

SO L A S T Y S C E N T U R Y

Curated like his ultra-cool concept store - with an ever-evolving, and always intriguing, collection - *Emmanuel de Bayser's* Berlin pied-à-terre is a paean to mid-century modernism

By Grace Cain



The Collector

*Design enthusiast
Emmanuel de Bayser
in his Berlin apartment*

The Collector

A healthy youthful rebellion, for most people, tends to be limited to regrettable fashion choices and lies pertaining to where they spent the previous Saturday night. For Emmanuel de Bayser, however, it took the form of a deep passion for mid-century furniture. “I guess when you grow up, you want to find your own way of thinking and being,” he says. “I was always surrounded by classical French art and interiors, so my natural reaction was to start collecting contemporary design.”

Fast-forward 30 years, and you’ll find two apartments filled with evidence that de Bayser’s love of modernism was not just a fleeting phase. He splits his time (and his collection) between Paris, where he grew up, and Berlin, where he lives above his hugely successful concept store, The Corner. “Two European capital cities, and they are both so different,” he muses. “In many ways, Berlin is like a new city. It’s full of young, creative people, and there’s a collage of different architectural styles that make it very visually inspiring.”

Presumably Berlin’s buzzy art scene and distinctive gritty glamour have influenced the décor in de Bayser’s apartment? “I would have to say yes, even though it is still very Parisian in many ways,” he says. “I am French and I love French modernism, so that is always going to be an influence. But while my collection in Paris is very eclectic, the one in Berlin is much more radical. Practically everything is post-1950.”

As fellow design enthusiasts have probably already clocked, some of the highlights of de Bayser’s Berlin collection are shown in these pages. Take the curvaceous Paul Frankl coffee table, which holds court in the centre of a living space, flanked by Jean Royère’s gently welcoming (and aptly named) Polar Bear sofa and easy chairs; or the strikingly simple monochrome Charlotte Perriand sideboard, where a selection of Alexandre Noll’s wooden sculptures keep company with George Jouve’s undulating green lamp. The self-taught designer Jean Prouvé (a favourite of de Bayser) maintains a particularly strong presence throughout the apartment: his clean, industrial style is instantly recognisable in the dining chairs, and in the green and white desk in de Bayser’s enviable library/study.

Considering that French designers are so well represented in his collection, it comes as a surprise to hear that de Bayser’s interest in modernism did not originate in the design landscape of his homeland. “It’s kind of weird. In my early twenties, I was more drawn to American designers and brands, particularly Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson and Herman Miller,” he reveals. It wasn’t until years later (“when I started earning a little more money”, he says, wryly) that he began to garner the love of French modernism that has continued to define his collection to this day.

‘Collector’ is perhaps not the best way to describe de Bayser, however; ‘curator’ may be more apt. “I’ve never felt the need to keep all the things that I have bought,” he explains. “When I see something I like, I tell myself that I have to sell something else before I can buy it. I’ve always been very happy to purchase something, enjoy it and then resell. Maybe it’s because I come from a family of art dealers.”

Thus, the mystery of the French classical childhood is solved. “My grandmother on my mother’s side was a dealer in 18th- and 19th-century paintings and objects, and my father’s family established a gallery that specialised in the drawings of the Old Masters,” de Bayser explains. All that art history, and yet he’s never tempted by anything created before the middle of the last century? “Well, I don’t completely reject everything pre-1950 – I’m not that radical!” de Bayser exclaims. “No, no. I always try to avoid becoming stuck in a single vision. It’s very important to be open-minded. Going beyond your comfort zone may be more challenging, but it’s always more interesting. In many ways, curating an apartment is very similar to running a fashion store; you can’t stock the same designers for 20 years, because you would go bankrupt.” >

“When I’m decorating an apartment, my focus is on *timelessness*: firstly, because I hope to live there for many years; secondly, because it’s more *reassuring*. I see an interior as a place where I can *relax*. When people come into my apartment, they tell me how *peaceful* it is. That’s exactly what I’m trying to do with my collection. I want people to *feel at home*”

Clockwise from top left: A Jean Prouvé desk with asymmetric legs is accompanied by a Pierre Jeanneret chair upholstered in green leather; in the living room, a Pol Chambost pitcher sits on a Paul Frankl cork-top coffee table, next to Jean Royère’s cult-favourite Polar Bear sofa in soft wool velvet; a piece by French artist Jean Arp hangs above a Charlotte Perriand sideboard; a 1950s Gino Sarfatti lamp is one of myriad colourful touches in the spacious bedroom; de Bayser’s petite Jean Royère Egg chair makes for a cosy spot beside the mantle





This page: The library/study features Philip Arctander's shearling Clam Chair, a rare 1930s Moroccan Beni Ouarain rug and bookshelves dotted with Rick Owens vases. Opposite page: Sunburst mirrors by French designer and jeweller Line Vautrin adorn the wall above an Angelo Mangiarotti marble table, home to a vase by Robert and Jean Cloutier

He's well-placed to comment. On a professional level, de Bayser channels his eye for design into The Corner, which he founded with his partner, Josef Voelk. "The way we edit and merchandise the store has definitely influenced the way I approach an interior," he says. "Of course, in the store we can opt for more of a shock factor, because it naturally changes all the time. When I'm decorating an apartment, my focus is on timelessness: firstly, because I hope to live there for many years; and secondly, because it is more reassuring.

"I see an interior as a place where I can relax," he continues, thoughtfully. And de Bayser does this a lot, cheerfully leaping between ideas, his mind buzzing from one thought to the next, never still. "And whenever people come into my apartment – in Berlin or Paris – they tell me how peaceful it is. That's exactly what I'm trying to do with my collection. I want people to feel at home. Of course, it must be organised, and the pieces should work well together; but in the end, I just want people to feel comfortable enough to sit down and relax."

It's true that there is a sense of warmth to de Bayser's apartment. He skirts the sparseness that comes with mid-century modernism's clean lines, pared-back forms and focus on functionality. In part, this is due to his knack for choosing and mixing materials. "I'm not a very glossy person. A little bronze patina can be nice, but I prefer matte textures," he says. "The softness of fabric, the warmth of wood, the coldness of stone... For me, a room is only complete when you have these contrasts. They add a little tension into the peace, which makes the interior much more intriguing."

Tension seems to be a recurring theme in de Bayser's life: tension between the two cities he calls home; between the classic and the contemporary; within his own approach to collecting. One moment, he'll emphasise the importance of timelessness; the next, he'll argue that it's important to evolve. "It's more interesting when a space is constantly in flux. Even if the shell remains the same, you can always alter the aspects inside. I'm a work-in-progress sort of guy... for me, an apartment is never truly finished."

Perhaps this thoughtful but consistent turnover is a by-product of those art-dealer genes, which have certainly had an effect on de Bayser's trajectory as a collector: "I was originally more into furniture, but I have become increasingly interested in objects – partly because I'm running out of space, and it's a way of prolonging the experience of decorating! I started collecting ceramics because I wanted to make the tables and sideboards look more interesting, and it has grown from there." As for his favourite ceramicist? That'll be Georges Jouve, who was himself a master of both evolution and timelessness. "In the beginning his work was quite figurative, but it gradually became more conceptual," says de Bayser. "At the time, his designs were visionary, but I think the fact that they are still in demand today shows that his work has reached a point where it is truly timeless."

When it comes to sourcing new additions to his collections, de Bayser often turns to online auctions – although they're not without their limitations. "The great thing about the internet is that it makes the learning process faster. It's much easier to research pieces and learn what visual aspects to look for in a particular design. However, the two-dimensional can never replace the three-dimensional, so it's still important to actually view an item to understand its proportions and how it will work with other pieces in the room."

This idea that each design has to relate to its surroundings resurfaces frequently in conversation with de Bayser. "I do not treasure particular objects, I treasure the way different objects talk with each other," he explains. "Choosing new pieces is an amazing joy for me, because I love the process of putting them all together in a way that brings them to life and creates a certain tension." There's that word again. "I do believe that every design becomes much more interesting when it's in conversation with others," de Bayser continues. "I love the feeling of finding the right combination. For me, that's the most thrilling part of curating an interior." □

Mancio Yliere/Photofeyr; Eric Campestrini for The Socialite Family



COLLECTORS' TIPS

01/ Begin with one iconic investment piece. From there, you can find new objects and evolve your collection over time. I like all the pieces in my apartment for different reasons, but I like them even more when they are in conversation with each other.

02/ Be patient, and go for quality instead of quantity.

03/ Buy pieces that you really like; be personal in your approach, and choose pieces that say something about you. Curating an interior is always a very dynamic process, so don't be afraid of trying, making a mistake, and trying again.

04/ Always check provenance and restoration history.

05/ After you have been collecting for a while, trust your instincts. You will develop an eye whereby you can understand the quality of something just by looking at the material and the craftsmanship – and that is a great joy.