



INTERIORS + DESIGN

7 Questions on Jean Prouvé Houses for Dealer Patrick Seguin

BY PATRICK SEGUIN | 14 MAY 2018



THE INTERIOR OF THE JEAN PROUVÉ ON VIEW AT SOTHEBY'S NEW YORK.

In collaboration with Galerie Patrick Seguin of Paris, Sotheby's presents Jean Prouvé's Maison Démontable, a prefabricated house designed by one of the 20th century's most influential industrial designers. Originally developed in the 1940s as emergency housing for bomb devastated villages in postwar France, the house measures over 20 x 30 feet and is made entirely of wood and metal.

The Prouvé house stands as the centerpiece of a selling exhibition of art and design spanning the 19th and 20th centuries. The exhibition is highlighted by a selection of Color Field masters including a 1970s Helen Frankenthaler measuring more than 8 feet tall, intimate works by Picasso, monumental paintings by Christopher Wool, Cy Twombly on canvas and paper, a survey of Alexander Calder spanning the 1930s and 1970s and more.

We asked design dealer Patrick Seguin to share his expertise on all things Jean Prouvé, from the fascinating history of his prefabricated houses to their elevation as art object and collectible.

In your opinion when did these houses go from being practical objects to becoming collectible art? Why is there such an interest in these now?

Since I opened the gallery in 1989, I've been promoting Prouvé's architecture as rigorously as his furniture. I realized that his houses deserved to be recognized as important works of mid-century French architecture. Given that the market for Prouvé's furniture has been steadily growing, I wanted to cultivate interest for his architecture as well. However, as with his tables and chairs, these works of architecture continue to be practical and functional in addition to being pieces of collectible art. The interest didn't spike overnight, but has consistently grown over the past 30 years. Today interest is very high because people have come to appreciate how ahead of his time Prouvé was.

How many houses did Prouvé make and how many are still in existence?

Prouvé once stated "The house of my dreams is made in a factory." He ambitiously hoped to industrialize housing using prefabricated elements, but was unable to reach his goal because of cost or material restraints, or simply because his avant-garde techniques were not understood at the time. Therefore, most of his houses were fabricated only as prototypes or produced in very small quantities. Examples include the Ferembal offices designed in 1948, of which only one ever existed, or the Bouqueval school that is currently in my collection, of which the only other version located in Vantoux is a classified architectural monument. The Maxéville Design Office, 1948, and Maison des Jours Meilleurs, 1956, are two additional examples of large-scale projects that did not come to fruition. There are 30 to 40 of these rare one-off structures that are not classified by the French government that still exist today. The exception is the Filling Stations that Prouvé designed in 1969 for Total later in his career, of which he succeeded in fabricating and distributing this structure on a larger scale.

With the commission in 1944 following World War II from the French government for those whose homes had been bombed in Eastern France, Prouvé thought he had the opportunity to oversee the production of mass-producing dwellings for these victims of the war. However, only 160 of the 6x6 meter and only 45 of the 6x9 meter house were fabricated, and very few of these survived, with roughly 20 of the 6x9 still in existence.

Today, [Galerie Patrick Seguin](#) has the largest collection of these works of architecture, with 24 different structures.



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Were they really used as dwellings for refugees? What makes the one on view at Sotheby's New York so unique?

The particular house comes from the commission by the French Minister of Reconstruction who called for an order of emergency housing after World War II. The houses were delivered in Eastern France and could be assembled in one day by three people, and were immediately habitable on the property of those who had lost their homes. The houses were designated to a different family and depending on the number of people, they would receive either a 6x6 meter house or a 6x9 meter house. Each one of these functional structures was inhabited after the war.

It is exceptionally rare due to its excellent condition and the proportion of original elements that remain intact. The 6x9 exhibited at Sotheby's retains its original bent sheet steel compass and entire steel structure, wooden panels, door and flooring. According to Prouvé's archives I had the metallic base and roofing slab refabricated and replaced the isolation of the panels to fit today's standards.

Based on today's political climate, these houses seem to have taken on new meaning. Do you look at these differently with contemporary eyes?

With the refugee crisis currently occurring, I think we can certainly look to Prouvé as a model. His ideas about using prefabrication as a solution to rehousing the homeless didn't reach their full potential during his lifetime, but could certainly be reexamined and reworked today. Separately, Prouvé's pieces of architecture also illustrate an awareness of the environment as Prouvé progressively declared, "I want an architecture that leaves no trace on the landscape."



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Can you share some private and museum collections that have notable examples? What are some of the surprising ways you've seen Prouvé houses been used or furnished?

We recently collaborated with Maja Hoffmann at the Luma Foundation to organize a massive exhibition featuring twelve of Prouvé's different houses dating from 1939 to 1969 that was on view from July 2017 to May 2018.

The [Centre Georges Pompidou](#) also possesses a Jean Prouvé Maison Tropicale that they recently installed in their new Kanal space in Brussels, and will also be exhibiting a 6x6 meter house in their upcoming exhibition focused on the Union des Artistes Modernes, of which Prouvé was a founding member. The [Vitra Design Museum](#) in Germany also has a particularly rare example of another Filling Station, designed for Shell and dating to 1953, located on their grounds.

I also have a number of private collectors who have utilized their Prouvé home in inventive and fascinating ways. Richard Prince has one in upstate New York, and Patrick McKillen uses two as libraries at the Château La Coste in Aix-en-Provence. Azzedine Alaïa in Paris, Miuccia Prada in Italy and Enrico Navarra in the French Riviera are also owners of Prouvé architecture, in addition to collectors in Colorado and the Hamptons.



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My wife Laurence and I worked with Richard Rogers and Rogers Stirk Harbour and Partners to adapt a Prouvé house a few years ago, and using contemporary technology they added kitchen and bathroom demountable pods that attach to the house in addition to water tanks and solar panels. RSHP rendered the house completely autonomous, making it an ideal vacation home that can be transported and reassembled to different locations depending on the season.

How do these relate to Prouvé's other work?

As we illustrated with the show at the LUMA Foundation, the different structures are related in Prouvé's conception of their building principles. Each time Prouvé took on a new project, he considered his past work, what techniques had proved to be successful, and sought to improve them. This applies to both his architecture and his furniture, as he used the same bent sheet steel principles for both the compass legs of a table as the compass structure that supports one of his pieces of architecture.

How significant has Prouvé been in blurring the lines between architecture, design and art?

Having grown up amongst the founders and members of the École de Nancy, Prouvé was raised in a stimulating environment that celebrated the intersection of art, architecture and design and encouraged industrialized methods. He was ingrained with the workshop spirit from a young age, which manifests in his oeuvre that ingeniously combines form and function. This is a defining principle of Prouvé's legacy.