



The Forgotten Modernist

Julia Weiner

To cite this article: Julia Weiner (2016) The Forgotten Modernist, Jewish Quarterly, 63:3, 44-47, DOI: [10.1080/0449010X.2016.1228240](https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2016.1228240)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2016.1228240>



Published online: 04 Nov 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

THE FORGOTTEN

BY JULIA WEINER

The importance of the role of continental European architects and designers in exporting Modernism to both the United Kingdom and to America cannot be underestimated. The Nazis suspected the Modernists of Bolshevik tendencies, leading to the flight of many great talents to Britain and the US. In this country, some of our most loved buildings were designed by Jewish architects whose early lives or studies in Europe had imbued them with the Modernist tradition. They include the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill designed by Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff and Highpoint flats in Highgate designed by Berthold Lubetkin. A new exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum this autumn focuses on a less well-known architect and designer of Jewish heritage, Pierre Chareau, and explores his interaction with the French Jewish cultural elite of the interwar years as well as reawakening interest in

his masterpiece, the Maison de Verre (Glass House), which still stands in Paris.

Pierre Chareau was born in Bordeaux in 1883, the son of a wine merchant. Whilst his parents' names, George Adolphe Benjamin and Esther suggest Jewish heritage, he was brought up Catholic. His wife, Dollie, however, was from a distinguished Sephardi family who had met hard times and it was many of her contacts (through time spent as an English teacher to members of the French Jewish intelligentsia) who became Chareau's major patrons.

Chareau had little success early in his life. Indeed the evidence suggests he failed to get into the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and he began his career in 1899 working for the British company Waring & Gillow. The company made period-style furniture for hotels, cruise liners and other public buildings and Chareau eventually became head draughtsman, gaining a robust knowledge of furniture design. He served in the artillery in the First

JULIA WEINER



MODERNIST

The Life and Work of Pierre Chareau

World War and it was only on his discharge in 1919 at the age of 35 that he set himself up as an independent designer.

Sadly, almost none of his interiors have survived intact, but the exhibition brings together over 150 of his designs including furniture, lighting, textiles and original design drawings. His furniture is particularly noted for combining rare and exotic woods, often polished until they shone, with Modernist materials such as steel, iron and glass, thus combining the natural with the industrial and soft textures with hard. He shared the Modernist sensibility for clean lines and unadorned surfaces but tempered his use of hard materials by incorporating sensuous curves. The exhibition includes many ingenious pieces of furniture that combine two uses in one, such as sofas with adjoined pivoting side tables or tables that incorporate bookshelves.

His attitude to electric lighting was particularly interesting. A dislike of standardised light levels led him to make light fittings in many different sizes. He

used alabaster shades to create a soft, diffused effect and created both small sconces and large-scale ceiling lamps to provide a range in scale and intensity of light. Particularly charming is his “Religieuse” lamp, where the white alabaster shades form a shape that mimics the look of a nun’s headress. (*Religieuse* is the French for nun.)

Perhaps Chareau’s most famous design is the Maison de Verre which is still a private home, located in the 7th arrondissement in Paris. Whilst it is not as well known as other modernist buildings, architect Richard Rogers has described it as “possibly the least known and greatest of 20th century houses”. Built for Dr. Jean Dalsace in 1931, the façade is made almost entirely of glass bricks supported on thin columns. The building was constructed both as a home and a consulting room for Dr. Dalsace, a leading Jewish gynaecologist. Following the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918 which killed millions worldwide, many modernists showed an interest in using materials



Particularly charming is his “Religieuse” lamp, where the white alabaster shades form a shape that mimics the look of a nun’s headdress



JULIA WEINER

Telephone table (MB152) and La Petite Religieuse table lamp, c. 1924, designed by Pierre Chareau. Table: walnut and patinated wrought iron; lamp: walnut, patinated wrought iron, and alabaster. Private collection



Pierre Chareau Maison de Verre, 1928–1932 © MARK LYON



A suite of furniture exhibited by Pierre Chareau in 1922. Chareau's signature pieces could be combined in endless variations and adapted to rooms of different dimensions and characteristics

considered hygienic, such as steel and glass, and the fact that the building was to be used as a medical practice no doubt led in part to glass being used in such great quantities. The glass bricks, however, are translucent rather than transparent, allowing in plenty of light but remaining impenetrable to outsiders' eyes. Robert M. Rubin, the current owner of the building, contributes a fascinating chapter to the exhibition catalogue about the challenges of preserving such a modernist icon.

Chareau was very much in demand in the interwar years in Paris with a number of Jewish patrons, designing villas on the Côte d'Azur and a hotel in Tours. He also provided designs for film sets and for the theatre. He

was friends with a number of leading artists and had an important collection of paintings and sculptures, often borrowing artworks to "dress" his interiors. He was particularly interested in Cubist paintings because of, in the words of his wife, "their architectural sense of structure". He owned works by Picasso, Gris and Braque as well as a major Mondrian painting. He was friendly with leading Jewish sculptors Jacques Lipchitz and Chana Orloff; the former persuaded him to buy a caryatid by Modigliani which sat in his garden for many years and the latter carved a portrait bust of him. His wife Dollie commented that it was the ability to sell these works that saved them from ruin, first during the Great Depression of the 1930s and then when they were forced to flee to the US.

In July 1940, Chareau left France first for Morocco and then for New York and Dollie followed him a year later. He received little work there, though he did design a home and studio for the renowned American Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell which was sadly demolished in the 1980s. He died in 1950. As this exhibition reveals, Chareau's was a career interrupted, first by the Great Depression and then by the trauma of fleeing his homeland. By bringing back attention to his best work, it reveals that his heyday was really in the 1920s and his surviving designs show both the talent of this undervalued designer and something of the glamour of France in the 1920s. —JQ

Pierre Chareau: Modern Architecture and Design will be on view from 4 November 2016 to 26 March 2017

DOI: 10.1080/0449010X.2016.1228240 © Julia Weiner 2016