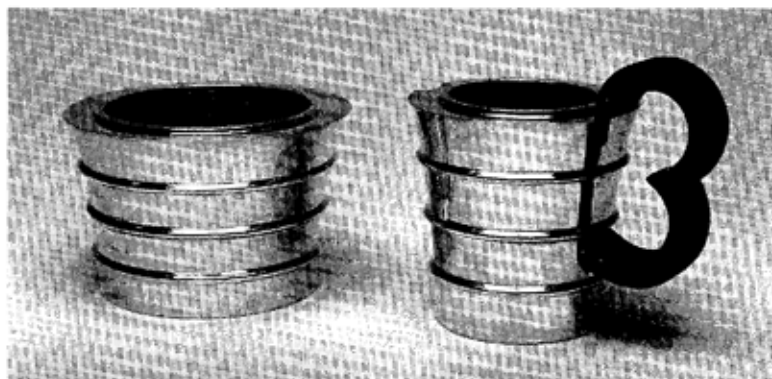


# Thoroughly modern: reflections on the work of Jean Puiforcat

SIMON BLISS

The career of the great French silversmith Jean Puiforcat (1897–1945) was brief but remarkable. Notable, of course, for its major contribution to the development of French Art Deco silver during the inter-war period, Puiforcat's mature work is acclaimed for its pure form, clean lines, precise articulation and tasteful luxury.[1] Puiforcat carried on a long family tradition of designing and making luxury objects which can be traced back to 1820. He was also a trained sculptor, influential member of both the Société des Artistes Decorateurs and the much more progressive Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM) as well as an enthusiastic and talented sportsman. Few people probably know that he was a nationally successful tennis and rugby player and a member of the French ice hockey team at the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. Indeed, his sporting interests are clearly reflected in many aspects of his work as is his love of classics and geometry – disciplines in which he apparently excelled at school.

Jean Puiforcat was born in Paris on 5 August 1897. After service in the First World War (when he was awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de Verdun) Puiforcat worked as an apprentice and designer in the family firm. At the same time, he studied sculpture under Louis-Aimé Lejeune (1884–1969). Later, his career was divided between Paris and the French Basque country where, from 1927, he and his family occupied a newly built house and studio at Urrugne, designed by his brother-in-law, the modernist architect Luis Estevez. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Puiforcat set new standards in the technical and aesthetic treatment of modern silver and contributed to most of the major exhibitions of the decorative



1 Cream jug and sugar bowl, silver, silver-gilt and rosewood, Jean Puiforcat, 1936 (Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

and industrial arts in Paris – most significantly those of 1925 and 1937. With the onset of war, Puiforcat left France for the Americas via Spain, Portugal and Cuba. He finally settled in Mexico with his family in 1941 where he continued his work, exporting principally to the United States. As soon as the war was over, Puiforcat returned to France but died almost immediately after his arrival on 20 October 1945.

Today, the legendary designer's reputation remains undimmed. His work is highly collectable and is represented in many important museums and private collections world-wide. Acquisitions of Puiforcat's work by major museums appears to have begun after the 1925 *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels* in Paris. This was a personal triumph for Puiforcat and, as many have commented, marked the point at which his own unique style began to emerge. He went on, of course, to be the dominant figure in French silver in the inter-war period.

Lengthy published studies of Puiforcat's work are surprisingly few in number. His work appears in virtually all of the general surveys of Art Deco silver and volumes dedicated to the

1. F. de Bonneville, *Jean Puiforcat*, Éditions du Regard 1986.

2. E. Flammarion, *Jean Puiforcat: Orfèvre-Sculpteur*, Flammarion 1951.

3. Jean Puiforcat, *Orfèvre-Statuaire*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 8 janvier – 9 février 1947. The catalogue is not illustrated.

4. T. Bouilhet, *L'Orfèvrerie française au XXe siècle*, Paris, 1941.

5. T. Bonney, 'New Silhouettes in the French Tea Service', *Arts and Decoration*, September 1927, p. 50.

6. T. Bonney and L. Bonney, *A Shopping Guide to Paris*, Robert M. McBride & Co, New York 1929, pp181 & 203.

7. R. Craig Miller, *Modern Design in the Metropolitan Museum of Art 1890-1990*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1990, p18.

great silversmiths, whilst de Bonneville's weighty 1986 monograph remains the most thorough account to date, particularly for its biographical information and excellent bibliography.<sup>1</sup> Earlier works, such as Ernest Flammarion's account of Puiforcat's career of 1951, contain some useful reminiscences by friends and colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Though carrying little meaningful analysis of his work, the collection of anecdotes and memories, still fresh in the minds of the contributors, can be taken seriously. Another useful source is the catalogue of the Puiforcat retrospective held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, in 1947.<sup>3</sup> Jean Fouquet's introduction gives a short account of Puiforcat's major preoccupations in both his life and work. Earlier still, Thomas Bouilhet's *L'Orfèvrerie française au XXe siècle*, published in 1941, contains a number of useful sections on Puiforcat's contribution to modern French silver.<sup>4</sup> However, given its date, and the fact that he was in self-imposed exile in Mexico, the account does not acknowledge the fact that Puiforcat was still active as a designer. Needless to say, due to Puiforcat's reputation and unceasing involvement with exhibitions during his short career, contemporary periodicals contain many references to his work. Either as a single contributor, or as part of his collaborations with others, illustrations of Puiforcat's work, together with commentaries and critiques (by no means all of them entirely flattering) can be found in virtually all of the popular Parisian journals dedicated to the decorative arts.

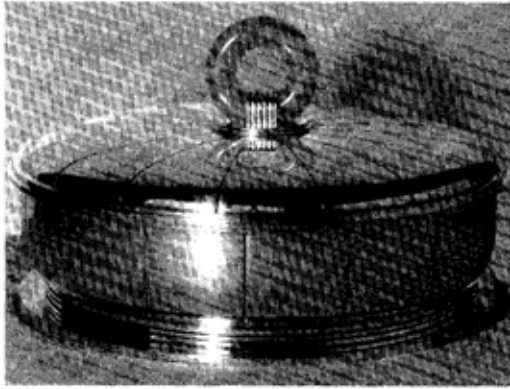
Outside France, the work of Puiforcat was heavily featured in an article by Thérèse Bonney in the New York journal *Arts and Decoration* as early as 1927. Bonney, American-born photographer and enthusiast for the inter-war decorative arts scene in Paris, was keen to stress how the new style in silver was beginning to influence the tastes of the modern French consumer:

The Parisienne ... is becoming used to the new lines of the modernistic school, she instinctively demands that the same spirit repeat itself in the furniture and accessories of her interior. Fortunately, there is a new and vigorous move-

ment in Paris, that of the decorative arts, in which the best artists and artisans of France are employing their talents in modernising the accessories of the house.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, there are also two references to Puiforcat's work in Thérèse and Louise Bonney's *A Shopping Guide to Paris*, published in New York in 1929. This is a lengthy and enthusiastic account of the delights of spending time and money in the city and is clearly aimed at a particular kind of affluent consumer. In the chapter 'Modern Decorators', the Bonneys are careful to point out the distributors of Puiforcat's work (Rouard and DIM).<sup>6</sup> Clearly, acquiring modern decorative arts in Paris was seen as an increasingly important part of any transatlantic expedition. Furthermore, the American market was always a significant one for Puiforcat; crucially so after he fled France. As indicated earlier, in the wake of his success at the 1925 Exposition, Puiforcat's work was being collected by major museums. For example, Joseph Breck of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acquired a silver service by Puiforcat for its collection in 1926.<sup>7</sup> This was to be followed by the acquisition of large amounts of his work world-wide. Today, the principal public collections are at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, and the Bröhan Museum, Berlin. In Britain, the Victoria and Albert Museum holds a small number of items, including a teaset manufactured by Elkington to one of Puiforcat's designs. Unsurprisingly, much of Puiforcat's output is in the hands of private collectors.

In spite of all this attention, both during his lifetime and following his untimely death, a critical approach to the study of Puiforcat's work is, at the time of writing, still lacking. Scant attention has been paid to his contribution to the wider concerns of the modern movement in France during the 'twenties and 'thirties, though many are at pains to assess his Art Deco credentials. He was undoubtedly affected by some of the avant-garde theories of art and design which were being propounded in Paris in the inter-war period. This short paper, therefore, considers some examples of Puiforcat's work in relation to the emergence and propa-



2 Serving dish, silver with fluorine handle, Jean Puiforcat, 1926

gation of modern art and design in Paris. Consideration of his work as a sculptor can also provide a unique insight into Puiforcat's motivations and interests. Whilst acknowledging that he will be forever remembered as the consummate Art Deco designer, Puiforcat's absorption of modernist design theory cannot be overlooked if one is to come close to a more complete view of his work.

Before his success at the 1925 *Exposition*, Puiforcat had worked through most of the styles he had grown up with in the studio and workshop of the family firm. The fluting of the vegetable serving dish of 1926 gives it a classical feel but it is, really, an exercise in restraint.[2] The ring of fluorine that forms the handle is practical and, at the same time, an echo of the circular form of the piece. According to the dimensions given in de Bonneville's monograph, the diameter (24.5cm) divided by the

height (15cm) approximates to the golden section.<sup>8</sup> Puiforcat's use of this ratio will be discussed later, but it is interesting to note its presence in a relatively early work.

The teaset of 1925, on the other hand, is a *tour de force* which can still hold its own against any piece with an apparently more suitably modernist pedigree.<sup>9</sup>[3] When viewed as an ensemble, the rhythm established by the glass handles and lids – so evocative of the precision of machine manufacture – is a telling sign of Puiforcat's interest in the modern aesthetic. Appearances can, however, be deceptive. In 1929, Puiforcat was at pains to point out that all his pieces were still made by hand. In response to an article on his work in *L'Art Vivant* which suggested that his work seemed to carry the mark of the machine, Puiforcat was reported as saying that this was, however, not the case. His explanation for the pure surfaces was the result, ironically, of a particular approach to hand production: 'Jamais on ne doit laisser le coup de marteau apparent'.<sup>10</sup> [One should never leave visible the marks of the hammer.]

Others mistook Puiforcat's simplicity for something more akin to a rite of passage. An article in *Vogue* magazine in 1925 discussed a number of examples of modern tea-services shown at the 1925 *Exposition* (Puiforcat among them). The overt simplicity of the creations was, according to the reviewer, part of a process of renewal through the rejection of historical ornament. By following the simplicity of mod-

8. de Bonneville (as note 1), p87.

9. This service was included in the exhibition *Paris-Moscou 1900-30*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 31 mai – 5 novembre 1979. It is illustrated in the catalogue on p249. The exhibition was a celebration of the exchange of avant-garde ideas in art and design between the two cities.

10. E. Tisserand, 'Chronique de l'Art Décoratif', *L'Art Vivant*, Mai 1929, p412.



3 Teaset, silver with glass handles, Jean Puiforcat, 1925

11. R. Linzeler, 'Des Services à Thé en Argent vis à l'Exposition', *Vogue*, juillet 1925.

12. Puiforcat quoted by René Herbst in *Flammarion* (as note 2), p26.

13. Bonney, (as note 5), p51.

14. Puiforcat quoted in Bouilhet (as note 4), p56.



4 Cup, silver and rosewood, Jean Puiforcat, 1935

ern form, the new young designers would comprehend the essentials of construction and, later, move on to consider decoration.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Puiforcat this didn't really happen. However, his work did develop to embrace fully what is now known as 'the machine aesthetic'. The flared silver cup of 1935 is an excellent example of this tendency as well as demonstrating the influence of cubist sculpture.<sup>[4]</sup> The dilemma for Puiforcat was whether his work should be interpreted as contemporary in its form or in its philosophical outlook. It was a problem which seems to have concerned him a great deal.

It is clear from many sources that Puiforcat's thinking about art and design was informed by a profound concern for the idea of modernity. This was expressed in a number of key ways. His attempts, through involvement with the UAM, to popularise the modern aesthetic in design are well known. In this respect, Puiforcat was always keen to point out that his ambitions for his work in silver went beyond the decorative and that his aesthetic decisions came from an understanding of mathematical order and proportion together with a recognisably modern sensibility.

Though this may not be true of all of his output, Puiforcat was quite scornful of the fashion for giving objects a superficially modern treatment by, for example, imitating machine parts – often a common practice among those designers who wished to be considered 'contemporary' in the inter-war period. Here, Puiforcat exposes what appears to have become, as early as 1925, a formal cliché:

Laissons à des artistes en quête d'idées pénibles, s'inspirer des éléments d'un moteur: leur erreur est aussi importante que celle de leurs Parents qui copiaient servilement la nature.<sup>12</sup>

[Let's leave to artists searching for bad ideas to be inspired by the elements of a motor: their mistake is as grave as that of their parents who used slavishly to copy nature]

Nevertheless, in her article mentioned above, Thérèse Bonney repeats a clearly held belief of the time that the machine was providing direct inspiration to the new artists. This derived:

...from the machinery of motor cars and the propellers of airships. At his best, the modern decorator achieves the clear cut grace of an aeroplane gliding through space. He draws his ideas from the topics of the day, and the problems that are occupying men's minds.<sup>13</sup>

Even with the benefit of hindsight it is difficult to disagree with this as a statement about what constituted the contemporary spirit in modern design. Indeed, it is rather perceptive. However, Puiforcat was to assert that one would be unlikely to find anything superficially 'modern' in his work. Bouilhet quotes Puiforcat writing in the *Figaro Illustré* in 1929:

C'est par la logique que nous rejoignons involontairement la machine ... L'orfèvrerie a de commun avec la machine le beau métal poli. Mais il serait aussi fou de faire une théière comme un piston ...<sup>14</sup>

[It is through logic that we unwittingly join with the machine. . . silversmithing has in common with the machine the beauty of polished metal. . . But it would also be crazy to make a tea pot like a piston...]

This was written when Puiforcat was preparing to break with the Société des Artistes Décorateurs and form the Union des Artistes Modernes with such luminaries as Le Corbusier,

Charlotte Perriand, Robert Mallet-Stevens and René Herbst. The UAM's attempts to promote the modern movement as the only relevant approach to design as the 1930s approached may have been arrogant, but it also had some intellectual justification which was based on more than giving objects a superficially modern treatment.

The interest in mathematical proportions on the part of Le Corbusier is well known. He may have coined the phrase 'a house is a machine for living in' but he didn't expect the house to resemble a machine. Rather, it would in its pure form and precision of execution be an appropriate form for the machine age. In a similar way, Puiforcat had begun to remove much of the applied ornament from his designs by the late 1920s, preferring to cite the logic, order and (above all) the functionalism of the machine as a formal source:

dans la mécanique, rien de superflu.<sup>15</sup>

[with the mechanical, nothing is superfluous.]

*Art et Décoration* reviewed the first UAM salon in 1930, which featured a number of works by Puiforcat, Le Corbusier, Herbst, Perriand et al and drew attention to the extreme rationalism of many of the pieces. The reviewer was less than impressed by this tendency:

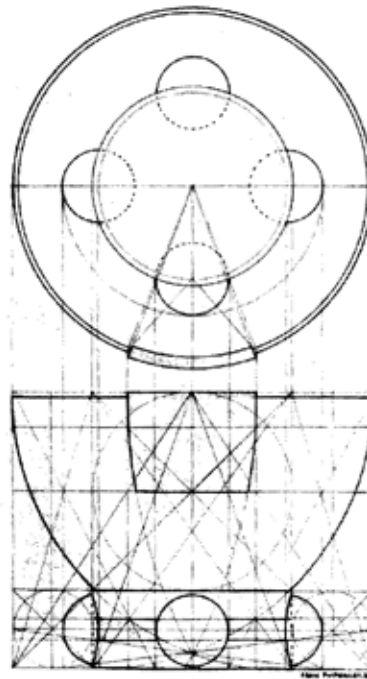
Il est vrai que la raison est raisonnable, mais il n'est pas vrai qu'elle suffise à reconstruire le monde ou le meuble par déduction.<sup>16</sup>

[It is true that reason is rational, but it is not true that it suffices to reconstruct the world or a piece of furniture by deduction.]

For Puiforcat, then, the purest modern aesthetic was not to be found in the imitation of machinery. Though some of his work comes very close to this at times. After helping to found the UAM, Puiforcat was increasingly to turn to mathematics as a means of working out proportions and relationships in his designs. This was partly a means to produce rigorously modern form and partly to satisfy his growing interests in the mystical properties of number.

Gaston Varenne commented on the relationship between modernity and the search for a pure form of expression in an article on Puiforcat in 1925:

Notre existence moderne, rapide, fiévreuse, au



COUPE DE GOLF  
TRACÉ HARMONIQUE  
FIGURE DE DÉPART N°6

5 Design for a golf trophy, Jean Puiforcat, 1934

siècle de la machine ... nous impose en effet une notion de la beauté qui vaut surtout par les proportions heureuses, par la pureté des lignes, la simplicité des formes, la parfaite harmonie des volumes.<sup>17</sup>

[Our modern existence, rapid, feverish, in the century of the machine ... imposes on us, indeed, a notion of beauty which values above all felicitous proportions through the purity of lines, the simplicity of forms, the perfect harmony of volumes]

So, the relentless spirit of the machine age gives rise to the contemplation of pure form. There is something of the modernist idea of the 'will to form' here. In other words, the logic of what Le Corbusier called 'the engineer's aesthetic' was rooted in an appreciation of mathematics and precision of execution. Yet Puiforcat, though recognising the importance of number for the engineer, preferred to emphasise the emotional, even mystical characteristics of proportions: 'Comme je le dis toujours, le nombre au service du coeur'.<sup>18</sup> [As I always say, number at the service of the heart.]

Puiforcat's concern was, therefore, for the creation of a lasting aesthetic based on a modern interpretation of classical ideas. His use of

15. As note 14.

16. L. Werth, 'Le Premier Salon de l'Union des Artistes Modernes', *Art et Décoration*, no58, 1930, p38.

17. G. Varenne, 'Jean Puiforcat - Orfèvre', *Art et Décoration*, no47, 1925, p5.

18. Puiforcat quoted in Bouilhet (as note 4), p22.

19. Puiforcat quoted in Bouilhet (as note 4), p19.

20. Le Corbusier, *Precisions*, MIT Press 1991, p72. The volume contains the full texts of a series of lectures delivered by Le Corbusier at Buenos Aires in the autumn of 1929. They were first published in Paris in 1930 and the ideas were quickly disseminated among the avant-garde.

21. Puiforcat refers to the influence of the mathematician Matila Ghyka in Flammarion, (as note 2), p19. Although most well known for 'The Geometry of Art and Life' of 1946, Gallimard (Paris) had published Ghyka's *Esthétique des Proportions dans la Nature et dans les Arts* in 1933. This is most likely to be the work that inspired Puiforcat in the 1930s.

22. Weill's address is reproduced in full in Flammarion (as note 2), pp7-17. It is a concise account of the historical development of French goldsmithing, concentrating on the influence of architectural forms.

the golden section has been noted by many and, indeed, in a letter to the Comte de Fleury in 1933, Puiforcat was explicit with respect to his sources:

Je me replongeai dans les mathématiques, poussant plus loin mes études premières, insuffisantes, et tombai sur Platon. La voie était ouverte ... Immédiatement, je sentis que l'art est divin et je travaillai les vieilles religions où partout le nombre est mystérieux et la clé de tout ... Le nombre 'd'or': voilà la solution.<sup>19</sup>

[I went back to mathematics, pushing further forward my early inadequate studies, and came across Plato. The road was opened ... Immediately, I feel that art is divine and I worked through the ancient religions or wherever number is mysterious and the key to everything ... the golden section: there's the solution.]

Puiforcat's use of geometry can be seen clearly in his drawings for a golf trophy in which he uses his trademark 'tracés harmoniques' (harmonic lines) to determine the proportions of the pieces.<sup>[5]</sup> This abstract sensibility, which was also a concern of modernist architects and designers, was intended to give weight to the concept and to suggest a connection with the mysterious number relations of the art of the past. As noted above, it also allowed for a modern, rational method of design based on what were considered to be immutable laws. In 1930, Le Corbusier had directly referred to the golden section as a key element in achieving arithmetical or geometrical order in design. Furthermore, reliance on this approach by the modern designer would produce both harmonious relationships and contemporary exactitude:

Precision has created something definitive, clear and true, unchangeable, permanent, which is the architectural instant.<sup>20</sup>



6 René Descartes, stone life-size sculpture, 1937

It is difficult to think of Puiforcat's mature work outside the context of these remarks. In the hands of both architect and designer, ancient systems of proportion were being given a new relevance as the machine age advanced!

In Puiforcat's golf trophy, a number of golden rectangles can be found - ie shapes which approximate to the proportion 1:1.618. If one measures the width of the cup, across the rim, and forms a rectangle by measuring down to the top of the silver-gilt band which links the spheres then there is a rectangle with a ratio of width to height of 1:1.625 - very close to the golden section. Smaller golden rectangles can be found by using the 'tracés harmoniques' as a guide. Notes written on Puiforcat's drawing for a table centre-piece contain four references to the golden section, using the symbol  $\phi$  (Phi) commonly used to represent the ratio. This is either expressed in its pure form or squared (which is actually  $\phi + 1$ ). Additionally, the ratio  $\sqrt{\phi}$  is used.

Although further work needs to be done on identifying Puiforcat's mathematical sources, it was certainly well known at the time that the designer's intentions were to employ a 'timeless' methodology in design in order to produce work which was, perhaps ironically, strikingly modern.<sup>21</sup> Puiforcat certainly preferred his work to be assessed against these criteria, perhaps in order to distance himself from the plethora of machine-form imitators of the day. He would have enjoyed the flattering comparison of his pieces to works of architecture in an address given by David Weill at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1934.<sup>22</sup> Weill also drew his audience's attention to the fact that Puiforcat had studied sculpture. It is, of course, in classical architecture and sculpture that one finds

most overtly an interest in order and proportion.

By the early 1930s, the reputation of the modern incarnation of the Puiforcat firm was firmly established. Promotion of its products continued apace. An indication of this is that eight out of the twelve issues of *L'Art Vivant* for 1933 featured full-page advertisements for the firm on the inside cover. Nevertheless, Puiforcat was also increasingly active as a sculptor, producing some of his most memorable pieces. The most significant of these were all produced in 1937. 'The Sprinter' made for the Pierre de Coubertin Stadium, Paris;<sup>[8]</sup> a life-size stone sculpture of René Descartes <sup>[6]</sup> and a statue of St Eloi.<sup>[7]</sup>

Françoise de Bonneville's monograph gives details of more and, in 1933, a short article in *L'Art Vivant* illustrated a number of early works, including a gigantic stone figure of a rugby player for the Yves du Manoir Stadium, Paris, the stone relief of a pelota player (traditional Basque game), some maquettes for a 'mother and child' and two female busts. The piece was very obviously intended to draw attention to a less familiar aspect of Puiforcat's output.<sup>23</sup>

His love of sporting subjects, reflected also in the many trophies he designed throughout his career, is an important clue to understanding Puiforcat's interests as a modern artist. *Art et Décoration* published an amusing article in 1934 on the subject of modern sporting trophies. Of the twenty-two examples illustrated, seven were by Puiforcat. To the author, these modern pieces represent a welcome alternative to traditional models:

... la plupart des coupes de sport sont aujourd'hui de simples objets d'art que le triomphateur peut laisser sans honte chez lui.<sup>24</sup>

[... the majority of sporting trophies today are simple artistic objects that the victor can have in his house without any sense of shame.]

Great news for all successful sporting aesthetes! More seriously, sport was clearly considered



7 St Eloi, plaster, Jean Puiforcat 1937

to be a uniquely contemporary subject by many modernist artists. It gave rise to opportunities to portray movement, speed, aggression and spectacle. Many major modernist painters and sculptors such as Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger and André Lhote had made important works with sporting themes. The Swiss-born composer Arthur Honegger (member of the influential group *Les Six*) had even produced a 'mouvement symphonique' in 1926 entitled 'Rugby'. This interest was shared by Puiforcat's friend, the jeweller Raymond Templier. At a selling exhibition in Paris in 1984, the Galerie 1900-2000 offered for sale fourteen inter-war drawings and gouaches by Templier on the subject of rugby.<sup>25</sup> It is now well known that the craze for health, fitness and the outdoor life (perhaps a product of the less sinister aspects of the 'Eugenics' movement)

had a considerable impact on inter-war European culture.

Puiforcat's sporting subjects are either conceived as monumental pieces or, like 'The Sprinter', aim to demonstrate the poise, physique and controlled power of the athlete. In addition, though, Puiforcat's runner is both machine-like and coolly classical. One senses

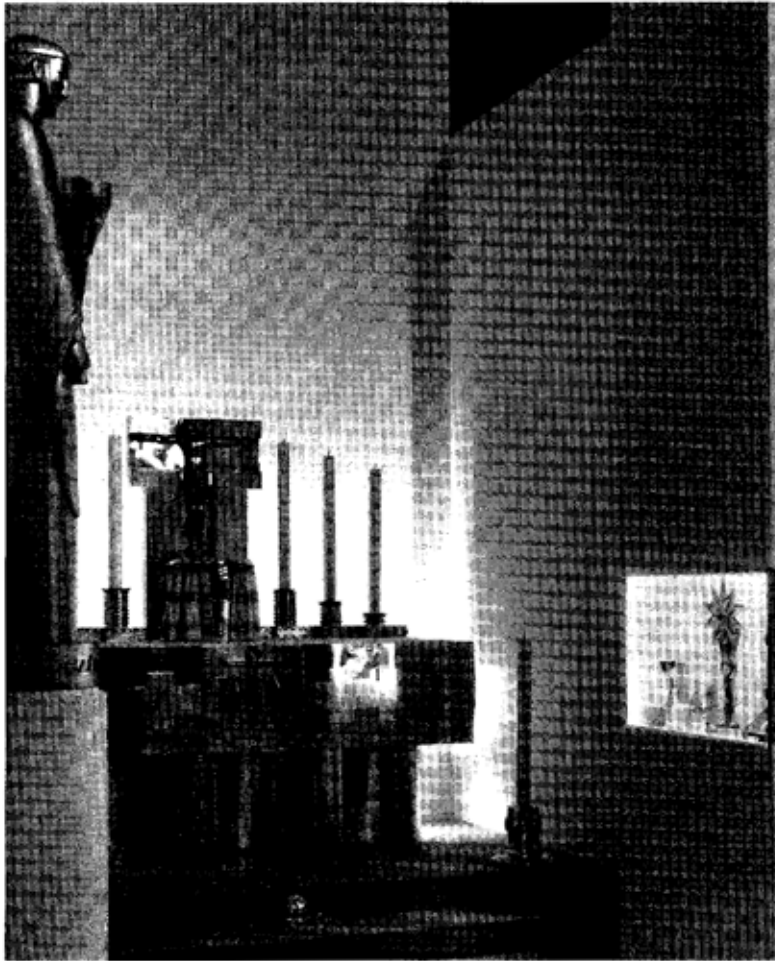


8 The Sprinter, plaster, Jean Puiforcat 1937

23. J. Guenne, 'Jean Puiforcat: Sculpteur', *L'Art Vivant*, octobre 1933.

24. P. Laroche, 'Coupes Pour le Sport', *Art et Décoration*, no63, 1934, p347.

25. *Retrosport 1850-1940*, 19 Octobre au 1 décembre 1984, Galerie 1900-2000, Paris. The catalogue has a foreword by Félix Marcilhac.



9 Interior of Puiforcat Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne

26. Marichalar quoted in Flammarion (as note 2), p25.

27. de Bonneville (as note 1) p228.

28. R. T. 'Jean Puiforcat', *Art Chrétien*, Mars 1956, p40. (Surely 'R.T.' is Raymond Templier, Puiforcat's erstwhile friend and colleague?)

that his intellect and his physical qualities are interdependent. The statue of Descartes, made to commemorate the tercentenary of the *Discours de la méthode* (1637) is an extraordinarily clinical piece, entirely in keeping with the intellectual rigour of its subject. Descartes clasps his book to his chest so that it becomes an inseparable part of himself. The rigid geometry of Puiforcat's conception only serves to reinforce the idea suggested by the Spanish critic Antonio Marichalar that the sculpture was, in effect, the representation of 'un homme machine'.<sup>26</sup> The work is now in the garden of the French embassy at The Hague.

Puiforcat's statue of St Eloi is much less rigid in its conception. As befits the patron saint of goldsmiths, he holds one of the tools of his trade (the hammer) and a simple bowl. The figure has a gentle demeanour and, in its elongation of form and rhythm of the draperies,

recalls French romanesque sculpture. Suitably enough, a gilded version of the figure calmly presided over Puiforcat's pavilion dedicated to modern liturgical silver at the 1937 *Paris Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*.<sup>[9]</sup> From the mid-1930s, Puiforcat had become increasingly interested in liturgical work and was, seemingly, determined to give rise to an approach to this kind of work which struck a balance between the figurative traditions of the past and a more modern treatment. In 1985, the figure was donated by Puiforcat's family to the church of S.Eloi in Paris.<sup>27</sup>

In 1956, an article in *Art Chrétien* observed that Puiforcat had indeed made a significant breakthrough in modern liturgical silver in 1937. However, the author is keen to point out that Puiforcat's approach to religious work was not radically modern *per se*. Having familiarised himself with the principal styles of French silver during his apprenticeship, Puiforcat was keen not to reject the past out of hand:

Mais il n'avait pas l'esprit d'un conservateur: il fallait laisser aux musées les rocailles et les acanthes du XVIIIe, survivances artistiques d'une autre ère.<sup>28</sup>

[But he didn't have the spirit of a curator: the rococo curves and acanthus of the eighteenth century had to be left to the museums as artistic survivals of another era.]

Objects displayed in the pavilion certainly bear this out, such as the silver chalice [10] and bishop's crosier.[11] However, many of the pieces are obviously based on traditional forms as the liturgical functions of the objects needed to be respected. The symbolic content is clearly



10 Chalice and paten, silver and ivory, Jean Puiforcat, circa 1937



preserved, too. There is a clear concern, though, for the use of these objects in the context of modern catholic worship. It is worth remembering that, in the immediate post-war years, a number of other key modernists (Le Corbusier and Matisse among them) turned their attention at some time or another to designing specifically for the modern church.<sup>29</sup> As in these later examples, Puiforcat's work betrays little obvious tension between the modern aesthetic and liturgical necessity.

Listeners to the Radiodiffusion Française programme *Paris vous parle* on 23 October 1945 would have heard an obituary of Puiforcat. The text survives and still remains a fitting tribute. Much is made of his contacts with the Parisian avant-garde architects and designers, like Francis Jourdain, Robert Mallet-Stevens and Le Corbusier. Indeed, his work is characterised as having clear architectonic qualities and the writer is keen to point out that Puiforcat's interest in mathematical proportions was one of his greatest legacies:

... il gardera le culte de la forme intelligente, pensée, voulue et la connaissance de la vertu de certains rapports de nombre, qui sont de première utilité en architecture ...<sup>30</sup>

[... he observed the cult of intelligent, considered and requisite form and the knowledge of the virtue of certain number relations which are of first use in architecture ...]

Emphasis is placed, naturally, on Puiforcat's patriotism and his eagerness to return to France as soon as possible after the war. Although it could be said that the sections on Puiforcat in Bouilhet's somewhat anodine *L'Orfèvrerie Française* effectively served to sum up Puiforcat's career before it had even ended, the description of him in the obituary as 'pittoresque et non conformiste' more accurately sums up the travaux of the dominant figure in modern French silver. As the obituary notes:

Tous les Musées du monde possèdent aujourd'hui quelques pièces maîtresses: sculptures, pierre taillés, bijoux ou métal signées Jean Puiforcat.<sup>31</sup>

[Today all the museums of the world possess major pieces of sculpture, carving, jewellery or metalwork signed 'Jean Puiforcat']



11 Bishop's crosier, silver and rock crystal, Jean Puiforcat, exhibited 1937

It should be noted, too, that the organisers of the 1947 retrospective at the Pavillon Marsan were able to muster 182 examples of Puiforcat's work, described fittingly by Jean Fouquet as representing: '... la tendance moderne – d'avant-garde – disait-on'.<sup>32</sup> [... the modern tendency, the 'avant-garde' one could say].

Although fate, rather than the war, brought about the demise of Jean Puiforcat, the conflict brought to an end the heroic period of modernism in the arts. Furthermore, it certainly killed off Art Deco – a stylistic label that does little justice to Puiforcat's mature work or his intellectual preoccupations.<sup>33</sup> His influence in later years was to be felt more in his rigorous application of proportions, clean lines and the abandonment of everything superfluous. In other words, all those qualities that made his work thoroughly modern.

Figs 2-10 are taken from E. Flammarion, Jean Puiforcat: Orfèvre-Sculpteur, Flammarion 1951. Every effort has been made to contact the publishers regarding this article.

29. See Le Corbusier's chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1950-54) and Matisse's decorations for the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence (1947-51). Both are rightly considered to be successful in adapting modernist forms to suit particular religious contexts.

30. Radiodiffusion Française, *Trate lu le 23 octobre 1945, au cours de l'émission 'Paris vous parle'*. This short document is unpaginated. A copy is held at the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

31. As note 30.

32. Jean Puiforcat: Orfèvre-Statuaire, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 8 Janvier - 9 février 1947, p35.

33. Interestingly, the 2003 V&A exhibition, *Art Deco 1910-39*, featured only one piece by Puiforcat, a clock of 1932.