

Le Corbusier

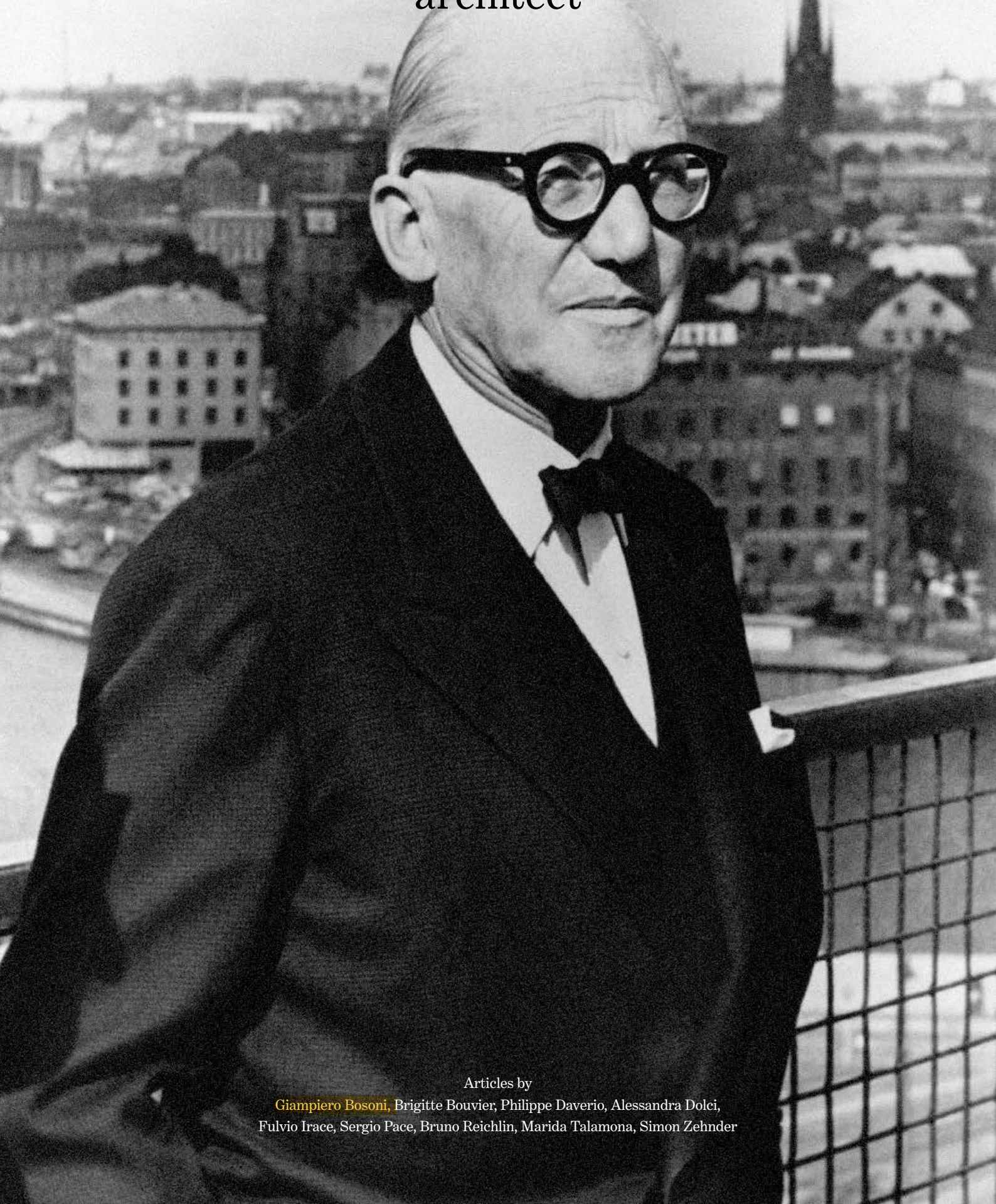
1887 - 1965



Annual Report 2019
cultural insert supplement

LE CORBUSIER

The many different faces of a revolutionary architect



Articles by

Giampiero Bosoni, Brigitte Bouvier, Philippe Daverio, Alessandra Dolci,
Fulvio Irace, Sergio Pace, Bruno Reichlin, Marida Talamona, Simon Zehnder



Introduction

“Le Corbusier changed architecture – and the architect”: this glowing tribute from André Malraux to Le Corbusier is as relevant now as it was then. Born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, Le Corbusier (1887-1965) was the most inventive and influential architect of the 20th century.

An architect, furniture designer, painter, sculptor, theoretician and poet all rolled into one, he designed 75 buildings in 11 countries, devised 42 urban development projects and wrote books. He left behind 8,000 drawings and over 500 paintings, sculptures and tapestries. Designed and constructed between the early 1920s, when the modern movement was in its infancy, and the 1960s, when this avant-garde architecture took hold, Le Corbusier’s buildings mark a clean break with the styles, technologies and practices of the “past”. Disdaining the weight of academic thought, Le Corbusier revolutionised the techniques and vocabulary of architecture when, in 1927, he set his “five points of modern architecture” – pilotis, roof gardens, a free design for the ground plan, a free design for the façade and the horizontal window – against the five orders of classical architecture.

The unique symmetry between the buildings he designed and the theory he wrote, disseminated from 1928 onwards by the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), would make him the spokesman for modern architecture. The global dimension that all of his work took on broke new ground in the history of architecture. Le Corbusier, who never stopped travelling in his quest to learn, pass on his theories and build his buildings, was really the first architect to work on several continents at the same time, carving out a reputation for himself before the era of the “global architect”.

At his Paris office at 35 Rue de Sèvres, he also welcomed young architects who came from all over the world for his tuition. Inspired by the “Esprit Nouveau” (“new spirit”) that Le Corbusier so championed, they would go on to revolutionise architecture in their home country: Balkrishna Doshi, winner of the 2018 Pritzker Prize, in India; Kim Joong-Eop, in Korea; Junz Sakakura, pioneer of the modern movement in Japan.

“Full hand I received, full hand I now give”: his work, founded in an inexhaustible curiosity for the city and all its transformations, embodies his desire to make architecture into a social art. His ambition was to meet the needs of society of his time while at the same time creating an architecture that was both human-scale and humanist. Le Corbusier was interested in all the programmes that shaped the 20th century: individual and collective housing, but also public, cultural, religious and industrial buildings.

Despite being a pioneer of sustainable architecture and the mind behind landmark buildings such as the Villa Savoye in Poissy, the Cité radieuse in Marseille, the chapel in Ronchamp or the Chandigarh Capitol Complex in India, Le Corbusier was nevertheless attacked for his avant-gardism for a long time before UNESCO recognised his work as an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement, including 17 buildings and sites on its World Heritage List.

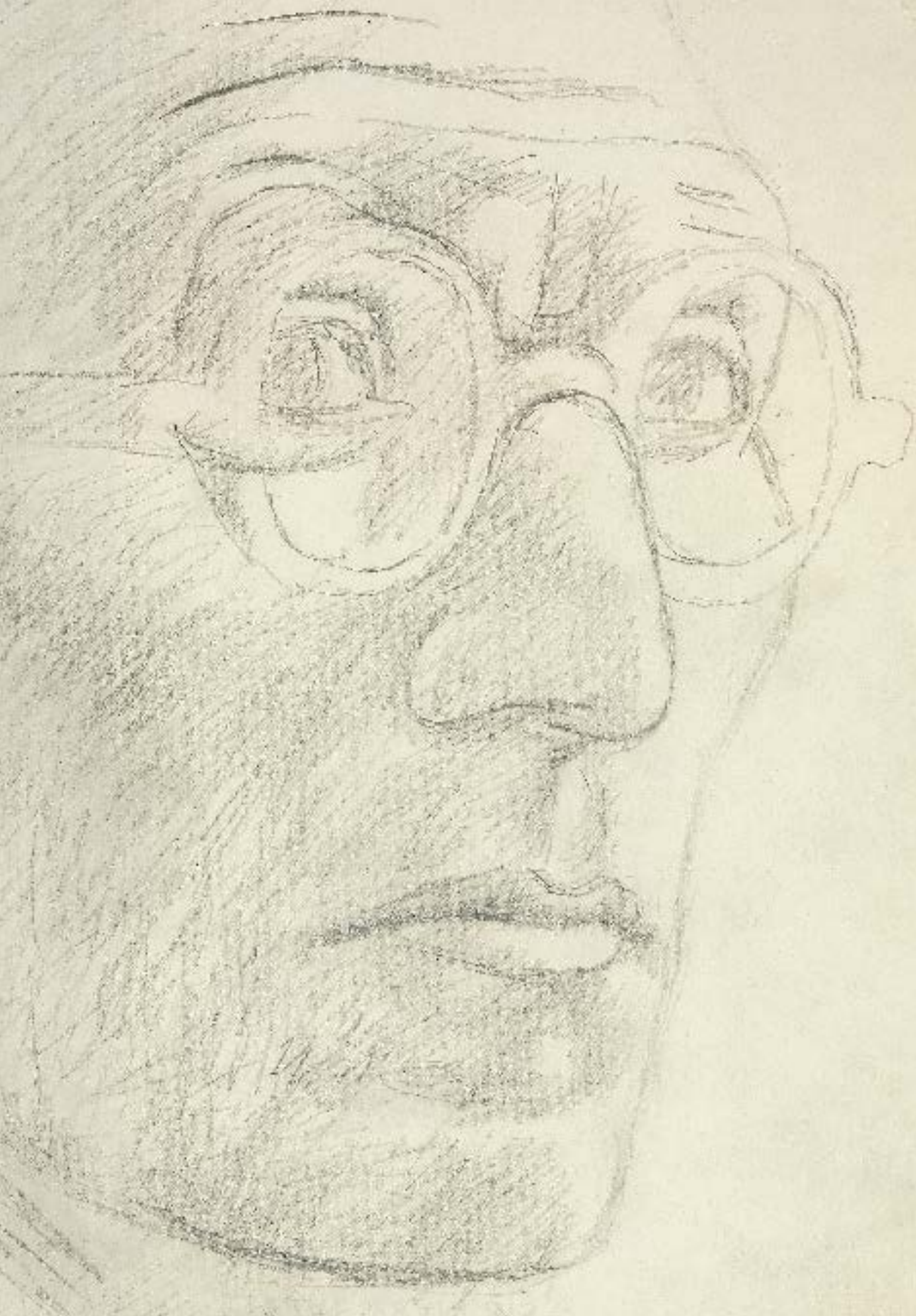
Brigitte Bouvier

Director of the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

Front page:
Le Corbusier in
Stockholm, c. 1960

Left:
The Swiss architect
at his house in
Boulogne, France.
Here, he is sitting in
his studio with
paintings leaning
against and hanging
on the walls, 1950.





Le Corbusier's gaze

by Giampiero Bosoni*



Left:
Self-portrait,
graphite pencil on paper,
1950s.

This page:
Swimming goggles
with varifocal lenses,
custom-made for
Le Corbusier.

In 1930, Le Corbusier wrote in *Précisions*:¹ “I only live as long as I see”, also observing that “the dominant sign [of the modern man of value] is no longer ostrich feathers in the hat, it is in the gaze.”

Le Corbusier’s was an inquisitive gaze and one that his ultra-watchful grey eyes had projected onto the world since his early youth through his spectacles, that instrument-prosthesis, that object-for-seeing. An object-prosthesis that this truly unique man of letters saw straight away not only as a necessary “tool of the intellectual artist” but also as something to further amplify that gaze of his that was aimed squarely at communicating his truth to the world. A gaze that, precisely because of that natural visual weakness, likewise subjected to tough investigation, found further support in the heightened strength, simple and austere, of the large black frames that characterised his robust presence and great intensity from the 1930s right up until his death.

In 1963, just two years before he died, Le Corbusier wrote a note to himself containing a simple thought that became a kind of synthetic representation of his “patient research”: “The key is this: ... look, observe, see, imagine, invent, create.” At the heart of this message lies the secret of someone who does not want to keep on being surprised by the phenomena of real life, which, studied and analysed, becomes the heritage of our knowledge.



Thus the eyes (to which the glasses add greater strength, including figuratively) are a “tool” to see but also a “means” of communicating.

Besides the many photographs in which Le Corbusier is always immortalised wearing his characteristic glasses, there are also those in which he plays with them, such as when he puts them on a large, polished stone that looks like a face with bizarre, deformed features. But his spectacles also appear occasionally in his drawings, abandoned here or there like a signature object in some internal perspective, as well as cropping up now and again in a few interior photos of his famous works from the 1920s and 30s.

Traces of his glasses can also be found in a number of letters, with the most touching testimony coming in a 1959 missive written from India to his friend Germaine Ducret,² which contains the following thought or



Le Corbusier playing around with his glasses, balancing them on a rock to look like a face, Chandigarh, c. 1950.

An evocative photograph of Villa Savoye, with Le Corbusier’s sunglasses and hat in the foreground, 1928.

Le Corbusier's glasses, resting on the preliminary sketches for his paintings in the apartment at 24 rue Nungesser-et-Coli, Paris, 1960. Photo by René Burri.

poem dedicated to his beloved wife Yvonne, who had passed away two years earlier:

“This night:

Corbu

his glasses
glasses
the Indian moon looks like Yvonne. –
asleep under the stars. adorably under
vast swathes of lawn. Alone.”

Thus seeing all these “famous” pairs of glasses that he lovingly preserved (now kept at the Fondation Le Corbusier), which mark almost every stage in his life (from the youthful ones with their light metal frame to the ones he had specially made for swimming, his great passion, with which he would die at sea), one wants to pay a little tribute to these anonymous yet indispensable tools of life and work. But it is also a way to remember once again the dominant sign of Corbu's gaze and, above all else, what he wanted to communicate to us.

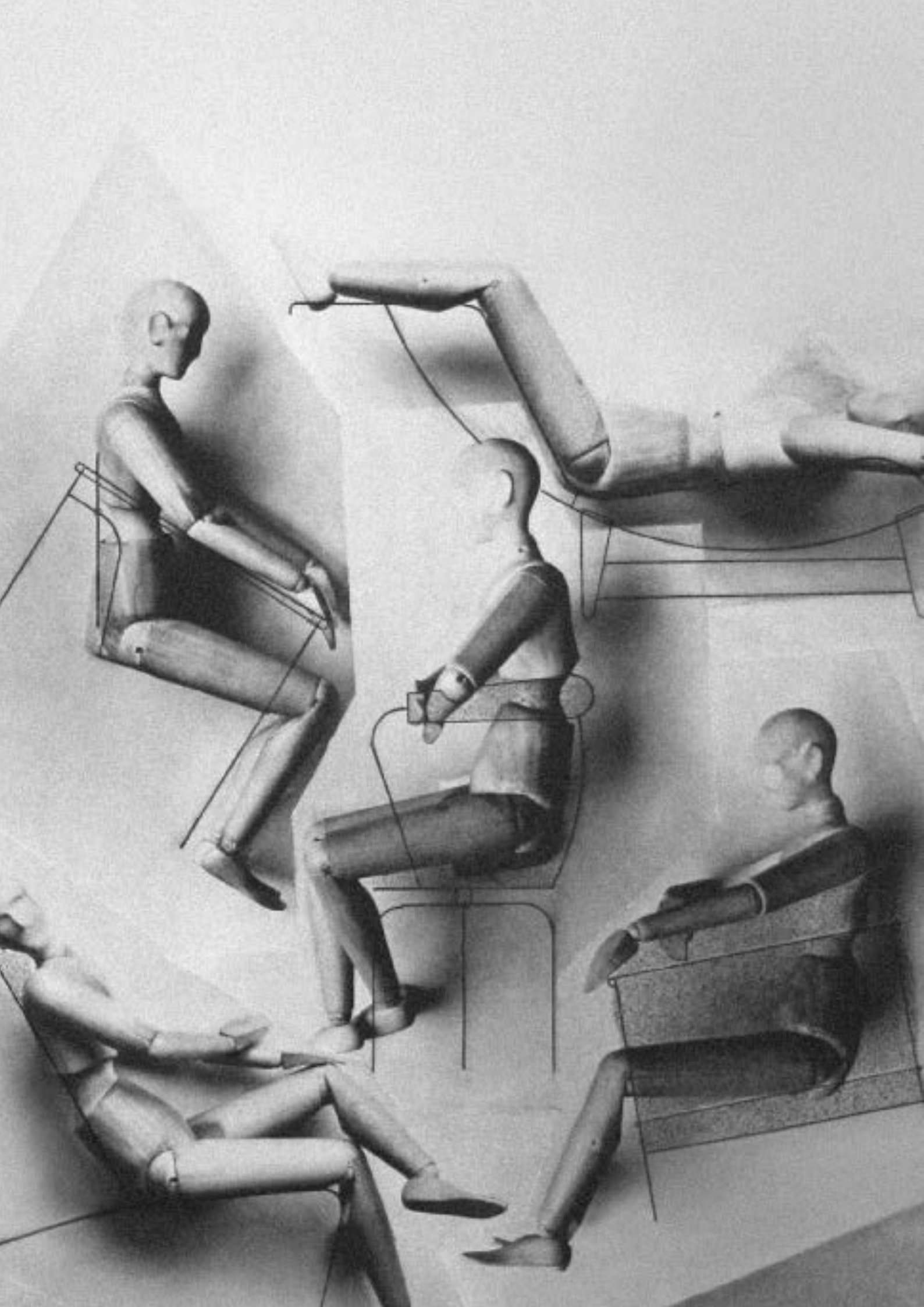
*** Giampiero Bosoni**
Professor of Interior Architecture
and the History of Design at the
Politecnico di Milano.



Notes

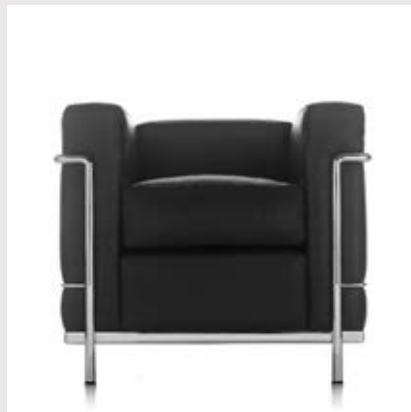
¹ Le Corbusier, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Éditions Crès, *L'Esprit Nouveau* collection, Paris, 1930.

² Letter of 25 April 1959 written from New Delhi to Germaine Ducret, in Jean Jenger (ed.), *Le Corbusier – Choix de lettres*, Birkhäuser, Zurich, 2015.



Le Corbusier and furniture design

by Giampiero Bosoni



Left:

Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret,
Charlotte Perriand, ergonomic
studies with dummies for
various types of chair, 1928.

Photomontage by
Charlotte Perriand.

This page:

Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret,
Charlotte Perriand,
*LC2 – Fauteuil grand confort,
petit modèle*, 1928.

New edition of Cassina's
1965 production.

In January 1917, the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris moved permanently to Paris, which he had already picked as his city of choice on his previous trip in 1908. This marked the end of his phase of development and training in Switzerland. Here, under the influence of his mentor L'Éplattenier and with some initial assistance from local architect René Chapallaz, he had created several pieces of furniture, including some custom designs. His clients were wealthy customers from the Jura for whom, as well as designing bespoke pieces, he also served as a consultant for the purchase of new furniture.

As regards this latter role (which he would keep up, including in his first few years in Paris, in order to make ends meet), there is clear documentary evidence that he tried to persuade his friends and clients to buy chairs with Louis XIII-style woven rush seats and backs as well as Directoire- and Louis XVI-style sofas, armchairs and tables that were understated and unadorned by carvings.



In terms of his projects for individual rooms (such as Raphael Schwob's library, the furniture for Moise Schwob's veranda, the furnishing of a study for his friend Marcel Levailant, Anatole Schwob's son-in-law, and the bureau for his mother Marie Charlotte Amélie Jeanneret-Perret), his work is extremely significant for studying the essence of the emergence of his interior and furniture design philosophy. His first steps on some of these projects were usually to install electric lights and remove all stucco and fake and redundant elements, which were to be replaced with simple elements in order to create bright, tidy rooms. To create the furniture, which was still constrained by the style of the

past, he used the cabinet-maker Schreiner Egger, with whom he maintained extensive correspondence, including in his first few years in Paris, in order to bring a number of projects to completion. This attention to detail in his choice of furniture would remain a constant feature of his work, as illustrated in the many documents now held by the Fondation Le Corbusier.

Within the overall context of the various cultural battles that Le Corbusier fought, furniture design held particular value as an ideological manifesto of his from 1925 onwards, when he devised a number of container elements for the "L'Esprit nouveau" pavilion. Christened "casiers standard", these were a kind of tangible demonstration of the concept of the "objet-standard" that he promulgated in his book *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui*¹ in the same year.

These containers, flexible in their use and performing various functions, were to be made by the Spojené U.P. Závody factories in Brno in the former Czechoslovakia, which Le Corbusier had been able to visit twice in order to specify the details of their industrial-scale production. He met Adolf Loos in Paris on 28 March, who told him that U.P. was on the brink of bankruptcy. This was confirmed in a letter dated 31 March, which stated that his furniture would not be able to be made due to a number of changes in company management. This left Le Corbusier hugely disappointed, because, as he would go on to write, this furniture represented for him "the moral armour of the pavilion's right wing". However, he did not give up: at extremely short notice, he managed to find a carpentry



The bureau at Villa Jeanneret-Perret, 1915-16.

Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Charlotte Perriand, "casiers standard" container system, 1925-29, in a version reissued by Cassina, mod. LC 20, from 1978.

Le Corbusier,
Pierre Jeanneret,
Charlotte Perriand,
home furnishings,
Salon d'Automne,
1929.

Le Corbusier, Pierre
Jeanneret, Charlotte
Perriand, *Fauteuil
grand confort,
grand modèle,*
property of Raoul
La Roche, prototype,
1928.



workshop outside Paris to create the prototypes. At least in their external aspect, therefore, he was able to produce convincing examples of these fundamental pieces that succeeded in defining the ground-floor environment through their distribution. It is worthwhile bearing in mind that this system of storage furniture paved the way for the concept of “cupboards” that were no longer designed just to be attached to walls but rather to be arranged freely in an open space, with great flexibility of use, in order to serve as mobile architectural parts that were thus more properly to be regarded as a peninsular or free installation style. The other furniture used in the pavilion, including the famous Thonet No. B9 armchairs (which would remain Le Corbusier’s benchmark model), were chosen with great care from amongst the current production models (such as the typical austere leather armchairs in the style of an English gentlemen’s club), all characterised by an exemplary functional design and some also representative of his concept of the “objet-standard” in mass production.

The project that most openly demonstrated his new concept of home furnishings and in which he introduced the principles of the “machine à repos” was undoubtedly *L’équipement de l’habitation: des casiers, des sièges, des tables*, which he exhibited at the 1929 Salon d’Automne and which was signed by him, his cousin and partner

Pierre Jeanneret and a young woman called Charlotte Perriand. The latter had worked at the studio at 35 rue de Sèvres since October 1927³ as an associate for the furnishing sector, for which she would go on to assume responsibility.

The work on these new furnishing elements was initially planned for a luxury residence, the Villa Church in Ville d’Avray (1927-29), for which these pieces were intended as prototypes.

Like the creation of the models, the exhibition at the Salon was financed by Thonet-France, who would also go on to catalogue all the chairs and tables throughout the 1930s. The design of these seats has often been compared to the structure of a bicycle. This hypothesis can be partly confirmed by the fact that, as Perriand reveals, the furniture had first been offered to Peugeot

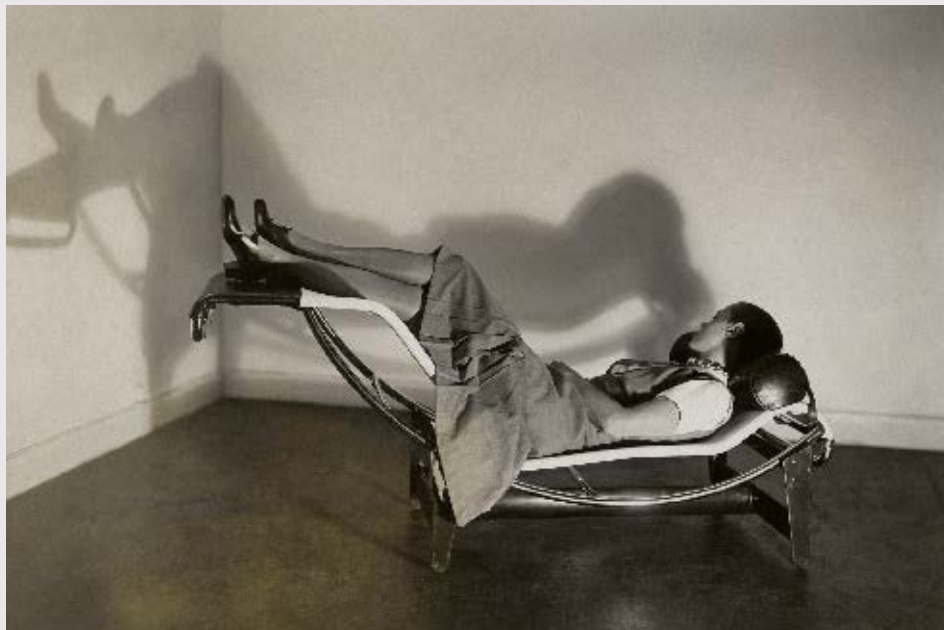


(which refused) before being made by Thonet: the thought was that, since the company produced bicycles for everyone, it could produce armchairs for everyone too.⁴ The design for this furniture mainly evolved in two- to three-hour rounds of discussions held every evening and based on the observations of the prototypes that Perriand produced in her own studio.⁵

With these creations, undoubtedly more interesting for their exemplary manifesto value than for the results they achieved in terms of low-cost, industrial-scale design, Le Corbusier concluded his fight for modern furniture by including it in the architectural and urban design revolution that he deemed complete in his 1930 pamphlet *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*. On the other hand, it is no coincidence that the design of these pieces of furniture began to take shape in the overarching vision that Le Corbusier first proposed in 1925 in his "L'Esprit nouveau" pavilion. In fact, its architecture gave him the opportunity to showcase the life-size realisation of the model of a duplex "maison-villa", copies of which were to be superimposed one on top of the other to create large building complexes he called "immeubles-villas". His designs for a city of three million inhabitants and the "Plan Voisin" were presented next to this villa-cum-pavilion. In this context, where the "radiant" city was born to meet the needs of a new society shaped by the recent social advancements

that allowed people to enjoy a good eight hours of rest (his beloved concept of "leisure") compared with the eight hours dedicated to sleep and the other eight to work, it is only natural that the furniture should become emblematic of this upgraded domestic dimension. In particular, the chaise longue perfectly encapsulates this concept of a machine designed purely for the purpose of resting and reading, as if it were a pendulum, a highly precise watchmaking instrument, in which the New Man enjoys his newly conquered freedom in a balanced relationship with the rhythms of urban life and with an ethical conscience (rest for the body and regeneration for the soul).

Production of Thonet's metal tube furniture declined with the outbreak of war, and it was virtually forgotten about in the post-war period. In 1959, the Zurich-based gallery owner Heidi Weber revived the *Chaise longue basculante*, *Fauteuil à dossier basculant* and *Fauteuil grand confort, grand et petit modèle*, which were produced in a very limited edition by local craftspeople. The collection was christened "Le Corbusier sitzmöbel/sièges/chairs". Each model bears the initials "LC". In 1964, at the same time as construction was getting under way on the "Maison de l'Homme" in Zurich and with Le Corbusier still alive, Heidi Weber entrusted production of these four models to Meda-based Cassina S.p.A. on the urging of various envoys from the Italian furniture-maker Cesare Cassina, who already



Charlotte Perriand lying on the *chaise longue basculant* that she created together with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, design 1928-29. Photograph for the Thonet Frères catalogue, Paris, 1930.

Le Corbusier,
Pierre Jeanneret,
Charlotte Perriand,
LC1 - Fauteuil à
dossier basculant,
1928. Reissue by
Cassina, 1965.



enjoyed great renown. Spending much of his time with architects, designer-intellectuals like Dino Gavina and high-end publishers like Bruno Alfieri had led Cassina to reflect on the opportunity being presented to develop production of the historic furniture of one of the most revered masters of the modern movement. He was to seize this opportunity after Gavina himself had voiced disinterest (in fact, an explicit refusal) in doing with this furniture what he had done with Marcel Breuer's, in his clear vision of bringing about an aesthetic renewal of the industrial product using the example of creative minds accepted as masters of modern furniture design. Gavina put his lack of interest in the furniture from Le Corbusier's stable down to its unsuitability for industrial-scale production, feeling that it needed too much manual working and welding.⁶ In a contract dated 23 October 1964, Italy's Cassina company acquired the publishing⁷ and sales rights for these models, which Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand had designed in 1928 and which would now be known as LC1, LC2, LC3 and LC4. The collection was officially unveiled, a few months after Le Corbusier's death, in the Sala Espressioni ("Expression Room") of the Ideal Standard company, a pioneering space for cultural activities in Milan designed by Gio Ponti. Ever since that point, the design of the furniture created by Le Corbusier and his associates has been a prominent benchmark on the international furniture production scene.

Notes

¹ Le Corbusier, *L'Art Décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, Éditions Crès, *Collection de "L'Esprit Nouveau"*, Paris, 1925.

² Arthur Rüegg, *Le Corbusier, Meubles et Intérieurs 1905-1965*, Fondation Le Corbusier – Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2012.

³ Her collaboration with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret would last ten years (from 1927 to 1937). She would go on to make around a dozen pieces of furniture with them and would also be involved in all their projects during this time as an architecture student.

⁴ From *Intervista a Charlotte Perriand*, edited by Maurizio Di Paolo, Paris, 22 December 1975, in Maurizio Di Paolo – Marcello Fagiolo – Maria Luisa Madonna (ed.), *Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret, "La machine à s'asseoir"*, De Luca Editore, Rome, 1976.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Even Charlotte Perriand revealed some doubts about the industrial characteristics of these pieces of furniture in a 1975 interview: "... Only God knows if our armchairs have been armchairs for everyone. We really got it wrong there. Because, at the beginning, it was only a handful of refined intellectuals who could afford them, and even now there's only a lucky few who can buy them. It's precisely the opposite of what we set out to do. It's niche, luxury furniture ...". From *Intervista a Charlotte Perriand*, op. cit.

⁷ Exclusive rights to the manufacture and sale of these models were first extended from Italy to the rest of Europe, followed by the Americas in 1967 and the rest of the world in 1971.

The publication of this booklet
has been made possible courtesy of the
Banca Popolare di Sondrio (SUISSE).

This banking institution headquartered in Lugano,
Switzerland, traditionally devotes a
cultural insert in its Annual Report to a figure whose
career links the Swiss Confederation with Italy.

ISBN 978-88-944708-3-3



9 788894 470833