

House & Home



► 18th-century longcase clock, £2,150, clockprogs.com

Paris is famous for its *marchés aux puces* or flea markets – vast acres of stalls located on the edge of the city selling everything from junk to antiques – and no trip to the “City of Light” would be complete without a Sunday morning spent wandering around these markets in search of a bargain.

Paris may have introduced the world to the grand art deco style, but the truth is many Parisians live in tiny flats. They are still French, of course, and those apartments are as individually furnished and elegant as you would expect.

The style is “bobo” – an affectionate term for bourgeois-bohemian. Pieces often come from the flea markets of Clignancourt and Vanves, or a smaller neighbourhood equivalent, with a view to putting together a collection of finds, inherited pieces and even things found in the street and “upcycled”.

Carole Polrot, an interior designer who moved to the UK from Paris two years ago, says the classic French look is not governed by trends.

“We are not particularly fashionable when it comes to interiors and we certainly don’t change every season. People buy for longevity and hold on to pieces from their parents and their travels. Visitors to my flat always comment on how French it is and I think that is down to the mix of flea market, eBay and Ikea. It’s a very personal look which is the key.”

Polrot is clearly an avid fan of the flea market. “You have to look closely to find a treasure, but I did once find a pair of white Wassily chairs.”

She keeps her walls and floors neutral and adds drops of colour in the soft furnishings and rugs. “The Moroccan look is very popular at the moment,” she says.

Parisian flea markets originated in the 19th century, when rag-and-bone men (known as *pêcheurs de lune* or fishermen of the moon) searched at night through the city’s rubbish to find junk to sell. They set up stalls in the centre but were sent outside the city walls to Clignancourt, Montreuil and Vanves. All three markets still exist today, although Clignancourt, at Porte St-Ouen, is the biggest – spread over seven hectares with 400 dealers – and these days Montreuil is mainly focused on fashion.

The idea of wandering around a flea market in search of a bargain may fit with the era of austerity being felt in France and elsewhere but, according to historian Andrew Hussey, it was a pastime that was actually invented by the surrealists in the 1930s. “The whole surrealist aesthetic came from flea market *flanerie* (strolling),” he says. “André Breton, the leader of the surrealists, was fascinated by pieces



An apartment in the Marais district of Paris, with decor inspired by vintage finds and antiques

Joel Ekman

Trash to treasure

Interiors ‘Bobo’ Paris and its flea markets, the last in a series by Kate Watson-Smyth

that were regarded as being of no use any more. He would go to the flea markets and pick up old ear trumpets and elephants’ feet and lots of African pieces too.”

Stuart Paterson, who specialises in sourcing pieces for restaurants, dealers and clients in the UK and acts as a tourist guide, is a regular at Clignancourt. “There’s everything from antique dealers with proper shops to guys selling stuff from a blanket,” he says. Sadly, Paterson points out that the crippled French economy has meant the markets are not the bustling, crowded places of 10 years ago.

“You don’t hear as many French voices as you used to. What seems to



▲ Desk armchair, £250, littleparis.co.uk

happen is that when times are tough the traders put their prices up rather than cutting them and hoping to sell more as you might see in the UK,” says Paterson. “When the French do come they buy industrial furniture and huge ancestral paintings, often by Dutch painters as well as coloured plastic chairs from *les années pop* [pop art era] and vintage metal clocks.”

It is perhaps not surprising that with rising prices, the Parisians have gone elsewhere. Rachel Khoo, author of *My Little French Kitchen* (2013), has a typically tiny studio flat of 21 sq metres in the 19th arrondissement,

Belleville. She says that while the traditional flea markets have become quite touristy, the French still love to rummage and have found a new source of affordable vintage. “You see signs in the neighbourhood for “*vide grenier*” (empty attic) and you can find all sorts of things. Everyone goes – from poor students to young professionals and wealthy Parisians. You find all walks of life and you can really haggle. There’s also a website called *brocabcac.fr* where you can look up details of sales in your area.”

Khoo has bought many items from these sales for her flat, which has become almost as famous as her recipes and typifies the bohemian look

► Josephine M table lamp in gold, £1,149, ambiente direct.com



▲ Orimono cushion flower, £68, anthropologie.eu



▲ Hare head, £225 each, londontaxidermy.com



▲ Oliver iron bedstead, £275, featherandblack.com



▲ Cocotte pot, £75, toast.co.uk



▲ Faitout pot, £75, toast.co.uk



▲ Eve cup and saucer, £25, toast.co.uk



with its brightly coloured tiles and mismatched furniture. "The classic Parisian style is to have non-matching pieces," she says. "The boba look is very strong at the moment; muted colours and bold designs. My kitchen has multicoloured Moroccan tiles which are perfect."

Alon Kasha, a US architect who specialises in renovating apartments for wealthy expats on the left bank, is another interior designer who has adopted the boba look. He lives in a tiny apartment under the eaves with his wife Betsy, and has repurposed an old door as a bedhead, an approach which typifies this style. "We buy so much from flea markets. Not just the

bedhead, but a bedside table – which was a small dining table so we cut the legs down – chairs, even an antique suitcase and mirror."

However, in a return to the ways of the original rag-and-bone men, many Parisians have shunned the markets altogether in favour of upcycling pieces they simply find on the street. "It's called *recupération* and even the posh people are at it nowadays," says Muriel Demarcus, who lives in London but runs a storage business in France. "People leave furniture that they don't want out on the street and others collect it before the rubbish men come. It's been going on for years and is now very acceptable.

"People will happily tell you that their stools came from the street. Then they clean them up and paint them. That is also very French – it doesn't have to all match and can be painted different colours."

"You might visit an apartment which is all white and feels very modern and then see an old metal hospital bed which they found in the street. Companies put out things they no longer need and people help themselves."

Michael Bruno, a former real estate agent from San Francisco, has created a successful business selling French flea market chic to the world. He set up 1stdibs.com as a



▼ Vintage Moroccan carpet, £2,600, madelineweinrib.com



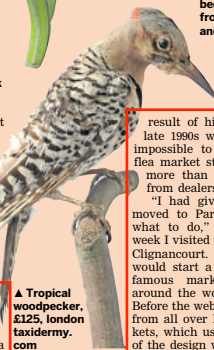
▲ Hayon Studio Bosa Table T, in black/white, £270; or in white/gold, £750, vesse gallery.com



▼ Dian Jacquard cushion, from £1,350, anthropologie.eu



▲ Monique bedside chest, from £1,350, andstobed.co.uk



▲ Tropical woodpecker, £125, london taxidermy.com

result of his time in Paris in the late 1990s when he realised it was impossible to source classic French flea market style in the US. He lists more than 4,000 items each week from dealers all over the world.

"I had given up real estate and moved to Paris while I figured out what to do," he says. "In my first week I visited the *Marché aux puces* at Clignancourt. In 15 minutes I knew I would start a business bringing this famous market to design lovers around the world using the internet. Before the web, dealers brought pieces from all over Europe to the flea markets, which used to be the crossroads of the design world."

Bruno has collected many pieces from the market for his own home, including a Jacques Adnet mirror, Jean-Michel Frank club chairs, a giant stone urn with electric-blue ceramic arms, nesting tables by Jacques Quinet, and a bronze clock with rock crystal rays projecting from the centre. "I had to move from my tiny one-bed flat to a large three-bedroom one because I couldn't stop buying furniture... There is definitely a French style which comes from the feeling that everything has been collected over time. They can mix pieces from the 1870s to the 1970s in a way that other people can only try to replicate – almost always to no avail."