

LE CORBUSIER – Mastering the Image

Opening of the exhibition in Chandigarh, 10 October 2015

Speech by Dr. Linus von Castelmur, Ambassador of Switzerland

Honourables and Excellencies,
Advisor to the Administrator of Chandigarh Vijay Kumar Dev,
Secretary Culture Anuragh Agarwal,
Ladies and gentlemen,
dear friends,

First of all, a warm welcome to all of you joining us at the opening of the Le Corbusier exhibition organized by the Embassy of Switzerland in India in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts of La Chaux-de-Fonds!

On the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th death anniversary of Le Corbusier, the Swiss Embassy in India is glad to bring this magnificent exhibition to Indian audiences. As a very special sign of recognition and friendship, we start today with Chandigarh, the “city beautiful”, and we are happy to join hands with the Chandigarh authorities - Department of Tourism, Government Museum and Art Gallery and Lalit Kala Academy.

In this city, I do not have to remind you of the fact that Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), who since 1920 started signing under the name of Le Corbusier, was an innovative architect, urban planner and thinker. If the proof of the cake is in the eating, as they say, the proof of urban planning and architecture lies in the sober functionality, quality of life, comfort and sense of beauty a town offers in a sustainable way to its citizens. I don't think I am over enthusiastic when I say that Chandigarh passes this test with flying colours, even 60 years after its foundation. It is probably the most functional and best organised city on the sub-continent, and still it is not devoid of a quiet aura that transcends by far the sum of its built architecture. Kudos to the visionaries Pandit Nehru and Le Corbusier, one is tempted to say even in 2015!

What is less known in India, is that Le Corbusier is the face of the Swiss 10 francs note. In fact, since 1995, Swiss banknotes feature Swiss artists and thinkers. Le Corbusier is depicted with his characteristic round tortoiseshell glasses, worn nonchalantly above the eyes. On the reverse, a plan and elevations of the façade of the Secretariat building and a picture of the iconic ramp of the High Court in Chandigarh are a glowing tribute of Switzerland to both Le Corbusier and India. Indeed, the planning, designing and building of the new capital of the state of Punjab was probably the most important commission he ever realised.

I am often asked two questions: Was Le Corbusier really Swiss? Let me answer unambiguously the following: Like other great creators, Le Corbusier was a citizen of the world – and like his buildings, art works and essays – he belongs to all mankind. Technically, though, he was a Swiss-French dual national. Born in 1887 in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland, he studied at the School of Applied Arts in his hometown, where he also realized his first works. Since 1920, he lived and worked mainly in France. After his marriage to a French citizen in 1930, he received French citizenship. Even though he never felt sufficiently recognised by his homeland, he remained a Swiss citizen and kept realising buildings in Switzerland until his death.

The other recurring question is: Was Le Corbusier a sympathiser of totalitarian and ultimately barbaric systems? To answer this question, taking into account the historic context, we should refrain from indulging in essentially ahistorical judgements. Le Corbusier was a man of his times, which were marked by two World Wars, disruptive technological and social change on one hand, and strong ideological polarities and fractures on the other. Led by humanist values of reform, he was eager to bring about a better quality of life and socio-economically functioning cities, factories and recreational facilities. In urban planning and architecture he was a man of sometimes rigid systems and principles – also in that a true son of his times. But Le Corbusier was equally a sharp observer, keenly interested in urban experiments, be it in communist Russia, fascist Italy, France, Germany – both during the Weimar Republic and during National Socialism or in capitalist America and postcolonial India. Being fundamentally an apolitical person, he saw himself as a builder and designer who wanted to change the world through planning and construction, within a given context. At times, he could behave opportunistically and unselectively, as shown by his attempts to ingratiate himself with the Vichy-government during the Second World War. However, according to available research, he did neither collaborate in his architectural practice in inhumane projects nor fall prey to the totalitarian mermaids' singing.

But let's talk about the specificity of this exhibition - Le Corbusier and photography: While you walk through the show, you will recognise many photographs: not only images of buildings in Chandigarh, Ahmedabad and European cities, but also portraits of Le Corbusier himself, immediately recognisable even to non-specialists at the first glimpse. If any proof was necessary, this shows that he became one of the few iconic architects of his time. Even before the star system of the second half of the 20th century came into being, he became the darling of the media and a real star – you see him with the mighty, rich and beautiful of the world, as photographs with Prime-Minister Nehru, Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein and Josephine Baker (to name just a few) show. In fact, he not only was an highly innovative architect, one of his talents was also to understand and anticipate the force of photography. Together with the many books, brochures and articles he published his use of photography for documentation, provocation, self-promotion and research purposes is another strikingly modern aspect of his work.

But you will also find almost unknown photographs, images that were never presented in India to this date, especially in the section entitled “A secret photographer”. Again, in a very modern way, Le Corbusier did use the camera as a memory tool and mental drawing device, for documenting mechanical details of an ocean liner, sea shells, pine cones and other *objets trouvés* at the shore of the sea or building materials stored on a construction site... These are very sensitive, emotionally charged images, with slightly nostalgic undertones. The great modernist and rationalist architect had a sensorium for the cosmic forces of light, energy and time passing by. His camera forced him to sharpen his vision and helped him to find inspiration, which in turn he used for designing buildings and spaces. The circle is complete: from shooting photographic pictures he moves back to architecture. Photography is seamlessly connected to his architectural practice of designing spaces and constructing buildings.

Ladies and gentlemen, through this exhibition, the Embassy of Switzerland in India is proud to contribute to the awareness-building of a larger Indian audience, about the important modernist building heritage constructed in the early days of newly independent India. I express my hopes that the exhibition and related discussions among urban planners, architects and interested citizens will also provide new inputs that eventually lead to a better understanding for much needed conservation measures in order to maintain these iconic buildings, and therefore an essential part of the Indian national heritage of the 20th century.

In this respect, I would also like to extend my very best wishes for the pending admission of 16 Le Corbusier sites in seven countries (out of which of course feature the Capitol complex in Chandigarh and several Le Corbusier built monuments in Switzerland and in France) to UNESCO World Heritage status. You certainly do deserve it, and so do we in Switzerland and in all the other countries which have done excellent home work!

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, let me state that it is a pleasure for Switzerland to partner with Chandigarh. And this partnership does not end with this exhibition. It will continue with many more meaningful events to come. The next one will be a contemporary dance performance by Swiss choreographer and dancer Gilles Jobin. It's called “Quantum”, and will be performed on 30 November 2015 at a very special location in Chandigarh: in the pitch of the “Open Hand”. I can guarantee you that this will be a remarkable event. So please, save the date, I am looking forward to seeing you again on 30 November.