

SPECIAL: THE NEW TASTEMAKERS

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THE NEW DEALERS

WITH THEIR SHARP AND SENSITIVE EYE FOR OBJECTS OF SINGULAR POWER AND BEAUTY, **HUGUES AND APRIL MAGEN** SUCCESSFULLY ARGUE THAT DESIGN CAN BE THE EQUAL OF ART



The Magens in their gallery, with pieces that include François Stahly sculptures (foreground and on table), Philippe Hiquily sconces, and a Jim Cole chair (rear).

IN THE BURGEONING NEW art-collector-fueled market for design as art, Hugues and April Magen, owners of New York's Magen H Gallery, are ascendant stars. Their methods, as much as their tastes, set them apart from other design dealers. Some counterparts tempt art collectors into

the design ambit with instant rarity: they underwrite new work from contemporary avant-garde designers that is produced in strictly limited editions. The Magens do things old-school style, unearthing unique, provocative, vintage design by dint of research and shoe leather.

A native of Paris, Hugues Magen has been planting his gallery's flag in the field of French design since World War II. The Magens do carry pieces by "brand names" of the era, such as Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé, but offer only the rarest specimens. The true gems of the Magen H Gallery inventory are masterworks by less well known artist-designers such as the sculptor and architect Pierre Székely, ceramist Georges Jouve, and sculptor and lighting designer Philippe Hiquily. An art-minded clientele has also allowed the Magens to bring pieces into their store by "pure" artists, such as the painter Georges Maurice Cloud and the sculptor François Stahly. It's a market into which the couple are eager to advance.

The old debate over defining the margins of art and design crackled into flame again when the contemporary art fair Art Basel/Miami added a design showcase in 2005; the original Art Basel fair in Switzerland followed suit the next summer. (The Magens have exhibited at these showcases *(Cont. on page 113)*

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(Cont. from page 110) since their inception.) Some of the most interesting work at the Magen H Gallery comes out of the last period when the design/art conundrum was fully explored: the Art et Industrie movement born in the 1970s. The movement took its name from an “art furniture” gallery that opened in 1977 in New York’s SoHo, when the area was the bailiwick of groundbreaking art dealers such as Leo Castelli rather than shoe stores. Ahead of its time—the gallery closed some ten years ago—Art et Industrie served as an incubator for the careers of such now famous designers as Ron Arad and Michele Oka Doner. The Magens represent such Art et Industrie graduates as Forrest Myers, whose signature piece is a wingback chair made of looped and tangled wire, and Jim Cole, maker of monolithic angular metal sculptures that also do duty as seating.

Hugues Magen’s argument for the parity of art and design is as succinct as it is persuasive. “The essential element is that a work stands on its own, that you feel an immediate relationship with the object,” he says. That reasoning has won the custom and admiration of style arbiters like Donna Karan and such design connoisseurs as interior designers Timothy Haynes and Kevin Roberts and architects William T. Georgis, Lee Mindel, and Alan Wanzenberg. “Almost immediately after meeting Hugues and April, it became apparent to me that they had one of the most evolved sensibilities for their materials,” Wanzenberg says. “Whenever I spend time with them, I am exposed to something new.”

An interesting biographical note: before they became dealers, the Magens were dancers. Hugues was a member of the Dance Theater of Harlem, while April performed with the now defunct modern dance company Donald Byrd/The Group. April Magen allows that an artistic temperament may lend something to the “instinctual feel we have for objects that speak to us.” More to the point, she says, the life of a dancer taught them discipline and “a natural ease with pressure and performance.” It shows: so far, the Magens haven’t taken a wrong step. [magenxxcentury.com]

—GREGORY CERIO