

From a Beloved Children's Boutique to a French Décor Store

Home and Work
By AMY SERAFIN AUG. 29, 2017



Marie-France Cohen, who co-founded Bonpoint and Merci, sits on a Howard sofa strewn with pillows made by her new venture, Démodé, in her 17th-century Paris house. Céline Claret

Over the course of more than 40 years, Marie-France Cohen joined her husband, Bernard, on countless adventures. The creatively fecund Paris-based couple were perfectly matched: She was the exuberant aesthetic force; he was the calm, calibrated business mind.

Together they founded two businesses, both of which have had an outside influence on the Parisian design and philanthropic scenes. In 1975, they launched **Bonpoint**, which pioneered exquisitely made children's clothes with an impeccably French sense of style, and in 2009, two years after selling the company, they opened **Merci**, the Haut-Marais concept store that donates its revenue to children's causes in Madagascar. Since its debut, the three-level emporium has become as emblematic of the city as the soon-to-be-shuttered Right Bank stalwart Colette.

The couple bought two homes with the profits from Bonpoint's sale — a 17th-century hôtel particulier and carriage house built around a lush courtyard garden in the Seventh Arrondissement, and a country manor on seven acres at the edge of the forest near Fontainebleau. But instead of turning them into formal showcases, the Cohens made them havens of comfortable yet refined taste, inviting and unpretentious, with room for their children and grandchildren.

When Bernard died in 2010 of pancreatic cancer, Marie-France was shattered. She had already lived through the loss of her mother and four of her sisters (one of whom was the legendary perfumer **Annick Goutail**) from cancer, but rather than withdrawing, she continued running Merci on her own, finally selling it to the owners of **Gérard Darel** in 2013. Now, she is about to launch her third act, her first without Bernard. Like Merci, it is a passion project: a small design and décor store-cum-showroom called **Démodé**, which she is running out of her nearby Paris home.



Céline Claret

The house was decorated in classic bourgeois Seventh Arrondissement style when she and Bernard bought it: silk-covered walls, waxed parquet de Versailles. Now, the aura is cozy English country, the large square rooms filled with favorite pieces, such as a feather-stuffed Howard sofa and a pair of carved columns from a 16th-century ship, found in a little antiques shop near her house. The carpets were sourced in Morocco by François Dorget, owner of the French home-design chain **Caravane**. The courtyard garden is profuse and untamed, with tangles of ivy and roses, foxgloves and lupines. "It's my obsession," Cohen says, "my English influence. I had two friends who said, 'You shouldn't have plants climbing up a Louis XVI facade.' I asked, 'Why shouldn't I?'"

The garden, like the house itself, is often filled with family. Cohen has three sons — one is a Brooklyn-based filmmaker, another founded the fashionable children's wear brand **Bonton** and the third is a restaurateur whose portfolio includes **Gracie**, a chic pizzeria near Merci — and seven grandchildren. Feeling that it was indecent to occupy this big house all alone, she also took in an Afghan refugee whom she met through an agency two years ago; he lives in a studio on the top floor.

Across the way from the main living quarters is a guesthouse where Cohen is conceptualizing **Démodé**. She and three colleagues, including a daughter-in-law, work surrounded by fragrance samples and fabric swatches.

Overhead is a brass pendant lamp by Paola Navone that resembles a floppy gold hat. A Muji cabinet is filled with color inspirations: a deep green sleeve from a Bonpoint sweater, the pale pink edge of an Indian sari. **Démodé** will have an e-commerce site, and Cohen has conceived of its companion pop-up shop, on the Rue de Grenelle, as a revolving exhibition — one month it might be styled as a writer's den, the next a teenager's bedroom. Unlike Merci's Pop-Modernist offerings, the new shop's products have a softer touch, such as light azure ceramic dinnerware, parchment writing paper and velvet floor cushions decorated with images of wilted flowers, details from the paintings of the French artist Gaël Davrinche.

There have been setbacks, of course, as there always are: In June, the prototypes Cohen had made in Italy were stolen off the truck just before her first press presentation. Briefly, she thought to herself how much easier it would be to simply tend to her garden. But instead of retreating, she once again regrouped. In her free moments, she sits at the table in the kitchen and throws open the window to gaze at the riot of flowers and listen to the birds chirp in the vines. She lets herself feel the old surge. "When you are creative, you need to create," she says. "Or else you perish." ■