



# THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 1 FIRST QUARTER 1980

## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AND MODERN DESIGN: AN APPRAISAL

by R. Craig Miller

*These remarks were first presented at the Frank Lloyd Wright symposium held at the University of Chicago in January, 1979. They were in rebuttal to a lecture given by David Hanks at the symposium, which was subsequently published in The Frank Lloyd Wright Newsletter (Vol. 2, No. 3). Many of the ideas in Mr. Miller's talk were amplified in a subsequent lecture, "Upholstery versus the Machine Aesthetic in the Twentieth-Century Chair," given at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in March 1979; the papers from this conference on historic upholstery will be published by the Decorative Arts Society.*

Frank Lloyd Wright's claim to be America's pre-eminent architect to date would be questioned by few people. His contribution to the field of modern design, however, has received less recognition. David Hanks' 1978 exhibition and accompanying catalogue<sup>1</sup> are thus of real importance for they will, I believe, mark the beginning of a concerted study of the designs of Wright and his American contemporaries.

My rebuttal to Mr. Hanks' talk consists of three observations on Wright as a furniture designer. My remarks will be limited largely to a stylistic critique of his work and are intended more as a cursory retort to stimulate

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discussion rather than a detailed analysis. For visual continuity, I have chosen mostly chairs for my illustrations. The points are:

1. I would like to illustrate Wright's multi-faceted talent as a designer of chairs.
2. I would like to offer an appraisal of Wright's influence on avant-garde design of the last century.
3. And in looking at Wright's nineteenth-century roots, I would suggest yet another source of influence besides the Arts and Crafts movement.

First of all, I would submit that just as Wright disliked the "box" as an architectural space, so he disliked the "traditional four-legged chair" and sought to give it a new, revolutionary form. As Wright himself said:

Yet every chair must eventually be designed for the building it is to be used in. Organic architecture calls for this chair which will not look like an apparatus but instead be seen as a gracious feature of its environment which can only be the building itself.<sup>2</sup>

Wright's genius can be seen in the variety of alternative forms he developed for the traditional chair over a period of some six decades. At least eight chair types

<sup>1</sup>David A. Hanks, *The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution; cosponsored by the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1977). A book of the same title by Mr. Hanks (New York: E. P. Dutton) appeared in 1979.

<sup>2</sup>Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Natural House* (New York: Horizon Press, Inc., 1954; reprint ed., New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 173.