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IN COLLABORATION: RAHUL MEHROTRA AND ASHIESH SHAH  
PLUS SHARP NEW HOUSES BY BIJOY JAIN AND VIKRAM GOYAL

# THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE CHANDIGARH CHAIR

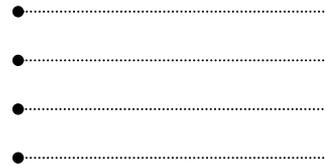
*There is both fascination and confusion around the handsome office chair designed by Pierre Jeanneret and not, as many mistakenly think, by his cousin, Le Corbusier. Here's everything you need to know about the fashionable design icon*

WRITER ARATI MENON

No discussion on mid-century Indian design is complete without a mention of Le Corbusier, the architect commissioned to build Chandigarh. But if Corbusier was the visionary, Pierre Jeanneret—his cousin and collaborator—was the quieter, but no less masterful, executor. Jeanneret lived and worked in Chandigarh from 1951 until 1965, and during those years did more than just follow command. While Corbusier designed the Capitol Complex, Jeanneret played architect to Chandigarh's housing complexes and the Panjab University campus. More recently, Jeanneret has also been celebrated for the wealth of distinctive furniture he designed for the city of Chandigarh. At auctions around the world, demand has soared for the low-slung lounge chairs,

desks and tables, many with Jeanneret's signature joinery style and compass legs.

But perhaps no demand (or indeed, supply) has surpassed that for the simple cane and teakwood chair designed for offices of the Chandigarh administration. There were thousands built over the creation of the city, as the original sketches got shared in what was an early example of open-source design, and replication continued in carpentry studios in Patiala, and as far as New Delhi. The humble 'Office' chair, handcrafted in the spirit of affordability and sensitivity to social context, is now among the most widely coveted from the Chandigarh oeuvre—as much an emblem of mid-century modern design as it is a statement of an unshackled India's faith in the future.



## WHO ACTUALLY DESIGNED IT?

No, it wasn't Le Corbusier. Michael Jefferson, senior vice president, and senior specialist of 20th-century design, at American auction house Wright—which auctioned 44 works by Corbusier and Jeanneret in 2015—says, “The design originated squarely from the hand of Jeanneret. Le Corbusier may have set forth the philosophical parameters for the Chandigarh project, but Jeanneret provided the practical application of furniture within this philosophy.”

## HOW TO SPOT A FAKE

Colen Colthurst, of Toronto-based Porch Modern, offers the following advice to buyers: “Remember that these chairs have been in heavy and constant use for over 50 years; so on originals, there will be repairs, additional nails, dowels, replaced parts, as well as damaged and missing parts. Some fakes are very easy to spot—with a fresh new coat or with the odd marks or scuffs trying to show age. Always ask questions about the history; if you're not convinced, simply move on.”

## PROVENANCE

According to Patrick Parrish, owner of the eponymous New York-based antiques gallery, the manner in which the furniture left Chandigarh, both legally and illegally, makes it virtually impossible to trace back to workshops or buildings they were used in. Additionally, only occasionally is there legitimate hand-painted inventory lettering or a government seal. “There are virtually no records to establish the number of pieces created or transactions of purchase,” says Chiki Doshi, of the House of Mahendra Doshi, important Indian antique dealers and long-time champions of Chandigarh design. Moreover, because only a portion of the original chairs was built under the supervision of Jeanneret, quality of wood and workmanship of ‘originals’ greatly vary. Several were also awkwardly restored—“Frankenstein” pieces as Jefferson calls them—not fakes, but far from desirable originals.

## GLOBAL TRADE

It was decades after Jeanneret left Chandigarh when the world took serious note of the furniture that had acquired, over time, a certain expendability. In the early 2000s, European dealers and auctioneers began visiting Chandigarh on a hunt for old furniture, often finding them abandoned in skips and unused lots, and acquiring them for next to nothing. Paris-based dealer Patrick Seguin has famously had the largest stock of the chairs and is considered the leading dealer and expert on all the furniture that Jeanneret and Corbusier made in Chandigarh. The furniture was brought to the notice of collectors with their addition in the auction market, aided by, as gallery owner Patrick Parrish says, “a film, two major monographs, and images of the furniture in the most luxurious homes in the world”. A series of successful European and North American auctions prompted Indian authorities to curb its trade.

## HOW MUCH DO THEY COST?

At a 2015 Saffronart auction of 20th-century design, a pair of ‘Office’ chairs sold for \$5,148 or ₹3,24,324. The price of a chair swings between \$2,500 and 4,000. Even with the embargo on furniture leaving Chandigarh, there is availability across dealers in North America and Europe and via marketplaces like 1stdibs. Fresh supply in India is harder to come by: the House of Mahendra Doshi, for instance, has stopped selling Chandigarh furniture out of respect for the legalities imposed by authorities to preserve heritage. “We wouldn't touch that furniture now; it's illegal,” says Chiki Doshi.

‘CONFERENCE’ TABLE, PIERRE JEANNERET

“This is a large and rather rare example of a conference table, which was a special order for the offices of the maharaja of Patiala’s palace. It’s unusual for its size as well as its history, being not from Chandigarh proper, but from Patiala. At around 4 by 8 feet, it was large enough to be used as either a dining table or a conference table.”

– COLEN COLTHURST, *PORCH MODERN*

## RARER STILL

*The ‘Office’ chair may be most emblematic of the Chandigarh furniture oeuvre, but there’s plenty more where that came from*

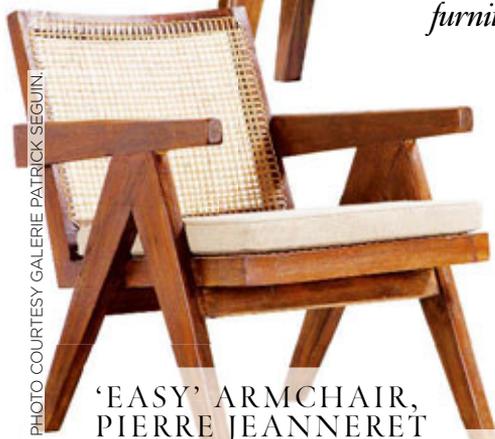


PHOTO COURTESY GALERIE PATRICK SEGUIN

‘EASY’ ARMCHAIR, PIERRE JEANNERET

“This armchair is my personal favourite from the period. It is a classic lounge chair—simple, elegant and very comfortable to sit on.”  
– DEEPAK SRINATH, *PHANTOM HANDS ARTISAN COLLECTIVE, BENGALURU*

Chandigarh is among the few cities in the world to have had furniture designed exclusively for their administrative needs. Imagine this: every single piece of furniture, of varying scale and function, all made to fit into a brand new vision for a modern India. “Furniture of this period is tethered to history as well as a specific site. The combination of purpose and practicality will ensure these works are appreciated for years to come,” says Wright’s Michael Jefferson. There were desks and tables, shelves, sofas, even beds and stools—the range of novel forms of furniture and lighting created by Jeanneret and Corbusier for Chandigarh was, and is, unprecedented. Here are some of them, expertly picked.



‘STANDARD’ LAMP, PIERRE JEANNERET

This lamp is made in teak, with two reflectors in embossed sheet aluminium, one lacquered black and the other red—they were lacquered in other colours as well—and an off-centred rectangular slab in teak. One of these was snapped up at a 2016 Bonhams auction for \$12,500 or ₹8,51,193.



‘DESK WITH LIBRARY’, PIERRE JEANNERET

“This desk is an absolute classic, and was collected by Mahendra Doshi back in the early 1990s. I’ve never considered selling it, and am actually in the process of restoring it; my only quandary is whether or not to use artificial leather for the top, as in the original, or replace it with wood.”  
– CHIKI DOSHI, *THE HOUSE OF MAHENDRA DOSHI*

‘ACCUSED CABIN’ (DOCK), LE CORBUSIER

“To me, this is the rarest and most important lot Wright has ever offered from Chandigarh. Very few of these were made and they encapsulate much of Corbusier’s mathematical philosophy and intellectual rigour as an architect at a portable scale.”  
– MICHAEL JEFFERSON, *WRIGHT*



PHOTOS COURTESY WRIGHT