

# Windows of Opportunity

Gallerist Ramis Barquet would never label classics of 20th century design works of art – but he doesn't shy away from placing them on equally elevated pedestals

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Visibly, audibly, Ramis Barquet relishes his work. This past January, the Mexican businessman opened a gallery in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. Despite its proximity to art world goliaths like the Gagosian, however, Sebastian + Barquet does not deal in fine art. Instead, this gallery has a distinct dual mission: to select 20th century design pieces showcased in its museum-like vitrines, and to educate through an annual program of eight exhibitions that will draw on Barquet's personal furniture collection which numbers over 700 pieces. Acquired with passion and celerity, the collection's aesthetic and historical breadth is surprising, including work by designers and artists ranging from Charlotte Perriand, Donald Judd and Ettore Sottsass to Frank Gehry, Tom Dixon and the Campana brothers.

The anchor of the gallery's inaugural exhibition was Marc Newson's riveted aluminum Lockheed Lounge, which Barquet bought for over one million dollars at auction, the highest price paid to date for the work of a living designer. At the time, Newson was also showing limited-edition pieces across the street at the Gagosian Gallery. Perhaps more than the exorbitant prices being paid at design auctions, this juxtaposition – the unselfconscious presence of Sebastian + Barquet beside the Gagosian, both showing Newsons – signaled a change in the design market. >



IN THE HEART OF ARTNESS: In New York's art district, Ramis Barquet exhibits design out of a jewel-like gallery and its companion showroom, both designed by Enrique Norten



DESIGN IS NOT ART: Barquet displays art amongst his design (above, in window) but doesn't confuse the two. His collection includes the Long Chair by Marcel Breuer (top left), a steel desk by Max Ingrand for Peugeot (left) and shelving by Charlotte Perriand (below)



corridors. A high school graduate, he now runs three art galleries in Monterrey and Manhattan, specializing in Latin American contemporary art. In 1991, when the US art market went bust and Mexico's was booming, Barquet came to New York to buy Mexican pieces from American collectors. By 1996, however, when Mexico's finances had plummeted, he committed to New York, opening a midtown art gallery and another in Chelsea in 2003.

Today, Sebastian + Barquet's purpose is to show and sell design but, like a handful of other showrooms, including Established & Sons and R20th Century, Barquet also commissions limited-edition pieces and produces accompanying shows to exhibit the original work. These commissions and shows will extend beyond furniture, to include jewelry, architecture, shoes, car, fashion, etc. "We want to focus on the product but also hang drawings and plans beside the work, to show the process," explains Barquet. "And I want every one of our designers to help design their own exhibition." Like the companion showroom, the new gallery was designed by Mexican architect Enrique Norten of TEN Arquitectos, who also designed the gallery's first line of commissioned furniture. It's a concrete room wrapped by deep glass vitrines that open like cabinets allowing for easy installation of the work. The space would be fully exposed to the street (and vice-versa), except that the glass is partly frosted and etched with delicate concentric lines. At night, the storefront glows like a lantern.

Perhaps Barquet's project began as an exercise in nostalgia, but it may grow into one of Manhattan's finest design venues and a profitable business. Despite his position at the crossroads of the international art world, Barquet emphasizes the distinct line that divides design from art. "When you talk to the great designers, it's like talking to an artist but design is more precise; it is made for use." Instead, he says, he chose the location in order to court members of the art world as possible patrons: "All the collectors are here, and now they will see objects they don't normally see. I'm pushing everybody to invest in design. The market is just beginning to take off." **SQ**

"There used to be thin, black-and-white catalogs at the auction houses and the pieces were all American classic design," Barquet recalls in a thick Mexican accent. "Now it's hefty catalogs, in color, with more modern pieces. I want to help people learn more about design and help to strengthen the market for it."

In his showroom two blocks north of the gallery, Barquet stands beside a baroque cabinet designed by Carlo Bugatti in 1893. He is surrounded by bird-like Serge Mouille lamps, a raffia chair by Tom Dixon, a steel chair by Donald Judd that could have been made from a filing cabinet, and a coffee table by Yves Klein filled with crumpled gold leaf. He's a warm man with curly brown hair and smiling blue eyes, wearing a handsome Etro tie striped with green silk and gray flannel. Like Ramis, his father was a businessman but also a sculptor and Barquet grew up in a modernist glass box ("like a Neutra," he explains), with custom-made furniture, two circular interior gardens and wood-paneled