

PATRICK JOUIN'S ZERMATT ABOUT WATER RANGE FOR PUIFORCAT INCLUDES, FROM BOTTOM, A BEVERAGE BUCKET, £3,549; A WATER PITCHER, £1,183; A BEAKER, £315; AND A VASE, £1,092 (NOT SHOWN), ALL FROM HARRODS, WWW.HARRODS.COM



# Shine on

Designer Patrick Jouin is ensuring the enduring French polish of venerable silversmith Puiforcat

PHOTOGRAPHY: BENJAMIN BOUCHET WRITER: NICK VINSON

Striving to eliminate superfluous decoration, leaning more and more towards simple forms with large smooth surfaces and avoiding the imitative spirit of traditional silverware. This would be an apt description of Patrick Jouin's new Zermatt About Water range for silversmith Puiforcat, yet it actually refers to the groundbreaking work of Jean E Puiforcat, the head of the firm during the 1920s and 1930s.

Puiforcat was founded in Paris in 1820 by Jean-Baptiste Fuchs and cousins Emile and Joseph-Marie Puiforcat, yet it was, arguably, a hundred years and »



four generations later that the silversmith achieved its creative peak. Jean E Puiforcat, who unveiled his first two tea sets at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1921, gave the brand the minimalist look it still has today. While everyone else continued imitating the ornate and highly decorative style of the 19th century, Puiforcat forged ahead with his own distinctive signature based on cubes, spheres and cones, and rigorous pure lines, combining silver with rosewood, alabaster, jade and lapis lazuli. Although his career was brief (he died in 1945), he was highly productive, creating 20 sets of flatware alone.

In 1993, Jean-Louis Dumas, the then head of Hermès, acquired Puiforcat. Having recently bought the Cristalleries Saint-Louis and launched the first Hermès porcelain collection, his dream was to ‘embellish the [Hermès] garden with exceptional creative talents and know-how’ and at the same time create a unique and complete offer in tableware.

That know-how includes the art of spinning and the now rare art of planishing, where a single sheet of silver is pounded by hand with a variety of special hammers, slowly forming its shape and eventually smoothing out the metal entirely. It’s a painfully slow and now very costly process; including finishing and polishing, it can take up to 2,500 hours to produce a single tea set. Today, special care is taken to ensure the expertise of

1921–1945

## Style revolution

One hundred years after the French silversmith company was founded, fourth generation Jean E Puiforcat gave the brand its signature look, eschewing the highly decorative style of the time. The polished, clean-lined designs he produced from the 1920s until his death in 1945 still define the brand today.

‘Socoo’ tea and coffee pots, 1937, £10,010 each; orange juice pitcher, 1930, £35,490, all by Jean E Puiforcat

## ‘Jean E Puiforcat reinvented the silversmith’s art by anchoring it in modernity’

the 15-odd craftsmen is kept alive, no mean feat when the training can take up to ten years, with many giving up along the way. According to Pierre-Alexis Dumas, artistic director and son of Jean-Louis: ‘When the silversmith is working on a piece of silver and giving life to new objects, he is almost like a magician or an alchemist. To work on the matter, he will use centuries-old tools – the hammer, the forge, the lathe. Sometimes he will even make his own tools for a particular object.’

In terms of exceptional creative talent, Puiforcat was, says Dumas, ‘a true visionary of his time, who reinvented the silversmith’s art by anchoring it in modernity. He was part of, and his creations were strongly influenced by, the art deco movement. Long before all of today’s well-known theories on design, he would advocate that the form of an object should be at the service of its function.’

Puiforcat’s craftsmen continue to reproduce his work. Each year, some past treasure is brought back to life thanks to the company’s exhaustive archive of technical drawings and photographs. In addition to sterling silver, stainless steel and plated silver are also now crafted into contemporary designs by industrial designers such as Gabriele Pezzini, who designed a set of rosewood-handled knives in collaboration with Jouin and Michelin-starred chef Pierre Gagnaire.

Three years ago, Jouin created a range of flatware (awarded a Wallpaper\* Design Award in 2011, see W\*143) called Zermatt, which was all sharp edges, elongated lines and polished surfaces (a little like the sharp, icy-hard terrain it is named after). Zermatt made it into the permanent collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou museum in Paris and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. This September, during Maison & Objet Paris, the designer launched Zermatt About Water, a new range of silver-plated vessels that includes a beaker, a water jug, a vase and a beverage bucket that can hold up to three bottles. Two years in the making, the shapes are simple but far from plain and, somehow, almost a hundred years after Jean E Puiforcat was crafting his designs, aesthetically connected to his pioneering output.

Masculine, pure and precise, with a curve that rises and stops towards the top with a gentle kick, the vessels are made in two parts, pressed in a mould, then welded and finished in silver. Jouin, who regards Puiforcat as a French national treasure, has been careful to create something competitively priced. ‘We have to be efficient. It’s a challenge to do something that hasn’t been done before, but at the same time it can’t be the price of a Rolls-Royce.’ Yet he did not produce a ‘cheap flat handle’, he says. His, pressed and forged, ‘is comfortable and heavy, a practical and solid tool’. Form at the service of function, in other words. \*

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