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DESIGN

## The Soft and Elegant Side of Stainless Steel

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PARIS — These days, the early 17th-century arches of Place des Vosges, the first planned square in Paris and one of King Henri IV's pet projects, have been elegantly restored, and the linden trees in the garden neatly pruned. Yet when Maria Pergay opened a store there in 1960 to sell the furniture and silverware she had designed, it looked very different.

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Philippe Pons

Maria Pergay's career spans 55 years.

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“There were only four street lamps to light the entire square, and the pavements were so dirty,” she recalled. “Antiquarian book dealers sold books from wooden stalls in the arcades. There were three or four antique shops, and little workshops making jewelery. When I told my friends that I was opening a store on Place des Vosges, they said: ‘But why? No one goes there.’ But I loved this place so much.”

The store was at 2 Place des Vosges, next door to the house where the 17th-century French wit the Marquise de Sévigné was born, and Ms. Pergay stayed there for 17 years. Now 81, she has returned to Place des Vosges, albeit to the opposite side of the square at number 24, to prepare for the opening Thursday of an exhibition combining her old and new work, which has been organized by her dealers, Demisch Danant in New York and JGM. Gallery in Paris, to celebrate her 55th year in the decorative arts. Ms. Pergay is also soon to be awarded the Légion d'honneur for her contribution to the decorative arts in France.

Ms. Pergay arrived in France in 1937 as a 6-year-old émigré. Born to Russian Jewish

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parents in Chisinau, which was then in Romania and is now the capital of Moldova, she fled to Paris with her mother to escape the threatened Soviet invasion, only to have to go into hiding when the Nazis occupied the city during [World War II](#). After school, Ms. Pergay studied costume and set design at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris, and attended sculpture classes in Montparnasse. Soon after leaving college, she started a family. A few years later, after having the first three of her four children, she ran into a college friend, who was decorating store windows, but had taken on too much work and asked her to help.

Having decorated a few windows for her friend, Ms. Pergay was offered other assignments. In 1957, she began her career in earnest by designing a collection of silverware, which was fabricated by the artisans in small, specialist workshops. After opening her Place des Vosges store in 1960, Ms. Pergay designed objects such as lights, tables and boxes to be sold there. She also made special pieces for fashion houses, including Christian Dior and Jacques Heim.

Stylistically, her early work tended to be simpler than that of her peers — “no Louis XIV, no Louis XV,” as she put it — but it was relatively conservative with decorative flourishes, such as moulded bows and buckles. She defined a distinctive style after another chance encounter in 1967, when she was asked to work in stainless steel by UGINE Gueugnon, which owned France’s largest steelworks.

At the time, steel was associated with the furniture of early 20th-century modernist designers, such as Charlotte Perriand and Marcel Breuer. The most fashionable materials among young 1960s designers were plastics, while Ms. Pergay’s contemporaries on the decorative arts scene favored precious metals or rare woods.

To her surprise, she discovered that the strength and suppleness of stainless steel enabled her to produce precise, yet expressive shapes. An example is her gently curved 1968 Flying Carpet Daybed and the 1968 Ring Chair, which was inspired by the spiralling form of a single strip of orange peel.

“I was peeling an orange for my children, and thought how nice it looked,” she recalled. “No one was doing stainless steel furniture then. The atelier made heavy doors, and when I asked them to make furniture they just laughed. But I pinned a huge piece of paper on the wall and drew my pieces on it to show them what to do. If necessary, I’d put my hand on the hand of the guy who was cutting the steel and tell him where to push.”

When her stainless steel furniture was exhibited in Paris, the entire collection was bought by the fashion designer Pierre Cardin. Ms. Pergay produced more steel pieces, and exhibited in other countries, including the United States. In 1977, she sold the Place des Vosges store to allow more time for interior design projects, many of them in the Middle East. In 2000, she seemed set to retire and moved to Morocco to design and run a guesthouse in the coastal town of Essaouira.

Four years later, she was tracked down by Suzanne Demisch, co-founder of Demisch

Danant, who had been intrigued by her early furniture since seeing it in the Paris flea markets in the 1990s and asked if she was willing to make new work. Ms. Pergay produced a new collection in Paris. By the time it was exhibited at Demisch Danant and the New York art gallery Lehmann Maupin in 2006, the value of her late 1960s and 1970s pieces had soared, as collectors' interest in that period grew. Like her fellow Parisian designers, François-Xavier and Claude Lallanne, and the Italian duo, Tobia and Afra Scarpa, the then-septuagenarian Ms. Pergay suddenly became an auction star.

She has since continued to develop new objects, many of them in stainless steel, and has enjoyed rediscovering her older pieces when they come up at auction. The Moroccan guesthouse has been sold, and Ms. Pergay now divides her time between her country home in Béziers in southern France and her Paris studio, where she has been planning the new exhibition. "It is so funny for me to go back to Place des Vosges after so many years," she said. "I wanted to call the exhibition 'Fifty Years to Cross the Square' because that's how it feels."

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