



### ***The origin of the Patient Recherche***

The study of Corb's works seems to be an inexhaustible source of reflections, a sign of the uninterrupted vitality of his thought, of the actuality of his words, but also of the biographical exceptionality of an undisputed genius of modern architecture. This is an acknowledgment that probably derives also from the versatility of his interests and of the fields in which he ventured in the so dense years of experiences and exchanges that have characterized his professional activity: few other Masters of modernity have been able to explore as lively the neighboring fields of the arts.

It is precisely on one of these fields – painting – that the efforts of the investigation conducted by two scholars, Giuliana Altea and Antonella Camarda, focused as authors and curators of the catalog "Le Corbusier. Lessons in Modernism". Bound not only by their common interest in Corbusier's work, but also by the management of the Nivola Museum in Orani in the role of President and Director respectively, the two researchers have given a new impulse in promoting the work of Costantino Nivola (Sardinian by origin and New Yorker by adoption, friend of Le Corbusier and his "pupil" in painting and sculpture), thus relaunching the figure of the artist thanks also to the reorganization of the collection of the Museum in Orani, today enhanced by the elegant permanent exhibition designed by Alessandro Floris.

In this context, in collaboration with the Fondation Le Corbusier, the participation of Marida Talamona and Richard Ingersoll and sponsored by the Fondazione di Sardegna, between December 2018 and March 2019, Altea and Camarda exhibited a selection of Le Corbusier's "American works", which remained initially in the custody and then in the possession of the Nivolas until the death of Costantino, when the collection was scattered between the Fondation in Paris and some private collections in the United States.

The exhibition "Le Le Corbusier. Lessons in Modernism" had a twofold purpose. On the

one hand, it meant to show the collection of drawings and paintings that had long remained in the hands of the Sardinian artist: it is an important corpus not so well known to the international public, which underlines the relationship established between the two friends during Corbu's "American period" (about 1946-1953). On the other, the researchers intended to explain a greater degree of autonomy of the painting by the Master compared to his architectural work. This was not an easy task, and the result was by no means obvious, because is known to all scholars the "subordinate" role of Corbu's painting, notoriously considered a functional activity to the "patient research" of architecture, as by his own admission. The well-documented story told by the authors of this volume highlights the difficulty of breaking out of a pattern of judgment that has been consolidated over decades of studies on the work of the Swiss architect. It is no coincidence that both Altea and Camarda repeatedly call into question the psychology of the author, using this lens to observe and try to understand the hidden implications of an activity that until now has been reduced to the handmaiden of a more grandiose, admired and universally recognized masterful production.

With this attempt at "rehabilitation", three aspects in particular emerge (and are striking for their intensity): the progressive development of the Master's artistic thought; the perseverance with which he strives to obtain recognition (including commercial recognition) for his work; the close relationship between this activity and his private and professional life as an "archpainter".

The first theme emerges in the contribution by Altea, which deals with the analysis of the more than evident change in style, content and expression in Le Corbusier's work, starting from the period of the rigorous purist compositions (that are geometrically contained and balanced within invisible grids obtained from the regulating lines), to that of the abstract realizations of Ubu, Ozon and Taureau, passing through the period of

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.4995/lc.2021.16217>

**Giuliana Altea, Antonella Camarda (eds.).  
Le Corbusier. Lessons in Modernism.**

Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich 2020.  
183 pages, color images  
ISBN: 978-3-85881-848-5 (eng)  
ISBN: 978-3-85881-853-9 (ita)

strong surrealist and expressionist appeal that he developed from the 1940s onwards. It is, in fact, a mutation, not a paradigm shift, a clear and progressive formal and chromatic research that, if on the one hand echoes his contemporary architectural work, on the other demonstrates a tenacious will to explore the spatial vision through the graphic sign, which Le Corbusier investigates with all the tools at his disposal: the accurate drawing, the quick sketch, the painting, the graphics, the sculpture, the sandcast (of which Costantino Nivola is his initiator, reversing the well-known master-pupil role).

Leafing through the pages of this book, it is impossible not to notice this very passage of style, a constant, continuous, progressive passage, which accompanies us from one language to another with naturalness and without skipping, even though in the results of this research we can recognize the change of contents and expressive means that strike for their radicalism. The calm and static equilibrium of the purist period, in fact, let the formal dynamism go ahead and only the “marriage of contours” from the first period is preserved, delving Corb’s painting into the investigation of a semantic complexity that many scholars – starting with Stanislaus von Moos and Mogens Krustrup – have analyzed and made evident. We cannot speak, in this case, of artistic maturity, because the way in which Le Corbusier reports on canvas and walls his interpretation of form is so distant between the two ends of his work (beginning and end) as to recall a biological transformation rather than the achievement of a technical and expressive peak. Unfortunately, the premature death of the Master prevents us from imagining what further change his visionary and creative ability could have reserved for us.

Likewise it emerges the permanent tension of the artist to the perfection of the sign, the expression of an act that has nothing of that graphic formalism to which many epigones have accustomed us after Corbu’s death but, on the contrary, it transpires a steady search for refinement of the form, a

balancing of the sinuosity of the lines and of the connections between curves that he pursued with constancy, as demonstrated by the incessant repetition of studies of the same subject (it is particularly clear in the sequence of some drawings and sketches collected in the catalog): sophisticated elaborations with minimal proportional variations. It is the demonstration of a “tendency to repeat and overlap themes and compositional elements, creating a tightly packed

network of references from work to work” (Altea, p. 47), an expression of the will to define a formal vocabulary not dissimilar to the one explained by Bruno Reichlin about the Corbusian typology.

An almost obsessive search for “dynamic balances”, an oxymoron developed thanks to the assiduous and uninterrupted work as a painter developed for over thirty years, an activity that was not subjected to any stoppage or renunciation despite the numerous failures of a market – the North American one – that Le Corbusier stubbornly tries to conquer during the period of his stays in New York related to the unlucky project for the United Nations headquarters. It is the same resolution that he shows when he writes to his mother that “I explode in there [in painting] in the end, since

elsewhere, everywhere you have to clench your fists in your pockets” (Altea, p. 46). Thus, the character of a man of great depth emerges, who, however, also had to face great struggles and overcome numerous defeats and disappointments, as it is well told in essay by Camarda, which focuses on Le Corbusier’s experience in “the Land of the Timid”, as he sarcastically renamed it. Unfavorable historical moments, profound cultural differences, unheeded appeals, an unfortunate professional network and a hostile character (Corb’s one) hindered the painter from being appreciated by the public, critics and the market as much as the architect was. The relationships with the art galleries and his North American agents are

well described by Camarda, in a succession of episodes that would make one imagine a television series, such is the absurdity and dramatic nature of the narrated events. Just as absurd and dramatic is the occurrence described in the third and last essay in the catalog, the work by the recently deceased Ingersoll (a former Nivola’ student at the prestigious Berkeley University), who collected and reported here the account of the unlucky participation of Le Corbusier in the project for the headquarters of the “world politics”, the UN Building in Manhattan. This episode, the one in New York, helps us to better understand the implications of Corbu’s professional life in his artistic activity, according to a reading that reverses the traditional paradigms with which we are used to observing the relationship of influence between the two arts he mainly practiced. From this period, in fact, characterized by outcomes against to all his expectations and by bitter disappointments in the professional sphere, are also some of the best works by Corbu as a painter, belonging to the “Nivola collection”: *Îcône* or *Woman with Candle* (1946), which will be helpful to the realization of *Femme à la bougie I*, from the same year; *Acoustic Form* (1946), a surprising preview of the forms employed in *Notre-Dame du Haut*; *Figure 1* or *Ozon et Georges IV* (1947); the two murals made “by heart” for Nivola’s Long Island home (1950), just to name a few.

The volume, therefore, has the main value of reorganizing a historical sequence not particularly investigated by Corbusier scholars, interpreting the contribution of painting to the definition of the Master’s personality from an unusual perspective, detaching it from to the ordinary constructive aim. A vision of “non-architects” that also helps the latter to reinterpret Le Corbusier’s work with “eyes that (finally) see”.



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Le Corbusier. Unité  
d'habitation de Firminy,  
1965-67. FLC L3(1)6