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At Par Excellence, artisan partners share resources and know-how for the sake of French craft—and designers' benefit

BY MEL STUDACH

A FRENCH DESIGN COLLECTIVE HEADQUARTERED

in a soon-to-be-unveiled Thomas Pheasant-redesigned showroom on the Bowery in New York City celebrates craft born nearly 4,000 miles away. Par Excellence represents eight of France's top artisans—from metalworkers who have worked on the gates of Versailles to the trimmings- and tassels-making firm that participated in the restoration of the royal theater at the palace. It provides just as many positives for the artisans themselves as it does creative range for the interior designers it serves.

Preservation of craft is a key part of the venture's mission. Consider Lison de Caunes, a straw marquetry artisan who opened her Paris studio in the mid-1970s. Despite a resurgence of interest in designs of the Art Deco era, by the 1980s de Caunes's trade was nearly devoid of specialized artisans. "It has always been my aim to make this craft fashionable again," says de Caunes, who is also a granddaughter of French decorator and furniture designer André Groult.

"The technique had been forgotten, and it is now taught in specialized schools, which, for me, is a great success. I was alone



- Château de Versailles became Atelier de Ricou's workroom on assignment during the 2015–2017 project. For the restoration of the Queen's guardroom, lead architect Frédéric Didier tapped the decorative painting firm to restore the golden ornamentation and frames on the doors and shutters.

- Clockwise from top: Manufacture de Tapis de Bourgogne has been hand-making custom rugs, carpets, and tapestries for more than 60 years; Ozone lighting has produced custom fixture designs for architects such as Joseph Dirand and Régis Botta; Declercq Passamentiers hand-weaves gimps, braids and bullion fringes for its trims and tassels; artisan Lison de Caunes in her straw marquetry workshop.

for more than 20 years, and now I have competition with other workshops, which forces me to innovate with new patterns and collaborate with craftsmen.”

Establishing those creative relationships became significantly easier when, in 2016, de Caunes’s studio joined upholsterer Charles Jouffre’s collective Par Excellence, whose novel model tests the theory that the artisans’ business is better together. Having established Jouffre US in 2001, Jouffre had become a de facto industry consultant. “I regularly came across French companies with exceptional know-how on our construction sites in Europe, that dreamed of coming to try their luck in the U.S. themselves, and asked me how to do so,” he says.

After being asked the same question dozens of times, in 2016 Jouffre formed Par Excellence with Declercq Passementiers and Lison de Caunes on board. “I wanted to share my experiences with others,” says Jérôme Declercq, a sixth-generation executive at the trimming, tassel, and fabric maker. “It’s not the time for individuality anymore. To be in New York with others gave me a lot of energy and faith in the future.”

Others were soon seduced by Jouffre’s vision. Since its launch, Par Excellence has added more French workshops to its roster: decorative painter Atelier de Ricou, rug and carpet weaver Manufacture de Tapis de Bourgogne, electrical hardware manufacturer Meljac, lighting studio Ozone, and decorative arts restorer Ateliers Saint-Jacques.

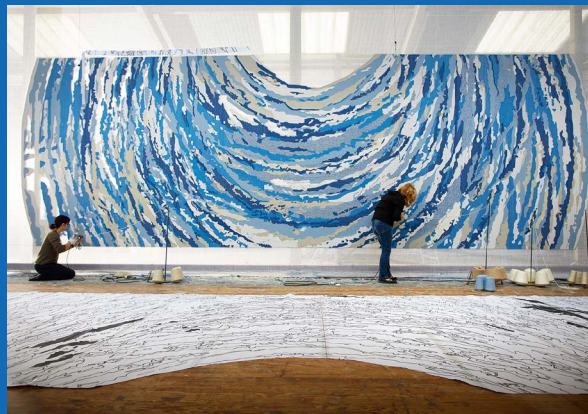
For many in the collective, Par Excel-

lence fills a need the brands wouldn’t have been able to satisfy on their own. De Caunes needed a place in the city to present samples and host meetings with clients—Peter Marino, Ernest de la Torre, and Frank de Biasi among them. The cofounders of Ozone, a 20-year-old company, enjoy access to the know-how and advice of the partnership’s heritage brands.

“It has been very fruitful,” says Etienne Gounot, cofounder of Ozone, of the resource channels. “We feel like being in the same boat is much stronger than [going it] alone in the big, intense city of New York.”

Those associative factors helped propel Ateliers Saint-Jacques’s business as well. “Having our name next to Charles Jouffre’s or Lison de Caunes’s gave us another dimension in New York,” says Pierre-Yves Guenec, a metalworker and blacksmith at the atelier. “We started to exist in a place in which we had been working for 30 years while remaining anonymous.”

Then there are the benefits reaped by all: “Sharing a showroom, experiences, addresses, and clients with people who have the same aim and share the same vision of the *art de vivre* is very rich and pleasant,”



says de Caunes.

Despite its members’ differing specialties, the mission to preserve French artistry is cross-collective. “We, as workers, are a link in a precious chain, and we want the next generation to be able to accomplish themselves through the craft like we did, and like many generations did before us,” says Guenec. “In this world, more than ever, preserving craft and passing along technique must be at the heart of our mission,” echoes Declercq.

Since de Caunes joined the collective, the extra visibility she has received has led to numerous commissions, including one from architect De la Torre for a series of straw marquetry wall panels designed to awe in the private entrances of a Gramercy Park residential building—and the need to bring in more hands. De Caunes has grown her workshop, to a current head count of 10, including daughter Pauline and sister Marie. “I’m no longer alone!” she rejoices. Not in the workshop, nor in the showroom.