Le Corbusier

History and Tradition

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1. Le Corbusier.
Illustration demonstrating how Le Corbusier relates dimensions of Ville radieuse to the dimensions of historical urban spaces in Paris.
From Propos d'urbanisme (1946).
In Le Corbusier’s correspondence with Auguste Perret one can single out a paragraph which refers to his intense appreciation of France and French culture. Le Corbusier tells of how he took Perret’s recent letter up into the mountains to a point where the Alps open out and he has a view of Franche-Comté, the region he crosses on his trips to and from Paris. From here the setting sun envelops a part of France’s soil in “radiant clarity”:

The vast panorama undulating from left to right; I knew the direction of Paris and could see the sun go down almost along the ideal line which has carried me forward time and again, as you know, to your city where I never experienced anything other than joy and enthusiasm.

Le Corbusier’s work is characterized by its strong, but also contradictory, relationship to France and the French tradition. In this letter written in May 1915 he talks about his “never abandoned dream” to live in Paris but also expresses his pride in belonging to the rugged mountains of Switzerland. Over the years he began to see himself as more of a Frenchman with Mediterranean origins, while his years in the Swiss Alps seemed to belong to a time of forced exile.

Some features of his rich and complex relationship with France are outlined here. The originally Swiss architect integrated French culture...
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profoundly into his own life and gave it a place of special importance. At the same time, he was one of the first modern architects to work across borders and appear internationally with projects in many continents. He was influenced by and interested in many aspects of the world and its cultures, which interacted with and enriched his interest in French culture. Moreover, his relationship with French culture was neither systematic nor critically nuanced. He referred to historical figures such as Louis XIV and Claude Perrault to illustrate his own reasoning rather than to reach a scientifically correct understanding of the significance of their actions.

Le Corbusier’s attraction to France appears relatively late in his training and is tied to a direct encounter with German culture. After completing work on his first building, Villa Fallet, in his hometown of La Chaux-de-Fonds, he set off on his first field trip. Following instructions from his teacher, the artist Charles L’Eplattenier, he travelled to Italy in September 1907 to study Italian Medieval art and architecture. After travelling south, as far as Sienna, he returned north, reaching Budapest and Vienna by mid-November to pursue a teaching program focused on modern art and architecture. This should have included regular studies as well as working with an architect or engineer, but Le Corbusier did neither. He chose instead to design two new villas in La Chaux-de-Fonds from his distant position in Vienna. The projects, Villa Jacquemet (1908) and Villa Stotzer (1908), were conveyed by L’Eplattenier and followed in the same traditional style of Villa Fallet.

Le Corbusier’s sojourn in Vienna came to an end when he travelled to Paris in mid-March 1908, against the wishes of L’Eplattenier. The reason for the breakup with his teacher has never been totally clear, but it is possible to highlight some underlying factors. From the annual reports of l’École d’art in La Chaux-de-Fonds, one can see how the school differentiated between Paris and the German-speaking countries. Paris was associated with pure art, while Germany and Austria were connected to the art industry which had a decidedly stronger connection to the economics of his hometown and the future of watch production. It seems that L’Eplattenier