

DESIGN SECRETS OF THE VERY RICH TOWN & COUNTRY

APRIL 2019

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BE RICH & CHILL

This cozy and collectible Midcentury furniture might be all that keeps you calm while reading Twitter.

By Stephen Wallis

Blame it on gyrating markets, extreme weather, and hyper-partisan politics. In these vexing times comfy, cocooning furniture is having a moment. As part of her 2019 forecast, interiors trendwatcher Michelle Ogundehin noted that “in this acutely digital age, as physical, sensory beings we have a primal need to surround ourselves with surfaces that thrill our fingertips or tempt our toes.” Tactile comfort, more than ever, is in.

For the collecting cognoscenti, when it comes to make-you-want-to-melt-into-them furnishings, nothing tops the Ours Polaire (French for polar bear) sofa and armchair conceived by French designer Jean Royère in the late 1940s. Elegantly rounded and incomparably cushy, these zaftig icons were upholstered in a soft

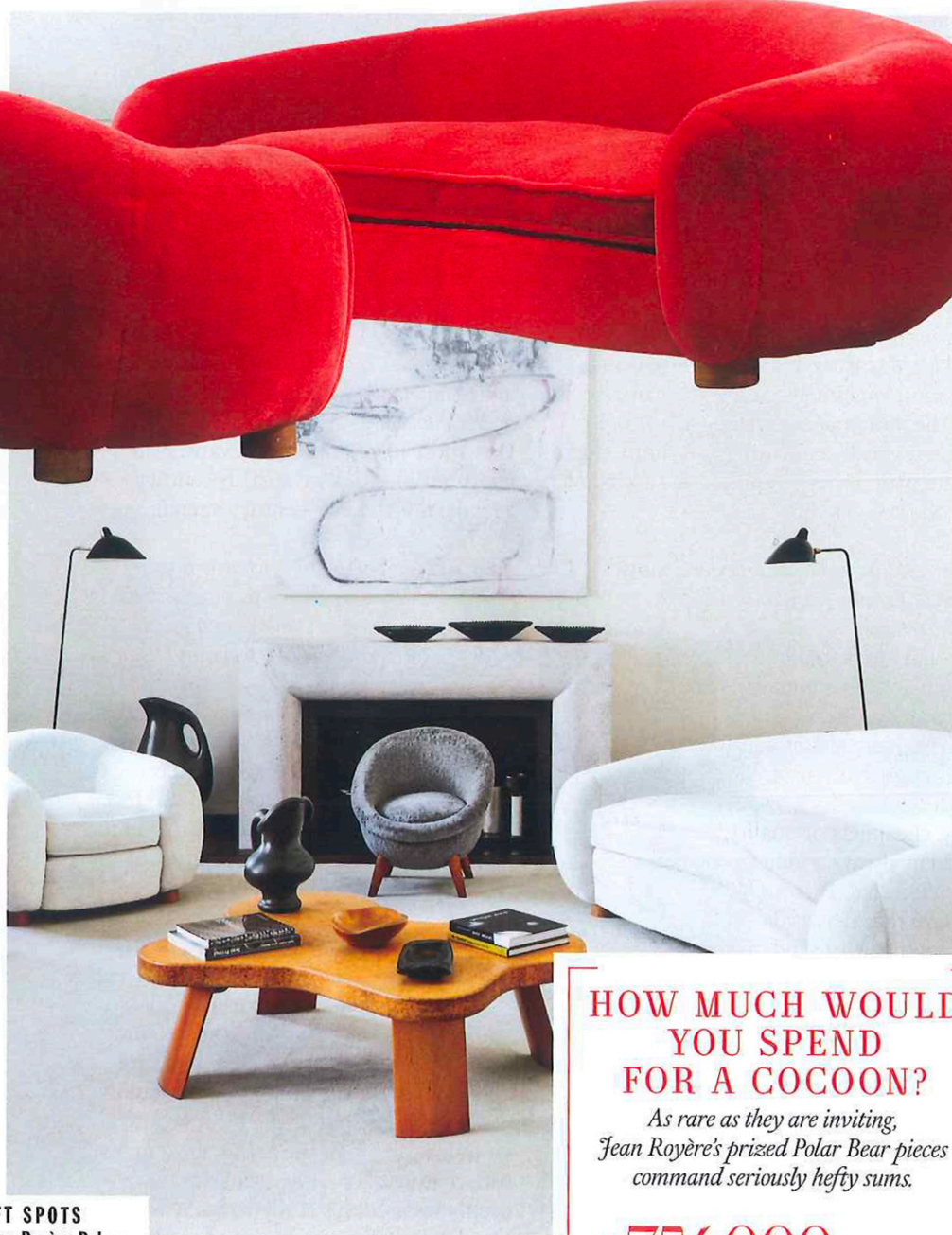
SOFT SPOTS

A Jean Royère Polar Bear sofa and chair—the ultimate in comfy chic—flank one of his Egg chairs in Emmanuel de Bayser’s Berlin home. *Top:* A set from Paris dealer Patrick Seguin.

woolen velvet reminiscent of plush toy fabric. “The Ours Polaire furnishings are an alcove, a nest,” says Emiliano Salci, one half of the Milan-based interiors duo Dimore Studio. “They even transmit visual comfort to a

room. They are timeless.”

Highly sought after today by tastemakers and collectors around the globe, Polar Bear sofas and pairs of chairs can command more than half a million dollars at auction or from a top dealer. Jennifer Aniston and Larry Gagosian have acquired pieces, as has Kanye West, ➡➡



HOW MUCH WOULD YOU SPEND FOR A COCOON?

As rare as they are inviting, Jean Royère’s prized Polar Bear pieces command seriously hefty sums.

\$754,000

The auction record for a Polar Bear sofa was paid for an off-white example sold at Phillips New York in June 2016.

\$995,000

The top auction price for Polar Bear chairs was reached by a yellow pair at Christie’s Paris in November 2017.

\$1,000,000

Paris dealer Patrick Seguin sold a Polar Bear set (a sofa and two chairs) for seven figures a few years ago.

OUT & ABOUT HOLY GRAILS

who once tweeted that his Polar Bear sofa "is my favorite piece of furniture we own."

Part of the brilliance of Royère's design is how he made the minimalist pieces look almost structureless, entirely covering the skeletons—created using traditional wood-bending techniques—in layers of synthetic foam. "Only the large circular feet underneath are visible," notes Paris dealer Patrick Seguin, a leading Royère authority who collaborated with fellow dealer Jacques Lacoste on a 2013 monograph on the designer. "The Ours Polaire pieces are emblematic of Royère's spirit of absolutely free creativity and reflect a true elegance without any kind of ostentation."

It all began in 1947, when Royère, who left a career in banking at 29 to devote himself to interiors, was renovating an apartment for his mother on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris. For that project he created some of his first biomorphic designs, including the sofa he originally called Boule (Ball) and later renamed Ours Polaire. "The model attracted a limited clientele initially," Seguin says. "However, its innovative design enjoyed success during the 1950s, when free-form designs and Royère's soft, round lines triumphed."

COOL AND COLLECTED
Jean Royère, circa 1930. Top: A 1950s illustration of a sitting area with a Polar Bear sofa and chairs in the foreground.



WHERE TO BUY

Specialist sources for Royère's work.

While his Polar Bear furniture can be hard to find, the designer's inventive, whimsical creations turn up regularly at **Sotheby's, Christie's, Phillips, and Wright** auction houses. Leading Paris dealers **Patrick Seguin, Jacques Lacoste, and Philippe Jousse** typically have a selection of pieces, as does **Magen H Gallery** in New York.

particularly in the Middle East, where he opened showrooms in Cairo, Beirut, and Tehran before expanding to Lima and São Paulo. This period saw him develop some of his most famous designs: the Egg and Elephant chairs, the Puddle and Sphere tables, various iterations of the Persian and Vine lights. Sophisticated yet whimsical, his creations, which often reference the natural world, exude refinement without veering into preciousness.

Because everything Royère produced was made to order, quantities were limited. Clients could commission an individual Polar Bear sofa or pair of armchairs, or they could get them together as a set. According to Seguin, between 1947 and 1967 only around 150 sets were made, plus another 150 sofas and 150 pairs of chairs. (Unlike other iconic Mid-century styles, there has never been an authorized re-edition.)

Royère died in 1981, having stopped designing a decade earlier. He left the bulk of his archives to Paris's Musée des Arts Décoratifs, which staged a reputation-burnishing 1999 exhibition that coincided with surging collector interest in midcentury French designers.

Royère prices took a notable upward turn a decade ago, says Florent Jeanniard, the European head of design for Sotheby's, which set an auc-

tion record for Royère last May, when a sideboard with a star-dappled marquetry design fetched \$1.8 million. "The demand is really global, with collectors now coming from Asia as well as the U.S. and Europe," Jeanniard says. "Royère's furniture has a combination of seriousness and joy that appeals to today's taste."

With the Polar Bear pieces, the challenge is finding them. "It has become very difficult to source a set from the original owners, and collectors who already possess these pieces very rarely sell them," says Seguin, who sold a set a few years ago that he says would be worth \$1.2 million today.

Decades on, many of the Polar Bear pieces—which Royère produced in several colors—have been reupholstered, often in fabrics mimicking the originals. One of the vintage hues is an eye-catching

yellow not far from what happens to be Ogundehin's pick for this year's trendiest color: mustard. About a year and a half ago a pair of Polar Bear armchairs covered in a supersoft fabric somewhere between classic Grey Poupon and French's sold at Christie's for just a hair under \$1 million. It was a giant price for two chairs, but for utter on-trend comfort perfection—it's hard to put a price tag on that. «



WHO'S GOT IT

Boldface names getting cozy on Polar Bear couches.

Owners range from Hollywood types like **Jennifer Aniston, Brian Grazer, and Ellen DeGeneres** to such tastemakers as **Christian Louboutin, Emmanuel de Bayser, and Larry Gagosian**. And, of course, **Kim and Kanye**, who lamented that there isn't a Polar Bear bed.