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Charlotte Perriand's Legacy Celebrated in a Show of Unprecedented Scope

A new exhibition cocurated by Paris's Galerie Downtown-François Laffanour and Venus Over Manhattan is the largest group of Perriand work shown in New York

TEXT BY NADJA SAYEJ • Posted November 9, 2018



A photo of the iconic Lc4 lounge for Cassina (designed by Charlotte Perriand in collaboration with Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier) hangs above an early wood table at Venus Over Manhattan, host of a show of over 50 Charlotte Perriand works. Photo: Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Laffanour /Galerie Downtown, Paris

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Charlotte Perriand was, without a doubt, one of the most important designers of the 20th century. Yet, in a demonstration of the gender gap so prevalent in the art and design world of the 20th century, she isn't a household name like Le Corbusier or Walter Gropius.

When Perriand first applied to work at Le Corbusier's studio, she was turned away with a sexist quip: "We don't embroider cushions here." Though her design work has become recognized since then, even today her contributions to furniture design, architecture, and art (she was a talented photographer) remain less celebrated than some of her male contemporaries'.

A new show, the result of a collaboration between two notable galleries in New York and Paris, respectively, aims to bridge that gap. At Venus Over Manhattan in New York, 50 works—the largest collection of Perriand ever to be staged in New York—capture the brilliant simplicity of Perriand's style. Items on view in the show, organized in partnership with Galerie Downtown-François Laffanour in Paris, range from early pine bookshelves to metal furniture Perriand designed alongside Le Corbusier.

"Charlotte Perriand has been recognized as one of the most emblematic women of 20th-century design," says Hélin Serre, the director of Galerie Downtown-François Laffanour (which just wrapped up its own show of Perriand in its Paris space today). "She created a style from the end 1930s until the end 1960s, which was recognized in the postwar era."

Perriand was always edgy, even as a design student in Paris. In the 1920s, she rebelled against the flowery Art Deco movement for mechanical, minimal design. She was a founding member of the leftist design collective the Union des Artistes Modernes, which was a bit like the Bauhaus of France. It ran from 1929 to 1959, touting

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antidecorative design and bringing together great thinkers like Fernand Léger, Eileen Gray, Jean Prouvé, and Man Ray (the group had a recent retrospective at the Centre Pompidou).

Following that famous dismissal, Perriand finally joined Le Corbusier's office in 1927, where she helped design the interior of



The show, which spans decades of Perriand's work, comprises the largest group of her pieces ever shown in New York. Photo: Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Laffanour / Galerie Downtown, Paris

Villa La Roche, his famous Unité d'Habitation, and even designed key components to Le Corbusier's penthouse apartment in Paris, a masterpiece of modern design.

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She is best known for her chair design—her masterpieces include the chaise longue, fauteuil grand confort, and the siège à dossier basculant; however, her work until recently—and, in some cases, even still today—was often credited solely to Le Corbusier.

Perriand, though, didn't seem caught up in recognition—or legacy. “These chairs will last until something better comes along to replace them,” said the designer in 1996. “I don't see why I should do what has been done before, I express my era, period.”

The new exhibition features her famed Cuisine-bar Marseille from 1952, a compact aluminum and wood kitchenette designed to maximize small spaces in tiny French apartments, codesigned alongside Le Corbusier. Also on view are her Protoypes Lumières CP1, sheet metal wall lamps painted in primary colors, which look a lot like file folders, from 1963.

She loved natural materials, and this showcase displays her love of wood, from oak to bamboo, mahogany, pine, and olive wood made into minimalist bookshelves, sliding wall cabinets, and Japanese-inspired benches. Some of her most memorable coffee tables are simply shellacked tree stumps. But she truly shines with her communal tables, which are at the core of her design philosophy: bringing people together.

“Across her whole life, she had different design periods,” Serre says, “from working from tubular metal for her modernist furniture with Le Corbusier, as well as the solid wood used in France and the exceptional furniture from her home in Brazil.”

Though Perriand has been overlooked in design history, her elegant furniture pieces helped give modern wooden furniture an organic touch. Several of her bookcases, steel chairs, and wall cabinets were easily mass-produced.

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She even predicted a return to independently produced works in a 1984 interview with *The Architectural Review*. “I think we can anticipate a return to a more primitive form of craftsmanship,” she said. “More and more will be produced by individuals, by artisans. The impact on creativity could be enormous; each individual could diversify.”

“Charlotte Perriand” is now on view at Venus Over Manhattan, 980 Madison Avenue.



Early works in wood share space with the modern furniture Perriand designed in collaboration with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, like the *Fauteuil chrome tubulaire*, *Édition Thonet* at right. Photo: Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Laffanour /Galerie Downtown, Paris