

**IN**

**RESIDENCE**

*An art filled home in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Près*

**WITH**

**FRANÇOIS**

*Words by Rebecca Voight*

**LAFFANOUR**

*Photographed by Paul Lehr*





**F**rançois Laffanour says he thinks of life as “a series of opportunities,” but then quickly refines that, “it’s not all luck, but I don’t make plans.” This is hard to imagine when one considers how seamlessly his passion as a collector and career as a gallerist of mid-20th century French and contemporary design has evolved since he launched Galerie Downtown in 1980 in Paris. Although he sees a direct connection between Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret, Jean Royère and Le Corbusier with contemporary designers like Ron Arad, or Choï Byung Hoon, he can’t explain it. “I react to things as they happen, and I see after all that I’m quite resilient.” In other words, when you know, you know.

His sprawling Haussmann apartment on Boulevard Saint Germain, steps away from Le Flore, is a case in point. It’s far from the Saint-Ouen flea market where Laffanour began, but the contrast between the whipped cream interior and Perriand, Prouvé and André Salomon’s studious wood library table with its integrated lighting and industrial metal legs, or Nam June Paik’s Robespierre, a robot construction of piled up retro

television consoles, is like a conversation between old friends.

Laffanour is from a family of artists on his mother’s side including a successful landscape painter and his aunt, who worked in-house for the Faucigny-Lucinge family in the 1930s when Japanese style decor was prized. He was born in Algeria where his father produced olive oil in the Kabyle region, but, his family moved to France when he was a young boy. Laffanour arrived “not knowing what a sweater and a coat were for” and soon discovered his maternal grandfather’s Brittany where the family spent every summer and all the children painted. “At least twice a week, we went out with easels headed for the edge of a field to paint the cows and the wheat. In the beginning it wasn’t at all an intellectual practice. It was physical, instinctive and isolating. Doing something completely on my own was good for me as a child because when you arrive from someplace else, other children can be very mean. With painting, you escape into your own world and then you do something.”























# Paul Gauguin

sa vie  
et le sens  
de son  
Œuvre

par  
Arsène  
Alexandre



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His experience in Paris in 1968 was formative. *"I arrived from Tours just after the demonstrations. It was a complete break with convention. It seemed like yesterday that I'd been sent home from high school because my hair touched my collar. There was no longer a right way of doing things. We hung out on the quais of the Seine, played guitar and met these magnificent, fascinating girls."* After that he knew he didn't want a boss. He wanted complete freedom, not only in his life, but in his surroundings. And he wanted to invent something.

He began painting nonstop after a motorcycle accident kept him in and out of the hospital for two years. His work was accepted in a salon at the Grand Palais where he met a gallerist who offered him a solo show. *"One or two paintings sold, but then I had to figure out how to support myself. As soon as I began buying and selling things, the energy it takes to paint left me completely. I couldn't do both so I stopped painting."* Hunting, collecting and staging exhibitions became his obsession.

And he found himself living in the same Paris apartment house as Charlotte Perriand. She was the woman with *"something different, almost Asian about her smile. A mysterious lady at the top of the building who wanted to modernize the elevator and build an apartment on the roof."* Later on, Perriand's daughter Pernette walked into his gallery. He recognized *"those blue eyes,"* but didn't make the connection until he ran into her later on at a show.

It was a desk with a chair in painted wood that first caught Laffanour's eye in the mid-1970s. *"Someone told me it was by Jean Prouvé"*. The idea of artists

constructing furniture to create their own universe appealed to him. *"Prouvé, Perriand and Le Corbusier's design was a little too simple, too poor. All this had become misunderstood, out of fashion, old school, but it pleased me"*

Laffanour began reading. *"I looked at catalogues, magazines and books and I found that Prouvé had worked with Charlotte Perriand, and that she had worked with Sonia Delaunay whose work was in the Musée d'Art Moderne with her husband. Next to*

*articles about Ferdinand Léger, Picasso and Miró, were were Charlotte Perriand and and Arne Jacobsen. It seemed impossible to me that they were no longer recognized. They had been at the forefront, and now they were forgotten."*

He found a pattern. *"I believe in cycles. When something has been loved, there's a period when people don't love it anymore. In general this happens twenty or thirty years later."*

Instead of searching randomly at the Hotel Drouot auction house, at the flea market or on the road from which he might come back *"with a marble sculpture and a clock,"* Laffanour became an

an archivist of mid-20th century design. He scooped up all the documentation he could find and from the period, traced the original collectors, their children and the institutions that had commissioned work.

Laffanour met Henri Machet who had taken over Paris's *Galerie Steph Simon*. The gallery had been the showcase of French post-war design in the 1950s and 60s with Perriand, Prouvé, Serge Mouille lighting, Georges Jouve ceramics and Isamu Noguchi's paper lantern sculptures. Simon was a gallerist, but also a producer. Laffanour













acquired the gallery's inventory and archives from Machet in 2001. *"I began travelling the world to discover the pieces that had never come up at auction or the flea market. I found them in Brazil, India and Africa, all over France and Algeria, the most beautiful things."*

Beyond the design, he discovered a deep admiration for the designers. *"Prouvé and Perriand represent pure freedom and liberty. It's not fussy, but it has a sophistication in the way it's thought out, and in its*

*creation. Jean Prouvé wore sneakers, he loved cars. Charlotte Perriand loved the mountains and sports. They were anti-conformists. I had studied art history and the surrealists, I had a notion of intellectual refinement, originality, and creative spirit. These people lived in a very desirable way and it motivated me to seek out what others were ignoring."*

Galerie Downtown's earliest customers were ten or twenty years older than Laffanour. *"My first client Roger Zana (the father of interior architect Charles Zana) was in advertising. He came into the gallery and he said 'oh I'd seen all this at the time, but I didn't buy it then. Now I can.'" Louis de Funès's son, a radiologist, furnished his office at the gallery because he told me he was sure it would frighten all his patients. Then came industrialist Daniel Lebard whose son was an architect. "He asked me to design his office on Avenue Kleber. I don't know how I had the nerve, but I said, 'okay, let's do it all in Prouvé.' And we did just that with twenty pieces."*

Lebard's extensive 20th century design collection almost doubled its estimation at Christie's in 2021 with the lighted library table by Perriand, Prouvé and Salomon selling for over a million euros, a pair of Jean Royère polar bear chairs for 1.3 million and Takis' Signal Light (double white) which sold for 137,500 euros, five times the estimate.

Today Laffanour considers collecting and selling a form of psychoanalysis. *"It's group therapy. What do you like? Will others like it? This becomes a way of understanding yourself. Discovering one thing leads you to something else."* Sitting at the library table he's had for the past thirty years, he reflects. *"There was a moment when I almost sold it, but I couldn't live here*

*today without this table. It breaks the mold."*

His apartment is a kaleidoscope of opposites that attract from a Joseph Beuys sled in a transparent box sitting quietly on the floor below a bookcase to a Jenny Holzer neon text work over the front door and Elaine Sturtevant's woman with neon lips in the hallway. *"I bought that thirty years ago and everyone says it's fantastic now."* Laffanour was introduced to Sturtevant's work by his late friend Bob Calle, the artist Sophie Calle's father. Calle also led him to Vassilakis Takis; one of his signal sculptures is in the salon. *"I sold that to a friend when I needed money once and two months later I begged them to sell it back to me. The things I like are the ones that, at a certain moment, I find better than anything else."* A Psycho-objet by Jean-Pierre Raynaud with a painting of a woman in nervous breakdown mode next to a collection of mysterious tubes hanging from a shelf is a personal detour from the artist's giant flowerpots. *"He did this after he was institutionalized," says "It's hard, but I love it."*

Laffanour keeps looking and when he finds something, or someone who attracts his attention it's like he's discovered a new star in the constellation. *"You can't say that one era that was best. I've been collecting Philippe Starck for the past 20 years. I love staying in his hotels. One of my collector friends has done a show at Fondation Cab in Saint Paul de Vence on Andrée Putman. I think the 1980s are coming back the way the 1950s did."*

He's into Ettore Sottsass too. *"I met him and he was intelligent, poetic, funny. He told me the origin of all his design came from a car trip he took to the tomb of Kasimir Malevich."* Destroyed during WWII, the grave under Malevich's favorite oak tree on the outskirts of Moscow was marked by a white cube with a black square by Nikolai Suetin.

*"You can love things and have an intuition about them, but what's really great is discovering someone who is an architect, but also a poet with passion. All the designers I like share a similar state of mind, they are all questioning things, reaching beyond themselves. They're not saying it was better before. They're saying tomorrow will be better."*



