

Le Corbusier Chairs

B306 and LC2: Two “Rest Machines”

The Swiss painter and architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965) – “Le Corbusier” – began his professional studies at the turn of the 20th century – as a metal engraver. One of his earliest jobs as an architect was in a firm known for pioneering the use of steel and reinforced concrete. He became known himself for his architectural work with metal and concrete. He also became famous for his “pure” visions of space, light, and clean living in the Machine Age. He called the house “a machine for living,” and he called his reclining couches and armchairs “rest machines.” This language seems to echo the 1908 “Sitzmaschine” by Josef Hoffmann.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Le Corbusier developed a number of utopian plans for large-scale urban developments. Projects influenced by his “rationalist” designs were built but failed in the 1960s, due partly to poor construction. This hurt the reputation of the Modern Movement and the International School that Le Corbusier represented. At the same time, he had grown freer himself in his sculptural approach to building materials and furnishings. His church at Ronchamp, built in the early 1950s, was built with great sensitivity to its natural surroundings. It also expressed the history and religious feeling of the area so well that the architect Frank O. Gehry has said, “Ronchamp humbles us all.”

Earlier in his life, religious architecture had inspired Le Corbusier in a different way. In his travels, he had been deeply impressed by the Ema monastery in Tuscany, and by monastic life at Mount Athos in Greece. His new classicism was thus radically minimalist. This was true of both his architecture and his furniture. Consider the tubular steel on LC2, the “Grand Confort” club chair. Here, even when the goal is “comfort,” the style is spare. The basic frame is formed by bending the same steel tubing four times at a 90-degree angle.

Does Model B306 – the chaise longue – also look vaguely “medical” to you? Le Corbusier was indeed influenced by dentists’ chairs and barbers’ chairs and other “medical” furniture.

There were other influences. The Viennese furniture maker Thonet was famous for its Art Nouveau products but also for its abstracted designs and