

VOICES

The Dealer Who Made Jean Prouvé Famous

In a new book out this month, Patrick Seguin fills the gap in scholarship on the important 20th-century architect and designer

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If you're at all interested in design history, chances are you're familiar with the work of midcentury French architect and designer Jean Prouvé. Likely, you've spotted one of his elegantly hewn Standard chairs in a well-appointed home or perhaps you snapped an Instagram photo of one of his *demountable houses*, built for emergency relief long before the modern prefab craze and now reassembled around the world at *art fairs* and galleries. But, like many of the heavy hitters on today's secondary market, he wasn't always so well-known. In fact, we owe much of our understanding of the modern master to a single man: Paris-based dealer Patrick Seguin, who has pieced together Prouvé's life story—and hundreds of his works—through 30 years of research, slowly unveiling them to the design world at design fairs and gallery shows. Now, as his gallery releases a 750-page double-volume compendium of the architect and designer's vast oeuvre, out October 15 (including texts by architects Renzo Piano and Jean Nouvel), we caught up with Seguin to find out what initially piqued his interest in Prouvé's work and what surprising details (he was the mayor of Nancy, France!) he's learned about the 20th-century talent through the years.



Patrick Seguin's new 750-page volume on Jean Prouvé.

Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Patrick Seguin

AD: When did your interest in the work of Prouvé begin?

Patrick Seguin: When I arrived in Paris at 32, I began by working as a server in restaurants, and I later purchased a restaurant-club and developed another near Les Halles. But when I met Laurence [his wife and business partner] in 1987, I decided to leave behind my night-owl lifestyle. We discovered the work of Jean Prouvé in the '80s; I was struck by it, even though not many people were familiar with it at the time.

AD: Was there a certain piece or body of work that captured your attention in the beginning?

PS: Our first purchases were the Compass table and Standard chairs. The pieces are simple, but I identified with their innate beauty the first time I saw them. The chairs were designed as cafeteria chairs in the 1950s, but I could tell how timeless and relevant they still were. I was excited to put them in dialogue with contemporary art in a modern setting, and I was astounded with the results.



Prouvé's Chair No. 4, made in 1934 with a backrest of molded plywood.

Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Patrick Seguin

AD: At that time, how much did the design world know about Prouvé?

PS: Not that many people were familiar with Prouvé or passionate about his work in the late '80s. Over the years we discovered many different projects and commissions that had been forgotten or disregarded. I decided to bring Prouvé into the international spotlight and to ensure that he was rightfully recognized in the history of art and design.

AD: How did you go about bringing Prouvé's work to public attention?

PS: That Prouvé is renowned internationally today is a result of years and years of devotion to exhibiting his work worldwide. I opened the gallery in 1989, and success did not happen overnight. Rather, it was gradual and consistent. There is a synergy between contemporary art and design that collectors are so passionate about today. I've staged numerous collaborative exhibitions with art, architecture, and design to illustrate their relationship, collaborating with Gagosian Gallery eight times since 2004. Most recently, we organized an exhibit in downtown Manhattan for "Chamberlain | Prouvé" on Jean Prouvé and John Chamberlain in 2015. The Prouvé pieces of architecture were a wonderful juxtaposition to the monumental Chamberlain sculptures, and the use of steel in two very different ways allowed the materials to echo and enhance each other. A few years prior in 2013, we organized "Calder | Prouvé" in Gagosian Gallery's space in Le Bourget, just outside of Paris, and in my Paris gallery. The works of these two creators who actually knew each other in the 1950s came alive when shown together.

AD: Do you think today's fetishization of his work is somehow contradictory to his ideas about mass production and accessibility?

PS: Today, the way in which one interacts with Prouvé's furniture and architecture is different from when it was created. It is no longer used in schools or administrative buildings. The pieces are taken out of context, but they are no less beautiful and meaningful than they were at the time of their conception. I think that Prouvé would be pleased about the international recognition that his work has achieved. The durability of his designs is evidence of his ingenuity on multiple levels — aesthetically, technically, and functionally. By using materials to their fullest extent his designs have become timeless. Today we place his pieces next to works of contemporary art because of the synergy created when a masterpiece of 20th-century French design is exhibited next to an extraordinary work of art. It surpasses trends because it was never about aesthetics, and this is why it will continue to be highly sought-after and cherished.



Prouvé designed the Cité daybed for the student dormitory at the Cité Universitaire in Nancy in 1930.

Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Patrick Seguin

AD: What qualities of Prouvé’s work make him such an important figure of 20th-century design?

PS: Prouvé never sought to make design that was purely beautiful, but by nature of its functionality and simplicity, his works are extremely aesthetically pleasing. By constantly refining and reworking his techniques to create the best possible pieces of furniture, Prouvé was truly avant-garde. Today, you do not need to be an architect or an engineer to understand this—everyone can appreciate the brilliance of Prouvé’s designs.

AD: Tell me about your work with the *demountable* houses.

PS: In 1990 we bought our first Jean Prouvé house, a six-by-six Demountable House created in 1944 for the victims of World War II in Eastern France. A self-taught architect, Prouvé used many of the same principles he had applied to his furniture to his architecture. He was extremely ahead of his time, designing houses for World War II victims who had lost their homes to bombs, temporary schools in the Parisian suburbs, and gas stations on French highways, all using prefabricated elements that could be assembled in a matter of days. He was very ambitious about the potential of prefabricated architecture and the concept of mass-producing houses similar to the production of cars. For a number of reasons, including lack of public funding and the fact that people didn’t understand these revolutionary ideas, many of his projects were not seen through on the large scale he had envisioned. With 23 houses, we currently possess the largest collection of Jean Prouvé structures, ranging from a six-by-six meter house from 1944 to the 24-by-8 Bouqueval School from 1949. This year we are participating in a massive exhibition in the south of France at the LUMA Foundation. The monumental show will feature 12 assembled Jean Prouvé houses, ranging from the four-by-four-meter Military Shelter from 1939 to the 24-by-8-meter Bouqueval School.



A 4x4 military shelter Prouvé designed in 1939.

Photo: Courtesy of Galerie Patrick Seguin

AD: When researching Prouvé, was there anything you were truly surprised to learn about his career?

PS: I was and am constantly shocked by Prouvé's capacity to be so avant-garde, so forward-thinking for his time. With architecture, for example, he designed houses that had no permanent foundation—they leave no trace on the landscape—illustrating Prouvé's ability to foresee the environmentalist movement that had not yet even started. His progressive thinking is seen consistently in his body of work and explains why his ideas weren't always accepted during his lifetime.

AD: Are there any aspects of Prouvé's oeuvre that still remain a mystery?

PS: Jean Prouvé is and will be a mythic character in history. He had many different roles—designer, architect, founding member of the Union of Modern Artists, mayor of Nancy in Eastern France, and professor at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers. There are so many questions I would have for Prouvé if he were still alive today. I would want to know what went through his head while he put his original concepts to paper, and then as he continued to tweak and refine them over the years to improve their functionality. I'm especially curious as to how he would use contemporary materials and technology to create brilliant pieces of design today. By mastering materials, pushing them to their physical limits, and exploring today's potential resources, I'm sure he would continue to awe us all.