



Left: Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier, and Pierre Jeanneret, *Chaise longue basculante B 306* (Adjustable reclining chaise longue B 306), 1928, lacquered sheet steel, chromium-plated tube, rubber, fabric, steel springs, 26 3/4 x 63 3/4 x 22 3/4". Charlotte Perriand, 1929. Below: Charlotte Perriand, *Salle à manger 28* (Dining room 28), 1928. Perspective drawing. Published in *L'art international d'aujourd'hui*, vol. 6, *Intérieurs* (Paris: Editions d'art Charles Moreau, 1929). Right: Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret, *Tonneau refuge* (Barrel refuge), 1938/2012, aluminum, wood. Installation view. Photo: Marc Domage.



Charlotte Perriand

FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON, PARIS

Daniel Marcus

THERE IS SOMETHING wonderfully perverse about the Fondation Louis Vuitton's decision to devote its first solo exhibition of a woman artist to the designer-cum-architect Charlotte Perriand, an unrepentant leftist who would have detested the cult of luxury championed by the LVMH conglomerate (the foundation's creator and arm's-length sponsor). The exhibition's title, "*Le monde nouveau de Charlotte Perriand*"—the English version of the catalogue translates this as "Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World"—derives from a letter she sent to her colleague Pierre Jeanneret in 1936, a year marked by a massive workers' uprising in France. Flush with activist verve, the missive bewails the social and political myopia of the modern movement: "Because we remained within a closed circle, we crystallized," Perriand admitted, likening the avant-garde's hothouse to an isolated cell. "The wall has been broken, and beyond it there is a whole new world that interests us in the highest degree, since the profession of architecture means to work on behalf of humanity."

This urge to break modernism's fragile walls helps to explain the strange shape of Perriand's career, which unfolded in a protracted line of flight across seven decades, from the late 1920s to the end of the twentieth century. Hardly an oeuvre in the traditional sense, Perriand's work advanced through a sequence of collaborations involving fellow artists, architects, and designers, as well as artisans, manual laborers, and even children.

Rather than force these unruly threads into a monotonous weave, the exhibition's curatorial team of Jacques Barsac, Sébastien Cherruët, Gladys Fabre, Sébastien Gokalp, and Pernelle Perriand-Barsac (Perriand's daughter)

rightly makes much of its subject's multifariousness. At its outset, "*Le monde nouveau de Charlotte Perriand*" places its subject's germinal furniture and architectural designs—including her still-ubiquitous tubular steel *Chaise longue basculante* (Adjustable reclining chaise longue), 1928, which she developed in collaboration with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret—in conversation with the work of her peers. Entering the exhibition's first gallery, visitors confront a mural by Perriand's longtime friend and collaborator Fernand Léger. Titled *Le transport des forces* (Power Transmission), 1937, it features a landscape of billowing steam and cotton-candy clouds that echoes the sinuous contour of the chaise longue. Nearby, Perriand's ebonized *Ombre* chair, designed in 1954, and her black aluminum tray design of 1953, *Table Air France*, sit in an alcove beneath Alexander Calder's mobile *Noir, bleu, rouge* (Black, Blue, Red), 1954, and together these objects play on the difference between planarity and volume, between abstraction and figuration. In this pair of designs, Perriand makes use of a single piece of material: aluminum for the tray table, bent and folded into a shape that recalls a shark's egg purse (look it up); and plywood for the *Ombre* chair, dissected and unfurled to create the low seat back and footed legs.

That both of these pieces were created in Japan suggests something of the geographic scope of Perriand's career. Although she was born and educated in Paris, Perriand spent part of her adolescence, during World War I, with her father's family in Savoy, a mountainous province that had only recently been incorporated into the French state. Entranced by the sight of the Alps, she embarked on a lifelong pursuit of mountaineering, an activity from which would spring her designs of lightweight mountaineering lodges and bivouacs of the '30s, including the cylindrical *Tonneau refuge* (Barrel refuge) of 1938, a reconstruction of which is included in the exhibition.

To some extent, Perriand's athletic wanderlust was generational: Especially in her youth, she fit the picture of the perfect *femme moderne*, an archetype that combined

self-reliance with vampish allure, and which the exhibition's curators propose as a framework for Perriand's early career, placing her in the company of dancer Josephine Baker and photographer Dora Maar. Embracing the loosened gender norms of Jazz Age Paris, she cultivated a butch style in art and in life, as emblemized by her design of a necklace of industrial ball bearings, which she wore as a badge of androgynous modernity.

In the show's first galleries, visitors encounter a reconstruction of Perriand's unmatronly dining room, designed around 1927–28, from the Paris loft she shared with her then husband, Percy Scholefield. In remodeling the apartment, which had previously been a photographer's studio, Perriand added unframed mirrors and potted cacti; she also conceived a custom retractable table, made of polished steel, and tubular steel-and-leather swivel chairs (a model that remains in production today) as seating for dinner guests. These renovations, with their spartan functionality, dovetail with Perriand's contemporaneous prospectus for

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a bachelor apartment, published in 1927 under the heading "Work and Sport." Here, as in Perriand's later *Maison du jeune homme* (House for a young man), created in collaboration with René Herbst, Louis Sognot, and Léger for the 1935 Exposition Universelle in Brussels (with assistance from Jeanneret and Le Corbusier), the bachelor's world is rigorously celibate, a universe of solitary self-fashioning and muscular pursuits.

THE ASTRINGENT MINIMALISM of Perriand's early designs earned her a position in the architecture studio of Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, where she took charge of designing interior furnishings (a not-subtly gendered role). Within



Far left: View of "Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World," 2019–20. Photo: Marc Domage. Left, top: Charlotte Perriand, *Mexique autre profil. Roche trouvée en Maurienne* (Mexico, Another Profile, Rock Found in Maurienne), 1933, gelatin silver print on card, 5 1/2 x 7 1/4". Left, bottom: Charlotte Perriand, *Fish bone*, 1933, carbon print, 33 1/4 x 33 1/4". Below: Charlotte Perriand, *Chaise longue basculante bamboo* (Bamboo adjustable reclining chaise longue), 1940, bamboo, oak, beech, 29 1/4 x 55 1/4 x 20 1/2".



a few months of taking this new gig, she had authored several still-iconic works of modern furniture, including the *Chaise longue basculante* and the *Fauteuil grand confort*, a pillow-stuffed easy chair enclosed within a steel basket frame. Branded "interior equipment" as opposed to "furniture," Perriand's designs complemented Le Corbusier's effort to remake domesticity along technohumanist lines; they also spurned the grammar of gender that had hitherto organized the development of domestic home goods. A photograph of Perriand modeling the chaise longue in 1929 follows androgyny to the letter: Sporting the *garçonne's* obligatory tomboy haircut and knee-length skirt, as well as her ball-bearing necklace, she turns her head to face a sheer wall, pointedly refusing to meet the photographer's gaze. In her contemporaneous writings, she struck a similarly deadpan pose, proposing a regime of self-control through design: "SPORT, indispensable for a healthy life in a mechanical age . . . WE MUST KEEP MORALLY AND PHYSICALLY FIT. Bad luck for those who do not."

Perriand's collaboration with Le Corbusier lasted for nearly a decade, a period in which her individual contributions often formed part of the atelier's collective work. It was mainly through extracurricular activities, and especially her travels, that she began to drift free of the architect's orbit. A trip to the Soviet Union introduced Perriand to the scene of revolutionary politics, while also revealing the incipient conservatism of the Stalinist project. Around this time, she began a routine of regular day-tripping and beachcombing along the Normandy coast, accompanied by Léger and Jeanneret. More than simple getaways, the group's excursions served as occasions to rethink modernism's relation to nature, a category reduced simply to greenery and fresh air in Le Corbusier's practice. Working with Jeanneret, her lover at the time, Perriand took haunting photographs of flotsam found during these getaways. These photos, more than three dozen of which are shown in the exhibition, were later dubbed *Art Brut* by Perriand, and grew to include shots of a range of natural and man-made items. They privilege entropy over Platonic form,

treating each misfit object—a saw-cut log, an aerated stone, a fish bone, a slab of pond ice—with quiet reverence.

As the Great Depression advanced, the trio of Perriand, Léger, and Jeanneret came to share a common politics. In 1932, Perriand joined the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, devoting her artistic talents to the cause of antifascism. In "*Le monde nouveau de Charlotte Perriand*," the curators survey this *engagé* period of Perriand's career by focusing on the propaganda projects she designed during the reign of Front Populaire, the left-wing coalition that governed France between 1936 and 1938. Included in the display is a re-creation of Perriand's 1936 photomural *La grande misère de Paris* (Poverty-Stricken Paris), a forty-four-foot-long analysis of poverty in Paris's proletarian suburbs, which superimposes images (many shot by Perriand herself) of rag-picking mothers and children atop a statistics-studded map of the city. Also re-created is Perriand's design for an outdoor photomural for the Ministry of Agriculture, made in collaboration with Léger on the occasion of the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris. Bursting with political optimism, the mural envisions a sort of Green New Deal for the aggrieved French peasantry, answering rural malaise with raised fists and upbeat slogans.

PERRIAND'S FORAY into left-wing activism proved short-lived, yet the episode changed the course of her life, precipitating her departure from Le Corbusier's atelier out of frustration with his political fecklessness. Cut loose after her decade-long apprenticeship, Perriand made quick hay of the separation. In 1938, following a trip to the Alps the previous year, she and Jeanneret constructed her first "free-form table" using pine slats left over from the previous year's Exposition Internationale. Sanded to silky roundness, and designed in an irregular shape to fit the space constraints of her new, relatively cramped studio (after her divorce from Scholefield, she had relocated to a loft in Montparnasse), this piece extended Perriand's pursuit of uncommodified nature back to the peasant origins of woodworking.

It also opened the book on her solo career, inspiring a series of handcrafted tables that included a massive desk made for Jean-Richard Bloch, editor of the left-wing newspaper *Ce soir*. Paradoxically, however, this career now seemed to fold back onto its origins. In 1940, with World War II under way, Perriand accepted an offer from the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry to serve as an adviser and consultant; the appointment was negotiated by her former studio mate Junzō Sakakura, who had recommended Perriand on the merits of her Corbusian credentials. Rather than proselytize the virtues of tubular steel, however, Perriand threw herself into the tradition of Japanese woodcraft. In a brilliant gesture of formal transposition, she worked with Japanese craftspeople to reengineer her steel-frame chaise longue in bamboo, capitalizing on the material's tensile properties while retaining the sinuous contour of her prototype.

Perriand's pursuit of a middle road between modernity and tradition carried forward after the war, yielding many of her most recognizable designs, including a three-legged stool, designed in 1953, patterned after a farmhouse model, and a pivoting sconce, from 1962, both of which straddle the line between fine art and housewares and were carried by the Parisian gallery Steph Simon. Politics is absent from these late designs, but so too is modernism's pretense to know best of all. What takes the place of politics in Perriand's late work—and, most of all, in the humble furnishings she created for Les Arcs, the middle-class ski resort she designed between 1967 and 1989—is a faith in the human ability to decide how to live. Rather than a set of instructions, her "art of dwelling" amounts to a leap of faith. "I put aside the profession of architecture to direct myself more directly towards questions *in life*," she wrote in her 1936 letter to Jeanneret. The questions remain unanswered, but at least she is asking them. □

"Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World" is on view through February 24. DANIEL MARCUS IS THE ROY LICHTENSTEIN CURATORIAL FELLOW AT THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO.