Together the two exhibitions offered unprecedented insights into selected aspects of the architectural glories of India. It is a pity that the results of the CCAs extensive scholarly work were shown at only three venues, and one hopes that other institutions will later seek to mount the display.

HELEN IBBITSON JESSUP
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn

Publication related to the exhibition:

Note
1. Judith Maria Gutman, Through Indian Eyes (New York, 1982); Vidya Dehejia, with Charles Allen et al., India Through the Lens: Photography 1840-1911 (Washington, D.C, 2000); and John Falconer, India: Pioneering Photographers, 1850–1900 (London, 2001), another important page to the historiography of twentieth-century Belgian architecture. Indeed, while several scholars have been studying parts of Lacoste’s œuvre for a few years now, and though the architect was given a prominent place in the survey Art Deco and Modernism in Belgium: Architecture between the Two World Wars by Jos Vandenberghe and France Vanlaethem (Tielt, 1996), no comprehensive overview of his complete work was available until now. Considering his compelling and highly imaginative architecture, which provides one of the most striking examples of Art Deco in Belgium, an overview of the work of this gifted architect and influential teacher was long overdue.

Monographic in nature, the exhibition was arranged in a logical but conventional manner. It opened with a section on the architect’s education at the Académie des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles/Académie voor Schone Kunsten van Brussel from 1904 to 1908 and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1909 to 1913, where he studied under Henri Deglane. The second section gave a summary overview of his entire career. Starting with his involvement in the mission Dhuique, which documented the built environment in Western Flanders threatened by World War I, and continuing with his consequent reconstruction project for the city of Bétharies, the display of the interwar projects was organized according to typology: houses and cabarets, funerary architecture, medical projects, and exhibition pavilions—the latter being a genre in which Lacoste excelled, as it allowed him to fully draw on his imaginative reinterpretation of past and foreign civilizations. Such an approach was already present in his private residence of 1926, where in a fascinating way the interior combined Assyrian, Egyptian, and Greek references with elements taken from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and his own time.

The presentation of Lacoste’s post-war work was built up around a few major projects, including the RTT home in Oostduinkerke (1948) and a competi-
tion project for a palace of justice in Beirut, Lebanon (1948). Two major parts of his oeuvre received a more elaborate presentation. On the one hand, particular emphasis was put on Lacoste's total design approach in church architecture, encompassing not only buildings and architectural decoration but also liturgical objects and garments. His churches of Bléharies (1919–26), Zwartberg (1937–41), and Beringen (1938–48) belong to the most innovative work in this domain of interwar Belgian architecture; their imaginative treatment of building mass, structure, and decoration brings to mind the work of Jože Plečnik.

On the other hand, due attention was given to his African projects: the excitingly exotic designs for Congo pavilions at 1930s international exhibitions, in particular those of Paris in 1931 and Liège in 1939, as well as in some post-war designs for buildings in the Belgian colony. The show also highlighted the impact that Lacoste's archaeological activities—undertaken mainly in Delphi, Greece, in 1913, and in the early 1930s, in Apamée, Syria, where Lacoste discovered “the lesson of urbanism”—had on the architect’s thinking and practice. Finally, Lacoste’s role as a teacher at the academy in Brussels, which according to the exhibition’s organizers was as important as that of Victor Horta or Henry van de Velde, was underlined by presenting student notebooks and a series of revealing quotes next to an audiotape of one of his lessons and a selection of work by his more prominent students, such as Claude Strebelle, André Jacqmain, Jacques Moeschal, and Paul Mignot.

The broad overview presented by the exhibition convincingly showed that Lacoste did not stick to one formal idiom, but produced a particularly eclectic oeuvre in which regionalist projects, most often massive structures in brick reminiscent of traditional Flemish architecture, stand next to the Art Deco of the 1930s exhibition pavilions. The formal language of some designs even fits into a more modernist tendency, as, for instance, the crematorium he built in collaboration with Lucien de Vestel in Uccle (1930–32) near Brussels, the first of its kind in Belgium. Yet the common element in his work was an obsession with formal invention, often introduced by a reinterpretation of traditional building forms and architectural elements, and a keen interest in architectural ornamentation that in a very personal manner played with iconography, color, and texture. In this respect, the exhibition’s organizers should...
be credited for having assembled such a rich array of drawings, photographs, full-scale architectural fragments, plaster casts, and samples of decorative materials, like colored glass and marblite, presented in an attractive and coherent way. The daring decision to invite two young contemporary artists to enter into dialogue with Lacoste's architecture added to the reading of the work: Hans op de Beeck's intriguing model of the Beringen church enhanced the sense of mystique of this remarkable project, while the playful cartoon-like drawings and video of Emilio Lopez-Menchero introduced an awareness of the imaginary levels at stake in Lacoste's passion for the past—uncovered and reimagined by his archaeological exploits—and in the architect's fascination with non-Western civilizations.

For some years now, the AAM has been documenting Art Deco architecture in Belgium. Its attention to Lacoste, who is represented at the institution with an extremely rich archive, is therefore no surprise. Yet the presentation of this puzzling architect also neatly fits the mission that the AAM and in particular Maurice Culot, one of its founders, have set themselves since the very beginning: to write an alternative history of modern architecture in Belgium, in which various kinds of modernisms can be inscribed. It is telling that in the introduction of the exhibition, the practice and teaching of Lacoste was presented as "an alternative for the normative discourse of the avant-garde." Yet, by focusing so explicitly on inventiveness in architectural form and decoration, and by only implicitly addressing functional and construction, the Lacoste exhibition failed to fully exploit the architect's oeuvre to make this case. Ground plans often highlighted decorative floor patterns rather than clarifying spatial qualities and, though a few striking photographs of construction sites were displayed, Lacoste's ambiguous attitude toward tectonics was not raised as an issue. The African projects section was perhaps most revealing in this respect, for in putting up a confrontation between drawings of Africanizing Congo pavilions and real African artifacts, it almost exclusively aimed at illustrating Lacoste's genuine interest in African culture. Yet the well-documented Congo pavilion at the 1931 Paris colonial exhibition, one of Lacoste's most daring designs and a brilliant exercise in what Jean-Claude Vigato once described as "colonizing the vocabulary of exotic architecture through the architectural principles of the École des Beaux-Arts," could have been used to induce a more profound reading. This would have required, however, focusing also on its ingenious planimetric layout and drawing attention more explicitly to the fascinating structural solution of its cupolas, a prefabricated wooden framework, which was shown without comment in just a few photographs. Only then would the truly modern nature have been revealed of a project that, as a contemporary critic in L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui wrote, "united the spirit of the colonial style with a formal logic resulting from functional demands." The presentation of an overwhelming number of meticulously executed and colorful drawings proved Lacoste's talent as a draftsman and made this exhibition particularly attractive. Letting the work speak for itself, however, also led to the danger of seducing rather than informing the visitor. The exhibition would have benefited from more elaborate texts on individual projects, as these would have offered a means to open up the perspective on Lacoste's work beyond the strict formal categories of Art Deco and to contextualize the work in relation to, for instance, its reception in professional as well as in popular media. No mention could be found of the telling controversy aroused by his Pavillon de la Vie Catholique at the Brussels World's Fair of 1935, a building that was regarded by some as a "blasphemy" for its resemblance to a mosque. One would also have appreciated finding out something about the role of his clients, but perhaps such critiques will be found in the forthcoming monograph. If the exhibition should have acknowledged that even such a truly creative architect as Henry Lacoste operated in and was influenced by the specific economic, social, and cultural conditions of his time, it nonetheless had the undeniable merit of successfully bringing into the picture a striking personality of twentieth-century Belgian architecture, a designer who beyond doubt deserves international attention.

JOHAN LAGAE
Universiteit Gent

Publications related to the exhibition:

Notes

Gund Hall Gallery, Harvard Design School, Cambridge, Massachusetts
6 October–19 November 2003

Josep Lluis Sert: Architect to the Arts II
Sert Gallery, Carpenter Center, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts
13 September–14 December 2003

Josep Lluis Sert (1902–1983) is among the remarkable number of architects and artists from Spain and in particular from Catalonia who have had a significant impact on modernism worldwide. Although he spent many years abroad, he remained close to his Catalan roots, returning to his native Barcelona in anticipation of his death. Having gradu-