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DESIGN



Lap of Luxury

Designer sofas evolve from big-ticket investment pieces to coveted works of art. *by Rima Suqi*



The Clinging Sofa by Pierre Yovanovitch, from a solo exhibition at New York's R & Company gallery in November.

THIS PAST DECEMBER, a 1950s Jean Royère Polar Bear sofa sold at auction at Phillips New York for the tidy sum of \$487,500. The often copied, curvaceous piece, one of an estimated 300 made to order by the late French designer during a 20-year span, is having an extended moment as an It sofa. Kanye West, a proud owner of one, has called it his “favorite piece of furniture.” Sky-high gavel prices (the highest was \$754,000, in 2016) have catapulted the Polar Bear from a sought-after trophy for design aficionados to a bona fide phenomenon.

The sofa as a status object is not a new phenomenon, but what qualifies as one has evolved well beyond the typical large, expensive, and room-commanding pieces found at many design showrooms. Now a different kind of sofa market has developed: one for ultraexclusive limited-edition pieces by world-class designers, created more like works of art and sold by high-end furniture galleries that are betting these sofas will someday command returns as staggering as Royère’s Polar Bear.



This Jean Royère 1950s Polar Bear sofa sold recently at Phillips for \$487,500.

The new sofas range from \$40,000 for Pierre Gonalons's San Primo sofa, a layered, undulating design inspired by the mountain overlooking Italy's Lake Como (through Twenty First Gallery in New York; 21stgallery.com) to \$70,000 for Georgis & Mirgorodsky's Whalebone, a semicircular armless piece perched on a bronze base (through Maison Gerard in New York; maison Gerard.com) to \$85,000 for Pierre Yovanovitch's angular Stanley sofa, with a stacked wood frame and upholstery fabric that's handloomed in Brooklyn (through R & Company in New York; r-and-company.com). A custom configuration can easily raise the final number to six figures. "We have amazing craftspeople doing what they do at an exquisite range that can only be done by hand and not copied by machine," says R & Company cofounder Zesty Meyers. "There's only so much these ateliers can handle in a year."

The Tête-à-Tête and Garda designs by Achille Salvagni (through Maison Gerard) are crafted in Rome and sit on bronze feet made by a workshop that counts the Vatican among its clients.

Most people shopping at this level are either collectors or using an interior designer, or both. Regardless, the

practical considerations are the same—be sure the piece will fit in elevators and through doors, be aware that fabric choices may be dictated by the designer and any variances will need approval, that any changes or customizations add to the cost, and that because every single component is made by hand, sometimes in different countries, it may take months to finish the final product. If you're buying a historically significant sofa as a potential investment, consider removing the original upholstery and storing it until it's time to resell (in the meantime, upholster the sofa in a fabric that appeals).

As for those inevitable mishaps of everyday use: spilled wine, greasy fingerprints? "You make your own damage," says Meyers, meaning the owner is responsible for the cost of all repairs. Owners of these sofas, similar to owners of luxury cars and watches, fall into one of two camps: those who use them every day and those who use them only on special occasions. No matter, owners should treat their status sofas with great care. Meyers predicts that the value will only increase. "I believe that these sofas are going to be at the big auction houses in 10 or 20 years, and that whoever makes this investment now is making a wise one."

Going the Vintage Route

If you're not prepared to splurge on a new trophy, here are four places where you can invest in your own bit of design history.

DÉCOR NYC

At this insider's source in Manhattan, decorators are known to consign entire apartments of luxury furniture. Each piece, often custom-made, is vetted by owner Bruce Tilley, who has a comprehensive knowledge of the designs he sells and is tapped in to the best upholsterers and restorers in town. Recently he offered a 1950s Nana Ditzel sofa in a bouclé fabric from Pollack (\$6,795). decornyc.com

CHAIRISH

Billed as an e-commerce platform for "design lovers to buy and sell chic vintage decor, furniture, and art," Chairish screens all pieces and coordinates shipping as part of the transaction. Search for sofas marked A-list to discover things like a pair of Jay Spectre mohair three-seater sofas on polished chrome bases (\$8,400). chairish.com

MODERN RESALE

Founded eight years ago by industry veterans Sarah Whipple and Stacia Vinar, this L.A.-based dealer specializes in classic modern designer furniture that's guaranteed authentic. A recent browse yielded pieces by Minotti (Seymour sectional, \$20,520) and B&B Italia (George sofa, \$2,975). modernresale.com

SOOTHEBY'S HOME

The auction house got into the online consignment business with the acquisition of Viyet in 2018 and sells all categories of home furnishings from individuals as well as galleries and showrooms. Buyers can ask questions in real time via chat, with the option to "make an offer" or "buy now." Recent offerings included a Poul Kjærholm PK 31 sofa (\$24,985) and a classic Tommi Parzinger from the '50s (\$8,250). sothebyshome.com