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The Inspirers of a Modernist Artist Identity: Le Corbusier's Relationship with Naive and African Art

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Abstract

This study takes as its starting point a painting by André Bauchant, a naïve painter who inspired the modernists, most notably architect Le Corbusier. Bauchant's *Bouquet Le Corbusier* (1927), which features a large vase and the figures of Le Corbusier and his wife shrunk to the size of ants, was given to Le Corbusier as a gift. Bauchant was a gardener who served on the front lines during the First World War, and he did not start painting until reaching old age. In addition to André Bauchant Le Corbusier's other favorite painter was the indigenous, self-taught African artist Kalifala Sidibé. Le Corbusier bought many of his paintings and even wrote a book about him. We know from contemporary photographs that Le Corbusier was attracted not only to naïve paintings but also to artists who lived natural lifestyles. Indeed, Le Corbusier regularly painted and drew nude in his home. Le Corbusier was searching for a way to return to a more natural and ecological orientation that diverged from the path that European civilization seemed to be taking. In this quest, he drew inspiration from many sources, and his home was very much like a *Kunst-* und *Wunderkammer* room that gathered together the works of naïve and indigenous painters, as well as seashells, snail shells, and prehistoric sculptures. In this paper, I examine one of the sources of Le Corbusier's inspiration: his relationship with naïve artists. I explore the modern European artist and star architect's relationship to autodidactic and African art, as well as his socio– and mental–historical background.

Keywords: Le Corbusier, André Bauchant, Kalifala Sidibé, naïve art

Smoke. Champagne. Jazz. Victor Vasarely, Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, Picabia, and Le Corbusier are all in the same room together; however, they are there independently of each other, and are unaware of one another's presence (Dana & Vasarely, 2022, pp. 64–65).

They all came to the legendary Negro Ball at the Montparnasse Club to hear Josephine Baker. After listening to the singer's performance, Le Corbusier commented, "This American music of Negro origin has a modern and invincible lyrical force, and I see in it the basis of a musical feeling for life that expresses the new age and renders obsolete the prevailing European solutions" (Vadas, 1983, p. 106).

In the 1920s and 1930s, there was growing interest in Europe in Black culture, especially Black music and revues. By the turn of the century, the magical power of African masks and sculptures had captivated the Cubists. So-called "Negro painting," however, was a novelty, and one of its first patrons was Le Corbusier, then an internationally renowned architect. For centuries, panel painting had been unknown to the "natives" of the British-ruled Nigerian colonies; however, the art education initiatives of the École Coloniale (Colonial School) led to the introduction of a growing number of fashionable African painters in Paris in the late 1920s. (Yanagisawa, 2014, pp. 97–108). These painters made their mark on the art market. Swiss-born Le Corbusier (real name Charles-Édouard Jeanneret) had been living in the French capital for 20 years (Nagy, 1984, p. 7). He was passionate about what he called "naïve" and "primitive" art. According to the contemporary perception of the word, *primitive* from the source of ancient African art (l'art primitif africain), was used as an artistic notion rather than a quality attribute. He decorated his home with such works and was a dedicated collector. For Le Corbusier, these works served as a kind of *ars poetica* an artistic guide.

It is not well known that Le Corbusier was actually not a trained artist. In his book *Modulor*, Le Corbusier writes:

> Our man was self-taught. He escaped formal education. That is how he came to be ignorant of the canonical rules enacted and promulgated by the academy. And he escaped the academic spirit, kept his head clear and his nose alert. (1971, p. 29)

Indeed, Le Corbusier forged his autodidacticism into a virtue, which conformed with the fashionable notion of the avant-garde artist as a "genius without artifice," who is independent of schools and styles and preserves his artistic individuality. The legends he created about himself as an artist were an important component of his self-branding; by Le Corbusier's own account, his natural talent had developed independently from the "bourgeois" stylistic practices of the École des Beaux-Arts (Ybl, 1958, p. 5). Indeed, he left school at the age of ten and, like Giotto or Pliny learned to paint on his own without a teacher. At the age of 17, he designed his first building in his own mind. Additionally, he passed a drawing instructor exam—the only drawing exam he ever passed in his life—only

so that he could take a job as a teacher. The label of self-taught genius can also be applied to Picasso, who, although once a registered student at art school, never actually attended a single seminar (Zinke, 2008, pp. 67–68, p. 92). Lacking a degree in architecture, Le Corbusier later had to prove his professional credentials as an architect. For this purpose, he often made appearances in scholarly settings. For instance, he took an opportunity to be photographed with Albert Einstein and regularly stood for photographs at Cambridge. The main driving force behind Le Corbusier's attraction to the "naïve" and "primitive" essentially derived from the fact that he was self-taught.

There is also a Hungarian connection in an important moment from Le Corbusier's life. In 1911, August Klipstein, an art historian from Munich, traveled with Le Corbusier, who was then a student, on a grand tour along the Danube, eventually taking him to Tabán in Budapest. Le Corbusier wrote:

> At the foot of the hill, near the Citadel, old huts are like flowers among the acacia trees. Simple buildings. Their walls cling to each other. Trees grow out of them. They were born naturally in this turbulent land. We stayed for hours looking at this peaceful mountain. (Vadas cites Le Corbusier, 1987, p. 22)

It was then that Le Corbusier developed the concept of combining nature and architecture, which ignited within him a fascination for folk art and solutions from ancient architecture (Le Corbusier, 1968, p. 153).

In 1917, Le Corbusier moved into his first studio apartment in Paris, his "laboratory" at 20 Rue Jacob, where he worked until 1933. Painting became a field of experimentation and exploration for him. He and Amédée Ozenfant developed purism, a method for preserving the intellectual purity of Cubism and defending an order based on geometry that was free of decorative elements. He published his artistic ideas in a magazine they published together titled *L'Esprit Nouveau* (Besset, 1968). He first encountered naïve art in 1921 at French naïve painter André Bauchant's exhibition at the *Salon d'Automne*, where Bauchant presented his large-scale painting *Ulysses and the Sirens*, which was Le Corbusier's mythical alter ego, (Rüegg, 2017, pp. 71–72) along with eight other important works (von Moos, 2017, p. 262). Le Corbusier's admiration for Bauchant is reflected in the fact that he bought several of his paintings off the wall and published a treatise on the work of Bauchant, who at the time was a 48-year-old gardener from Auzouer-en-Touraine—hence the flower motif that covers Bauchant's paintings (Southgate, 2011, p. 32). In his treatise, Le Corbusier praised Bauchant's enchanting naivety and his willingness to defy the classical aesthetic canon (De Fayet, 1922, p. 2).

Le Corbusier wrote of Bauchant, "You worked hard, like a man possessed, from dawn till dusk... You fought a heroic battle with the private and the mockery of those around you" (Weber, 2008, pp. 526). At the time, even collectors of Henri Rousseau considered Bauchant's paintings too primitive—a view that only changed when art dealer Jeanne Bucher saw the magical Bauchant collection at Le Corbusier's home (Weber, 2008, p. 526). Le Corbusier, an architect, and Bauchant, a painter, developed a close friendship, as evidenced by the fact that Bauchant painted two intimate portraits of Le Corbusier. In 1924, he painted a portrait of Le Corbusier with his future wife, Yvonne Gallis, in which the former appears somewhat stiff, dressed in a suit, and the latter appears as a lively young woman who resembles a flamenco dancer. In 1927, Bauchant painted Le Corbusier and his cousin and business partner, Swiss architect Pierre Jeanneret, in a richly detailed landscape. Le Corbusier wore a brown trench coat while standing in front of a bridge over a valley, the bridge symbolized architecture, with Pierre Jeanneret, while Yvonne, a modern woman, is barefoot and holding a bouquet of flowers while sitting at the foot of a tree.

On the wall of Le Corbusier's study was a typical Bauchant floral still life titled *Bouquet Le Corbusier*. This commissioned work was unique for being unframed, with the edges of the canvas visible. It was fixed to the wall at the corners—as if it were a tapestry—between a period rowing machine, an empty frame, and a pile of books.

Other works in Le Corbusier's collection include *Hurricane at Saint Brice* (1931), *The Visit of the Bride* (1928), and an Adam and Eve painting he bought from a friend after visiting the Carthusian monastery in the Ema Valley near Florence. The structure of the monastery, with its interior spaces connected organically to the garden, introduced to Le Corbusier's architectural practice the concept of paradise on Earth (which informed his -shaped dwellings), an articulation of the relationship between nature and architecture, exterior and interior. It was at this time that he wrote a study of Nicolas Poussin's *Spring or Paradise on Earth* (1660–1664) for *L'Esprit Nouveau* and added to his collection Bauchant's painting of the first human couple (Suárez, 2014, pp. 62–63).

Among the Bauchant works, the religiously themed painting *The Coronation of Mary*, which can be interpreted as *ars poetica*, played a prominent role. It was hung in the bedroom of Le Corbusier's new apartment at 24 Rue Nungesser-et-Coli within an exciting interior. The built-in wardrobe in the living room doubled as a door to the bedroom, and to close it, a complete wardrobe had to be pushed through the doorway, like a stone slab rolling in front of the entrance to a rock cave. In the bedroom, there was an anthropomorphic vase (for Le Corbusier, the most erotic sex symbol), a washbasin, and a marriage bed with the crowning of Mary above it. The image ironically mixes ancient mythology and Christian iconographic elements.

The halo of the deity enthroned above the heads of Mary and Christ is pierced by horns and surrounded by naked angels in a Bacchanalian ceremony. The motifs of the painting unite the Dionysian and Apollonian worlds, reflecting Le Corbusier's own personality (Menin & Samuel, 2002). The friendship between Le Corbusier and Bauchant lasted for the rest of the painter's life.

Kalifala Sidibé (1900–1930), who was from French Sudan (present-day Republic of Mali), encountered panel painting through missionary and colonial art programs in the colonies in the 1920s (Cohen, 2020, pp. 189–191). Little has been written about Sidibé and, with the exception of a few pieces, the whereabouts of his works are unknown. According to exhibition catalogs published during his lifetime, he produced approximately 40 to 50 works, and he worked on each individual work for considerable lengths of time (Yanagisawa, 2014). His first exhibition was held in 1929 at the Georges Bernheim Gallery in Paris, with an introduction by Le Corbusier, historian Georges Huisman, and writer Roland Dorgelès. Dorgelès states that Sidibé enjoyed yams, loved crocodiles, and dried meat on the roof of his house. The intellectuals of the time made a distinction between the "genuine" and "unpolluted Negro" and the already "corrupted," or cultured, Black painter. Sidibé belonged to the former group, and his works were considered "authentic" creations that provided a "real" picture not only of the African landscape but of the Black man as well.

One of the anecdotes closely associated with him tells of his becoming a painter: One day, Sidibé crouched down in front of his hut and painted his wife's portrait in green and red on a canvas spread out on the ground. He did this without any training, like the young Giotto: "he became an artist, just like Giotto, without knowing what is art" (Chavance, 1929, p. 2). Another legend purports that his instinctive talent was bestowed upon him by the gods and other spirits of his tribe, who called upon him to paint (Le Corbusier, Dorgelès & Huisman, 1929). His exotic aura was reinforced by two photographs of him that have been widely reproduced: one showing him crouched, painting with rudimentary tools on a piece of cloth laid out on the ground, and another showing him posing with his naked children in front of his hut, on top of which he is drying pieces of meat and paintings (Yanagisawa, 2014). This is, of course, the stereotypical European image of the "primitive native," and Le Corbusier was perhaps the only one among his contemporaries to be interested in the Persian, Hindu, and Arab elements in Sidibé's paintings rather than the "typically African" elements (Le Corbusier, Dorgelès & Huisman, G., 1929). Sidibé died at the age of 30 in a drunken stupor following a successful exhibition of his work in Paris—as if there were a causal link between his tragic end and his initiation into the European art world. It was not by chance that a contemporary of Roland Dorgelès addressed him with the following line: "If you love Caliphala, leave her alone! Let him live peacefully in his family, in his village" (Chavance, 1929).

During Sidibé's short career, he became noticed by Le Corbusier, who bought more of his paintings and wrote articles about him. Le Corbusier was attracted to Sidibé's childlike, magical paintings. His fascination with Sidibé led to the introduction of animals, hybrid creatures, bulls, and minotaur in Le Corbusier's painting at the turn of the 1930s and the incorporation of curved lines into his architecture (Rosales, 2012, p. 105). It was at this time that he began to modernize the city of Algiers, and for the construction of Maisons Jaoul, he worked with Algerian master builders using traditional tools—ladders, hammers, and nails without the use of synthetic materials (Maniaque, 2008–2009, p. 107). We know from contemporary photographs that Le Corbusier was painting in the "native way"—that is, naked—during this period. His study was decorated with a bouquet of Bauchant flowers and a painting of Sidibé's rampaging elephants and lions. He also owned a painting of a giant mythical snake devouring a man, and a painting of an African hunting team. Le Corbusier bucked contemporary interior design trends by creating a *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* room in his house defying the preference for purist, functionalist interiors stripped of images (Rüegg, 2017, pp. 74–75). On his first visit to Le Corbusier's cluttered, untidy home, his regular photographer, Brassaï (Gyula Halász jr.), was unsure whether there was even a bathroom in it. In the mid-1930s, Le Corbusier moved into a penthouse and transformed its rustic brick walls into an exhibition space for expressing his emotions through using objects (Rüegg, A. 2017, p. 67). "I am attracted to all natural beings," Le Corbusier wrote in the opening line of his autobiography published in the same year (1935, p. 1). On the wall and on the floor Le Corbusier had placed objects and artistic works that represented, for him, nature and naturalness: prehistoric pots, naive and primitive paintings, antique torsos, stones of particular shapes, and shells. Art collector Louis Carré found this private collection—which was reminiscent of the Surrealists' evocative objects—to be immensely inspiring, an "ideal museum." He was so impressed that he organized a ten-day mini-exhibition in July 1935. As a gesture of "modern sensibility," Le Corbusier placed the contemporary works he wished to show among the objects in the collection.

In Le Corbusier's home—which was also a metaphor for his own concept of art—the values of ancient, primitive, and naïve art, as well as classical antiques, coexisted peacefully. Le Corbusier, the legendary suit-clad figure of functionalist architecture, was, in fact, a self-taught nude painter who was fascinated by the cultural values of the natural world, embraced the Sudanese Caliphate, and could not come to terms with the loss of his friend Bauchant for the rest of his life. Le Corbusier was looking for a way to return to something closer to nature, to an ecological system, like the one towards which European civilization is moving. Looking at his sources reveals a more sensitive face of the modernist architect.

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