

FORCE OF NATURE
Maria Pergay, photographed in the wood workshop she uses in Paris' 12th arrondissement, is still full of energy at 81

Ave Maria

We give thanks and praise for octogenarian furniture designer Maria Pergay and her unique twists on metal and wood

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN DE VILLIERS PRODUCER: MICHAEL REYNOLDS WRITER: AMY SERAFIN

Wallpaper*

Call Maria Pergay on her mobile phone and there is a good chance you will find her on a train. Set up an appointment to meet, and she will tell you that her only availability is a Sunday evening. The French designer may be 81 years old, but she is as busy as at any time in her 55-year-long career.

Perhaps even more so. This year alone, the first *catalogue raisonné* of her work is hitting bookstores around the world, a major museum acquisition is underway, France's Culture Minister decorated her with a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and a retrospective is taking place in late March at a mansion on the Place des Vosges, where she once owned a shop. At the same time, she must respond to increasing demand for new pieces from clients around the world.

It would be an exhausting rhythm at any age, but Pergay seems to be taking it in her stride. Her eyes shine as she describes her newest works, such as a stainless steel console table that mimics the loop and waves of her signature. Or a coffee table made from a slice of a tree Marie Antoinette planted at Versailles, uprooted during the storm of 1999. Pergay combined the two-century-old oak with her favourite material, stainless steel. 'The wood was of an insane arrogance. And the steel was unfailingly vigorous. They are opposites, but when they find each other, what a marriage! The force of nature and the force of man.'

Pergay herself is a force of nature, with a strength of character she attributes to the trials of her childhood. She was born in 1930 in Moldavia, where her father was an engineer officer in the military, as well as a Russian spy. In 1937, his cover was blown and he escaped back to Russia, where he ended up in a labour camp, while Maria and her mother fled to Paris. After the war, she threw herself into her passions, studying costume and set design and taking sculpture classes with artist Ossip Zadkine. She married business student Marc Pergay and raised four children before divorcing 20 years later.

In 1954, a friend invited her to dress boutique windows around Paris, and Pergay's theatrical set-ups quickly created a buzz. She started making unique objects in silver, such as champagne buckets with belt buckles, and received commissions from the likes of Hermès and Christian Dior. In 1960, she opened a shop on the Place des Vosges, where she displayed her silver objects on top of antiques.

It was a time when stainless steel manufacturers were hoping to find greater uses for their product than pots and pans, and a representative from the French steelmaker Ugine-Gueugnon approached Pergay to ask if she could craft her objects in inox steel. She told >>

Wallpaper*



STEELING BEAUTY

A sample of pieces that will be showing at Pergay's upcoming exhibition in a mansion on the Place des Vosges awaiting shipment at her Parisian storage facility. From left to right: 'Ring' chair, 1968; 'Bracelet' pouf (on top of steps), 2007; 'Plexicube' tables, 1972; 'Flying Carpet' daybed, 1968; 'Drape' cabinet, 2005; 'Ribbon' pouf, 2007



him the metal wasn't suitable for her small pieces, but she could do furniture. Alas, he explained, the company had conducted surveys to see if the public would buy steel furniture, and the answer was no. How could she possible change that? 'I was young and pretty,' she recalls. 'I smiled at him and said, "You'll see."'

Such confidence arises from the fact that Pergay's talent is near-mystical. Ideas come to her fully formed. She draws her idea on whatever scrap of paper is at hand, and what appears is exactly what the workshop will realise. 'There's nothing I can do about it,' she says. 'I can't take credit. It's like saying someone has beautiful eyes – I was just born this way.'

Her first piece in stainless steel was the 'Flying Carpet' daybed, followed by the 'Ring' chair with its concentric circles. Both remain her best-known works, combining a curving sensuality with the austerity of steel. They were part of a collection shown in 1968 at the Galerie Maison et Jardin in Paris; Pierre Cardin bought the entire thing. (Nearly a decade later, the French fashion designer commissioned more pieces from her, including a low spiral table shaped

TIMELINE OF AN OCTOGENARIAN

28 October 1930

Born Maria Alexandrovna Kachnitskaya in Moldavia, Russia

1937

Emigrates to France with her mother

1960

Opens a shop in the Place des Vosges, selling her silver objects

1968

Galerie Maison et Jardin shows her stainless steel furniture and Pierre Cardin buys the entire collection

1977-85

Designs for the Saudi royal family and other prominent Middle East figures

2004

Meets design dealers Suzanne Demisch and Stephane Danant

2007

A vintage, one-arm daybed sells for \$421,000, a record for Pergay

2011

The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquires Pergay's 'Wave' bench, 1968

SIGNATURE STYLE

Above, 'Chevet' bedside table, 2008, photographed in the Paris wood workshop

Opposite, above, 'Signature' console, 2012, in mid-progress, photographed in the steel workshop

Pergay uses in Valençay in the Loire Valley. The signature part of the piece was designed by Pergay's daughter Valerie

Opposite, below, design dealers Stephane Danant, sitting on Pergay's 'Colonne' pouf, and Suzanne Demisch

like an ammonite fossil, which he is lending to her current exhibition.)

Stainless steel was Pergay's destiny and she has always had her way with it, draping or folding it like silk, or combining it with other materials from Plexiglas to tortoiseshell. Its technical complexity has never intimidated her. 'Steel talks to me,' she says. 'If it's ready to obey, it is like a tamed animal. But if it's bad, it's a slap in the face. Fortunately, I haven't received many of those.'

Her reputation spread in the 1970s as she created furniture for wealthy patrons in Europe and the US. When Europe's economy stumbled, her focus shifted to the Middle East, where she spent eight years designing palaces for the Saudi royal family. In the 1990s, she concentrated on Russia, decorating homes for the country's budding oligarchy.

'She was always ahead of her time,' says New York design dealer Suzanne Demisch. 'She consistently arrived on the scene before it was a scene.' Demisch and her partner, Stephane Danant, discovered Pergay's vintage work at the Paris flea market in the late 1990s. Demisch tracked her down to a riad she had built in

Morocco, and to her amazement, the designer was still working. 'Suzanne asked me if I could come up with ideas for new objects,' remembers Pergay. 'And I said yes, but thinking I had lost my mind.' Then she surprised herself, drawing five sketches on the spot, including a macassar ebony cabinet with a sheet of stainless steel folded back and held in place with a giant safety pin. All five ideas became pieces in her next collection.

Pergay's former metalworkers in France had long since retired, so she had to search for hands skilled enough to make her designs. She eventually located two steel workshops and two more for wood, though it is still not sufficient to keep up with her constant flow of ideas.

In 2006, the galleries Demisch Danant and Lehmann Maupin teamed up to exhibit 15 new pieces by Pergay, her first show in New York in more than 30 years. Since then the designer has attracted a whole new generation of clients.

Pergay's work is incredibly diverse. Her style straddles art and design, past and present, masculine and feminine, with a tension between the frilliness of the motifs she favours – belts, ribbons,



tassels – and the violence of creations like her 'Broken Cubes' side tables with ripped steel faces. 'It's interesting that these comes from a woman,' notes architect Rafael de Cárdenas, who has been obsessed with Pergay since discovering her work five or six years ago. 'Furniture is a macho discipline. And her work is sort of macho. There is something brutalist about it, yet refined at the same time.'

Pergay has only ever made one-off pieces or very limited editions, so auction prices for her vintage furniture have soared in recent years. 'Flying Carpet' daybeds have sold for well over \$100,000, while Phillips de Pury sold a one-arm 'Banquet' daybed for \$421,000 in 2007. Pushing the value of her creations even higher is the fact that many of her collectors won't part with what they own. Pergay says that's a good thing: 'You can't imagine the pleasure it gives me when somebody says "No, I don't want to sell it, I love it too much".' ★

Maria Pergay: Complete Works 1957-2010, £50, by Suzanne Demisch and Stephane Danant (Damiani). The Pergay exhibition will show in the Place des Vosges, Paris, March 22-31. www.demischdanant.com