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Le Corbusier
History and Tradition

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CIAM’S GHOSTS

LE CORBUSIER, ART, AND WORLD WAR II

1. Meeting Picasso

The Unité d’habitation in Marseilles is Le Corbusier’s most ideologically charged, socially ambitious and politically controversial project of the postwar years (1947-1952). As to its aimed for rank in the history of art, we need only to look at the snapshot that shows the architect together with Picasso visiting the construction site. The picture was taken in October, 1949: it shows Picasso, occupying the middle of the picture; his regal profile stands out in the sunshine against the murky background of a piloti. Around him is a gathering of architects, all ready to accept the blessing—and the stigmata—of modern art. Le Corbusier, behind the mask of his horn-rimmed glasses, stands clumsily to the side, sharply observed by his collaborators (among them Bernhard Hoesli clearly recognizable on the far left), all eager to see if, and with what arguments, their boss will pass the test in the eyes of the artist regarded as the unequalled master of modern art.

Picasso had been Le Corbusier’s supreme point of reference in matters of art since the days of L’Esprit Nouveau. In 1939, ten years before the Marseilles encounter, the painter had entrusted Guernica, the mural shown in the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, to the Museum of Modern Art in New York for safekeeping. Meanwhile, with the monumental outcry against the savagery of Nazi air raids still resonating in New York,
his aura had reached a peak in the world of art and politics. After all, moma was universally seen as Modern Art’s unquestioned hub, not to mention the fact that Picasso was a membership of the French Communist party, which added a further element to the magic of his name in a way that clearly outshone the ambivalences of Le Corbusier’s own chequered political past. It is therefore understandable that Le Corbusier reproduced the picture as the frontispiece of the fifth volume of his *Œuvre complète*. Picasso’s visit to the Unité appeared like the art world’s accreditation of his own efforts as an artist-architect (Fig. 1).

However, if Picasso does not always appear in person, as in Marseilles, his presence is ubiquitous in Le Corbusier’s work after 1937, the year of *Guernica*. There is a photograph of the model of the Ronchamp chapel, for example, in front of a large painting whose date and subject matter bears no direct connection with it, except for the Art Nouveau rhythm of sweeping outlines that reverberate with the model’s curves (Fig. 2). The painting in question, *La Menace*, dates from 1938 and the scene depicted is martial. A tall nude woman is standing to one side, only just identified by her hip, leg, and navel. A much shorter man on the right (*a maréchal ferrant* or “farrier”) is holding a horse, which clearly dominates the scene, its head and mane intersecting with the woman’s face. The distressed expression of the “Amazon” and her brown face, turned to the right, are nearly eclipsed by the grimace of the horse’s head above her. With its eyes wide open and nostrils flared, its ears pricked and tense, and teeth bared, the horse dramatizes the pain and panic that is in the air; it is an allegory of despair. A glance at *Guernica* (and at Picasso’s studies for the painting) is enough to contextualize *La Menace* within contemporary art (Fig. 3).

A letter dated March 6, 1938 and addressed to Le Corbusier’s mother, casts further light on the painting and suggests a direct connection with *Guernica*. In it, the architect refers to the “disquietudes of the times,” which forced him to work on *La Menace* from early in the morning and deprived him of the “beautiful tranquillity of the postwar years” (he is referring, of course, to the Platonic dreams of Purism after 1918). The “terrifying risks
Model of the Ronchamp chapel (built between 1951 and 55) in front of *La menace*, a painting of 1938. Unidentified photographer.

Pablo Picasso.
Head of wounded horse.
Sketch study for the painting shown at the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 Paris World's Fair (*Guernica*).
From *Cahiers d’Art*, 1937.
of a nameless war” are in the air, he says, although he does not rule out that “this terrible fever, this agony” may well prove to be “the end of the malady,” bringing about “the delivery of a new civilization.” The Spanish Civil War appears to have played a key role in this “disquietude.” In the year following the painting of La Menace, Franco’s brutal conquest of Barcelona, an event that forced many of Le Corbusier’s republican friends to leave the country (José Luis Sert, among others), would be at the core of yet another series of allegorical paintings.

Le Corbusier’s interwar tribulations as a “fellow traveller” of French fascist groups and, more generally, of France’s “droite autoritaire,” has recently become a subject of intense interest. While privately (and not so privately) committed to ideas about democracy, capitalism, war, and “la question juive,” which puzzled friend and foe alike, the artist Le Corbusier liked to cast his political instincts in mysterious allegories, not totally unlike his alter ego Picasso in that respect. As an incarnation of archaic man, nestling under the wings of ancient mythology and musing about the law of eternal return, he liked to picture war as a cosmic fatality, or even as a universal, inevitable purgatory rite at the service of man’s (and architecture’s) rebirth. It is tempting to consider the mysterious combination of the Ronchamp model with La menace as an illustration of such a mythic practice. Note that, at one point, the architect compares the whitewashed walls of the church to “the Virgin carrying in her womb the martyrdom of her child.” Is the chapel thus presented next to the painting the baby that has been delivered from its mother’s womb, or does its form itself incorporate the suffering? Whatever the case, the harmony of the building’s outline seems like the counterimage of the agony and bloodshed that preceded its birth. Could it be that Ronchamp, apart from its role as a pilgrimage chapel, needs to be seen as a war memorial?

Whereas the message of La menace is mythological and apocalyptic, the often reproduced Graffite à Cap Martin, also of 1938, appears to represent a pastoral scene and to carry a pacifying message. In formal terms, as a monochrome mural, this work, too, recalls Guernica, though not in respect of
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La menace.

Oil on canvas, 162x130cm.
style and emotional content. The mythology of “Algérie française,” which sparked Le Corbusier’s interest in Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger* to begin with (for that painting doubtlessly served as the basis for the mural), to say nothing of the troubling presence of what looks like a swastika inscribed on one of the figures, rather suggests that what the painter had in mind was a tribute to the pacific and constructive forces of some kind of Mediterranean fascism.\(^{14}\)

Whether Picasso’s own fifteen variations on Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger*, executed between 1954 and 55, had anything to do with the architect’s work is a matter of speculation. It is interesting that Le Corbusier later claimed to have at one point shown the mural to Picasso. He even recalled that, while examining the mural, Picasso instantly recognized the connection with Delacroix.\(^{15}\)

Be that as it may, Picasso’s symbolic patronage of Le Corbusier’s postwar *Œuvre complète* was all the more adroitly staged as it implied both cultural nobilitation and political exorcism. Picasso’s public engagement with the cause of the left was a matter of public record in the years after 1945 (he had joined the French Communist party in 1944). Furthermore, his many variations on the theme of the peace dove, multiplied by the thousands on posters, book covers, handouts, ceramic plates, scarves, etc. (Fig. 5), were about to become synonymous with the international peace movement, which had started in Europe as a response to the American-led arms race, and which notoriously had Stalin’s blessings (in fact, centre-right Europe suspected the Kominform of being its ideological headquarters).\(^ {16}\) Picasso had participated in the *Congrès Mondial des partisans de la paix* (World Congress of Partisans for Peace) only a few months before his visit to the Unité, a meeting that ended in a mass rally attended by half a million peace activists waving home-made versions of Picasso’s Dove of Peace at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris. As if touched by the wings of glory, the artist stood on the gallery and remarked to his friend and neighbour, Louis Aragon: “Alors quoi? Dis-moi? C’est la gloire?”\(^ {17}\) Le Corbusier did not participate in the event, although he may have witnessed some of it from his apartment situated directly across the street from the stadium. We do not know whether
Italian members appear to have been particularly annoyed by Giedion’s unwillingness to open up the discussion for new approaches to history in design; see Oechslin, “... auch ein Reisebericht in die ‘Geschichte,’” in Bruno Maurer and Werner Oechslin, eds., *Der unendliche Raum der Architektur. Ulrich Stucky (1925-2009), Architekt, Planer, Forscher, Vermittler* (Zurich: gta Verlag), 2009, 106-125. For Giedion’s comments on the Unité d’habitation see his *Architektur und Gemeinschaft*, 100-105.


On the political circumstances and ideological implications of Chandigarh’s foundation see primarily Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh’s Le Corbusier. The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial*
Stanislaus von Moos


55 See Avermate and Casciato, *Chandigarh Casablanca*, 54-57 for the basic information. Already in 1946, thus before India even existed as an independent nation, Mahatma Gandhi and his designated successor, Pandit Nehru, had instructed the Indian delegates at the first General Assembly of the United Nations scheduled to be held in London, “to stay clear of rival power blocs and try to ease the tensions that such blocs generated.” Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Place. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 177.

The drawing by Le Corbusier mentioned before is from the *Carnet Nivola*, 211; FLC, Paris). In the 1980s, an international financing campaign ultimately allowed a version of the “Open Hand” to be erected posthumously in the intended location.


57 A photograph of the “Marseillaise,” including also a view of the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower, had already appeared on the cover of *Logis et loisirs. 5ième Congrès CIAM Paris 1937* (Boulogne-sur-Seine: Éditions de l’Architecture d’aujourd’hui, 1937); and a drawing representing the same “pastiche” appears on the cover of Le Corbusier, *Destin de Paris* (Paris: Collection Préludes, 1941).

58 Maurice Thorez, “Discours de Maurice Thorez, 17 avril 1936.” The relevance of this speech in connection with the monument as well as the respective bibliography was indicated to me by Jean-Louis Cohen.


60 Following the “caprice of events” (Le Corbusier), after World War II “Rockefeller” (via the Museum of Modern Art in New York) inquired about the possibility of building the monument as a memorial to the GI’s fallen in France during the war. See *Le Corbusier textes et planches* (Paris: Vincent Fréal & Cie., 1960), 135.

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68 The drawing must have been prepared as an illustration to Kahn’s essay on “Monumentality,”
in Paul Zucker, ed., New Architecture and City Planning (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 577-588, but was not used on that occasion. A photograph of the drawing survives in the Kahn collection at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.


72 In a text fragment dated April 4, 1946, Le Corbusier formulates his radical objection against reconstruction as a way of preserving monuments. Gresleri and Gresleri, Le Corbusier. Il progetto liturgico, 221-222.


75 Ibid., 13.


78 Banham, The New Brutalism, 12. Measured up against that reality, the “fashionably morbid school of landscape/townscape painting” à la Graham Sutherland and its “mood of elegant despair” was nothing less than “A blank betrayal of everything that Modern Architecture was supposed to stand for;” if not, indeed, an “act of treachery”; ibid., 13.


Ibid., 14.


Banham, *The New Brutalism*, 16, but see also Banham’s “The New Brutalism.”


See Alison and Peter Smithson, “Human Associations,” in *Ordinariness and Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 44-61; and van den Heuvel and Risselada, eds., *Alison and Peter Smithson*, 61-78.

What *Le Corbusier* had in mind when he referred to Marseilles as a “battlefield” was the battle against the unionized architects in France and their organizations, which were determined to stop the project (see von Moos, *Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis*, 156; Monnier, *Le Corbusier: Les Unités d’habitation*, 46-47, 60-62, passim). The Smithsons had visited the Unité’s construction site before; see Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973), 4, passim. For a recent discussion of the project see Martino Stierli, “Taking on Mies: Mimicry and Parody of Modernism in the Architecture of Alison and Peter Smithson and Venturi/Scott Brown,” in Mark Crimson and Claire Zimmerman, eds., *Neo-avant-garde and Postmodern: Postwar Architecture in Britain and Beyond* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2010), 151-174.

See Wikipedia, *Bombardements de Marseille*, accessed March 1, 2015. In 1940 the German Luftwaffe had already bombed the city; furthermore, under the German occupation its core, the Vieux port, was razed and rebuilt entirely.