



Jane B. Drew

Le Corbusier as I Knew Him

I cannot remember when first I met Le Corbusier, but I think it was at the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) at Bridgewater in 1947, when he made little impression on me.

I was new to CIAM Conferences and realized that there was some kind of political trouble going on between Corb and Cor van Eesteren—I remember Corb being rather dogmatic.

He must have become a friend, for I remember he visited my office in 36 Bedford Square. He was highly excited about the modulator that he produced from his pocket with great pride. It was in a small roll that stretched out for a long way like the roll of his lovers Don Giovanni produces in the opera.

I also remember him trying by some sort of chart at that time to prove he was not Swiss but French.

I saw more of Corb at the CIAM Conference of 1949 at Bergamo. He seemed then to be the most important member of CIAM. He impressed me as having the face of an ascetic with internal force.

The last Congress I attended was in 1954 at Aix-en-Provence, France; there were amusing incidents when the Dutch members walked out because nude French girls appeared on the roof at Marseilles. I remember the CIAM grilles, and Corb talking well, not much more than the others, but with more authority.

Through CIAM a friendship was established, and he sent me a photograph of himself with an affectionate dedication (misspelled) (Fig. 98).

After that Corb seemed to regard me as a special friend and wrote me numerous personal letters. I have kept these letters, but since my life has always been overbusy they will require, like my photographs, a long time to sort out. I remember much of what was in them: "There is no such thing as detail in architecture, everything counts"; his card from Egypt with him (drawn on) sitting on a pyramid, saying, "This time it is not a square peg in a round hole"; his several letters asking

me to see Jawaharlal Nehru on points to do with his work, which I did; his letter from America about Costantino Nivola and how happy he was. But I am no historian and one day when I retire I will sort out my letters; meantime I will tell only of those days I remember.

He sent me his Modulor book with an inscription. This inscription was not correct—I did not help him (Fig. 99).

It was when the Indians came to our office about Chandigarh that I first phoned him. I had not yet been to his Paris office. The first visit impressed me—his tiny modulator office and his way of life.

Corb was a very good friend. His numerous letters and postcards and a constant stream of his paintings and drawings, that he sent me until his death, showed me how seriously he treated friendship. He said living was an art.

The drawings and collages, some of which are now in my office, often have two dates. For example, *Woman with Open Hand* (Fig. 100) has two dates on the bottom: Paris 32—when Corb did the preliminary sketches, and Chandigarh 52—where he actually executed it. It is a good illustration of the current themes that appear in his architecture. One can see the acute contrast between the carefully designed curved shapes and rectangles, the combination of architecture in stylized human forms, and few of the very flat triangular forms that he fell in love with after his early visits to Greece and which he used only at points of importance. He very often used as his signature the image of a little crow, which he so much resembled in appearance; and he chose the double dating to indicate when he first started to work on a theme, and when he eventually worked it to completion, in this case twenty years later. The open hand here is part of his lifetime philosophy and implies his idea that one should give, as indeed he did.

I found him a man with a serious purpose, egocentric but also able to appreciate others. He had a great sense of humor and enormous vanity. To go for a walk with him was a revelation, he would notice so

Figure 98

Le Corbusier in his studio, 24 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli, Paris XVI^e. "Pour Jane Drey [sic], avec mon amitié," signed Le Corbusier, 12 December 1950. (Photograph by Maywald, Rue Jacob, Paris, May 1948.)

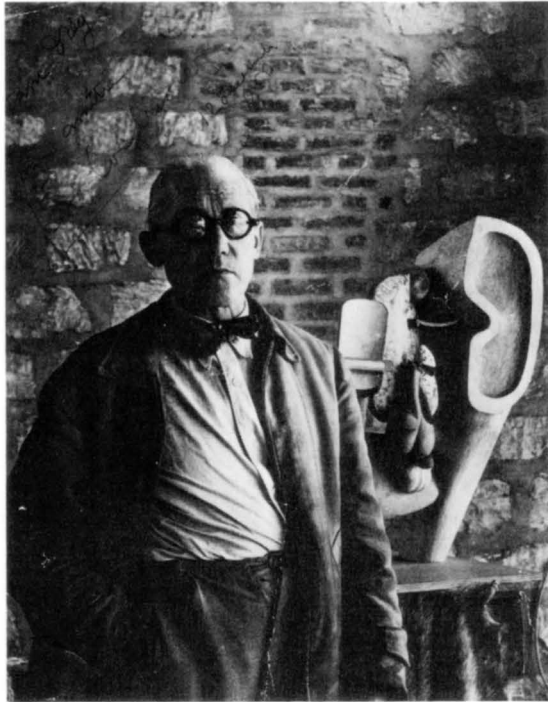
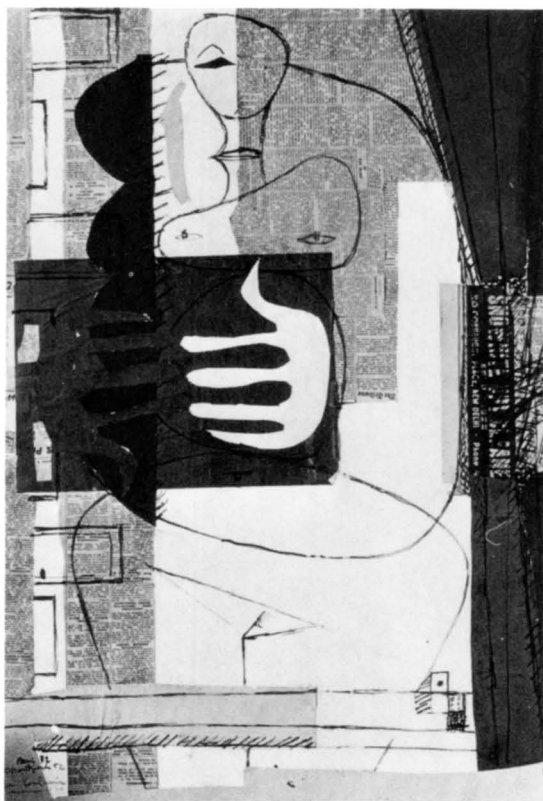


Figure 99

Le Corbusier's inscription to Jane Drew's copy of *Modulor 2*, January 1956.



Figure 100
Le Corbusier's collage,
Woman with Open Hand,
1952. (Collection of Jane
Drew.)



much. He loved the quiet lines of the green hills and mountains in Chandigarh but he also loved strong colors. His dislike of “sweet pea” colors in buildings (his words) was relevant to his whole wish for a clear definition and drama.

He lived and worked in his own extraordinary way. He painted in the early morning, settled alone at his desk uninterrupted when he wanted to study problems in depth, as he put it, and when he relaxed he liked sport and talk, away from architecture.

He had a lot of the monk in him. His idea was that his painting exercised his imagination. He dated everything he drew. He tried to find logical reasons for all he did and to separate and discover the experiences life could offer, the difference between seeing during night and day, the different experiences possible in daily life, and the maximization of each experience.

I remember visiting him as an old man in his flat. He had taken up enamel work to do the Chandigarh High Court doors. He was determined to get all the virtue out of enamel that was possible and learned when he was seventy how to work with it.

His view of life was moral. He was loyal to mathematics, to order, to living the life he thought worth living. He gave his life to his work; his reason for not having a family was that, like a monk, an artist could not spare the time. He did, however, value affection and women—not in an English way: he spoke to me of his women loves, and although he recognized sex as the force it is and was not respectful of man-made laws, he did respect the women he loved, and his love of his mother was a very great force in his life.

Corb was an extremely witty man. He was not a *raconteur* of others' stories. He possessed a marvelous and original sense of humor. For example, a pompous architect came into my office in Bedford Square while Corb was there. He was a very unbending type and said he had lost his umbrella. Corb murmured to me, “*C'est en dedans.*” I remem-

ber also when he sent us an invitation to a party in Simla in northern India, where monkeys are sacred. The invitation consisted of a caricature of him and Jeanneret both drawn as monkeys (which they singularly resembled at times!). A further illustration of Corb's humor is a drawing he did in Chandigarh of the "family" responsible for the creation of Chandigarh—a sort of caricature of us all (Fig. 101). This shows Corb as a crow, looking in the opposite direction. Jeanneret is shown as a cock with his head in the sand. I am shown as a goat and Max as a dog. I asked Corb to scrub out the names because I thought Jeanneret, in particular, might take offence, but it was a good illustration of his kind of humor.

Corb's judgment of men was also good. He despised the American scene, the waste of materials, the wrong direction in life. He used to say Paris could live for a month on the waste New York made in a day. He disliked the slick smooth finishes of the expensive American offices; equally the way of life of the business men as he saw it.

I remember him admiring Edwin Lutyens' work greatly; he was too big a man for style in itself to prejudice him—proportions and forms were what mattered.

He did not bother much about cost or what he had told his clients. It was almost irrelevant to him; although he was anxious to do good cheap housing, he was even more anxious to make major works. He did not like anonymous artifacts. He liked a world where bosses, for example in the Secretariat building in Chandigarh, could visibly be made important. Where station in life was defined, he had no intention of wasting his own efforts on anything irrelevant, but he did regret that sometimes he put himself and his own work so much in front of doing things that mattered for others.

He has written so much that his views about architecture must be known, but to be with him was to find him always discovering (Fig. 102). Discovering why Moghul forms look right in the Indian light, dis-



Figure 101
The Chandigarh
"Family," as depicted by
Le Corbusier, 8 April
1952. (Collection of Jane
Drew.)

Figure 102
Le Corbusier and Jane
Drew on the grass at
Chandigarh, 1951.
(Photograph by Eulie
Chowdbury.)



covering why saris might be a better solution to heighten the attraction of women than French fashions. Discovering how underarm hair is beautiful and to him added to a woman's attractiveness. Discovering the mood of the late afternoon and night in India. Not for him were the views of the fashion merchants and depilatory salesmen.

I am not saying that I agree with all Le Corbusier's views; I am trying to describe how I found him as a person. His manner to reporters was offhand because he thought them unserious about architecture and untrustworthy; also because he did not wish to waste his time, for he cared much about whom he was with.

His life was, in a way, a battle. He recognized that authorities with their by-laws about, for example, heights of rooms were not concerned with proportion; such laws were pointless to him. All proportions must be related to man and to geometry.

He was able to tell Nehru that he had put more thought into the High Court in Chandigarh than he had envisaged and so his fees must be higher—I was with him and translated this to Nehru. For him a formal contract regarding fees was irrelevant. Luckily Nehru was another big man who also saw that a contract was not important in such a work.

Le Corbusier was so egocentric that I once teased him about the fact he could not talk for ten minutes without bringing himself into the conversation! He realized this was true. I also said to him that he was too selfish, and he must go and thank the Indian young men who had worked so hard for him. He had not wanted even to go and see them; however, he did go and agreed it was right to do so. He was both selfish and unselfish. His kindness and unselfishness to me may well have been partly or largely due to my being a woman, but he continued it when our work association was over.

Le Corbusier, with all his maximizing of drama, was also delicate and refined. I do not know if I have given the full picture of this man

who was thrilled to be receiving our architect's Gold Medal from the Queen of England and who argued with Jeanneret for the virtues of royalty versus democracy because it was more poetic and detached. I am writing of a man whom I greatly admire, but I recognize that I also am very attached to him.

I think of Le Corbusier as the architect from whom I have learned most. I am sympathetic to him for his primary allegiance to his own vision of the truth and his life spent in trying to affirm it.