Forum and Reviews

Radici

Charlotte Perriand, the Voice of the Modern Movement's *Monde Nouveau*

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Charlotte Perriand's approach to the world and to design in particular is perfectly summed up in her words: "When I was ten, I was admitted to the children's hospital... I liked the place, it was white and the stark room looked onto a courtyard planted with trees... Back home, the clutter of furniture and objects accosted me and I began to cry. The hospital asceticism suited me better. For the first time I discovered the power of the void 'all potent because all containing'".

This clarity led her to become the excellent designer she was with a brilliant career, all the more so given that she was working in a society that was far from appreciating women's creativity and genius.

Inspired by Art Deco, the machine aesthetic, organicism, biomorphism, Art Brut and industrial prefabrication, the French architect and furniture designer passionately believed that good design had to be fundamentally transformative and accessible to all.

Her life spanned the 20th century as she was born in 1903 and died in 1999.

When, at the age of 24, she walked into Le Corbusier's studio in 35 Rue de Sèvres, Paris, in 1927, and asked to be hired as a furniture designer, the answer she received was trite: "We don't embroider cushions here" and showed her out. However, this didn't stop her. On the contrary Perriand managed to remain focused and creative thanks also to her extremely progressive mentality.

That same year, she unveiled her first furniture collection at the Decorative Arts exhibition in Paris.

She possessed a strong sense of empathy and she knew that design could play a key role in providing solutions that could make society fairer.

Indeed, Le Corbusier begged her pardon just a few months later. After having visited the 1927 Salon d'Automne, where he was struck by the sight of the *Bar sous le toit* —

which Perriand had built out of glass, steel and aluminium — Le Corbusier invited her to join his studio in Rue de Sèvres, where she was given the opportunity to work with an international group of architects that included two Japanese members: Kunio Maekawa and Junzo Sakakura, the Swiss architect Alfred Roth and Pierre Jeanneret, with whom she particularly bonded. None of them received regular pay and Perriand continued to work independently as well, supported by her first husband Percy Scholefield, a wealthy Englishman. He also funded her private architecture lessons with Roth. In 1930, she and Scholefield separated and she moved to a loft in Montparnasse.

In the 1920s, Le Corbusier was still clearly convinced that a woman could only fulfil a complementary role to a man, especially if the latter was brilliant and narcissistic. However, Charlotte was a forerunner of a particular way of practising architecture, anticipating the feminist movement with her independence.

She believed that the objects that we choose to surround ourselves with and the spaces we inhabit influence our state of mind. She acted upon that idea, creating an aesthetic consciousness based on the way that function and rationalism should help make a better world.

Working in one of the world's most prestigious design studios marked her future career, as she would go on to embrace a vision of design at the service of people, shared by Pierre Jeanneret, and was to experiment with new materials and new mass production techniques. Though Eileen Gray — with whom Perriand is often compared — condemned the Modern Movement's reductionism, she embraced its ideology. And while both women were sucked into Le Corbusier's predatory orbit, Perriand managed to gain enough momentum to escape it thanks to her charm, her tenacity and her unfailing eye for the shock of novelty.

She remained in Le Corbusier's studio until 1937, responsible for interior design research and development.

"I think the reason Le Corbusier took me on was because he thought I could carry through ideas" said Perriand in an interview published in the *Architectural Review* (1984). "I was familiar with current technology, I knew

how to use it and, what is more, I had ideas about the uses it could be put to".

Tasked with designing *équipement* (furniture and furnishings), she developed prototypes based on her analyses, including two armchairs and her famous chaise longue. "Ils sont coquets", was her employer's reaction and seal of approval.

The relationship between the two of them and Pierre Jeanneret was strengthened thanks to their common vision of furnishings as part of a system, like that of mass production, which harnessed the enormous potential offered by new materials and special production techniques. Indeed, furnishings were given a new label — *équipement* — thus abandoning the traditional definition of *mobilier*. This new approach was evident in the objects exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1929, dominated by the famous *Chaise-longue basculante* and the *Grand confort* armchair, all made using stainless tubular steel (and better known in today's Cassina catalogue with numbers LC4, LC1 and LC2) Fig. 1.

The *Chaise-longue* is a rocking *dormeuse* in leather, which contrasts with the lightness of a tubular steel frame. It descends from older pieces such as bent wooden loungers and adjustable chairs for invalids. More specifically, it is a modern appropriation of the 18th century *duchesse* (a kind of sofa or *dormeuse*). Despite its overt femininity and eroticism, Le Corbusier insisted on its mechanistic, male overtones, and stated: "We built it with bicycle frame tubes and covered it with a magnificent pony skin. It is so light that it can be pushed with the foot, it can be moved by a child".

Perriand, posing on her chaise longue, was to become synonymous with its malleable, evocative charm, appearing languidly elegant. Initially considered a form of *arte povera*, the chaise longue, like Eames's lounge chair, became a visual marker, a trophy of good taste, found in the elegant living rooms of those who could afford it.

Over the decades, Perriand's creations moved into a more sophisticated sphere of consumption, and yet she was completely against commodification. As she became more and more radical in the 1930s, reacting to the political and economic crises of that

Fig. 1

Fig. 1
Charlotte Perriand
presents the *Chaise-
longue basculante*
herself. An innovative
and seductive form
in the communication
of the time. Salon
d'Automne, Paris,
1929. © CHARLOTTE
PERRIAND, by SIAE 2021.

Fig. 2

Fig. 2
Maison au bord de l'eau.
Art Basel, Miami, 2013.
© Fondation Louis Vuitton.

Fig. 3

Fig. 3
Maquette of *Maison au bord de l'eau*. Exhibition view at Espace Louis Vuitton, La Biennale di Venezia, 2021. © Fondation Louis Vuitton.

Fig. 4

Fig. 4
Refuge Tonneau. Exhibition view at Espace Louis Vuitton, La Biennale di Venezia, 2021. © Fondation Louis Vuitton.

decade, her concept of design attempted to be more openly egalitarian and populist. She developed cheaper lines of mass-produced furniture and actively criticised, and campaigned against, the defects she saw in contemporary architecture as it remained inexplicably aloof from social needs.

It was only recently that her *Maison au bord de l'eau* (originally conceived in 1934) was completed under the supervision of her daughter Pernette and Jacques Barsac, with the support of Fondation Louis Vuitton, and was presented at the Art Basel exhibition in Miami in December 2013 *Fig. 2*.

Fondation Louis Vuitton meticulously constructed the building by carefully following Perriand's sketches, one of her most acclaimed works and one which never saw the light in her lifetime. She designed the building over eighty years ago originally producing it in response to an architecture competition sponsored by *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* magazine. In this design, she envisaged a building constructed with the use of easily assembled prefabricated parts. The challenge posed by the competition was to create holiday homes for the mass market that would therefore be inexpensive. In the design, she opted for a U-shaped layout that surrounded a canopy-covered terrace and sliding screens to maximise the amount of light. The house, built by Fondation Louis Vuitton on the beach of the Hotel Raleigh in Miami, was furnished with objects found in Charlotte Perriand's drawings from the 1929-1942 period.

Recently, another project of the 1930s has been reconstructed. Perriand's *Refuge Tonneau* *Fig. 4*, dating from 1938, was completed in 2010 for "Acte 3 à Alex" (Haute Savoie). The structure, entirely made out of nickel-plated copper and anodised aluminium, was hailed by the critics. It demonstrated Perriand's ability to offer everyday objects a new contemporary image, thanks to the use of new shapes and, above all, new materials. The choice of materials is telling: she chose them for their lightness as well as their resilience, suited to withstanding the toughest weather conditions. The aluminium sheets cover a 12-panel structure supported by a central pole to which the metal sections are attached as in an umbrella, designed to withstand a snowstorm. In contrast, the interiors

are all in pine. Once inside the hermetically sealed door, one finds oneself inside a small entrance and must go through another door to get into the living quarters, which demonstrates the importance given to the issue of heat retention, a rather visionary concern if we consider the era in which the shelter was designed. The second door leads to twenty square meters of living space distributed over two floors, perfectly arranged to ensure that everything one needs is at arm's length, as well as providing storage space for things one doesn't need once inside the shelter, such as skis or rucksacks. Everything is extraordinarily minimal: the design prioritises function over decoration, which makes perfect sense in a shelter designed for use in extreme conditions. Yet, once again, what surprises us is the incredible modernity of the great masters of design who as early as the 1920s and '30s were capable of creating objects that still look pioneering today. Her deep love of the mountains is apparent in her work: a keen skier and climber. It was this passion that inspired interesting high-altitude architectural projects such as her *Chalet a Meribel* and the *Les Arcs* ski resort in Haute-Savoie.

In 1940, as Hitler's Germany invaded France, Charlotte set sail for Japan, where she had been invited to hold seminars on the new design movement, so as to guide the country's production of applied arts. She was an enthusiastic teacher at the Institute of Industrial Design in Sendai, where she became a figurehead, grafting European culture onto oriental expertise, as in the prototype of a chaise longue with a steel and bamboo frame, or a wooden chair with a bamboo seat, or a bamboo table with a lacquered top *Fig. 5*.

While in Japan, Perriand not only produced ideas and designs, she also absorbed oriental philosophy, imbued with spirituality: "A habitat's harmony cannot be created without the involvement of architecture and town planning. It would be useless to think we can create it merely through furnishings, because it is also affected by external factors such as location, placement, the amount of light. A habitat shouldn't merely use such and such materials, it should also create the conditions necessary for human balance and freedom of spirit. So we have to take a stand. Do we want fullness or emptiness? This apparently ridiculous question is important. For some

people, emptiness is nothingness or poverty; for others, it is a chance to think and to move. Western monks in their cells chose emptiness to meditate and concentrate. Taoism, in the Far East, celebrates the religion of emptiness, as expressed by Okakura in his *Book of Tea*: 'The essential only resides in emptiness. The void is omnipotent because it can contain all. In the void, only movement becomes possible'. Applied to art, this principle is expressed in subtle suggestion. By not revealing everything, the artist offers the onlooker the chance to complete"¹.

It was in such circumstances that she curated the *Tradition, Selection, Creation* exhibition in Japan in 1941 where living space and the use of traditional materials such as bamboo was revisited. It influenced a generation of Japanese designers and drew new sources of inspiration from the country's culture.

An article written by Marta López García seem particularly apt because it considers Perriand's approach to the *Maison du* the project. She read *The Book of Tea* while she lived in Japan and Vietnam during the Second World War. Both the book and her years of exile had a huge impact on her ideas. A long time after her return to France in 1946, she was commissioned by her friend Hiroshi Teshigaharato to design a tea house as part of a Japanese Cultural Festival held in Paris in 1993. Her proposal was to be located on the rooftop of the UNESCO headquarters, along with other tea houses designed by Tadao Ando, Ettore Sottsass and Yae Lun Choi. Perriand's design was extraordinarily simple, yet rich at the same time. By using traditional materials such as pine and bamboo, natural elements like stones and water and her knowledge of Japanese culture, she presented a proposal that provided the quiet and peaceful atmosphere that the tea ceremony requires.

It presented a clearing in a bamboo forest which allowed visitors to experience the ancient ceremony. This sanctuary was surrounded by dense bamboo plants creating a buffer area. Due to the bamboo's durability, strength and flexibility, the structure designed by Perriand was light, slender, recyclable and created an organic and permeable shelter under which the tea ceremony could be celebrated.

Perriand designed every single piece of furniture, including the *tokonoma* (the altar to the gods and ancestors) and the *mizuya* (the place where utensils are stored). The green sail forming the roof also included a transparent section at the top, which allowed a view of the sky and the passing clouds. The festival lasted two weeks. Later, a replica of the tea house was erected as part of the Charlotte Perriand exhibition, also held in Paris, in 2011.

After Japan entered the war against the United States, Perriand was segregated and was only able to return to France in 1946 with a new husband and a daughter born during that time.

She started collaborating with new and old partners, such as Le Corbusier, with whom she began working on the design of the *équipement* of the *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseilles and various Air France travel agencies.

She gained experience with the painter Fernand Léger, with Jean Prouvé, José Luis Sert and Lucio Costa; she worked with other important artists and architects as she constantly travelled the world, from Brazil to Tokyo and Beijing; an itinerant life that only ended with her death at the age of 96, in Paris.

She designed the student lodgings of *Maison du Mexique* (1952) and *Maison de la Tunisie* (1952) while constantly focusing on and experimenting with minimal space and the way furnishings, architecture and art combine. The postwar reconstruction effort was clearly physical but metaphorical as well, in the hope of offering men and women a radical renewal following the trauma of war.

She did this by placing the reproduction of a drawing by Picasso in the window of a house (the Nelson family home, 1947), or by selecting "useful forms" for display at an exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs (1949-1950), or with the kitchen "module" displayed at the MoMa and the interiors of the Marseilles housing unit. All these are examples of the poetic function that Charlotte Perriand hoped to add to modern living space. Known as *The Mexican Bookshelf* because it was originally designed for the *Maison du Mexique* in Paris's Cité Internationale Universitaire, this piece of furniture was for some time attributed to the French designer Jean Prouvé. In actual fact, the bookshelf was designed by Perriand and produced by Prouvé Atelier Prouvé. Due to the fact that the

Prouvé name attracted higher bids at auction (roughly 20% higher), Perriand's name was practically erased from these designs. It was only recently that her authorship was finally accepted and fully recognised. This bookcase consists of oak shelves with vertical aluminium dividers. Sliding trays run along the front of the shelves, allowing the owner to hide or reveal particular parts. Thanks to the different sized compartments, one can store objects of differing sizes. Today many of her bookcases are once again in production, and this particular one is produced by the Italian furniture company Cassina and called *Nuage*.

Perriand came up with this authentic and pioneering design in 1940, after having noticed shelves arranged in a cloud formation on the walls of Kyoto. She developed her own personal interpretation of free modularity, closely based on functionality, aesthetic taste and the object's facility of use. The principle of combinability permitted a number of different uses in different surroundings, evolving into different possibilities that range from sideboards to containers, wall bookcases to hanging compositions, right up to free-standing structures designed to be placed in the middle of a room. The modules with a hinged door, available in anodised aluminium or in a vast range of colours, free the imagination, suggesting a visual play of alternating open and shut sections. Fig. 6-7

Perriand inherited a deep love of the mountains from her family origins in Haute-Savoie, both in her personal and professional life, which can be detected in her designs for high-altitude living spaces, sport and tourism. Everything from single pieces of furniture to modular interior units which formed the basis for developing entire buildings or building complexes, as occurred with the *La Cascade* complex (*Les Arcs 1600*, Savoy, France, 1968-1969).

Her life was shaped by a series of anti-conformist choices and a lifestyle that was almost controversial: an army haircut, unusual jewelry such as her ever-present ballbearing-inspired necklace, then her trips abroad, sport, her studio-home in Montparnasse, built in 1937 with an all-purpose space that featured gymnastic rings at the centre. In short, as Jean-Louis Cohen wrote in a 1988 issue of *Domus*: "In the ongoing juxtaposition of the working woman and the housewife that is

part of daily life, Charlotte occupies a unique position as, in a way, she works on homes, making them her place of production [...] Perriand herself once said, 'my design method is the same that everybody who studies a problem conscientiously has [...] If they commission me to do a project, I analyse this object and think of all the possible gestures which concern it. Then I take into account the place, the possible arrangements and the materials; they depend on the climate and sometimes on personal preference. And this procedure, which can be mastered, leads to forms'".

The Exhibitions

Over the past decade, a series of exhibitions dedicated to Perriand have finally recognised her achievements, giving her the credit for designs that had originally been attributed to Le Corbusier alone, purely for market reasons. Above all, they have presented her theories and their evolution, and how her belief in the principles of the Modern Movement and the formal and technological choices regarding innovation and industrialisation, following her experience in Japan and inspired by her love of the environment, reinterpreted the use of natural materials such as wood and its formal value.

The exhibition at Paris's Petit Palais showcasing Charlotte Perriand's work featured 380 photographs and 70 pieces of furniture (*Charlotte Perriand. De la photographie au Design*, 2011). For the first time ever, the installation revealed the role photography played in Perriand's creative process, demonstrating the methodology and innovation of her work. The exhibition underlined her enthusiasm and presented the random objects she found and collected, art and natural elements, in an appealing way. Steeped in the rationalist spirit of the 1920s, her photographs capture a particular aesthetic sensibility that, in the end, led to the flexibility and freedom of her work. A selection of pieces of furniture was also on display that demonstrated the links between the photographs that set the scene and the three-dimensional objects that formed the material and spatial requisites of the exhibition. The objects were placed in the midst of the Petit Palais's permanent collection, highlighting the impact of modernity.

Fig. 5

Fig. 5
Tokyo Dormeuse, design Charlotte Perriand. Cassina I Maestri Collection. © Cassina.

Fig. 6
The Mexican Bookshelf, originally designed in 1940 for the Maison du Mexique in Paris's Cité Internationale Universitaire, was produced by Prouvé Atelier Prouvé. Since 2012, the piece was introduced in the Cassina I Maestri Collection with the name Nuage. © Cassina.

Fig. 6

Fig. 7
Mexique, design Charlotte Perriand. Cassina I Maestri Collection. © Cassina.

Fig. 7

Introductory note of the exhibition curated by Roberto Fabbrì: "The exhibition presented the work of Perriand the photographer in order to explore the relationship between photographic images and designed objects. The compact Rolleiflex camera was first launched on the market in 1928, while the Leica A dates from 1925. Artists and architects of the time immediately adopted them as tools for analysing and studying new professional and expressive possibilities. It is well known that photography was a field of formal study for most of the architects of the time (and beyond), but often these pictures are given less importance compared to the rest of their artistic output. Even less attention is paid to the way in which the creative design process is influenced by preparatory photographic work. In contrast, the rooms of the Petit Palais attempted to interpret photographic work as the basis for an artist's research into form. Little is known of the rest of Perriand's photographic research. The exhibition was arranged chronologically and summed up Perriand's entire artistic career: from her training in Paris at the Union des Arts Décoratifs and her subsequent change in direction, up until the presentation of her first tubular steel pieces of furniture at the 1927 Salon d'Automne; her partnership with Le Corbusier, which came about thanks to those early efforts, on the interiors of many of the projects that were underway at the time; the foundation of the Union of Modern Artists in 1929 and her admission to the CIAM in 1930; her militant political activism during the 1930s and her partnership with Léger; her Japanese sojourn during the war, as an industrial design consultant for the Ministry of Trade and Industry; her return to France after the war, the revival of her partnership with Le Corbusier on collective housing projects and with Jean Prouvé on industrial design projects; Brazil with Lucio Costa; her (re)discovery of Alpine landscapes and her design for the Les Arcs 1600 ski resort, a project she was to work on until her death. Within this narrative, which crosses the Rationalist twentieth century in an aesthetically linear fashion, the Petit Palais's exhibition highlighted her adoption of the so-called Art Brut approach, highlighting the fact that, following the crash of 1929, this artist lost interest in machine-based theories, moving towards a

plastic, flexible investigation of nature.

Portable cameras first appeared on the market in the mid-1920s. Artists and architects of the time used them in order to find new forms of work and expression, but the rest of their artistic production often left these snapshots in the background. The Petit Palais held a retrospective exhibition on Charlotte Perriand that considered photography as the basis of her research. As well as her famous designs and architectural achievements, the exhibition considered photographs as the basis of her research and instead focused on so-called Art Brut, emphasising the fact that, from the 1930s on, her fascination with machines was replaced by a new interest in the plasticity of nature. She began a new line of research: distancing herself from the city and becoming more attracted to the random encounter with l'objet trouvé: the wind, rocks shaped like drops of water, gnarled roots and animal bones. This line of exploration led to a new syntax of infinite opportunities. Her notebook from this campaign is entirely photographic. In the mid-1930s, she consolidated what became known as 'poetic functionalism' and the new language that followed. The exhibition juxtaposed photographs and pieces of furniture and presented her large-scale, politically themed montages created for public events and displays.

After the war, the photographs she took to be used in a large format became even more important, becoming the main theme in Air France travel agencies, blown up to cover entire walls, like windows that look out onto the natural landscapes and archaeological wonders of distant worlds. Even if these images were the focus, the exhibition also presented Perriand's masterpieces of industrial design, drawing from the museum's own collection. Perriand began a random process of research consisting of walks, straying far from the city, in the company of Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret and Fernand Léger, which included random encounters with objects found along the way. This process of exploration found its own new formal syntax that opened up infinite possibilities, which could be added to the reflections already underway regarding straight lines and 90-degree angles.

The notebooks compiled during this campaign are entirely photographic in nature.

The design objects produced from the late-1930s on, termed *fonctionnalisme poétique*, reflected this new language of forms, and the exhibition clearly explained this dialogue by juxtaposing pieces of furniture and photographs. Such research crossed the path of the Surrealists and Duchamp's readymades, though it stemmed from different demands. Nevertheless, Perriand worked on finding the right combination of these objects within a symmetrical, 'modern' interior. Take, for example, the *Maison du Jeune homme* project presented at the Brussels exhibition of 1935: the *mur de collection* that lines the studio features a series of *sauvage* objects set side by side and arranged, whose plastic forms are in perfect compositional harmony with the rigid linearity of the shelves they sit on.

In an attempt to further emphasise the primary role of photography, another part of the exhibition presented the communicative and political aspect of the large photomontages created on various occasions for public events and displays.

Each of these photographs, enlarged, with contrasting white and black images, placed alongside drawings and text, dramatised the intended message: the living conditions in 1936 Paris, the poverty of the French countryside and the resulting agricultural reforms, the working class rebellions... In the postwar period, these same enlarged photographs were given pride of place in Perriand's interior design work. They became the main theme of the interiors created for Air France travel agencies, blown up to the point where they occupied entire walls, like large windows looking out onto natural landscapes and the archaeological wonders of distant worlds.

Apart from the photographs and their relationship with her designs, her masterpieces of industrial design couldn't be absent from an exhibition on Perriand. The Paris event was intelligent enough to present them alongside the *Petit Palais*'s permanent collection, inviting comparison. The exhibition itself wound through sections of the museum, thus creating an interesting mixture of stylistic languages, though it sometimes caused some confusion along the route. Fourteen of this artist's most famous pieces, most of which

are still manufactured by Cassina, were positioned against the Tuck Gallery's wooden panelling and signposted, and created a purely form-related dialogue with the gallery's eighteenth-century paintings and furnishings: the *Fauteuil Méribel* (1948) placed next to a lacquer and bronze commode (1790); the bamboo *chaise longue* (1940) placed under *Portrait of a woman* by Pierre Allais (1740), the famous *Fauteuil à dossier basculant* (1928) opposite a Louis XV chair.

Perriand felt that any attempt to copy the past indicated the extent of a society's decadence. The shape of these objects was not inherited from their predecessors, nor can they be compared to each other in terms of their function alone, however the chance to verify their similarities and differences – with a view to delving deeper into the subject of industrial design above and beyond the horizons that guided twentieth-century designers – was too much of a novelty to allow such an opportunity to slip past.

Nevertheless the association of such objects can either be read in terms of a new interest for tradition as the root of the present or as the reneging of the functional methods of tradition in preference for new formal and functional purposes. The new objects that owe their form to their predecessors, however, cannot serve the same purpose, and can only verify similarities and differences in order to move beyond them".

An exhibition at the Venus Over Manhattan Gallery celebrated this legendary French designer, the only woman to be numbered alongside the masters of the 20th century (The creative avantgarde of Charlotte Perriand, 2018) *Fig. 8*.

As Massimo De Conti wrote: "Charlotte Perriand (1903 – 1999), a tireless traveller, would have undoubtedly appreciated this American event. The Venus Over Manhattan gallery in New York paid tribute to the queen of design, the only woman amongst the greats of the twentieth century, many of whom she had the opportunity to work with. The Charlotte Perriand exhibition, which was organised in partnership with the Laffanour/ Galerie Downtown in Paris, ran until 12 January and featured 50 pieces attesting to the calibre of this great designer. In 1927, Perriand walked into Le Corbusier's studio in Rue

Fig. 8

Fig. 8
Installation view of
Charlotte Perriand,
organized in collaboration
with Galerie Downtown/
François La anour, at
Venus Over Manhattan,
New York, 2018-2019.
Ph. Cooper Dodds.
Courtesy Venus Over
Manhattan, New York.

Fig. 9

Fig. 9
Reconstruction of the
setting for the *Maison
du jeune homme* (1935)
by the Fondation Louis
Vuitton in 2019. © Fonda-
tion Louis Vuitton.

de Sèvres, Paris, as the interior design manager, working alongside his cousin, Pierre Jeanneret. This proved to be the launch pad that allowed Perriand to work on prestigious commissions, including the *Unité d'Habitation* apartments in Marseilles (1945–1952), for which she designed the *Cuisine-bar* (1952), one of the most surprising pieces on display. She chose to place the kitchen module in the middle of the living space, a common idea these days but something that was very unusual at that time. Another rare piece is her *Table à six pans* (1949) based on Perriand's first wooden table design, built in 1938 for her Montparnasse apartment.

This designer innovatively interpreted materials and furnishings thanks to a curious eye that was constantly looking for new stimulus, such as during her long countryside walks, which produced hundreds of photographs that served as inspiration for new objects. Examples of these are the bent wood pieces of furniture, such as the *Ombre chair* of 1954, a product of her time spent in Japan, now revisited by Cassina. Her many trips to the Orient led to the reinterpretation of many iconic designs produced during her time with Le Corbusier and the introduction of oriental woods and bamboo features, such as in the *Maison Borot* (1959). Montmartre a refurbishment that took 15 years to complete. Among the objects of the exhibition, which spanned an 80-year career, a room that recreated the student lodgings of *Maison du Brésil* (which was also designed in partnership with Le Corbusier in 1959) was recreated, complete with bed, desk and wardrobe.

Twenty years had gone by since Perriand's death, however the interest in her work was far from waning. Proof of this was the success of exhibitions and auctions dedicated to her, like the one held a year earlier at Paris's Artcurial, where a desk en forme originale was auctioned for over €700,000".

To mark the 20th anniversary of her death, Fondation Louis Vuitton dedicated a sweeping and complete retrospective to Perriand: a revolutionary benchmark figure of twentieth-century design who deserved independent recognition (*Le monde nouveau de Charlotte Perriand*, 2019).

An imposing tour-de-force of an exhibition, it also covered the many foreign trips and experiences that marked her career and contributed to making her the woman she was: revolutionary and brilliant when it came to her pure and concrete approach to design and the way it should serve people.

The exhibition featured the work she did following the Liberation and Reconstruction of France, work that committed her to architectural and social projects.

The exhibition was a journey across the 20th century in the company of an exceptional woman. It covered all her architectural work, which foretold the new role of women and nature in our society, and it allowed the visitor to experience her modernity through the reconstructions of her designs, faithfully researched, including the works of art that Charlotte chose for her clients, thus making her vision a "synthesis of the arts" of reality. It explained how her many interests touched upon different aspects of design and creativity: product design, interior decor, town planning, painting, sculpture and even photography.

In the introductory note of the exhibition curated by Roberto Fabbrì, we find: "The exhibition revealed how her life crossed the Twentieth century and how her career reflected the sudden changes and watersheds that marked the Modern Movement. It presented Perriand as a leading figure of twentieth-century design who influenced the way contemporary people lived.

Perriand was shown to be a visionary woman, who embraced the twentieth century and created the elements needed to understand the art of living in a modern world as both artistic and intellectual interactions of twentieth-century society: a woman committed to leading what was nothing short of an evolution — if not a revolution — in the way we think and see the world and its cultural and artistic expressions, placing her at the centre of a new order of things, a new relationship between the arts themselves, architecture, painting, sculpture, and among widely different cultures in Asia (Japan, Vietnam), Latin America, Brazil; among social movements, the political world order and the place of women, our relationship with the countryside, the transition from a society

inherited from the nineteenth century to the contemporary model of the twentieth century, scarred by cataclysms such as totalitarian regimes and world wars followed by phases of both physical and moral reconstruction.

What also emerged was a Charlotte Perriand whose particular vision of the world demonstrated a unique sensitivity towards the environment: an awestruck, inspired, sensitive view of nature and man's place within it.

Charlotte Perriand's awareness of the place of the individual in his or her environment led to an enduringly lively and constructive dialogue that can be glimpsed in all her commitments — both intellectual and artistic — and in her avantgarde vision of the 'new workshop' of a constantly evolving world, a new art of living. She was a pioneer of modernity and, in her role as architect and designer, Charlotte Perriand is particularly famous for her fundamental contribution to the field of design.

Every room of the exhibition guided visitors along a voyage through the twentieth century in the company of a woman who was busy defining a new art of life and whose work was well ahead of today's debates regarding women and the role of nature in our society.

Visitors were given a chance to understand the Modern Movement as interpreted by Perriand thanks to scientifically accurate reconstructions which included the works of art Perriand chose to realise her vision of a synthesis of the arts. In this exhibition, the work of Charlotte Perriand invited us to rethink the role of art in our society: both a thing of joy and a spearhead for future social transformation.

For Charlotte Perriand, architecture and design, inextricably linked, were the tools that help us imagine the options available to us to enjoy our existence as much as possible, claiming our surroundings rather than remaining crushed by them.

Within the exhibition, the furnishings for Charlotte Perriand's apartment in Saint-Sulpice, Paris, dated 1927 which naturally featured chrome-plated tubular steel, were a statement in favour of modern apartments in a city which at the time was brimming with cars, cinemas, electricity and where everything was in movement and could change from one moment to the next, starting with the role of women.

The exhibition paid tribute to this French architect by featuring a series of accurate reconstructions of interiors, where what emerged was how Perriand's search for the right materials and functions was her constant guiding light at that particular moment in history. A free spirit, a professional, a woman surrounded by great men, she was finally freed of the Charlotte Perriand, a colleague of Le Corbusier label, something which has always spawned debate regarding the true authorship of many design projects.

The exhibition's title, *Le monde nouveau de Charlotte Perriand*, perfectly suited a figure that used architecture to put forward a new vision of life, and the world as a result — at a time when such visions were automatically attributed to men — a new vision of how we characterise space, environments and single functions.

The large wooden tables, the enamelled metal lamps, the objects made out of natural wood and the area set aside for crafts were set against the interior of the Foundation designed by Frank Gehry, in a continuous dialogue between container and content, modern and post-modern, an interweaving of elements that is now a fairly common practice in today's museums.

After all, the synthesis of arts was a theme that ran through all of Charlotte Perriand's work. Through art, man can explore his existence, just as great architecture and great design provide individuals with the tools to shape their existence.

Inspired by the idea that 'the architect's role is to work for people', as early as the 1920s and '30s, Perriand concentrated on the concept of the 'ideal apartment' that Le Corbusier developed into 'a machine for dwelling'. Together, they created design icons whose characteristic feature was always the use of tubular steel, because they were designs that came about at the very moment in history when industry and functionality blossomed.

The Italian company Cassina made a fundamental contribution to the exhibition.

Assisted by Pernet Perriand Barsac, the company completed a detailed philological reconstruction of the interiors of the *Salon d'Automne* (1929) with new editions and studio models that faithfully represent this revolutionary design. Moreover, it reconstructed

the space and the furniture of the *Maison du jeune homme* (1935) Fig. 9, the content of the *Proposition d'une synthèse des Arts* (1955) exhibition and, last but not least, other pieces that she designed during her time in Asia.

The *Refuge Tonneau* (1938), nothing short of a futuristic masterpiece of portable architecture designed for mountainous areas, was also lent to the exhibition by Cassina, which completed its construction on the basis of Perriand's initial design".

The exhibition was divided into different sections that displayed specific areas of Perriand's work.

The section entitled *The ideal apartment* was dedicated to the invention of a kind of modernity that swung between a fascination for industry, political activism and a much-needed return to nature. From the 1920s on, she imagined an "art of living" that broke the rules of her time. Inspired by the world of the automobile, the cinema and in rethinking the role of women, she designed chrome-plated steel furniture for her studio in Saint-Sulpice (1927) that was surprisingly modern. There was the design entitled *Work & Sport* (1927) that illustrates her vision of a modern apartment.

The section entitled *Political activism and a return to nature* reflects her awareness of the danger posed by a modernity devoted solely to functionalism. She began making efforts to improve human habitat from the 1930s on with a return to nature. She condemned the "extreme poverty of Paris" as regards housing and, with her *Maison du jeune homme* (1935), put forward a space where light, works of art, found objects and modern furniture joined forces. By comparing her art brut photographs and Fernand Léger's designs, we can see the strength of the view of nature that inspired Perriand, creating her first "free forms" featuring organic curves.

The section entitled *A synthesis of arts and cultures* shows the continuity between art and architecture manifested in the *Proposal for a synthesis of the arts* exhibition which opened in Tokyo in 1955. Charlotte reunited her old travel companions, Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier, as well as Hans Hartung and Pierre Soulages, designing a space that combined paintings, sculptures, wall-hangings, furniture and architecture, abolishing the borders between disciplines. Her aim was to transform daily life through the arts, creating

a new relationship with the world, new social interaction that was less compartmentalised and more pleasing to the senses. This utopian proposal was taken to Paris by the Steph Simon gallery as it offered Perriand's emblematic creations of the art of living. The home she envisaged in Rio illustrates this tireless designer's ability to transform herself throughout her career, whilst remaining faithful to her principles: designing useful objects, combining state-of-the-art technology and the know-how of different cultures.

The section entitled *Charlotte Perriand and the arts* presents little-known aspects of her work, particularly her contribution to the world of museums and collectors with her Equipment for the museum of modern art (1965), the apartment of collector Maurice Jardot (1978) and the new concept for the Galerie Louise Leiris (1989), creating spaces that fostered a dialogue between visitors and the works on display. She was also a great "builder".

The section entitled *Arched Architecture* reflects on 1930s prefabrication. Perriand joined forces with Pierre Jeanneret to create the *Refuge Tonneau* (1938), both a mountain shelter and an invitation to travel. This love of nature and of the mountains explains the strength and discretion of the architecture designed for the *Les Arcs* ski resort in Savoy (1967-1989). Masterful for the way it follows the sloping landscape, its buildings offer those inside a place to rest as well as a place for contemplation, framed by the spectacular view of Alpine peaks.

In the section entitled *Meditation on the place of nature*, visitors were invited to meditate on the place of nature and on the importance of a dialogue between cultures at the *Tea House* (1993), produced for UNESCO, which included works by Japanese artists such as Sofu Teshigahara and Isao Domoto.

London's Design Museum presents *Charlotte Perriand: The Modern Life* (2021), an exhibition that turns the spotlight on one of the 20th century's most iconic artists. This new exhibition marks twenty-five years since Perriand's last exhibition at London's Design Museum, held in 1996, and was put together in collaboration with her family and the Fondation Louis Vuitton, with the support of Cassina and exhibition design contributions by Assemble and A Practice for Everyday Life.

Justin McGuirk, the chief curator, believes that "Charlotte Perriand was a hugely influential figure in design". "The exhibition goes over her work by exploring some of its salient aspects, her theoretical and professional approach, in three themed sections: The Machine Age, Nature and the Synthesis of the Arts, and Modular Design for Modern Living. The exhibition reveals Perriand's creative transition from a modern machine aesthetic to her preference for natural forms sculpted from wood, and this process is also visible in her all-encompassing vision of a 'synthesis of the arts', where design, art and architecture combine. Described as 'a free spirit who championed good design for all', Perriand espoused modernist aesthetic values that could be perceived in her furniture and architectural designs. She once said, 'Dwellings should be designed not only to satisfy material specifications; they should also create conditions that foster harmonious balance and spiritual freedom in people's lives' and the Design Museum's exhibition has helped to revive her ideas. In the 1930s, Perriand's interest shifted from metal furniture and industrialised production towards nature, and her artistic work took a turn in this direction. Brilliantly exemplified through 'Nature and the Synthesis of the Arts', this shift included organic furniture forms in wood and leather, inspired by personal collections of found natural objects such as rocks, sticks and fossils. The exhibition includes black and white photography and experimental sketches; mixed with furniture from the time, these give a sense of how these inspirations were translated through Perriand's sensibility. 'Modular Designs for Modern Living' forms a synthesis of Perriand's trajectory through modernity, and shows her work in modular furnishings, interior design and architecture. She strived to create affordable and adaptable interiors, and some of her best known furniture works include bookcase designs originally conceived for student dormitories – a fitting example of democratic design, featuring a simple, modular construction in wood and plastic. The exhibition culminates with her legendary work for the French ski resort Les Arcs in 1968, with a life-sized model and a film that helps visitors immerse themselves in her pragmatic design thinking". He continues: "Perhaps most poetically, the show's last

item on display demonstrates Perriand's curiosity and humour. It's a vase she had bought in Brazil in the 1960s, made from an everyday plastic bottle that, she said, captured the essence of good design to be resourceful, intelligent and infused with humanity. The last time Perriand had an exhibition at the Design Museum, in 1996, she was concerned at first that she was being presented as a furniture designer". Finally he says: "Twenty-five years later, there is no risk of any misunderstanding. Here, she is presented as a synthesiser, a collaborator, an integrator. And it is this ideal that she offered as a framework to those who wished to live a modern life, like her own".

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Translated from Perriand, C. (2006). *Io, Charlotte. Tra Le Corbusier, Léger e Jeanneret*. Laterza.