

CHAPTER 14

“UN BEL ATELIER MODERNE”: THE MONTPARNASSE ARTIST AT HOME

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In 1925, an article about studio-houses in the rue Cassini, Montparnasse, concluded: “We hear that there are charming things inside, but respectful of the privacy of these ‘homes’ of artists, we have not spoken of them” (*L’Architecture* 1925: 436). Such restraint—more typical of an architectural journal than of the popular press—did not last long. By the end of the decade, even specialized journals like *L’Architecture* were illustrating the interiors of the homes of artists who had commissioned leading architects to work for them. The journal—published by the Société Centrale des Architectes—was until 1927 dominated by reviews of exhibitions, reports of architectural competitions and congresses, analyses of public buildings and town-planning schemes. After that date, *L’Architecture* grew in size and scope; now supported by the Société des Architectes Diplômés par le Gouvernement and the Association Provinciale des Architectes Français, it included accounts of new buildings alongside historic ones and adopted a more conversational style. Although house interiors were shown devoid of their inhabitants, there was some discussion of the personality and tastes of the clients, rather than simply the architectural character of their homes. By contrast, the drier and more factual journal *L’Architecte* illustrated few interiors and generally identified clients only by their initials.

This informal new tone reflects both the journalistic practices of 1920s and the publicity courted by contemporary artists. It does not merely indicate a dwindling concern for privacy and a merging of the techniques of the mass media with the sober traditions of architectural journalism. It also registers a change in attitude towards artists, who, until the early twentieth century in France, were shown the deference due to public intellectuals. An expanded illustrated press and a burgeoning entertainment industry meant that the stars of stage and screen began to appear in the pages of general interest magazines. So did artists and the studios which—with greater economic well-being after the First World War—provided them with a stylish domestic environment and enhanced opportunities for display and entertaining as well as working.

This chapter examines the significance of the modern studio space in inter-war Paris and explores the interconnections between celebrity culture, the art market, and the modern studio interior. It considers the ways in which three women—Chana Orloff, Tamara de Lempicka, and Mela Muter—made their way in a highly competitive art world, helped by an adroit manipulation of the media. All three achieved critical success in the 1920s and their choice of leading architects to design their studio-homes served to attract additional publicity. The chapter argues that the volatile economic conditions of the 1920s and 1930s gave studio design an unexpected importance. During the boom years studio-dwellings

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signaled success, but after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 they were implicated in critiques of the art market and its impact on an old artists' quarter. In the wake of this critique, broader debates about the artist's vocation, the commerce of art and the relationship between French tradition and modernism surfaced.

The French art world of the 1920s was transformed by the boom in the market for contemporary art. By mid-decade, in response to the demand for studio and living space, the area south of the Carrefour Vavin was developed with short cul-de-sacs (known as *impasses*, *cités* or *villas*) behind principal street frontages. Alice Halicka termed it "an age of gold" which impacted the lives of artists as much as the area of southern Paris containing warren-like studio complexes built on awkward plots of land left over from nineteenth-century urbanisation. With an acid tongue Halicka wrote, "New streets sprang up in which the artists lived in town houses in the style of Le Corbusier and Mallet-Stevens. The painters carried themselves like *nouveaux-riches*, talked lots about country properties, makes of cars, jewels they'd given their wives ... Montparnasse was the cradle of the new over-optimism" (Silver 1985: 45).

It was in one of these new cul-de-sacs that the sculptor Chana Orloff made her home. Orloff (1888–1968), born in Ukraine to an impoverished but well-educated Jewish family, came to Paris in 1910 to work in an *atelier de couture*. After attending classes at the École des Arts Décoratifs and studying sculpture at the Academie Wassilief, she exhibited work at the Salon d'Automne and began to frequent the literary and artistic milieu revolving around the journal *SIC*. Her marriage to the Polish poet Ary Justman was cut short by Justman's death in the influenza epidemic of 1918, leaving her with a one-year old son. By the early 1920s, Orloff began to make her name as a sculptor and wood-engraver and purchased a building plot with a bank loan made possible by these improving prospects. She commissioned the architect Auguste Perret, whose portrait bust she had modeled in 1923, to build her a "workshop" in a newly created street, the villa Seurat (sometimes known as the cité Seurat). Orloff's house, designed and constructed in 1926, provided studio spaces on the ground floor and compact living quarters above. These elements were accommodated behind a well-proportioned tripartite elevation, with a generously windowed studio occupying the lion's share and the living quarters above forming a sort of attic story beneath a deep concrete cornice (Culot, Peyceré and Ragot 2000: 152).

Perret took advantage of the capacity for concrete to create generous spans and textured surfaces. Although he did not normally use concrete to create extensively glazed façades, he did so here out of necessity. But in contrast to other modern architects of the period, his design revealed the construction process. The concrete beams and columns which articulated the façade he left un-rendered, providing a contrast in color and texture to the brickwork of the panels separating the street-level doors and the bricks set at an oblique angle to create zig-zag profiles in the upper façade (Culot, Peyceré and Ragot 2000). Perret's façade composition provided differentiation between structural frame and infill (a feature of almost all his buildings) and gave this sculptor's studio a markedly classical character. This design strategy distinguished Orloff's habitat from the other artists' dwellings in this street, including those built during the same period. Mostly designed by André Lurçat, these studios, houses and apartments combined a concrete frame with infill brick walls. But, unlike Perret's, Lurçat's façades were smooth and uniformly rendered, accentuating their cubic character and play of solid to void, recessed terraces and projecting bays (Imbert 1927).

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Orloff’s house was ingeniously planned. The ground floor contained two studios. The first had a north-facing street frontage with a mezzanine gallery running around two sides to allow sculpture to be viewed from above, whereas the second studio was a top-lit space to the rear. In practice, the front studio functioned as an exhibition space, through which visitors were routed before entering the working studio. The living quarters included a mezzanine sleeping cubicle for a nursemaid and on the first floor, two small bedrooms, living-dining room, top-lit kitchen and bathroom. “I don’t like furniture; I prefer the walls to be furnished,” Orloff told the correspondent of *L’Architecture* (Imbert 1927: 111). This remark is borne out by photographs of the interior which show rooms sparingly but stylishly equipped with furniture designed by Orloff’s friends the designer Francis Jourdain and architect-designer Pierre Chareau. The bedrooms were described as “cells without austerity, mother’s room and child’s room, cheerful, neat and sober” (Imbert 1927: 112). Built-in storage cupboards, beds, and mirrors were designed to save space and keep loose furniture to a minimum. Textiles pinned to the walls complemented the robust textures of the plank-marked concrete studio ceiling and beams. Sculpture was displayed on handsome timber plinths (Figure 14.1).

Orloff’s success at the 1926 Salon d’Automne followed by an exhibition at the Galerie Druet brought the artist public recognition and articles in *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* and *Paris-Midi*, which featured Orloff side by side with the beauty queen Edmonde Guy as contemporary celebrities (Coutard-Salmon 1980: 48). Both popular and more specialized journals commented on the phenomenon of a woman sculptor practising in a field traditionally

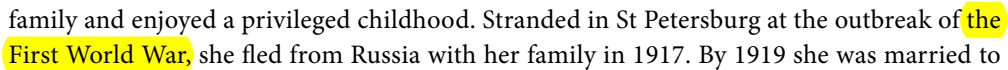


Figure 14.1 Auguste Perret, Interior of Studio for Chana Orloff, 1926, Fonds Perret, CNAM/SIAF/CAPA/Archives d’architecture du XXe siècle/Auguste Perret/UFSE/SAIF-2014, Photo: Chevojon.

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dominated by men. Art critics described her sculpture as vigorous, powerful and the sculptor herself as “cette robuste ouvrière” (this  worker) (Charensol 1927: 40). It was an image which Orloff was careful to sustain. At a time when artists were increasingly featured in gossip columns, she steered a judicious course between courting the publicity that artists attracted and maintaining the more anonymous role of the artisan. This was a particularly difficult task for a sculptor who relied on portrait commissions and received both ongoing and prospective sitters at her studio. While maintaining the friendships and prewar Montparnasse’s traditions of informal hospitality, Orloff entertained a more worldly and successful crowd (Coutard-Salmon 1980; Silver 1985).

The character of her studio helped to counter both the superficial glamor attached to the modern artist (especially the woman artist) and the identification of Montparnasse as a home for foreign artists. In the light of Perret’s image as an architect belonging to the French classical tradition, it is significant that Orloff had at first considered using Lurçat as her architect, but turned instead to Perret in the year before she and her son acquired French citizenship (Campbell 2002). In 1928, a critic writing in *L’Amour de l’Art* referred to Lurçat’s house designs as lacking traditional elements of architecture, as “dead-end fantasy.” By contrast, he wrote, the Orloff studio nearby “teaches them a lesson, functions as a call to order, to good sense, to good taste... it is frank, likeable, robust, distinguished. Down-to-earth architecture, up-to the minute architecture, French architecture” (Mayer 1928: 268). Montparnasse was viewed as an increasingly Americanized place dominated by large modern cafés and a spate of “Studio Buildings,” a place which was losing its character as a *quartier* (Golan 1995; Renault 2013). By contrast, Orloff’s studio, with its bold frame and infill of glass, brick, and timber, referenced the buildings of an older Montparnasse such as the sculptors’ workshops around the Avenue de Maine, while employing elements derived from classical architecture.

Tamara de Lempicka’s career and studio is in striking contrast to that of Orloff. Lempicka (1898–1980), ten years her junior, was part of a new breed of artists emerging in the 1920s who grasped the opportunities for self-advancement offered by the illustrated magazines and gossip columns. She was born Tamara Gorska in Poland to an affluent professional family and enjoyed a privileged childhood. Stranded in St Petersburg at the outbreak of  she fled from Russia with her family in 1917. By 1919 she was married to Count de Lempicka and living in Paris where she studied art with André Lhote. In 1922, she exhibited paintings at the Salon d’Automne and regularly showed there until 1938. During this period she painted portraits of aristocrats, rich collectors, family members, and professional models. In 1929, Lempicka purchased an apartment in a new building designed by Mallet-Stevens in the rue Méchain near Montparnasse cemetery, for which her sister Adrienne de Gorska designed some of the furnishings. Described in detail in the sumptuous decorative art journal *Mobilier et Décoration*, this apartment was the setting for private views and glittering social gatherings (Remon 1931). Although Lempicka was a regular exhibitor at the Salons and at FAM (Société des Femmes Artistes Modernes), like Orloff, she did not have a dealer’s contract (Birnbaum 2011), and therefore her studio functioned as an important ancillary gallery. This similarity aside, there are significant differences between the character of these two artists’ habitats and the ways in which they served to frame the endeavor of their occupants.

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Lempicka's apartment was a duplex, entered via a streamlined spiral staircase with a carpet containing geometrical designs. A lobby with doors of iron, glass and chrome opened into a magnificent double-height studio lit by a north-facing window. An open staircase led to a mezzanine floor which contained a cocktail bar-cum-library and two bedrooms, the smaller of which doubled as a study. Located opposite the staircase, this room (used by the artist's daughter) provided spectacular spatial effects and provided views of the studio below, but not very much privacy. The high gloss of the furniture and fittings (glass, chrome and steel) contrasted with the smooth texture of the gray-painted walls. Specially designed light fittings threw dramatic shadows across the walls and ceilings, accentuating the highly theatrical nature of this place. A bronze sculpture by Orloff was placed at the foot of the staircase, and a sheet zinc sculpture by the Martel brothers occupied a mirrored niche (Figure 14.2). Although the owner's initials were part of the geometric design for the upholstery in the library, the photographs published in *Mobilier et Décoration* presented surprisingly little evidence of her occupation as an artist (Remon 1931). These photographs showed areas to play cards, drink cocktails, dine, relax, apply make-up, and sleep. Instead of an easel, a bridge table and chairs dominated the foreground of the magnificent space of the studio (Gronberg 2004: 55).

Both Lempicka and Orloff presented themselves in ways which re-defined what it meant to be a woman artist in the modern era. Orloff, speaking to a journalist in 1936, referred to women's traditional concern with affairs of the heart, stressing that her own, rather different, priorities were her work and her child (Coutard-Salmon 1980: 47). De Lempicka, who



Figure 14.2 Robert Mallet-Stevens, Detail of studio for Tamara de Lempicka showing staircase, bridge table and corner of the salon, in *Mobilier et Décoration* (January 1931), Courtesy Alain Blondel, Photo: Gravot.

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appears at first sight the epitome of frivolity, embodied a distinctively modern femininity, a sexualized, high-earning artist with sophisticated tastes. The 1932 Pathé newsreel, *Un Bel Atelier Moderne*, showed the artist seated at her dressing table laden with an impressive range of beauty products, being served dinner by her man-servant and painting a nude portrait of the night-club singer Suzy Solidor (Gronberg 2004: 52). Lempicka later gave credit to Solidor for the publicity which she herself began to attract: “While she was sitting for the portrait, she brought the newspaper [writers]. And that was the first newspaper that started [to publish] photographs of myself and my studio... It was wonderful publicity for me” (Claridge 2000: 187). Accounts of studio parties now supplemented the architectural descriptions of Lempicka’s home. These included the French version of the American cocktail party known as “le 5 à 7” at which guests drank tea or alcohol and artists mixed with the *beau-monde*. Attended by guests displaying their talent, beauty or wealth they underlined the exclusive character of these occasions and echoed reports of glamorous Hollywood parties. They conjure an image of the film-star artist, whose habitat was so closely tailored to her own appearance that the décor was described in terms of fashionable coiffure; “this magnificent studio, all in gray and platinum, the color tones of the latest in hair styling” (*Notre Temps* quoted Blondel 1999: 499). Lempicka’s reputation as a painter of both explicitly erotic subjects and unstable sexual identities was enhanced by an episode in 1931 when a theater poster based on her painting *Adam and Eve* was banned by the police (Blondel 1999: 236). Such publicity further added to the artist’s reputation for being daring and challenging convention.

By 1932 the impact of the 1929 Wall Street Crash began to have a serious effect on the French art market. For the first few years after the Crash, artists like Lempicka continued to sell well, but the 1931 currency restrictions undermined the international art market. Buying contemporary art, which had seemed a good investment for collectors in the 1920s, now appeared riskier. However, Orloff and Lempicka had extended their client base to the United States, and although this provided both artists with some protection, other Montparnasse artists were less fortunate.

On the strength of exhibitions at the Galerie Druet in 1926 and 1928 the Polish-born painter Mela Muter (1876–1967) followed the example of her friend Orloff by commissioning a studio-house from Perret in 1928, the year in which she acquired French citizenship (Silver 1985; Birnbaum 2011). The house Perret built for her was an L-shaped building arranged around a patio on a cramped site in a cul-de-sac off the rue de Vaugirard. The ground floor contained a large exhibition room, a garage, a dining-room and a kitchen, whereas the first floor accommodated a studio, bedroom and bathroom. The design enabled the house to be adapted for diverse purposes such as making, exhibiting and selling her paintings; holding painting classes; and social events and private views.

Like in Orloff’s studio, the design appears to be a studied complement to the character of the occupant’s work. Muter was a figurative painter with strong links to the work of the Pont-Aven school and was known for her bold handling of paint and use of strong color. Perret again employed a strongly articulated concrete frame with slightly recessed wall panels. However, the wall surfaces of this house were extremely lively and consisted of red and white brick panels arranged in groups of three, laid alternately horizontally and vertically to create a checker-board pattern. Squares formed by the horizontally laid bricks were raised and, together with the broad courses of mortar, created a strong relief. The effect was enhanced by curtains with bold stripes hanging at the windows.

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Perret's interest in painting and sculpture and sensitivity to his clients' needs attracted a wide spectrum of artist-clients throughout his career (Campbell 2002). Five years after building Muter's studio, Perret provided her with assistance of a different kind. In 1933, the year in which the French art market hit rock bottom, the journal *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* devoted an article to the work of Muter, which was accompanied by two photographs of the artist. One photograph presented the artist in her patio-garden, with her dining room's rustic wooden chairs, woven table covering, and pottery ornaments glimpsed through the open French windows; the other photograph showed her in her studio painting a portrait of Perret (Figure 14.3). The journal, founded in 1930 with the aim of defending modern architecture from its critics, occasionally featured the work of such artists as Chagall and Czaky, as well as illustrating studio-dwellings by architects like Mallet-Stevens. However, this article was unusual in that it showed the artist at home and represented Muter as the innocent victim of circumstance, observing: “in an epoch when bluff often takes the place of talent and when many painters are either the prey or the accomplices of picture-dealers, it is good to note that some artists continue to exercise their profession honestly and courageously” (Bloc 1933: 96). Perret (whose work the journal supported enthusiastically) is here co-opted in order to boost Muter's reputation.

In 1933 the art dealer Berthe Weill, looked back at the preceding boom years and judged the 1920s to have been “disastrous for art, disastrous for commerce, an epoch of speculation, of bluff, an unwholesome epoch” (Klüver and Martin 1994). In a similar vein to Weill, the inference in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* was that the market had collapsed as a result of speculation and dishonesty rather than as an inevitable consequence of the worldwide economic crisis (Gee 1981). Similar claims fueled criticism of both art dealers and artists who in their way of life and their habitats were highly conspicuous 1920s consumers. These critiques served to bring to the fore the vexed issue of artistic integrity and—more significantly for the present chapter—served as a conduit between discussions of art and the assessment of contemporary architecture. The discourse of truth and deception characterized architectural debate in the nineteenth century as new structural materials like iron became available and were accommodated into the existing lexicon of architecture. A similarly moralized discourse acquired new currency in the economic crisis of the 1930s, when during this era of protectionism and xenophobia it was suggested that new buildings in Montparnasse were soulless, badly constructed, and of little architectural value. These emerged in parallel with criticisms of foreign-born artists working in France. A growing preoccupation with questions of ethnic and national difference emerged, and alongside the term “École de Paris,” which denoted the rich diversity of both French and foreign artists who worked in the city, the more selective term “École française” came into use (Golan 1985 in Silver 1985: 80–87).

Orloff, Lempicka and Muter struggled to navigate this altered landscape. Orloff, who had many American clients, had special grounds for concern, but family connections in Mandatory Palestine and a loyal network of patrons in France allowed her to survive (Marcilhac 1991). Her decision to commission the Palestinian architect Zeev Rechter to build three flats, a garage, and another studio beside her original house appears in retrospect rather rash (Tamir, Justman and Birnbaum 2012: 30). However, it provided a useful source of rental income and space to execute large-scale sculptural commissions for the new state of Israel after the Second World War. Lempicka's finances were eased by her alliance with the wealthy Baron Kuffner from about 1928, something which probably made possible the purchase of the studio-apartment in the

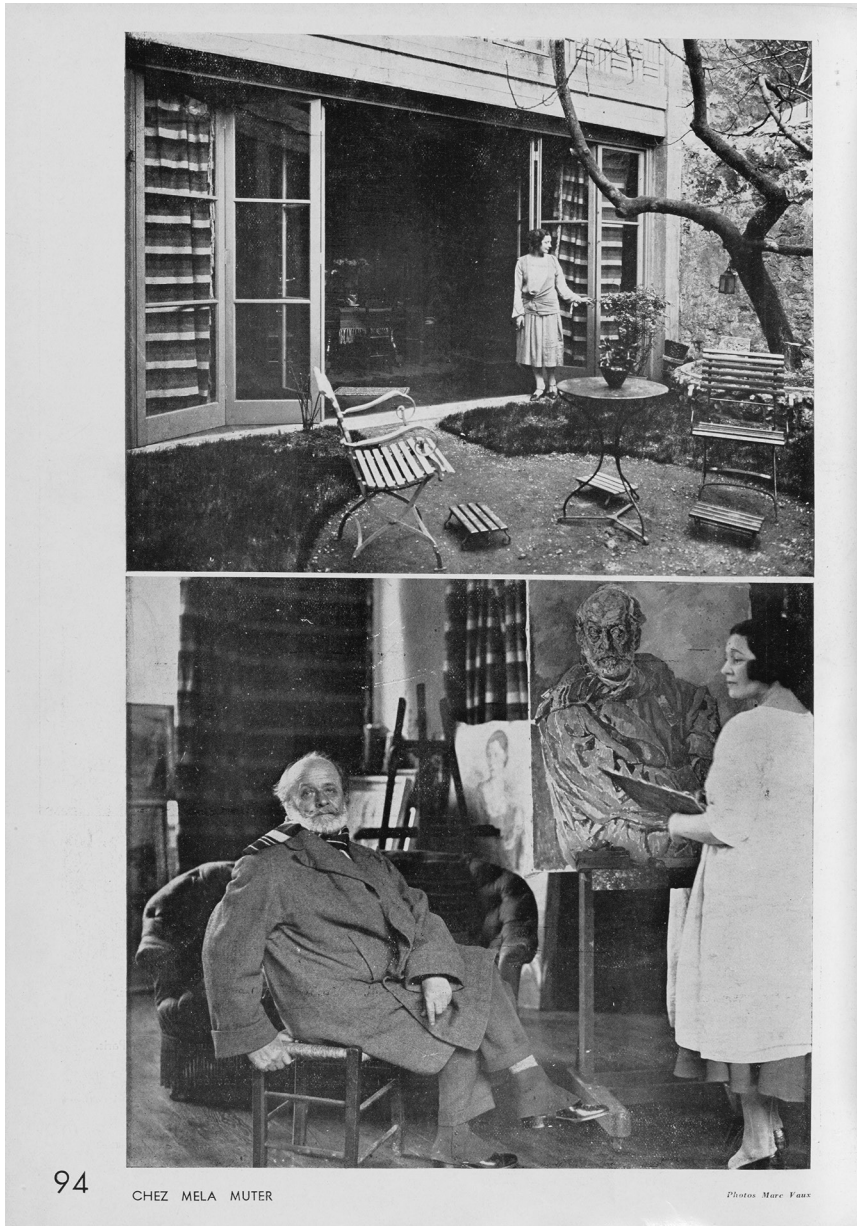


Figure 14.3 “Chez Mela Muter,” *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* April 1933, RIBA Library Books & Periodicals Collection, Photo Marc Vaux.

rue Méchain. She was in New York when the Crash occurred and remained there for several months longer in order to complete commissions. Reputed to have lost money on investments and forced to lower the high prices she had previously asked for paintings, Lempicka appears to have used her apartment and the social events it accommodated as a means to sustain interest in her work during the 1930s (Claridge 2000: 182–183). After suffering a period of

depression which affected her style and subject matter and curtailed her output, she and Kuffner immigrated to the United States in 1939 (Blondel 1999: 56–60). The impact on Muter’s career was more serious. This was already looking precarious in the late 1920s, when—with abstract art and Surrealism in the ascendant—her brand of figurative painting appeared old-fashioned. Exhibitions in the United States failed to generate the anticipated sales, and her financial predicament obliged her to spend more time teaching and, in 1934, to let her house to tenants. Unfortunately, postwar legislation gave her tenant security of tenure, and Muter was never able to resume occupancy (Nawrocki 1993: 5).

Analyses of inter-war French art have significantly underplayed the effect of the *retour à l’ordre* on architecture (Golan 1995: 23). The buildings of the boom years were unmistakable signs of the affluence, rapid modernization and new ways of living which the 1920s brought to Paris. The blocks of studio-apartments by Henri Astruc in the rue Delambre and Louis Süe in the Boulevard Raspail were conspicuous examples (Delorme and Dubois 1998). The following decade saw a new interest in the vernacular and regional and a resurgence of interest in the classical tradition of French architecture. The private house—a place where tradition and modernity collided—now became the focus of critical debate. In 1933, Camille Mauclair launched an attack on modern architecture criticizing Le Corbusier’s journal *L’Esprit Nouveau* for encouraging the machine aesthetic and for promoting an architecture devoid of sensory pleasure or spirituality (Mauclair 1933). The painter Ozenfant responded with a robust defense of his studio-house designed by Le Corbusier, which he described as practical, light, and comfortable: “I work there happily, and I love the cosiness. And I hope, M. Mauclair, that you will one day live in a similar house ‘à la française’: you’ll see that you can think more clearly there” (Ozenfant 1968: 258). The following year, the critic Waldemar George called for an end to the “modernist exhibitionism” of modern architecture and proposed the eighteenth-century house as the epitome of France’s “ethnic and aesthetic reality” (George 1934: 182).

It was in this context that attitudes to Perret—who until the mid-1920s was regarded as a pioneer modernist—were subtly revised in such a way as to situate him as heir to the classical tradition of French architecture. In 1928 Perret’s use of concrete was simply compared favorably with that of Lurçat’s, but by 1929, Marie Dormoy characterized Perret’s treatment of concrete as “true” and Lurçat’s as “false,” the latter having walls prone to discoloration and structural systems obscured by cladding (Dormoy 1929: 132). This moralized discourse (magnified by the economic crisis) helped to shape attitudes to Perret in ways which unexpectedly worked to the advantage of his artist-clients. To the jaundiced eye of the 1930s, Parisian studio-houses had come to be associated with profiteering and the gradual erosion of local and national identity. The glamor of Lempicka’s slickly elegant studio evoked Hollywood, conspicuous consumption, and the economic crash. By contrast, Perret’s work was described by *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* as evidence of a rare architectural integrity and consistency in an era of ephemeral success (Bloc 1932: 1). The architect’s commitment to clarity and invention of a form of ornament integral with the wall was explicitly linked with Muter’s refusal to modify her style according to fashion. Her solid little house, with its clearly delineated frame and infill, was said to represent a commonsense Modernism, a French alternative to the international language of modernism practiced by Lurçat and Mallet-Stevens. Perret’s clients—although not immune from the downturn in the art market—benefited from his reputation as a classicist. The symbols of high culture—majestic

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cornices, fine proportions, and emphatic frames—with which he endowed their homes, were to afford Orloff and Muter a welcome means of protection in the years when issues of ethnic origin and national identity began to color the criticism of art.

Acknowledgments

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