



French designer Marcel Gascoin's oak-and-cane C chair.

Courtesy of Malcolm Kutner

## THE REPORT

### Hidden in Plain Sight

Overlooked for decades, the work of French midcentury designer Marcel Gascoin is finding a new audience

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The story begins three Januaries ago at a flea market on a rainy Sunday in Paris. More elephant than flea, the gigantic jumble of Les Puces ranks right up there with medieval treasure houses and expatriate haunts on many must-do lists. And for those in the interior design trade, it's an essential stop. Wrapping up what had turned out to be a dreary, drizzly few days in Paris, designer Malcolm Kutner made the market his last stop, hoping it might lift his spirits. Drifting from one stall to the next, Kutner hoped for something smashing to catch his eye. The moment he stepped into the booth of Jean-Baptiste Bouvier, something did: a wooden chair of charm so discreet that Kutner still struggles to put into words what it was about the oak-and-cane creation that stopped him so completely in his tracks.

Pressed, the designer comes up with a succinct answer that has both literal and symbolic meaning: “Good legs,” he says, “the way we say that a house has good bones.” Citing its elegant shape, sturdy construction, understated hardware, and the inviting angle of the seat, Kutner considers the piece “a near-perfect melding of utility and beauty—a well-made and comfortable seat that's also a sort of sculpture.”

We may value an object for its form and function, but we cherish it for the history it has witnessed and the stories it can tell. And Kutner felt a connection to the chair that went beyond its aesthetics. Watching his customer trip back in time, Bouvier offered a *raison d'être* for the chair. “This,” he said, “is furniture for people who went through a war.” The reference to France's post-WWII reconstruction period, for which designers and architects were enlisted in the enormous task of getting the devastated country back on its feet, was not lost on Kutner. Thanks to Bouvier, Kutner left the market in possession of the head-turning chair, the name of its maker—Marcel Gascoin—and a new passion.



Jean-Baptiste Bouvier's stall at the Paris flea market.

Courtesy Jean-Baptiste Bouvier

A son and grandson of mariners, Gascon discovered his calling at an early age. Immersed in all things nautical, he developed a deep appreciation for the tight and tidy spaces that seafaring vessels demand and sought to apply those lessons on land. Innovative, economical, and effective, his savvy storage units became a particular specialty. Until his death at 89 in 1986, Gascon seems to have worked continuously, engaged by design as a problem-solving discipline and a profession that welcomed innovation. Experimenting with new materials like aluminum and plywood, he mastered manufacturing techniques that brought factory efficiencies and finishes to the studio and went on to win myriad commissions to design affordable housing and furnish school rooms and post offices.

All along, Gascon exhibited at buzzy exhibitions and expos such as the Salon des Arts Ménagers, an annual exhibition of housewares and furnishings held from 1923 until the '80s, while keeping pace or at least making peace with the revolutions that rocked his world. As a teacher, he inspired an honor roll of pupils. Uncommonly devoted to the common good and to the sharing of goals, Gascon was the most collegial of men, quick to collaborate with fellow designers. He even joined forces in a competition to design a boat's cuddy cabin—the ultimate small-space challenge—with the man whose work is sometimes confused with his, Jean Prouvé. They didn't win the prize, but the fact that they chose to team up suggests resonance and mutual respect.

It's true that these days Gascon is sometimes mistaken for Prouvé, who overshadows pretty much every other designer of that time and place: women and men who, in different circumstances, it's nice to think, might have enjoyed broader recognition. Prominently featured in essential sourcebooks and academic catalogues and included in major design surveys and museum exhibitions, Prouvé's work is what we (re)discovered first. And, yes, it is sublime.

To discover (or rediscover Gascon is not (yet, anyway to elevate him into the pantheon of French modernists presided over by Prouvé and whose numerous demigods include René-Jean Caillette, Roger Landault, and Michel Mortier. "By measures of innovation and influence, Prouvé stands at the center of the innermost circle," says Cindi Strauss, curator of design at Houston's *Museum of Fine Arts*. But that circle can and should widen with new discoveries and reconsiderations.

Recently introduced to Gascon and excited by the work—"How did we all miss that?" she asks—Strauss calls him "one of the standout parts in an ongoing story that is so large that even significant talent can be overlooked."

Being confused with a renowned master can bestow a kind of bragging right, and on that point alone, Gascon scores posthumous points. Arriving on the scene some 32 years after his death as a relatively new name—and a relatively affordable one—makes for a fascinating story, and a discovery to share.



An installation view of McClain Gallery's "re:construction" featuring furniture by Marcel Gascoin.

Photo by Peter Molick/Courtesy of McClain Gallery

Halfway around the world, the chair that Kutner found, along with other Gascoin pieces, forms the core of an art exhibition. Working with Simone Joseph, an art adviser in New York, and Erin Dorn, director of the McClain Gallery in Houston, Kutner has gathered an array of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and decorative objects that have something to say to the wooden chairs, tables, shelves, and cabinets that seem right at home in an art gallery setting.

On view through March 31, the show reflects on notions of "reconstruction" (as they have titled the show, which beyond postwar France, resonates poignantly in a city still reeling from Hurricane Harvey. Some of the works—bold jigsaws of color by Leon Polk Smith; Claire Falkenstein's leafy wonder—are from Gascoin's time. The more contemporary pieces—including petite Bo Joseph bronzes incorporating found objects; a Sheila Hicks textile that suggests fabric as an almost painterly medium; Thaddeus Wolfe's glass vases in impossible colors; and Donna Green's dropped-from-the-heavens stoneware—all relate to the shapes and warmth and vibes and even the shadows of Gascoin. "The exhibition means to encourage conversations about and between objects and paintings and sculptures in a way that narrows the gap between fine art and the decorative arts," says Dorn. "At home, it's not such a leap from table and chair to a framed oil canvas to a blazing ceramic vase to a bronze sculpture on a pedestal. So, it starts here."

From cobwebby flea market to sleek art gallery, Kutner's enthusiasm for Gascoin has journeyed from the personal to the professional. Now forging a relationship with Bouvier and his partner, Pierre Le Ny (Galerie Bouvier-Le Ny), he aims "to bring Gascoin and other lesser-known French makers into the conversation." And, he adds, to the marketplace.