

On March 31st Wright will offer 23 lots from the architectural city of Chandigarh, India.

The lots consist of furniture designed by Pierre Jeanneret, often in collaboration with Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier was hired by the Chandigarh government to re-design the city as a monument to modernity. Le Corbusier hired his cousin – Jeanneret – to design the furniture. The installation was completed by the mid-1950's, but had begun to degrade by the 80's.

The New York Times reported:

*Despite the striking simplicity of their design, few of the city's employees gave the furniture a second glance. Gradually, as the furniture fell into disrepair, it was thrown into government store rooms and occasionally auctioned off, "for peanuts," Wattas said, usually to local carpenters who broke it up and reused the increasingly expensive teak. "People wanted new and glossy stuff: synthetic leather, Scandinavian design, metallic furniture."*<sup>1</sup>

By 1986, government officials had begun to view the Jeanneret furnishings as disposable. An official letter dated January 22, 1986, by Wazir Chand Malhotra, chief architect and secretary, architecture, said,

*"Sanction is hereby accorded under Rule 10, schedule VII of the Delegation of Financial Power Rules, 1958, to declare the articles of stores as unserviceable and their disposal at public auction."*

By this point, many of the furnishings and buildings had degraded due to neglect. In the beginning of the sales, some items were sold either at fractional prices or just for the scrap value of the wood. There was also no early effort to attempt to preserve these items.

Eventually several art dealers of 20th century design in France became aware of these auctions. These art dealers in many cases exported the works to Paris and arranged and funded restoration of these works. Once restored, the works were offered at auction houses around the world, expanding the market for Jeanneret works and achieving significant prices.



None of this was done in secret. There was news coverage of the purchases from Chandigarh. See "French Love Our Furniture" Chandigarh Newslines, July 11, 2001. The auctions occurred at major auction houses across the world (including Wright, Sotheby's and Christie's). And, a lengthy book was written about the works, their condition and their role in modern design. (See Le Corbusier Pierre Jeanneret L'Aventure Indienne / The Indian Adventure Design-Art-Architecture by Eric Touchaleaume and Gerald Moreau).

Last February, Artcurial, Paris, auctioned furnishings purchased in Chandigarh. The Indian government asked Artcurial to halt the auction, insisting that the items belonged in India. Nevertheless, Artcurial proceeded. Indian governmental authorities conducted an investigation as to whether the items were legally purchased or stolen: the conclusion – by India's own investigator – was that the items were sold by Chandigarh authorities with permission of Chandigarh authorities and were legally purchased by the European art dealers.

Here is the quote from the Indian Times:

*An internal inquiry conducted by the department has confirmed that significance of the heritage artifacts was not taken into consideration at the time of fixation of auctions as is evident from the list of items sold. The probe was ordered after Paris-based auction house, Artcurial, took UT by surprise in February 2010 by selling furniture, wooden models and sketches. The Times of India has a copy of the inquiry report submitted by UT senior architect Maitreyi C Gupta.<sup>2</sup>*

But, regardless of the government's own report showing that the works were properly purchased, the Indian government continues to pursue these items. Interpol has been asked to look into Jeanneret items that have departed the scene in Chandigarh. In fact, Wright has been contacted by the Indian Consulate, Homeland Security, Immigration and the FBI.

At Wright, we support the preservation of cultural heritage. When we got the requests from the government agents, we began a review of all documentation we could locate to verify the provenance of these items. We also took a look at India's legal rights.

In India, the government can only gain dominion over non-antiques that it designates as "art treasures." We could not find any designation of these items as art treasures. In spite of the numerous articles, blog posts and preservation projects launched in the last year, there was never any mention of using India's own legal tools to protect the works in Chandigarh.

The India Times has confirmed the failure of the Indian government to take steps to protect these works. Deepak Yadav of the Indian Times wrote:

*CHANDIGARH: Here's a shocker for everyone who has been protesting the auction of "heritage" items created or designed by Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier: the UT administration has no notification whatsoever qualifying these to be of heritage value.<sup>3</sup>*

The New York Times reported:

*Kiran Joshi, a professor of architecture in the city, agreed that the dealers were perhaps not to blame. "It's not the collectors that were the problem. The problem is our perception of heritage. We thought it was junk, our government thought it was junk," she said.*

It was only abroad that people prized the chairs as "part of the history of modernism. That's why they are selling for such exorbitant prices. Suddenly this has become the rage. But we didn't know anything much about it in India," she said.

We believe that the Indian government does not have a legal right to these works, particularly given the fact that the Indian government thought these works were "junk" and authorized the sale of these works at public auction. If the Indian government can produce a designation of art treasure over these works that preceded their purchase, we will work with all parties to resolve matters fairly and quickly.



<sup>1</sup> [New York Times, Letter from India: Avant-garde city of Chandigarh, India, loses overlooked treasure; By Amelia Gentleman; Published: Friday, February 29, 2008.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Unserviceable' furniture sold 5 times; Vibhor Mohan, TNN | Feb 22, 2011, 04.01am IST.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UT has no notification for heritage; Deepak Yadav, TNN, Mar 25, 2011, 12.34am IST.](#)