

## » EXHIBITION

### L'ITALIA DI LE CORBUSIER

MAXXI, Rome, until 17 February  
Review by Roberta Marcaccio

Right: Umberto Riva's rough timber walls of the exhibition are a contrast to the smooth marble of Zaha Hadid's museum venue

Below: Hundreds of original documents illustrate Le Corbusier's creative involvement with Italy – including this plan for the new Venice Hospital, sketches of monuments (below right), and project schemes (far right)

L'Italia di Le Corbusier, curated by Marida Talamona, illustrates the rich and complex relationship that tied the Swiss master to Italy. It presents the reciprocal inspiration and influences from Le Corbusier's earliest study trips to his last projects for Olivetti and the Venice Hospital.

The space of the MAXXI primes the visitor; moving past Anish Kapoor's PVC funnel and Cassina's reading corners, one encounters Umberto Riva's sequence of self-supporting walls. The roughness of their timber – a raw material also used in formwork – contrasts with the marble-smooth perfection of the concrete with which Zaha Hadid gave form to her museum. The impression is of entering a giant notebook, the pages flipping to unravel the sinuosity of the space. Riva's and Kapoor's installations break the flowing continuity to create a series of more intimate 'rooms' that structure the vast amount of material on show.

Between 1907 and 1922 Italy was above all an object of study and probably a rather disorienting one for Le Corbusier, whose early drawings betray a sense of confusion. Jumping from style to style, he imitates at one point the synthetic world of his master, L'Épplatier, using rapid and softly shaded watercolours, then adopting Ruskin's meticulous trait to render the Duomo di Pisa, for instance, he indulges in the perfection and sensuality of its decorative motifs.

Only after 1911 do Le Corbusier's drawings become interpretative. Details become increasingly more rare on the pages of his carnets, giving way to more schematic representations rendered with stronger lines and solid colour-fields. The focus is now on

volumes and the way they react to light.

Particularly striking is a picture he personally takes of the Pantheon in 1911: he frames the image to exclude the heavily decorated lower part of the building, choosing to capture only a fragment of the dome and its vibrant reaction to the light coming from above. The same attention to the contrast permeates all the photographs on show, from the shaded arches of the Basilica di Massenzio to the strong lines of the stairs in Piazza di Spagna, San Pietro, and Villa Adriana.

More than 600 original documents recreate Le Corbusier's creative universe. Mostly courtesy of the Fondation Le Corbusier, they comprise his theoretical writings, projects for Italian locations, paintings that show the influence of Italian artists, films and biographical references – ranging from photos to notes, letters and sketches of monuments.

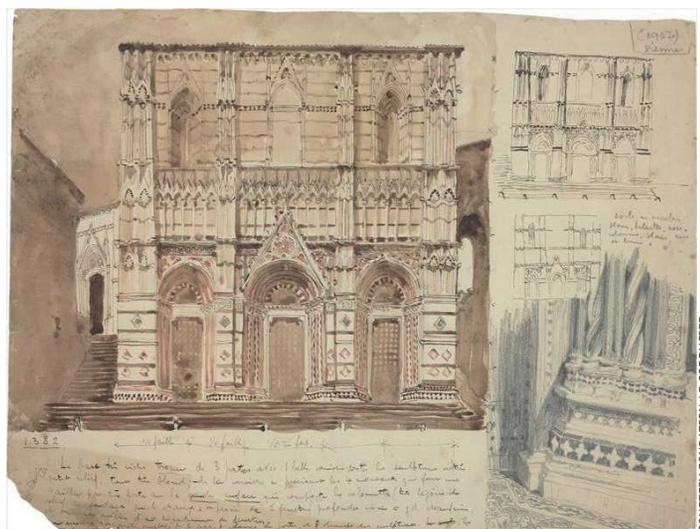
Their chronological organisation not only documents the consistency of Le Corbusier's relationship to the Italian artistic tradition and cultural elite, but also traces the changing points of view, approaches, interests and objectives with which the Swiss master looked to Italy over his lifetime.

In October 1920, in Paris, Le Corbusier founded the journal L'Esprit Nouveau, together with Amédée Ozenfant and Paul Dermée. This was a period of intense exchange with Italian artistic and literary publications and of early affinities with the research of several Italian painters. In a section of the exhibition, Le Corbusier's paintings from the purism period are on show, presented with works by Carlo Carrà, Giorgio Morandi and Gino Severini.

Six large and beautiful drawings, made during the Urbanism conference held in Milan in 1934, underline the

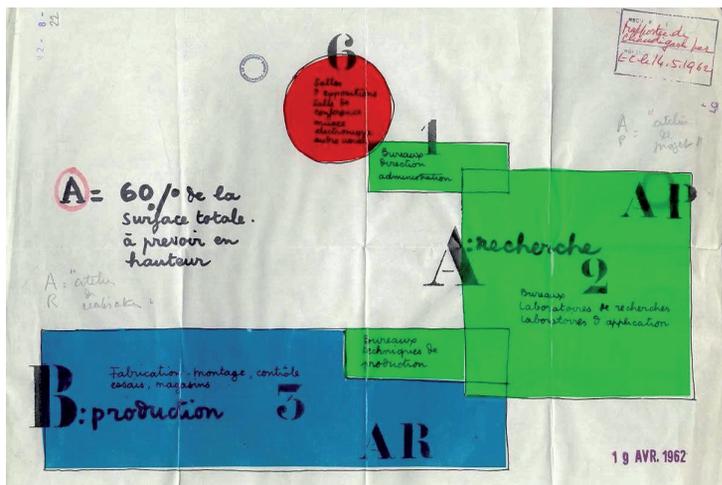
influence that Le Corbusier's theories and architecture had on the young Italian Rationalists of the Thirties. As various pictures testify, Le Corbusier was heavily present in Italy during these years, interacting with various cultural figures and taking part in conferences and lectures, mainly with the hope of obtaining a commission from the Fascist regime that would allow him to implement his idea of the Ville Radieuse.

Le Corbusier's architectural projects for Italy arrived at the end of his lifetime, when between 1962





COURTESY FLAMINIA NOBILI



COURTESY FONDATION LE CORBUSIER

and 1965 he developed designs for the Olivetti Electronic Calculation Centre in Rho and the new Venice Hospital. Destined to remain on paper, the two projects occupy the last section of the exhibition, representing the apex and conclusion of the affiliation between Le Corbusier and Italy.

L'Italia di Le Corbusier develops a portrait of an architect and draughtsman who notes and comments on Italy's history and cities, observing them as a form of living raw material to be critically reinterpreted in the creation of new forms. His drawings capture an existing situation while presenting an architectural concept.

This is all too evident in the rarely seen drawings for the Venice Hospital; his early studies of the meander, made as a young student, clearly inform his proposal, suggesting a frayed 'plate' that completes the existent urban fabric while imposing a new rigour on it.

The exhibition highlights Le Corbusier's positive relationship to history, suggesting that a constructive confrontation with the past is imaginable even in a complex context like the Italian one, which too often seems to remain suffocated under the weight of its cultural heritage.

## >>BOOK

### LE CORBUSIER FURNITURE AND INTERIORS 1905-1965

Arthur Rüegg

Fondation Le Corbusier /  
Scheidegger & Spiess

£140

Review by Johnny Tucker

Think Le Corbusier and furniture and you immediately think of the classic, box-like, and surprisingly comfortable, tubular steel and leather seat/sofa or the cowhide seat and chaise longue. They are the 'classics', as it were. All are still in production and none designed by Le Corbusier.

I should definitely qualify that – they were not designed by Corb alone, but with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, with whom he worked for around 20 years, and the accomplished young interior designer Charlotte Perriand.

There is no doubt that this period of collaboration – it lasted a decade with Perriand, starting in 1927 – was also the golden period. And that fact is recognised in this huge tome by Arthur Rüegg.

The book is essentially split into two parts: the first 200 pages scene set, place Le Corbusier in context and draw themes together in a series of chapters, one of which focuses specifically on the aforementioned trio's prestigious output.

Talking about the pieces from this period, Rüegg notes that they have 'retained to this day, not only their freshness, but also their whiff of originality, of bohemian laissez faire and exclusivity. They have become magical objects which continue to fascinate us even now.'

This work also has its own section towards the back concentrating on the output of Italian furniture manufacturer Cassina, which has produced these pieces and more under licence since the early Sixties. Cassina has also of late brought to the fore the importance of Perriand in the design process.

Rüegg's book is a scholarly and

exhaustive tome. He refers to the opening sections as essays and the book as a catalogue. And the latter is essentially what it becomes after the opening section – a well-illustrated, highly-detailed attempt to catalogue everything that passed for furniture or interior and was touched by the hand of Corb.

When talking about the specific pieces and interiors in this part of the book, the author steers away from critical analysis, concentrating on the facts. As a result, it's only the

### HIS INTERIORS SERVED HIM AS A TEST PAD WHERE HE COULD OVERSTEP BOUNDARIES AND OPPOSE PREVAILING CONVENTION AT WILL

obsessive or completist that would sit down to read this in its entirety. It's really a book where you flit between projects and gradually build up a vision of how he worked and what he created. Rüegg's easy-to-read yet authoritative style helps you in this mode, continually cross-referencing and drawing lines of evolution.

In its totality, the work is hit and miss, some fantastic and much that would have been lost in the annals of time had it not been for the other masterful output by its creator. That makes the book no less interesting though, and it is perhaps the perfect companion piece to the eight-volume Le Corbusier Oeuvre complète, which as Rüegg points out, glosses over this part of the man's output.

The importance of the work is summed up by the author thus: 'His interiors served him as a test pad where he could deliberately overstep boundaries and oppose the prevailing convention at will; examples of this can be found throughout his oeuvre. Items of furniture transplanted from the office, a hospital or military context into a domestic interior thus became one of the hallmarks of his slightly odd-looking Purist repertoire, just as provoking the establishment was a key motif at the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau of 1925.'

