

A 'Machine for Living' Who Enjoyed Life

By Nicholas Fox Weber

New York

One late November day in 1907, 20-year-old Charles-Edouard Jeanneret was sitting in Venice's Piazza San Marco. After a week of nonstop rain and fog, bright sunshine broke through. The future architect—who, under the name "Le Corbusier," would re-plan cities and permanently transform the look of luxury dwellings, apartment houses and public buildings—felt his spirits soar.

"The blue sky is a miracle. Everything is singing. I have seen the most extraordinary colors in the canals," he wrote his parents back in Switzerland. It was his first journey away from them and from the bleak industrial city where he had grown up. Looking across the great Venetian square, he felt as if he were witnessing "a marvelous, supernatural spectacle" orchestrated by a magician. The "perfect harmony" transported him.

That unreserved passion for seeing is what comes through in "Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier," an exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center on West 86th Street. This show of work by and pertaining to Charles-Edouard Jeanneret makes clear how unbalanced the public perception has been of this architect known for tough concrete buildings and accused of an autocratic will to raze cities and erase their history.

Le Corbusier, often tagged as the inventor of "the machine for living," should, one learns at Bard, be known more for the "living" and less for the "machine." The gracious furniture, vases and wallpaper he designed; the rich still-lives and vivid watercolors with which he chronicled his travels; the designs for comfortable villas: All of this early work invites a reconsideration of a man who, contrary to his myth, was intoxicated with everyday pleasure.

The name change took hold in the early 1920s. The work that followed, in the architect's maturity, would certainly differ from what we see in this show. Le

Corbusier's best known buildings—the multiterraced, streamlined Villa Savoie (1928-31); the ark-like, exuberant country church of Ronchamp (1950-55); the bold civic buildings in India at Chandigarh (1952-56)—would eliminate reference to past styles and earlier epochs. These 20th-century icons would be as carefully constructed and purely inventive as the architect's name. But this exhibition makes evident that other salient qualities—the love of color, the eye for rhythm, the

refer to himself in the third person, as if he could distance himself from his own humanness. He also became "Le C"—a correlative of "Le Christ"—which suited his obsession with a biography of Jesus Christ and his idea that he was put on this earth to change it while undertaking much personal sacrifice.

That complexity, and a profound emotional intensity, are apparent in the Bard exhibition. The watercolors show that

when he faced the cathedral at Pisa, or pine trees, he was deeply moved. Pisa dazzled him so that, as a young traveler, he stayed in front of the cathedral for four entire days—except for a couple of brief junkets to the nearby museum. He was happy enough just to watch the shifting sky and light and the changes they brought about on the façade.

The old-fashioned villas he designed and furniture he made before permanently leaving Switzerland reveal his fondness for luxury. A painted divan on a platform, and a library ensemble, exude charm and meticulous craftsmanship. Le Corbusier could be tough and spartan—he considered monks' cells ideal habitations—but he also loved beautifully arranged flowers, well-cut suits and good wines.

It's simply that he kept his private self very private. Few people even realized that he was married—to a notoriously lusty woman from Monaco, as Mediterranean in her roots as he was Calvinist in his—and that his wife told wicked dirty jokes (which he adored, even when her scandalous quips astonished distinguished clients), drank pastis with abandon, and made a famous bouillabaisse.

No wonder Josephine Baker, with whom he had an ardent shipboard romance in 1929, declared "*il est simple et il est gai*"—untranslatable words given their current meaning in English. To those in the know, the rigorous, uncompromising Charles-Edouard Jeanneret/Le Corbusier had flare and verve at his core.

Mr. Weber, executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, is writing a biography of Le Corbusier.

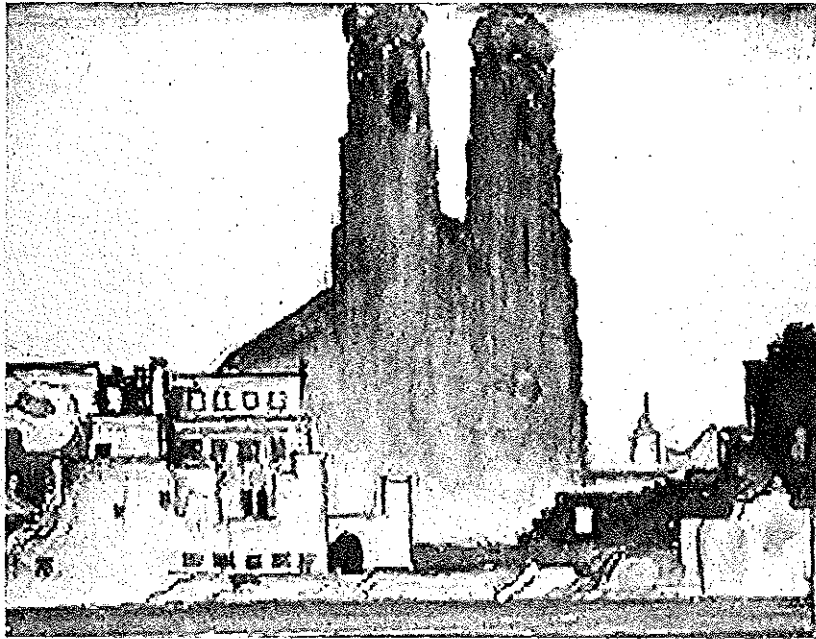


Photo: Artist Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC

Chronicling his travels: The "View of the Frauenkirche," Munich, 1911, by the young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret aka Le Corbusier.

sheer vitality—were seminal to Jeanneret/Le Corbusier from the outset.

He initially took his new name when he and the painter Amédée Ozenfant created the magazine "L'Esprit Nouveau" and each wanted a pseudonym. Jeanneret's intention was to be his old self as a painter, his new self as a writer. The source, ostensibly, was the name of his mother's paternal grandfather, a "Mon-

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sieur Lecorbesier," who had the distinction of having had his portrait painted by Victor Darjou, a court painter of the Empress Eugénie. (That portrait is in this show with other important relics of Jeanneret's childhood.)

But the new sobriquet was suitable for other reasons as well. He would often