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Charlotte Perriand

A Life of Creation

by **Charlotte Perriand**

New York: The Monacelli Press, 2003

Charlotte Perriand

An Art of Living

edited by **Mary McLeod**

New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003

Although she is often considered one of the 20th century's most renowned women in architecture, Charlotte Perriand (1903 – 1999) was not an architect — she regarded herself an interior designer and took issue with those who thought her merely a furniture designer. Her best-known interior was a temporary installation that she and Pierre Jeanneret completed while in the atelier of Le Corbusier for the 1929 Paris Salon d'Automne exhibition. In that same year, in collaboration with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, she designed three chairs: the *chaise-longue*, *grand confort*, and *fauteuil à dossier basculant*. All were essential “equipment” in the 1930s architecture of Le Corbusier, and all are in production today.

Though Perriand's fame was established in Le Corbusier's firm where she worked as an associate from 1927 to 1937, she was just thirty-four when, at the height of the Depression, she left the studio. For the next six decades she designed mostly interiors. While with Le Corbusier, Perriand espoused belief in metal and new technology as means for

modern furniture, in the mid-30s she adopted a preference for wood. Le Corbusier himself had moved in a similar direction as had Aalto, Breuer, and many renowned artists. As box gave way to human psyche, Surrealist artists like Miró and Calder experimented with “free-form” — form easily translated into furniture, if not so easily into interiors. For the editor of a leftist paper *Ce Soir*, Perriand designed a free form desk. A unique, large, and apparently expensive object, the desk seemed to contradict Popular Front convictions Perriand espoused at the time. Indeed, bourgeois tastes and socialist notions were not easily reconciled. “One-offs” were obviously exclusive, whereas Modernist aesthetics of simplification and serialization were rejected by the French populace. Today, issues of cost and mass-market are addressed in Michael Graves's Target line and Phillipe Starck's cheap chairs — but with production, materials, marketing, and consumers unavailable to Perriand in the 30s.

When the Germans took France in

Book Review

1940, Perriand took refuge in Japan. There, local tradition, craft, a love of wood, and the presence of bamboo (a strong yet lightweight, standard yet unique, warm, malleable, organic “tube”) encouraged design in wood, Perriand now taking cues from Japanese vernacular form. In 1941 the famed 1929 *chaise longue* was translated into bamboo-and-wood, and Perriand’s lightweight tubular steel “folding and stacking chairs” from the mid-30s were done with a heavy wood frame and cushions of a woven straw fabric. Perriand’s stay in Japan culminated in a 1941 exhibition of her work at Takashimaya, a department store in Tokyo and Osaka. As at Stuttgart in 1927, the exhibition was a “room within a room” set up inside the warehouse-like store itself. Designed with the Japanese architect Junzo Sakakura, the exhibition room was modulated by existing department store columns and further modulated by Perriand’s floor and wall materials. The resulting “space” (and here one relies solely on black-and-white images of the installation) was not unlike that of the 1929 Salon, or of Le Corbusier’s Villa Church *bibliothèque*, or of the lobby and *bibliothèque* of his Pavillon Suisse. Obviously, furniture grew chunkier as wood replaced metal. Yet, it was still of Modern form. In agreement with Japanese preference, Perriand placed furniture closer to the ground, thus creating a greater sense of space. Like Le Corbusier’s *pilotis*, legs lifted these objects into the air, permitting an uninterrupted horizontal plane. While space flowed unencumbered, furniture was arranged in orthogonal “rooms.” Lost in this wood translation was the illusive spaciousness of earlier high-tech interiors, an effect achieved with the gloss of synthetic floors and ceilings, the chromed legs and mirrored sliding doors of metal furniture, and the translucency of tabletops and vertical partitions. Designing in wood, Perriand enhanced space not with surface shine and translucency, but by placing “other space” — murals and lighted openings, both of which possessed their own space, space of an order different than that of the interior ensemble itself — at dominant focal points. Earlier, Le Corbusier

had employed similar strategies using murals and coloration to “explode” the space of enclosure, a space simultaneously planar and volumetric.

From national to international, from metal to wood, from industrial to indigenous, from the here and now to an a-historic wandering, Perriand’s transition was permanent. It added significance to her *œuvre*, for it initiated a dialectic. To reiterate, in the late 30s, while retaining a taste for Modernist space and form, Perriand adopted organic materials and shapes, and then traditional, vernacular design. This adoption affected proportions and structure. Her furniture no longer defied gravity; the opposite was true. Inertness replaced mobility. Space was absorbed, not heightened. Oddly, this contrast is most evident not in Perriand’s interiors but in her three mountain structures for minimal habitation. On the one hand, her Modernist 1937–1938 Bivouac and barrel shelters — refuges for “inexpensive vacation retreats” comprised of tubular-metal supports and aluminum panels and braced by metal cables — were shiny, minimal, lightweight capsules. They were intended to be assembled on site, mass-produced, and to delicately hover on snow-covered mountainsides. By contrast, the traditional 1960 Méribel-les-Alpes wood chalet that Perriand designed as her own retreat is rooted in the ground, blended with nature, heavy, organic, and inert. Where the first is anonymous and “for the people,” the latter is personal, a “second home,” a refuge exclusively for Perriand. The transition can be understood as moving from, in Umberto Eco’s terms, a positivistic-technological ideology towards a materialistic-historical one: both “optimistic ideologies of progress” that seek to build a better world but in very different ways.¹

Leaving Japan, Perriand moved to Indochina, where, in 1943, she married Jacques Martin, an executive with Air France, and gave birth to her only child, Pernelle. In France after the war, Perriand found that “the polluted Paris air wasn’t good for Pernelle,” and she and her family moved to Jacques’s sister’s “comfortable, sunny house in the Champagne region, complete with garden, rosebush-

es, cherry trees, cats, and dogs” [A, 206].

Perriand continued to design. Her guest rooms of the Hôtel du Doron (1947) and later for student rooms in the Maison de la Tunisie (1952),² feature a colored accent wall combined with a continuous, shallow desktop. Whereas the hotel rooms seem almost quaint, the student rooms offer color and Noguchi-esque free-form as relief to the inherent heaviness of an opaque, almost monolithic wood. In 1950 a far more intriguing Perriand is evidenced in her kitchens for Le Corbusier’s *Marseilles Unité* housing. Later, with Jean Prouvé, Perriand designed wall cabinets and storage units for Air France staff housing in Brazzaville, Congo. In both instances, metal was reintroduced into a wood aesthetic as was the sense of mass production, though the latter was never realized.

In the mid-50s in Japan, together with Sakakura and Martha Villiger, Perriand designed the exhibition *Synthesis of the Arts*, a living and dining room ensemble for the department store Takashimaya. Proportions, intimate scale, color, the warmth of wood, and subdued metal parts were crucial in achieving a humane, delicate aesthetic. As noted above, in 1960 Perriand built a rustic chalet for her own use (tempting another comparison to Le Corbusier and his 1952 *cabanon*), but perhaps more importantly, at this time she designed two interior screen walls: one, a colored pleated fabric for the Tokyo Air France agency; the other, a “staggered bookshelf” for her own Air France apartment in Rio. Both, in a sense, are thickened walls, the latter more “equipment” than the former. The bookshelf of 1962 owes its conceptual origin to the wall of *casiers* in both the *Villa Church* and the *Salon d’Automne* of 1929. In Rio, as earlier in the mid-fifties Japan *Synthesis of the Arts* exhibition and in her design for shelving in the *Maison du Mexique*, Perriand brings color and the warmth and texture of wood to this wall. The design of a functional wall that both partially separates and fully invigorates modern space seems the very essence of furniture as equipment. Perriand elaborated the concept in her designs for bathrooms. With the bathroom for the

1929 *Salon d'Automne* as precedent, Perriand pursued the idea in the Delafon bathroom for the '37 Paris World's Fair (together with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret), in a 1952 design for her own Paris apartment, arguably in the very wonderful "Maison du Sahara" capsules with Prouvé in 1958, and ultimately in a 1975 prefabricated polyester bathroom — mass-produced and plugged into *Arc 1800*, ski resort units in the French Alps. These late manifestations of prefabrication and equipment are important for they return Perriand to what seems her most significant contribution to Modern design: working walls (sometimes swollen to include kitchen or bath). Neither furniture or "interiors" *per se*, these highly ambiguous — in the most positive sense of the word — elements of architecture are simultaneously object and place and as such question the notion of furniture and room as distinct and immutable entities. Certainly similar questions occurred in earlier architecture; and after Perriand and Le Corbusier, Kahn found like value in *poché* space, while various PoMO masters allowed thickened walls to swallow up the built-ins and barely mentionables. The concept is not original, but Perriand's Modernist manifestation might be.

Recently, several accounts of Perriand's life and work have appeared including Perriand's autobiography and an extensive, beautifully made review of her work, *Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living*, edited by Mary McLeod. The former is Perriand's personal account of her life and friendships. It makes little attempt to directly account for her design, but offers instead a chronological record of her life and valuable insight into personal and professional relationships. The latter, by contrast, is a detailed review of Perriand's work, a collection of essays that more or less chronologically examines not Perriand the person, but Perriand the designer, her furniture and interiors, and their political and social context. Taken together, the two give a well-rounded view of Perriand. Neither book critically examines Perriand's design from formal or functional points of view. (Isn't the *gran confort* too wide for most

human bodies, the *petite confort* too narrow? And why is the former a diminutive 25" [62 cm] high, causing it, or everything around it, to look positively wacky in the company of "real" furniture?) But this is by design and not omission.

Issued in French as *Vie de creation* in 1998 — a year before Perriand's death at the age of 96 — Charlotte Perriand's autobiography was published in English five years later by The Monacelli Press as *Charlotte Perriand: A Life of Creation*. It is dedicated: "To Tessa and future generations who will build the twenty-first century." At ninety-five, Perriand tells the story of her long life in design. Many of the book's shortcomings result from this distant perspective. Recollections are sometimes inaccurate. Biases are all too evident. Sentimental moments appear as obstacles in otherwise intriguing stories. And opinions on things and events outside Perriand's realm of expertise are offered all too often. In addition, the book only marginally establishes the conditions of the times in which Perriand lived. And unlike Henry Adams' *Education*, for instance, or even Bob Dylan's *Chronicles*, Perriand's autobiography seldom elevates its telling to a point at which the inevitable truths of experience are communicated. Still, the autobiography succeeds, for one value of autobiographical writing is not its accuracy of accounting but its capacity to convey the author's way of thinking about things. And whereas a too guarded recollection necessarily diminishes this conveyance, one imagines Perriand's writing at least semi-unguarded. That is to say, she does not tell all, but the absence of the sound of hammer on nail-head is conspicuous. We are encouraged to speculate, and in such encouragement some idea of her way of thinking is communicated.

This being said, one notes that often the impression Perriand renders of herself is less than flattering. Again and again she tells of her socialist convictions, her sympathies with the French working class, and her various attempts to better the everyday life of the average French citizen through furniture design — attempts that reached their apex in 1934, when Perriand wrote "The Housewife

and Her Home" column for *Vendredi*, the "Fight-Against-Fascism" review [73]. Yet despite these stated convictions, almost always Perriand's actions belie an allegiance either solely to herself or to political parties overtly responsible for social misery on the largest scale.

For instance, when in June 1940, the Germans marched effortlessly into Paris, the thirty-seven-year-old Charlotte Perriand escaped by train to Marseilles. There she boarded an ocean liner and traveled in a "first-class, mahogany-finished cabin" (129) to Japan. In Japan, she assumed a government position as design consultant in decorative art with the Imperial Ministry of Trade and Industry at a "salary of 100,000 francs a year, plus fees and travel expenses" (121). Perriand — who pleads "Not for anything in the world did I want to leave Paris," and then asks, "Would it be able to defend itself?" (125) — exited the chaos of war in comfort and luxury, not forgetting to take proper skiing and mountaineering gear, having learned in advance, she tells us, that "there was a lot of snow in Japan" (122). Apparently, Perriand was untroubled by atrocities committed in Nanjing by Japanese soldiers against innocent Chinese citizens and by the menacing presence of Japan in French Indochina. She seemed untroubled, too, by the presence of Stalin during her extensive stays in the Soviet Union in the early '30s; and untroubled later by the notorious Mao regime during her 1972 visit to the People's Republic of China. Indeed, during that visit, when the tourist Perriand sensed herself intrusive as she attempted to pry "in the old quarters, hoping to see one of those small traditional dwellings nestled in a square courtyard," she tells us that to avoid ostracism she gladly would "have slipped into a Mao outfit" (357) if only to be free to see all that she wanted to see.

Often Perriand's autobiography seems excruciatingly self-centered — beleaguered by the word "I." This is most evident in her telling of various romantic relationships, a telling that comprises a substantial part of her book and tends toward the frivolous. Thus while still a student in Paris's Union Centrale des Arts

Décoratif, she married an Englishman. “He was called Percy,” she writes (20), then explains that “at the time marriage was the only way for the chrysalis I was to turn into a butterfly . . .” (20). She divorced a few years later. In the 30s, she pursued Pierre Jeanneret, Le Corbusier’s partner. Jeanneret appears in the book’s photos six times more often than both of Perriand’s husbands combined. “Pierre followed me” (58), Perriand writes triumphantly. And later, “Poor Pierre . . .” (64) and then “. . . so I dragged Pierre along . . . where amid fragrant thyme and rosemary we swam naked . . .” (102). Indeed, in reading the autobiography one imagines that being naked in public was a particular preoccupation of Perriand. “I wondered how I could sunbathe nude with a priest around,” she mused (102), while the autobiography’s illustrative text shows Perriand in 1935 from the back, topless, hands raised above her head Rocky-style. More than a quarter of the book’s photos are not of Perriand’s design work, but of Perriand herself. There are no images of Perriand in her 40s; only two of her in her 50s; and then three of her in her 90s. The front cover of the Monacelli English edition features three photographs, all of Perriand herself, including a cropped version of the well-known “Charlotte and Corb” image (with husband Perry smiling benignly in the background while tending bar for the occasion) and the oh-so-controversial photograph of a face-to-the-wall Charlotte, reclining, with skirt at the knee, on the 1929 *chaise-longue*.³

Charlotte Perriand: An Art of Living is a far more comprehensive, accurate, and analytical account of Perriand and her work. Edited by Mary McLeod, the book is a collection of introduction and eight essays. The first four essays (for brevity, I’ve abstracted all titles) are arranged more or less chronologically: Esther Da Costa Meyer’s “Perriand Before Le Corbusier”; Mary McLeod’s “Domestic Equipment, 1928 – 29”; Danilo Udovicki-Selb’s “Perriand and the Popular Front”; and Yasushi Zenno’s “Perriand in Japan, 1940 – 41.” The next three are overviews that collect Perriand by type, association, and “object-ness”: Arthur

Ruegg’s “Transforming the Bathroom, 1927 – 57”; Roger Aujame’s “Perriand and Jean Prouvé”; and Joan Ockman’s “Lessons from Objects.” The final essay, “Perriand and the Alps,” is a largely pictorial review of six decades of Perriand’s designs for various ski huts and resorts. Throughout, the book is richly illustrated in black and white photographs and line drawings. In addition, it features fifty-nine color plates, color being essential to interior design. Four short “Recollections of Charlotte Perriand” followed by five “Selected Writings by Charlotte Perriand” end the book. The selected writings offer Perriand’s own theoretical insight into each phase of her long career, adding “ideology” to practice and therefore expanding one’s understanding of Perriand’s purpose.

McLeod’s collection is largely historical. It touches on the last half of Perriand’s long career, but far greater emphasis is placed on Perriand’s more productive and significant first thirty years. Despite Perriand’s relative fame, little was known about her work after she left Le Corbusier’s atelier. Indeed, Carol Corden’s entry on Perriand in the 1982 *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architecture* is limited to about 200 words. Because of this, the book is a revelation. All seems fresh, even new. There is a precarious balance that must be maintained, however, in presenting Perriand at this time, when so much is constantly being made of so little. For Perriand’s importance is in many ways marginal. By its very nature, a monograph must promote its central figure. McLeod quite ably elevates Perriand’s work, but for the purpose of scrutinizing it carefully, from several angles and with great critical insight. “I hope,” she writes in her introduction, “that by expanding the conventional historical perspective to examine what has usually been considered a modest or marginal practice — because of her position as a woman, working in collaboration, and designing interiors — it will help provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of French modernism” (20). I think it is to McLeod’s great credit that the “understanding” goes well beyond French Modernism. Indeed, and rather unfortunately,

the essays (Da Costa Meyer’s is the exception) too infrequently place Perriand in the context of other French designers of interiors and furniture — Herbst, Chareau, Gray, for instance — and too infrequently focus on essentials of interior design—color, scale, space, light. What McLeod’s book makes evident again and again, however, is the role of salons, furniture rooms, and marketing images — that is, the role of the ephemeral and almost wholly visual — in the promotion and dissemination of “interior design.” (Has anyone *ever* sat in a Perriand chair?) This being said, McLeod’s emphasis on materials and production, on Perriand’s associations with artists and industrial designers is entirely appropriate to Perriand. One wonders if it is indicative of French Modernism as well?

What then is the significance of Charlotte Perriand — her life, her thoughts, her work — to the 21st century? For while her designs were extremely good, arguably they were never as essential as those of Herbst, Chareau, Noguchi, Breuer, Eames or a host of other furniture and interior designers. And her life’s story, though it spans nearly the entire century and involves architects and artists of great renown, lacks heroic conviction and is often fraught with contradictions. Yet, both work and life are the subjects of an autobiography and a large, unusually beautiful and intelligent review, work too good to be dismissed as fashionable elaboration on the odd or irrelevant. Not to ask of these books “Why Perriand?” is to risk underestimating the significance of her life and design. My own answer is that first, Perriand *was* a woman in architecture; second, Perriand made a decisive move from metal to wood, a move implying much more than simple preference; third, like Gray, Chareau, Breuer, and others, Perriand cultivated the extremely potent notions of furniture as equipment and of functional wall as ambiguous entity.

I suspect, however, that neither the autobiography nor Mary McLeod’s *An Art of Living* would agree with this answer. Each sees the work differently and in its own way. Significance is not absolute. The two books together expose

Perriand's life and work and way of thinking. The exposé provokes the reader to thought. One could hardly ask for more. □

NOTES

1. The nomenclature is from Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), 91.
2. One questions, however, the 1947 wood chairs pictured in Perriand's Shangri-La nightclub in Méribelles-Allues (McLeod, 172, Fig. 22). The nightclub's seemingly uneven, apparently stone floor could only have encouraged the notorious instability of three-legged chairs. That reviewers never interrogate the comfort and function of furniture is unfortunate, for as with architecture of a certain kind "commodity" is an essential criterion.
3. That Perriand was an extremely short person is not noted when this image is "analyzed." Yet Perriand's size seems of the utmost importance since a good deal of the furniture that she designed or helped to execute — including the *chaise-longue* — is unusually small, so much so that it borders on the dysfunctional. Scale is significant to interior design and is only understood in relationship to the human body. Almost all of Perriand's work is shown without the human figure, the obvious exception being two of the four photos of the 1955 *Takashimaya Synthesis of the Arts* exhibition that feature female Japanese models conveniently attired to "work" with the show.