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Symbolic, Cerebral, and Spiritual

The art and design of **Pierre Székely** embody a singular mix of the erudite and the ethereal

People go to Donna Karan's Urban Zen store in downtown Manhattan for many reasons. Most, of course, are there to shop the fashion designer's selection of elegant-but-earthly women's wear inspired by traditional garb from Asia, India, and Africa. Some come for the exotic jewelry and fragrances, or for the art photography, books, and educational DVDs on offer. Still others go in the spirit of giving, knowing that sales from the store—and its two sister shops—support Karan's Urban Zen Foundation (the core mission of the non-profit, established in 2006, is to foster the integration of ancient Eastern healing treatments and physical therapies with modern medical practices). But all visitors are no doubt mesmerized, if only for a few moments, by a singular example of art and design on display in the store: an eight-foot tall by ten-foot long room divider comprising 174 biomorphic forms made of sandblasted wood, each different in shape. "It has a soul behind it. It has creativity behind it. It has artistry behind it," Karan says. "It is spiritual and cultural—all qualities embodied by Urban Zen."

The room divider was created in 1962 by a French artist, Pierre Székely (1923-2001), whose functional pieces are familiar in this country only to the most dedicated design aficionados. Though first and foremost a sculptor, Székely made a number of specially-commissioned forays into design, working in materials ranging from ceramics to wood and metal. The room divider, for example, was made for the suburban Paris home of a friend, architect Henri Colboc. Székely would surely be pleased that the piece can now be enjoyed by anyone. "He had a deeply humanist spirit, and was philosophically opposed to art being kept in private, enclosed spaces," says April Magen who, with her husband, Hugues, runs New York's Magen H Gallery. "Székely always sought to have his sculpture placed where the public could see it. He believed art should be a vital part of everyone's life."

Below: The 1962 room divider by Székely is comprised of 174 different forms made of sandblasted wood and is hinged at three points.



Photographs by Ben Ritter

Designer Spotlight

Székely ably achieved his goal to be inclusive. By one count, 110 of his sculptures—many of them monumental in scale, made from stone or reinforced concrete—stand in public sites on three continents. Székely was as much a semiotician as a sculptor: he strove to create a vocabulary of forms that, like Egyptian hieroglyphics or modern international road signs, could be intuitively understood by a viewer. “There was a sort of archaeology in his creations,” April Magen says. “He was pure, almost to the point of being primordial.”

Székely also participated in several architectural projects on which he could bring his progressive political philosophies to bear. On the Brittany shore, for example, he helped design a sort of vacation commune of whitewashed concrete buildings—constructed between 1967 and 1969—where arc-roofed bungalows surround structures, in shapes suggested by shells, waves, and fruit, for communal dining, entertainment, and recreation (the compound resembles a set from *Star Wars*).

Székely did have a sense of humor and fun. In Évry, a “model town” project, built in the ‘60s, just south of Paris, the artist erected a nearly sixty foot-tall concrete sculpture, triangular in profile and relatively blade-thin in width. The sculpture, completed in 1975, was covered in small outcroppings, chutes, balconies, and steep inclines dotted with handholds. Székely devised it as a place for rock-climbing enthusiasts to hone their skills.

For collectors of the applied arts, the most fertile ground for Székely pieces is the nine year period—from 1946 to 1957—when he, his wife, Véra, and the painter André Borderie shared an atelier outside Paris, producing ceramics. The trio worked on projects alone and

together. Their shared hope was to create artful design that, rather than looking back at the war years with horror and repulsion, would look forward with optimism towards the new way of life they were sure would emerge from the conflict.

Véra and Pierre made pieces such as metal-framed tables with ceramic tops decorated with simple, colorful abstract forms, and pottery pieces that clearly show the marks of the makers’ hands. One ceramic vessel made in collaboration with Borderie in the mid-’50s (it is on offer from the Magens, who plan to present a Székely show late this autumn) has a bulbous base from which four smokestack-like pipes emerge. You have to picture sprays of flowers emerging from each tube to see how the design would be fully realized—though such a vision also prompts recollections of Vietnam War protestors placing flowers in the rifle barrels of National Guardsmen. Székely would likely have welcomed any interpretation: what mattered to him was that his work made you think.



Above: Székely and his wife, Véra, collaborated on this ceramic top table, made circa 1948 to 1953 and signed “PV Székely”



Left: Two views of a sculptural blue ceramic vase—more than two-feet tall and just as wide—made jointly by André Borderie and Székely circa 1948 to 1953 and signed by both artists.