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Exhibition

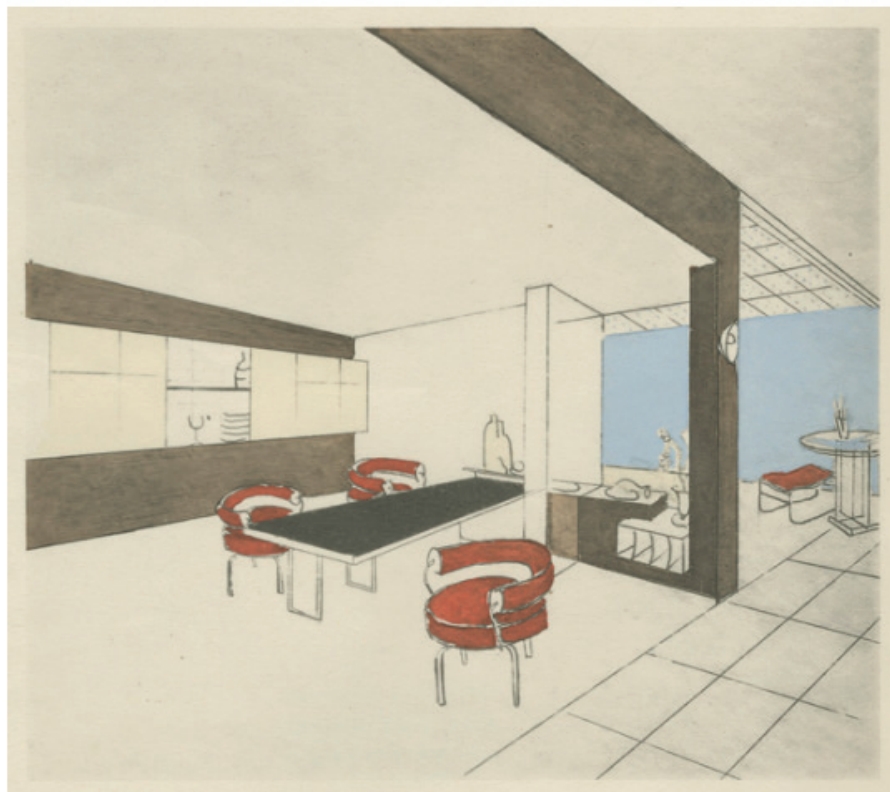
It's Time to Rediscover Charlotte Perriand

A monumental new show at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris celebrates the designer's 70-year-long career—one that is more relevant than ever

By Madeleine Luckel
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The galleries of the Fondation Louis Vuitton, the billowing Frank Gehry-designed art museum in Paris, are filled with works of art and design by some of the 20th century's greatest masters—[Pablo Picasso](#), [Alexander Calder](#), [Joan Miró](#)...the list goes on. Usually these paintings, mobiles, and sculptures might constitute a show of their own. But currently they are supporting players in a groundbreaking new exhibition celebrating the oeuvre of one of design's most prodigious women: [Charlotte Perriand](#).

Perriand—the creative force behind the show's 200 works of furniture, scale models, and photographs—frequently defied the confines of her century. A great appreciator of travel, sports, and work, her independent lifestyle was often at odds with what contemporaneous society expected. The show, [Charlotte Perriand: Inventing a New World](#), is organized chronologically, and opened 20 years to the month after Perriand's death in 1999. It also, notably, marks the first time that the Fondation Louis Vuitton has dedicated its entire premises to a single subject.



Perriand exhibited design aptitude from a young age, as seen in this 1927 dining room scheme. Image courtesy Adagp, Paris, 2019/ACHP

Today, Perriand's name may be vaguely associated with peers such as Jean Prouvé and Pierre Jeanneret. More likely, however, it will conjure up that iconic tubular [chaise longue](#) designed for and with Le Corbusier, with whom Perriand worked throughout the 1920s, herself a mere 20-something at the time. That period—as this exhibition bears out—is a fascinating jumping-off point. While Le Corbusier has previously been credited with “discovering” Perriand, cocurators Pernette Perriand-Barsac and Sébastien Cherruet, Charlotte's daughter and longtime assistant respectively, hope to amend, and greatly add to, her record.

Perriand was born in Paris in 1903. In 1920, she matriculated at France's École de l'Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, where she studied furniture design. This interest in visual and specifically functional artistic pursuits was far from out of the blue. As the daughter of a tailor and a seamstress, Perriand undoubtedly learned to appreciate craft from an early age. And as a whimsical illustration of Josephine Baker on display shows, she was a standout art student.

After Perriand graduated in 1925, Henri Rapin—a successful [Art Deco](#) interior designer who at the time was serving as the school's artistic director—encouraged her to exhibit her work as widely as possible. The most striking example of Perriand's early work was her *Bar Sous le Toit* (“bar under one roof”) installation at the 1927 Salon d'Automne, which featured futuristic furnishings plated in chrome and aluminum—a radical departure from furnishings at the time.



The exhibition reconstructed Perriand, Le Corbusier, and Jeanneret's *Un Équipement Intérieur d'une Habitation*, exhibited at the 1929 Salon d'automne. Photo courtesy Fondation Louis Vuitton/David Bordes

The installation caught the eye of Le Corbusier, who recruited the young designer (and ardent fan) to work in his atelier. There was, however, an inherent paradox to their professional union: Le Corbusier was [not known](#) for his high estimation of professional women. And while Le Corbusier [reportedly](#) once dismissed Perriand with the gibe “We don't embroider cushions in my studio,” Perriand upended her employer's sexist expectations and helped the atelier create its most enduring pieces, including the famous [LC family](#).

Unsurprisingly, neither Perriand nor her colleague Jeanneret—Le Corbusier's cousin—received credit for their work at the time, a critical oversight the exhibition seeks to remedy. In today's exhibition, both individuals are listed on the labels for each and every such piece. (It's worth noting too that Cassina, the company who distributes the line today, lists all three designers on their [LC-dedicated webpage](#)). And of course, the very nature of a major solo exhibition dedicated to Perriand helps to rectify historical imbalances.



A 1928 model of the iconic LC2 chair that Perriand designed with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Image courtesy Fondation Louis Vuitton

As the 1920s waned, Perriand left Le Corbusier's studio and teamed up with fellow studio alum Jean Prouvé. While it's unclear what exactly prompted this move, it certainly wasn't a permanent schism: During the postwar period, Perriand approached Le Corbusier to work together again, but with the hindsight of a decade-plus of new wisdom.

Throughout the 1930s, Prouvé and Perriand built a fruitful partnership, and became busy with commissions for the French Army. But when France fell to Nazi forces, Perriand moved to Japan, where she remained throughout the duration of World War II. This period was an influential and productive time, as evidenced by bamboo pieces dating back to 1940—the very year she made her move—as well as later works including her *Banquettes Tokyo*, created in 1954, and a '60s-era lamp created with Isamu Noguchi. She also became increasingly interested in the expression of **natural materials**, as particularly shown in humble wood furnishings and a minimal bench formed from a split tree trunk.



Though known for her work with tubular steel, Perriand was drawn to natural materials, as show in a reconstruction for her 1934 design, *La Maison que Bord de l'Eau*. Photo courtesy Fondation Louis Vuitton / Marc Damage

Though the bulk of her career continued in this vein, today Perriand is still best known for her '20s and '30-era tubular and swivel furniture. But with a 70-year career, there's always more to unpack, as the Fondation Louis Vuitton show demonstrates—from her *Les Arcs* ski resort in the French Alps, built in the late '60s, to a stacked, polychromatic bookcase from 1952 that presciently anticipates the Memphis Group.



Perriand's career didn't end when she left Le Corbusier's atelier—it thrived. Here is a 1955 design for a reception room. Photo courtesy Adagp, Paris, 2019/ AChP

Such a rich and extensive body of work presented numerous curatorial challenges, chief among them how precisely how to present her creations, which spanned art, architecture, and design. "The kind of exhibitions we've had so far have simply featured art on walls. In curating this exhibition, that approach was simply not right," Cherruët, the cocurator, insists.



A section of Perriand's Les Arc ski resort, completed between 1968 and 1969 in the French Alps. Photo courtesy Adagp, Paris/Charlotte Perriand/AChP

Indeed, one of the most successful components of the show are six historic reconstructions of Perriand's architectural designs, including the 1927 Salon d'Automne, the 1934 La Maison que Bord de l'Eau, the futuristic 1938 Le Refuge Tonneau, and the 1993 Le Pavillon de thé de l'UNESCO. They provide visitors with a chance to see works that truly would not otherwise be able to be experienced. These vignettes are interspersed with works by Perriand's contemporaries and influences, like a Pablo Picasso portrait of Dora Maar, one of Perriand's closest friends and confidantes.

Cherruet stresses that many pieces, such as Perriand's well-known mechanical swivel LC7 chair, can only be understood after grasping the time in which she lived. Nevertheless, as much as this exhibition is about drawing renewed attention to a previously undervalued female designer, Cherruet underscores the groundbreaking nature of her work today: "Of course, I'm an art historian, so I look with history over my shoulder," he says. "But I think it's very contemporary."



Perriand designed well into old age. Here, a reconstructed version of her 1993 La Maison de Thé at the Fondation Louis Vuitton. Photo: Courtesy of Louis Vuitton Foundation

Clearly, Perriand's work has taken on new meaning in the two decades since her death. Stateside, the new [MoMA](#) features her furnishings in its marble-clad lobbies and lounges. And just three and a half miles across town from the Fondation Louis Vuitton, a concurrent show at [Galerie Laffanour](#) is also examining her work. (That gallery, which has a considerable collection of Perriand holdings, lent a handful of objects, many of which date to the 1950s, to the Fondation Louis Vuitton exhibition.) It's all more proof that Perriand is very much in the midst of having an extended moment.

Would Perriand be flattered by the attention? She probably would have taken it in stride. As she told the *New York Times* in 1996, "It's necessary to be acquainted with everything that has gone before us...I think of tradition as a chain."

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