

ART

Reviews

Travels with Charley

“Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier” charts the architect’s youthful forays

By Noah Chasin

The most famous paradox put forth by the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea concerns the possibility of traversing a line: Geometry defines a line segment as the accumulation of a finite number of individual points. Yet the distance between those points can be subdivided ad infinitum. The endpoint of a line can thus, logically, never be reached. In the never-ending analysis of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (known as Le Corbusier), a similar paradox holds. We know he was born (in 1887) and died (in 1965) and that he was responsible for a specific number of words and works. Still, historians continue to mine ever deeper into Corbusier’s history and archive, challenging the seemingly obvious fact that perhaps there is not much more to know.

The latest attempt has arrived in New York in the form of “Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier,” an exhibition organized by Stanislaus von Moos, one of the most talented and tenacious archaeologists in the land of Le Corbusier. (Arthur Rüegg, a practicing architect and design historian, serves as cocurator.) A significant portion of the show, which includes sketches, photographs, paintings and applied art, is devoted to Corbusier’s fabled *Voyage d’Orient*, a somewhat expanded version of the grand tour, popular for hundreds of years among Europe’s elite.

It is generally acknowledged that the months he spent in 1911 in Italy, Greece, the Balkans and Turkey significantly contributed to Corbusier’s desire to reconnect a modern style with the classical past, as well as with the vernacular architecture he encountered during his travels. In a convincing bid to challenge the common but ill-considered assumption that Corbusier’s contribution to modernist architecture was marked by a chilly disregard for the

needs and desires of the individual, Von Moos and Rüegg further contend that the trip instilled the enduring values of secular humanism in the young Jeanneret. Humanism and functionalism, we learn, are not mutually exclusive: One only need contemplate the 1911 sketch of a cornice in Istanbul, the 1916 exterior of the Villa Schwob or the meticulously carved edges of a 1922 walnut desk in order to see the historical sources in Corbusier’s oft-maligned asceticism.

For this reputation, Corbusier himself is more than partly to blame. He produced his own historical record of his development in

would later call Purism. Yet the curators have uncovered two earlier (and, frankly, uninspired) canvases that get the debunking started straightaway.

The overall effect of the installation (in the genteel confines of the Bard Graduate Center’s townhouse) is of a bourgeois family’s abode, proudly furnished and hung chockablock with projects by its precocious son. The works themselves (especially the photographs) are sometimes banal, but they do bespeak a voracious, energetic mind and point toward a brilliant destiny. Still, for neophyte and aficionado alike, there are many pleasures: the original designs for the *Maison Dom-ino* (1915), the concrete-slab-with-steel-support module that was the elemental unit of Corbusier’s modernist projects, and an 1841 portrait of Corbusier’s maternal grandfather, M. Lécorbezier, whose name (bisected and made fanciful) was the source of the young Jeanneret’s nom de guerre. Indeed, the show boasts an astounding number of rare pieces—many from the notoriously circumspect Fondation Le Corbusier, assembled here in a nonlinear yet thematically coherent fashion. And in a great service to those of us who have wearied of the pervasive and infantilizing Acous-



Charles-Edouard Jeanneret next to a column at the Parthenon, 1911.

the eight-volume *Oeuvre Complète*, the very title of which immediately invites suspicion. In fact, these tomes were carefully edited to provide a specific trajectory that admits no youthful prodigality, no mid-career missteps, no late-period indulgences—all of which most certainly existed. Von Moos and Rüegg’s curatorial revisionism attempts to clarify some of the mystery. In the first gallery hangs what Corbusier insisted was his first painting, an 1918 gem titled *La cheminée* (*The Mantelpiece*)—a work that anticipates the austere and systematic rigor of what he

tigide, Bard’s exhibition staff has produced an ingenious spiral-bound “travel guide” that enables visitors to chart their own *voyage en zigzag*—as Von Moos affectionately terms Corbusier’s early peregrinations.

“Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting and Photography, 1907–1922” is on view at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture through February 23 (see Elsewhere).