

# How a Low-Key French Designer Went from Deep Cut to on Trend

The 20th century designer Charlotte Perriand's work is all over Instagram—and in Jay-Z's office. What does the Perriand boom tell us about the state of design?

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A few months before her death in 1999, Charlotte Perriand was asked in [an interview](#) whether she considered herself an architect or a designer. She rejected both titles. “I’d say first of all that I’m nothing. For the following reason: I have never designed an object, a form, a piece of furniture that I didn’t need to relate to a whole. If you asked me today to design you a chair, I would say ‘To go where?’ I have no imagination.”

Such a claim seems like rich stuff, given the place Perriand has come to occupy in an increasingly design-obsessed culture. One of her iconic desks is in [Jay-Z’s office](#). Perriand makes frequent appearances on [The Row’s Instagram](#) and in its [boutiques](#). Last year, [Aesop released its Rōzu perfume](#), a gender neutral fragrance “inspired by the life, work and enthusiasms of the modernist designer.” Shoe design brand [LoQ’s FW ‘20 collection](#) was also inspired by Perriand. So was jewelry designer [Sophie Buhai’s](#). Fashion designer Isabel Marant has [long cited](#) her as an influence, the freeform offerings from brands like [Wiggle Room](#) seem obviously indebted to her. There have been two major retrospectives of her work in the past two years, first in [Paris](#) and then in [London](#). Oh, and [Kris Jenner](#) bought one of her credenzas from Ellen DeGeneres. Weird!



One of Perriand's iconic shelving units. Alamy

So how did this relatively obscure figure, long overshadowed by collaborators like Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé, become so popular, so quickly? It can be hard to pinpoint where visual trends start, but in the case of Perriand, it's safe to say that her most recent resurgence is largely due to a single, quaintly old-fashioned event: a museum exhibit. In 2019, the Louis Vuitton Foundation (LVMH's nonprofit art museum, which opened in Paris in 2014) put on a major survey of Perriand's work. All eleven galleries in the Frank Gehry-designed space were devoted to more than 200 scale models, furnishings, and photographs. *Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World* was the museum's first show to focus on the work of one artist.

Patrick Seguin, whose Paris design gallery specializes in the work of French modernists like Perriand, Prouvé, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret—all of whom worked together at various points in their careers—says the value of Perriand's work “gained a real significance” in the art world following the 2019 show. Today, many of her designs fetch six figures at auction. Part of Perriand's appeal has to do with the limited number of original pieces in circulation—she always wanted to create accessible, inexpensive furniture, but like so many modernist ideals, this never came to be. Only one brand—Cassina, which collaborated with LVMH on the exhibit—is authorized to create reproductions of her work.

No longer famous by association, Seguin says “it's precisely the singularity of her ideas and her vision on furniture which is sought after today.” Unlike other iconic figures in design, such as Frank Lloyd Wright (hated air conditioning, cities), or her onetime mentor Le Corbusier (who famously decreed, “A house is a machine for living in”), Perriand was never prescriptive or elitist. She managed to be principled without being prickly. She was less of a philosophizer and more of a doer.



Modern-rustic chairs and a dining table by Perriand. *Andreas von Einsiedel / Alamy*

Interiors stylist and designer Colin King first came across Perriand while on styling jobs early in his career. At a time when he was hungry for references and inspiration, King was moved by her ability to find beauty in “unexpected sources,” like the chrome of a car showroom or the pattern of fish bones. He says clients are more aware of Perriand these days, likely because they, too, are drawn to her ability to “merge a modern, man-made aesthetic with the natural world.” At a time when the future inspires more fear than wonder, it makes sense that objects created by one of modernism’s most accessible, forward-looking designers are particularly attractive.



Dimitri Levas's Spanish Revival bungalow, originally built in the 1920s, in Hollywood, Florida. Here a set of Charlotte Perriand Le Corbusier chairs are mixed with a Prouvé table laden with treasures, including vintage photographs of Alain Delon and Luchino Visconti on the set of *The Leopard*, and against the wall, a self-portrait by legendary Florida Everglades photographer Clyde Butcher. François Halard, *GQ*, May 2004.

As might be expected given her disposition, Perriand didn't much like mulling over the past. She enjoyed (though it may be more accurate to say endured) a revival towards the end of her life in the 1980s and 90s, as retrospective shows solidified her contributions to the modernist canon. In interviews from that period, Perriand is loath to dwell on her body of work and instead focuses on the problems of the future. "It's not about today that we need to be thinking; it's about tomorrow," she *told Artforum* in 1999, "There is of course the need to make inexpensive products. New models have to be created for the masses. But I think there is also something beyond prêt-à-porter. Say we no longer use techniques like weaving because of the expense. So do we do without it definitively? Why? There's no need. What is inexpensive because it is produced cheaply won't last 100 years."



A Charlotte Perriand coffee table in Levas's home. François Halard, *GQ*, May 2004.



It's ironic, of course, that a designer so opposed to looking backward, even at her own work, has become a well of inspiration across disciplines. But her creations are more than fodder for moodboards. They embody her optimism, her commitment to the "art of living," the possibilities she saw in the materials and modes of the future. Being optimistic about anything these days, much less material culture, is difficult. Today, we take it as a given that the older a thing is—a chair, a car, a pair of shoes—the better quality it's likely to be. That idea drives much of the modern appetite for vintage goods. It's not just nostalgia that has so many people craning their heads backward on eBay and Etsy—it's utility. It's no longer a requirement that, in order to be a modern person, one must consume modern things. In some sense, that belief seems dated, even wasteful.



Michael and Gabrielle Boyd's Santa Monica home, originally designed by architect, Oscar Niemeyer, in 1963. Here, a 1952 Charlotte Perriand wall cabinet is accompanied by a Josef Hoffmann vase and a 1950 André Bloc chair. Scott Frances, *GQ*, May 2005.

When it comes to design, timelessness is an irrational goal. Functionality is maybe a better one. If you meet the needs of the people of your own era, you have a chance at connecting with those of the future. Perriand's work has the kind of perpetual relevance that comes from understanding how people actually live. Seeing her designs feels like finding a flash of recognition in a passage from a Victorian novel. It's the kind of thing that makes you say to yourself: People lived like this then, too?

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