

# Le Corbusier and His "Totem"

## collection

With his Rolleiflex camera, in 1951 Lucien Hervé took this black and white photograph of Le Corbusier (1887-1965) chiseling wood chips from the mouth of his "Totem," in the atelier on the roof of his rue Nungesser-et-Coli apartment, Boulogne-sur-Seine. The image was included in a portfolio of ten photographs produced by Hervé in 1987 of the architect's post-war work, including the Unités d'Habitation de Marseille (1949-1952) and Rezé-les-Nantes (1952-1955), the Chapelle de Notre-Dame-du-Haut, Ronchamp (1950-1955), and works in Chandigarh, India (1951-1957).

Né Lucien Elkan Laszlo in 1910, in Hungary, Hervé became a French citizen in 1938. He began his career as painter, soldier, Resistance member, and dress designer before engaging in photographic work at *France Illustration* in 1947. Two years later, on the advice of Dominican Father R.P. Marie-Alain Couturier (friend and collaborator of renown modern artists of the period, including Matisse, Léger, Chagall, Picasso, and Le Corbusier) whom he met in Nice while photographing the Matisse Atelier and Chapel in Vence, Hervé traveled to Marseille. There he exposed 650 black and white negatives of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation under construction. Without an introduction, Hervé brought his prints to Le Corbusier who, in a letter written that same day, acknowledged their profound affinity with the spirit of his work: "You not only complement my work through your remarkable vision, but you have the soul of an architect and you know exactly how to look at architecture." Thus began an informal, lasting exchange between architect and photographer, with Hervé documenting all major built works, models, drawings, paintings, and sculptures, as well as intimate events in the life of the architect until Le Corbusier's stroke while swimming in the Mediterranean Sea in 1965.

The wood-and-iron "Totem" of 1.22 m, unusually large within the architect's sculptural oeuvre, was executed by Joseph Savina, a Breton ebonist (1901-1983), in his Tréguier studio in 1950. Their fruitful collaboration (begun in 1946) resulted in forty-four, three-dimensional wood structures which Savina worked up in scale and detail from the Le Corbusier's studies on paper. The architect often added final chisel marks or colour to the works in Paris, or by suggestions through an exchange of letters and photographs.

A sharp, diagonal, overhead beam of light dramatically casts into relief the upper reaches of the "Totem" and the torso and head of the architect, emerging out of a velvet blackness. Hervé's closely framed image, cropped from a larger negative, dramatizes the intense reciprocal energy between creator and created, to achieve an organic plasticity of form suggesting a mirrored double portrait. Set upon a square, deeply undercut block, the sculpted, horizontally laid oval head, with bulging almond eye and mouth agape, and uneven chisel marks rippling in waves across the rough, wooden surface, is in sharp contrast to the taut, smooth skin of the architect's skull, jawbone, and forearm.

Hervé's photograph stands as an icon of Le Corbusier's post-war production: primitive, archaic, sculptural, dense, mythological, abstract, yet grounded in human proportion. It embodies Le Corbusier's relentless quest, especially during the 1950s, to synthesize the arts (architecture, painting, sculpture), having abandoned definitively his purist, Machine Age architecture for a complex, collaborative expression. That the forms and textures in "Totem" resonate with elements of his own built works of this period attests to Le Corbusier's ultimate success in creating a "poésie héroïque."

- Barbara Shapiro Comte  
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The CCA holds a collection of over 200 photographs of Le Corbusier's work taken by Lucien Hervé between 1940 and 1960. Acquired directly from the artist, the images document primarily three projects: Unité d'Habitation, Marseille, Villa Savoye at Poissy, and the Maisons Jaoul at Neuilly-sur-Seine. The CCA acquired an additional portfolio of Hervé's work which brings together projects by Le Corbusier in France and India.

**"You not only complement my work through your remarkable vision, but you have the soul of an architect and you know exactly how to look at architecture."  
– Le Corbusier, to Lucien Hervé**



Lucien Hervé. Le Corbusier and his "Totem". 1951.