

A NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

What does the director of two important Parisian art institutions collect himself? Olivier Gabet gives Cynthia Rose a glimpse inside his apartment, where folk art meets cutting-edge design. Photography by Alex Crétey Systemans





Among the smart façades of Paris' rue de Monceau hides perhaps the city's most discreet museum, the Musée Nissim de Camondo. A 1911 replica of Versailles' Petit Trianon, it was once the home of Turkish-born collector Moïse de Camondo. The 18th-century arts and crafts he assembled in it are mythic: they include fine Sèvres porcelain, Pierre Gouthière sconces and furniture made for Marie Antoinette. Yet Camondo's treasures testify to a tragic loss, a world of Franco-Jewish patrons murdered during the Second World War.

Obsessed with leaving his mansion as a museum, Camondo included a residence for its director. This is now home to Olivier Gabet, but the 44-year-old doesn't merely direct the Camondo: he also oversees the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the capital's huge museum of decorative arts, which occupies a wing of the Louvre. As such, Gabet works in one museum and lives in another.

Like Camondo, he amasses things he adores: classics of mid-20th century style and contemporary ceramics. But, unlike the museum founder, Gabet is unbothered by provenance: 'For me, what comes first is always material, colour and form. Nothing has to be by a certain artist nor do I always need a thing to be signed.' Gabet laughs. 'Generally speaking, I'm very impious.'

Gabet's professional path has been atypical. He studied art history at the École nationale des chartes, then spent a year at the French state heritage school. Yet his thesis tackled an oft-derided subject, that of cabinet-making under the Second Empire. It focused on the maker Henri-Auguste Fourdinois, whose father-in-law was the English satirist William Hone. Researching Fourdinois' family ties put this fervent Anglophile in touch with key London curators.

It was just the start of a meteoric rise. By the age of 29, Gabet was in charge of the Decorative Arts collection at Paris' Musée d'Orsay. There he became close friends with Laurence de Cars, who is now the Louvre's first-ever woman director. Back in 2008, when de Cars was helping create the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Gabet joined her. For six years, he says, 'I learned exactly how you build a grand museum from nothing'. At 36, he became head of Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the Nissim de Camondo.

In eight years, he has transformed his two museums. Gabet views their founding mission – to emphasise both French creation and the history of decorative arts – as an international one. Within this context he has overhauled the presentation of collections and re-designed galleries, all the while staging thoughtful, stylish shows.

In 2017, his blockbuster *Christian Dior* ran in tandem with the enterprising *Constance Guisset*. Both shows concerned French designers with a global reach. But while Dior's story was fixed and historic, Guisset's was its opposite: youthful, still-evolving and ultra-modern. Other shows, like 2015's *Unbuttoning Fashion* (about the humble fastener) and 2016's *From Caricature to Poster Art*, proved as groundbreaking as they were surprising. On 7 October, Gabet opens a show at the Camondo devised by Edmund de Waal titled *Letters to Camondo*, also the name of the artist's new book. He will be the first contemporary maker to exhibit there.

The innovations don't stop with galleries and exhibitions.



Gabet gave the Musée des Arts Décoratifs its elegant restaurant Loulou – named for Yves Saint Laurent stylist Loulou de la Falaise. Its institutional boutique, 107 Rivoli, now sells one-off art in addition to books and decorative objects. All these pieces are commissioned from outstanding names, such as Paola Navone and Vanessa Mitrani.

The result has been a faithful clientele. Today, says Gabet, 'Our public is very French, Parisian and European. We get a lot of artists, makers and designers but we see far fewer tourists than most museums. People know why they're coming through our doors and tend to come back multiple times a year.' (In 2020, visitors to the Louvre fell by 75% but figures for the Musée des Arts Décoratifs shrank by only 35%, despite longer COVID-19 closures.)

How does the home of such a bold thinker look? To find out, you open a door in the wall around the Camondo. Just inside stands a simple staircase filled with light. The minute he saw it, says Gabet, he had to move in. 'I already had an apartment I loved. But that staircase totally seduced me.'

Previous page: Olivier Gabet with his wire-haired dachshund, Philo, seated on Papa Bear chair by Pierre Yovanovitch, 2021. The lamp on the right of the mantelpiece is by Guillaume Bardet. Above: staircase with pieces on the shelf by Enzo Mari (left) and Francois-Xavier Baillery (right), and pictures by Emilie Duserre (top) and Pierre Seinturier (right). Opposite: overflowing bookcase

Along its shelves, he's set vessels by the French designer François-Xavier Balléry and Italy's late design guru Enzo Mari. The former are PVC imitations of plumbing pipes, the latter a classic 1968 design (from his *Bambù* series of vases). Over these hangs an abstract drawing in felt-tip pen by the young artist Emilie Duserre. A second piece comes from the painter Pierre Seinturier, a Parisian whose work Gabet loves.

The rooms upstairs don't just expose Gabet's interests – they fight to contain them. Every space teems with books, glass, ceramics, paintings and prints. Pieces overflow the shelves, line every baseboard and weigh down the tables. The clear light is multiplied by glass, absorbed into clay and lost in dark, blistered metal. But it's a panorama made from countless compositions. A portrait of Gabet's dachshund, Philo, for example, shares space with vessels by ceramicist Jean de Lespinasse (1896-1979). Wooden folk sculptures mix with Venetian glass and an old-fashioned figurine in faïence de Quimper. His grandmother had a collection of these Breton pieces – pottery that is still hand-painted today. 'That little chap's been part of my life since I was two.'

So have ceramics more broadly; Gabet has always loved their combination of force and fragility. 'All that emotion you feel in front of a work by Matisse, you can also feel for them. Ceramics can display that same poise, that same mastery of technique and sensation. Our world likes opposing things to one another. But what I love myself, whether it's here or at work, is seeing things together, putting them in a dialogue,

engaging them with a moment in time or a certain idea.'

Gabet has many pieces from present-day makers, including works in concrete by artist Frédéric Gautier, 3D-printed vessels by Dutch designer Piet Hein Eek and a range of works in glass by François Azambourg and Réjean Peytavin. Newer works co-exist with classic pieces by the likes of de Lespinasse, Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), Roger Capron (1922-2006) and, most of all, Jacques Blin (1920-1995).

Thanks to Gabet's late spouse, Philippe, Blin has long held a central place in his life: 'We were together for 10 years and he was crazy about ceramics. Self-taught, an autodidact, but one with the most wonderful eye and sensibility. When we met in 2006, I didn't yet know Blin. But Philippe collected him and had 30 or 40 pieces.'

From 1959 to 1985, Blin ran a small atelier in Montparnasse. There, with the younger artist Jean Rustin, he forged a style which still feels unique. His pieces are monochromatic, roughened for a 'cloudy' look, and deeply scored with strong, pictographic images. Largely executed by Rustin, these marks and figures brim with personality.

Gabet likes makers who share his love for encountering difference – different views and cultures, but also varied ways of making. 'Our age talks incessantly about globalisation. But, in the world of decorative arts, objects have *always* travelled, much more than paintings or styles of architecture or sculpture. You see it in every century, across all geographies.'



'I love seeing things together, putting them in a dialogue, engaging them with a moment in time or a certain idea'

Left: one of the monochromatic, scored works by Jacques Blin (behind) and a ceramic piece by Philippe Borderieux. Right: Gabet in his home office with a fin-de-siècle dress collar by Paul Poirret and an enamel and cast acrylic piece by Pierre-Yves Hervy-Vaillant





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He adds: 'Right now, we're preparing a show on Louis Cartier and Islamic art [21 October – 20 February 2022]. I've been utterly fascinated by the ways those objects moved. Pieces that were once the treasures of Venice were collected by Louis XIV and then... they just keep moving. By 1910, they've reached Cartier's collection and changed how the firm makes jewellery.'

Gabet has spent much of the past 12 months at home, but his office there is filled with works that inspire him. One piece – a dark, multi-layered ring of feathers – looks like an ancient Oceanic artefact. In fact it's a fin-de-siècle dress collar by Paul Poiret, one of haute couture's most important founders. ('Unbelievably, I found that in a flea market'.) It sits next to a vivid work in enamel and cast acrylic. 'That's by Pierre-Yves Hervy-Vaillant, a close friend who died of cancer. Philippe and I hung those two pieces up together.'

The table underneath holds yet more talismans. One of Gabet's favourites is the frothy-looking piece in front. 'That was a birthday gift. It's by Philippe Borderieux, a painter who draws and also makes ceramics. I don't really care for his paintings, but I'm completely mad about his ceramics.'

Despite its blue Ekstrem chairs and Jean Paul Gaultier chest of drawers, nothing in Gabet's home is 'interior decoration'. Neither are his objects, in the usual sense, collections. This is the exterior shape of a very interior life, one that is centred on learning and communication. 'Really, the most beautiful things are books,' says Gabet. 'The only thing more basic for me than reading is breathing.'

From novels to poetry, monographs to catalogues, he surrounds himself with every kind of title. 'I've always bought so many books, but if you ask me which are the ones I love the most, then that's literature and it's often English.'

Fine bindings or first editions, though, hold no interest. 'Consider Pierre Bergé,' says Gabet. 'He was the archetypal businessman [Bergé built the Yves Saint Laurent empire] and was always very close to museums. He played a central role in making me a director. One day we met for lunch; we were meant to talk about fashion but talked of nothing but literature. Bergé had a legendary library, with exquisite first editions and rarities. But that day he told me, "I sold all of it. I've replaced everything with paperbacks that fit in my pockets". He was telling me what really counts.'

Reading, says Gabet, gives him the energy to do everything else – and he trusts it to equip him for the future. 'Because as much as I love objects and I adore books, everything that really counts,' he says, tapping his head, 'that's up here.'

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Opposite: prototype of a chest of drawers designed by Jean Paul Gaultier for Roche Bobois; above it hangs a piece by Philippe Borderieux. This page, top: blue Ekstrem chairs by Norwegian designer Terje Ekstrøm. Left: display of objects with a lamp by French designer Constance Guisset