

# THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

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### JAPANESE THEMES AND THE EARLY WORK OF FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

by Margaret Williams Norton

Frank Lloyd Wright's fascination with the Orient is visible in his architecture throughout his long and productive career. His plans and papers are imprinted with the red square, by his own definition an abstract symbol of integrity, but also resembling the cinnabar seal of Chinese courts; in fact, Wright used a real Chinese seal to mark pages in his album of Japanese photographs and inside the covers of favorite books. Oriental themes are most apparent in overall effects, but sometimes, especially during the Prairie period (1900-14),<sup>1</sup> they are obvious also in the details of various works. Later the details of Orientalism are no longer evident, although Wright's buildings are often best complemented by Oriental art works. Even in later designs, Wright's juxtaposition has a touch of Oriental sensitivity. Japanese references such as the *origami* roof shape appear in post-Prairie works.<sup>2</sup>

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These characteristics of style materialized through a series of both direct and indirect influences. They came partly through conscious and acknowledged choices (the Japanese prints), and also in filtered form through the works of other architects. At the same time, Wright's philosophy of design allowed him to be immediately sympathetic to the Japanese approach. His method of abstracting from nature, as well as his empathy with it, had counterparts in the indigenous religion of Japan, Shinto, and in the Japanese artist's approach to design. In Japan that manner of problem solving or abstracting was built upon centuries of tradition and culture. Having been introduced to similar ideas through the lessons of the Froebel blocks and through the *Beaux Arts* methods of Sullivan,<sup>3</sup> Wright was attracted to Japanese art where the abstraction of the essence of natural form was the traditional approach.

Wright made a clear distinction between the influence of the prints and the influence of Japanese buildings on his own work. Although he credited the prints with teaching him about design and structure, he stated that he knew nothing of Japanese architecture before he visited Japan the first time. This statement is a puzzling one to students of his design, because Wright's first visit to Japan was during 1905 when the Prairie style was already well-developed. This statement can be easily dismissed as another ex-

ample of Wright's usual refusal to acknowledge any outside inspiration. Or, it can be taken as a sincerely felt statement meaning that the full impact of Japanese architecture struck him when he visited Japan and saw the buildings in the context of Japanese civilization, which in 1905 was only beginning to break from traditional patterns. It is true that the beauty and complexity, as well as the extensiveness and variety of Japanese architecture, could not be ascertained from pictures available at that time nor from the few examples of authentic Japanese buildings which Wright saw in the context of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

<sup>1</sup>Japanese themes in Wright's work during the Prairie period were first discussed in Grant Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 34-41.

<sup>2</sup>*Origami* is the Japanese art of folding paper in a variety of designs. Traditionally, the paper should not be torn or cut because the *kami* (spirit of nature) resides within, and it should not be thus torn apart. Constructionally, the image is one of a continuous unified fabric.

Wright's use of the interestingly angled roof forms sometimes seems to imitate the potentials of the *origami* process. This feature is most evident in certain buildings of the 1950s—the Beth Shalom Synagogue, the George Ablin House, and the Don Stromquist House—although experimentation with the complexities of pitch and intersection of angles is exhibited in Wright's early work, such as the beamed ceiling in the living area of the Heurtley House of 1902.

<sup>3</sup>Willard Connolly writes that "Yet, from Sullivan, Wright had already absorbed the best of the *Beaux Arts* if unwittingly." See, *In Louis Sullivan as He Lived: the Shaping of American Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), p. 202.

Greater detail is provided concerning the methodology which Sullivan used in Paul Sprague, *The Drawings of Louis Henry Sullivan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 11.



A factor which is often overlooked in assessing Wright's adoption of Japanese themes in architecture is that of the social interests of the time: there was a general high interest in all things Oriental, and especially Japanese, on the part of fashionable and educated people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This was true of Wright's friends and clients, as well as of Americans in other parts of the country. In *The Japanese Influence in America*,<sup>4</sup> Clay Lancaster published numerous illustrations of late nineteenth and twentieth century buildings of Japanese inspiration. A few of these designs were never built. Of those which were, many no longer stand. Some have disappeared through neglect and the attrition of time, but many of the most authentic representations of Japanese styled buildings were deliberately destroyed in the fervor of anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II. The intervening period of anti-Japanese opinion also makes it difficult to remember that in the early decades of the twentieth century Japanese culture had a great fascination for Americans, especially for those who were interested in the arts and who lived in the larger centers of culture.

Today the Japanese effects in building design from this period remain most prominently in the works of Wright, other Prairie school architects, and Greene and Greene in California. Few other Japanese-inspired buildings of the date remain. Since architectural and interior design preferences have changed many times since 1900, it is with surprise that today's students of the history of American architecture note the important role that Japanese themes played in the fashionable architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This interest was notable in Philadelphia and Boston as early as the 1870s and in Chicago in the 1890s.

Such Japanese themes, affecting the architectural world and capturing the imagination of the public, were derived from a number of sources: from Art Nouveau which had already fully absorbed Japanese ideas, from Anglo-Japanese design, from the English and American Arts and Crafts movements, and also from American contact and trade with Japan which had been extensive since the 1870s. In 1885, Dr. Edward S. Morse wrote:

Within twenty years there has gradually appeared in our country a variety of Japanese objects conspicuous for their novelty and beauty,—lacquers, pottery and porcelain, forms in wood and metal... We found it difficult to formulate the principles upon which such art was based, and yet were compelled to recognize its merit.<sup>5</sup>

He continued:

The Japanese exhibit at the Centennial exposition in Philadelphia came to us as a new revelation; and the charming onslaught of that unrivalled display completed the victory. It was then that the Japanese craze took firm hold of us.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of the Centennial Exposition<sup>7</sup> and other influences from Japan was enormous, but it is interesting to observe how differently various American architects viewed and transformed the essentials of Japanese architecture in their own work. As Vincent Scully has shown, the first observable Japanese influence on American architecture appeared in the shingle style dwellings of the late 1870s.<sup>8</sup> This was specifically in response to the Japanese structures built at the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876. Japanese features are apparent in the open floor plan and textural features, as well as by screen effects in partitioning space.

Following this period of experimentation of the 1870s, and the popularization of the shingle style in the 1880s and 1890s, other more imitative designs based on Japanese models appeared. Some were strictly interpretations of design motifs (abstracted flowers, lattice screening, sharply upturned roofs), exotic additions to the long sequence of revival styles of the nineteenth century. Other interpretations were more basic, as in Wright's work, going to the heart of the design process. During the next decades many architects became interested in Japan. Three prominent examples were Ralph Adams Cram in Boston, Greene and Greene in California, and Frank Lloyd Wright and other Prairie school architects in Chicago and Oak Park.

Cram's Japanese-style designs were less impressive, by some distance, than his early English style churches (designed with Wentworth) or his neo-Gothic designs (with Goodhue). In his Japanese interests he was stimulated by the museum movement in Boston, where for the first

time in America good Japanese art was being collected on a large scale. His view of Japan was intensely romantic, and the medievalism which still existed in Japan when he visited there in 1898 impressed him greatly, since his interests were in the structure of medieval society as well as in ancient crafts. Among dozens of books and hundreds of articles which Cram authored is a book on Japan, *Impressions of Japanese Architecture*, first published in 1905. Among his numerous articles on the same topic is "Cherries of Ueno" published in *Atlantic* (April, 1900), which clearly exhibits Cram's highly sentimentalized view of Japanese culture.

Stemming from similar sources, the Japanese features in the work of Greene and Greene in California were quite different.<sup>9</sup> In their designs, as in Cram's, features from temple architecture as well as from residential buildings are used. More importantly in the works of Greene and Greene, there is an emphasis on the sculptural effects of the woodwork, often consisting of interlocking pieces. These recall various styles of Japanese bracketing. Greene and Greene acknowledged their debt to Japan. From the outset, one of the Greenes' most "Japanese" buildings was "expressly designed to be somewhat Japanese in feeling, though it cannot be said to conform to Japanese style. . ."<sup>10</sup> Randell L. Makinson wrote about the Gamble House this way:

... Greene and Greene believed that a wooden structure should clearly express the building up of its many separate parts. Joinery and each member are design elements contributing to the enrichment of the structural composition.<sup>11</sup>



Gamble House, Greene and Greene, 1909. Photo courtesy Marvin Rand.



Just as the Ward Willits House in Highland Park, Illinois, was built for a family which later traveled to Japan, so was the Gamble House in California. Construction of the house itself was completed in the summer of 1908. In August of the same year when the Gambles returned from a trip to Japan, the finishing details were put on the building, the Tiffany glass decoration being based on a silk embroidery which Mrs. Gamble had purchased in Kyoto.<sup>12</sup>

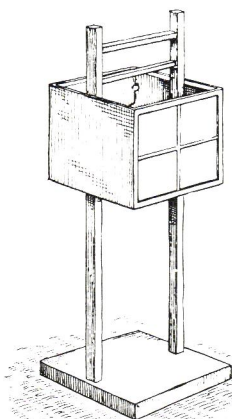
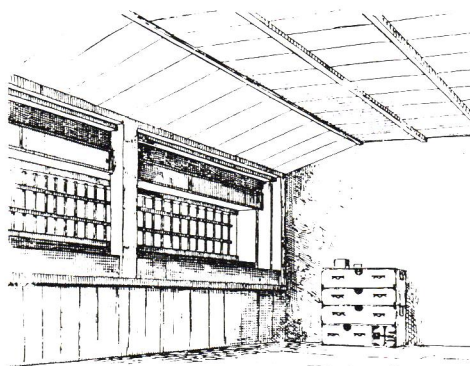
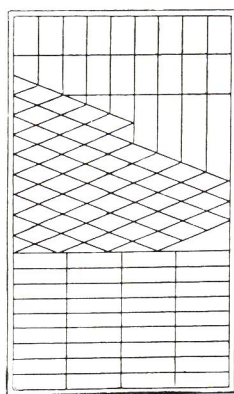
In Chicago, Wright was exposed to Japanese art early in his career (around 1887) through the collection of his first employer, architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee. Louis Sullivan, his second employer, was also a devotee of Japanese art, although this interest is rarely noted. Willard Connely, in his biography on Sullivan, notes that in 1892, when Sullivan moved to Kimbark Avenue, there were a number of books on Japan and Japanese art among his possessions. During this year, he and Frank Lloyd Wright attended auctions together, and Sullivan was at that time enlarging his collection of art, especially in the areas of Chinese ceramics, Persian rugs and Indian statuettes.<sup>13</sup>

During this time Wright probably became acquainted with an important book on Japanese architecture, Edward Morse's *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, originally published in Boston in 1886. Wright's acquaintance with this book might be speculative, if it were not for the fact that the edition was very popular, and went through a second printing in 1887. More importantly, *American Architect* published a review of the book with extensive excerpts and illustrations in the January 2, 1886, issue. Edward S. Morse, the author, was a native of Salem, Massachusetts. As early as 1881 he was a lecturer on Japanese art, and it was he who collected the extensive Japanese pottery collection for the Peabody Museum, the first of its kind in the United States. His *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* is the only book in English from this date which features the Japanese home rather than the more formal and elaborate temples and palaces. It remains a classic in the field and is profusely illustrated with the author's drawings.

A glance through the pages of *Japanese Homes* reveals numerous details which have counterparts in Prairie School architecture. Features emphasized in the ordi-

nary Japanese dwelling were the direct placement of the Japanese house on the ground, its light timber construction, the division of space by opaque screens along with outer walls consisting of sliding doors, opening up to nature, making the interior and exterior continuous. The modest drawings show, through shading, the textured aspect of the simple settings.

As evidenced by the collecting interests of Silsbee and Sullivan, the taste for Japanese art moved westward from Philadelphia after the Centennial. The rage for Japanese things was evident in the suburbs of Chicago, too. Even before



Illustrations from *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, drawn by Edward S. Morse.

Wright built his home in Oak Park, activities with Japanese themes began to appear on the society pages of the local papers. One of the earliest appeared in the *Oak Park Reporter*, December 16, 1887, where it was announced there that "the ladies of the Methodist Evangelical Church will give a Japanese Fair and Entertainment in the church parlors this Friday evening."

When the Columbian Exposition opened in 1893 some of the most intense public curiosity was focused on the Japanese exhibits, as it had been in Philadelphia in 1876. With Japanese decorative arts and their western derivatives already in fashion, the public was prepared to enjoy the exotic Japanese architecture of the *Ho-o-den* (Phoenix Hall) and the Japanese tea house.

In 1892 and 1893 when these two buildings were being assembled on the "Wooded Isle" of the fairgrounds by workmen brought from Japan, the activity was covered with great interest by the press. The methods of construction and the tools, as well as the structures themselves, caused much comment. These were all described and illustrated with drawings in the papers. During the period of construction in 1892, reports were carried in the *Daily News* and in Wright's hometown newspapers, the *Oak Park Reporter*, where an extensively illustrated story appeared December 16, 1892.

<sup>4</sup>See Clay Lancaster, *The Japanese Influence in America* (New York: Walton H. Rawls, 1963).

<sup>5</sup>Edward S. Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972), p. xxxv.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>7</sup>It is even possible that the precocious Frank Lloyd Wright observed the Japanese buildings at the Centennial Exposition. In Robert C. Twombly, *Frank Lloyd Wright, An Interpretive Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 15), the visit to the Centennial Exposition is described as a "family excursion." One can be almost certain that the young Wright, destined since before birth to be an architect, would have viewed this building complex and its adjacent exhibits with curiosity; the impact from that time cannot be determined, however. It should be reiterated here that Wright was born in 1867 rather than 1869 as some earlier publications state, and that he was about nine years old when he visited the Centennial.

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of this entire area, see Vincent J. Scully, Jr., *The Stick Style and the Shingle Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

<sup>9</sup>See Randell L. Makinson, "Greene and Greene: the Gamble House," *Prairie School Review*, Vol. V, No. 4 (Fourth quarter, 1968), pp. 5-24.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup>Connely, *Louis Sullivan as He Lived*, p. 152.

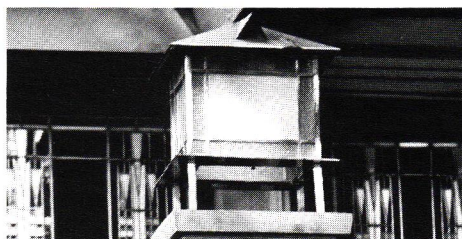


At the time of the Exposition, articles on Japanese culture appeared in the Oak Park papers, as well as in the Chicago papers, with some frequency. Along with the Columbian Exposition, the World's Congress of Religions (which opened at the Art Institute on September 11, 1893) was being held in Chicago.<sup>14</sup> This was an enormous gathering where almost half of the scholarly papers read were devoted to some aspect of Asian religion. These topics turned up as lectures on the local circuit or as subjects for newspaper articles. Perhaps such was the inspiration for several articles on Buddhist temples which appeared in the *Oak Park Reporter* in 1893. Meanwhile, one of the most popular entertainments was *The Mikado*. It was performed in both Oak Park and Chicago. Themes for parties were adapted from it.

In the years immediately following the Exposition, Wright's designs showed Japanese features which were suggested by the construction of the fair buildings. Such references are especially apparent in the roof-lines of the Smith House of 1895, and the Hills House, which was designed in 1895 and built in 1906. This is one of several forms of the "floating roof" which Wright developed with broad overhanging eaves. Japanese architecture contains an unending variety of roof shapes, adjusted to building scale and purpose. In Japanese architecture this shaping is structurally based upon various systems of brackets and cantilevers which support it from above.<sup>15</sup> Similar sculptural shapes in Wright's work were achieved by double-hipped structures and later by materials and support structures of twentieth century technology.

In the mid-1890s Wright began to use new details from Japanese architecture in his work, features less subtle than those absorbed through the shingle style. Along with the interest in roof lines was an emphasis on a low building profile and on the massing of irregularly sized rectangular rooms. One of the most obvious details is the use of square lamps which recall Japanese lanterns (as on the Frank Thomas House in Oak Park, 1901). Wright's rectilinear abstraction in window designs can be compared to Oriental lattices, a feature already in use in shingle and Queen Anne style. Such fenestration designs never copy these lattices, but are like them in feeling as they are based on

a similar rectangular format and are composed of similar vertical, diagonal and horizontal divisions.<sup>16</sup> An Oriental effect is achieved masterfully by combining several devices: the "lattice-like" windows built up of lead comes and set in a series,



Entrance lantern, Thomas House, 1901. Photo courtesy Thomas A. Heinz.

a "floating roof," and lantern-like lights. Such evocative ornamental features must have been attractive to clients who may have read in the local papers about Japanese flower arrangements and even about the use of the Japanese floor mat (*tatami*).<sup>17</sup>

Although the Prairie style was developed before Wright's trip to Japan in 1905, his obvious interest in the art of Japan increased during the years immediately following the trip.<sup>18</sup> The following events occurred after the Wrights and the Ward Willits of Highland Park, Illinois, returned from a first trip to Japan.<sup>19</sup> In Oak Park, another client of Wright's showed her Japanese art collection. In the *Oak Park Reporter-Argus* (February 24, 1906) it was reported that "Mrs. H. W. Winslow of River Forest gave a talk on Japanese art in her home, and by way of illustrating it, had an exhibition at the club house of part of her collection of Japanese works, prints and bronze pieces as well as some beautiful pottery."<sup>20</sup>

Just one week later a party was given by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Lloyd Wright, at their home at 620 Forest Ave. This "dime social" was given as a function of the Unity Club (of Unity Temple). The program was a stereopticon lecture on Japan given by a Mr. and Mrs. Booth. This was followed by a short musical program and tea was served by young ladies in Japanese costume.<sup>20</sup>

This event was almost exactly contemporaneous with the exhibit of Wright's print collection at the Art Institute. The exhibit of 213 of Wright's own prints made up the display. The horizontal formats of the Hiroshige landscapes were perfectly

complemented by the Prairie style wooden display structures which Wright built for them. In the forward to the catalog for the exhibit which opened March 21, 1906, Wright wrote this poetic description, "this is no longer the sequestered art of an isolated people, but one of the most valuable contributions ever made to the art of the world."

It was also in 1906 that the Japanese style presentation drawings began to be made by Marion Mahoney Griffin in Wright's studio.<sup>21</sup> It was during this time, also, that changes were made in the design of the hanging lamps in Unity Temple. In the design explanation, *The New Edifice of Unity Church*, which was prepared in June 1906 by Wright and the minister, Rev. Jonhnot, square lamps are shown bracketed to the balconies. By the time of the completion of the building in 1908, hanging lamps, which give a much more Oriental feel to the room, had been adopted.

In *An Autobiography*, Wright wrote about these years:

During my later years at the Oak Park workshop, Japanese prints had intrigued

<sup>14</sup> *The World's Congress of Religions* (Chicago, 1893, no publishing house credited). Sidelights of interest to students of Wright are that this book shows the active participation of his minister, Reverend August Chapin (for the Unitarians), and his uncle, Reverend Jenkin Lloyd-Jones (for the Universalists). Lloyd-Jones is pictured in a full-page plate on page 1101.

<sup>15</sup> Descriptions of Japanese roof types and a discussion of construction principles can be found in Arthur Drexler, *The Architecture of Japan* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> To compare Wright's window designs with Oriental ones, see Daniel Sheets Dye, *Chinese Lattice Designs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> "Japanese House Mats," a full-page article describing *tatami* for functional use and as a modular measurement, appeared in *Oak Park Reporter*, April 14, 1893.

<sup>18</sup> In the spring of 1981, Wright's son David donated to the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation (Oak Park, Illinois) a formerly unknown album of photographs taken by Wright on his first trip to Japan in 1905. This small, grasscloth-covered album which contains fifty-five views of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, landscaped gardens, roadways, and street scenes, is just one of many examples of Wright's interest in Japanese culture—an interest which predated his trip by many years and which was shared by many friends and clients. It is curious that none of the photos shows Wright and his wife or Mr. and Mrs. Ward Willits, who accompanied them on the trip.

<sup>19</sup> The Willits House (Highland Park, Illinois, 1902) is one which was influenced by the plan of the *Ho-o-den* of the Columbian Exposition of 1893.

<sup>20</sup> The invitation is to be found in a scrapbook in the Unity Temple archives located in the Oak Park Public Library, Oak Park, Illinois.

<sup>21</sup> See David T. Van Zanten, "The Early Work of Marion Mahoney Griffin," *Prairie School Review*, Vol. III, No. 2 (Second quarter, 1966), pp. 5-23.



me and taught me much. The elimination of the insignificant, a process of simplification in art in which I was myself already engaged, beginning with my twenty-third year, found much collateral evidence in the print. And ever since I discovered the print Japan had appealed to me as the most romantic, artistic, nature-inspired country on earth. Later I found that Japanese art and architecture really did have organic character. Their art was nearer to the earth and a more indigenous product of native conditions of life and work, therefore more nearly modern as I saw it, than any European civilization alive or dead.<sup>22</sup>

The fashionableness of Japanese art for this period can hardly be overstated. However, for artists and intellectuals the concerns about Japanese art and culture were not entirely superficial, limited to themes for social gatherings. In the above passage it can be seen that Wright sensed the mystical and philosophical importance of Japanese art and architecture. These thoughts are insistently clear in his 1928 lectures on the nature of materials.

The relationship between Oriental mysticism and fine craftsmanship is one which characterized the entire Arts and Crafts movement in American and in Great Britain. It was discussed in England by

the Arts and Crafts designer, William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931), founder of the Art Worker's Guild in London in 1883, in his book *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* published in 1891.<sup>23</sup> In this discussion, he emphasized the universal symbolism of form. His description of the mystical properties of the square and the cube are similar to the governing principle of Wright's later design for Unity Temple. Lethaby's work discusses Orientalism not in terms of motif or style, but in reference to the philosophy of pure form. The central idea is that forms grow from the philosophical or religious meanings which they represent.

It is not known whether Wright knew Lethaby's book, although he probably did, since Lethaby was such an important figure in the Arts and Crafts movement (he was also the biographer of Philip Webb).<sup>24</sup> However, it is not of great importance to know whether Wright was acquainted with this particular book since the ideas expressed there are ones which were already popular among architects and artists associated with the Arts and Crafts movement in America and England as early as the 1880s.

Wright's own most expressive statement concerning his understanding of the religious feeling with which the Japanese

artist could imbue his architecture is the following words from the lectures on the nature of materials, published in *Architectural Record*, May, 1928:

Wood is universally beautiful to man. . . and yet, passing by the primitive uses of wood, getting to higher civilization, the Japanese have never outraged wood in their art or their craft. Japan's primitive religion, Shinto, with its "be clean" ideal found in wood ideal material and gave it ideal use in that master piece of architecture, the Japanese dwelling. . .<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p. 194. Earlier he used much the same language in *The Japanese Print: An Interpretation* (Chicago: The Ralph Fletcher Seymour Co., 1912).

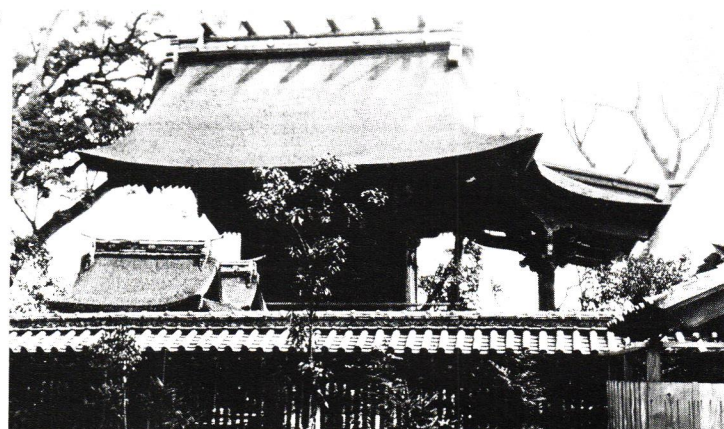
<sup>23</sup> Lethaby's greatest emphasis is on Indian rather than Japanese art and philosophy. It could be suggested that the Orientalism of Unity Temple, with the exception of details such as the lamps, is also more similar to Indian Orientalism, especially in the protracted entryway to the temple area. This ritual resembles the Hindu circumambulation of the inner sanctum of a shrine. See William Richard Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (New York: George Braziller, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> Wright's acquaintance with the English Arts and Crafts movement was first-hand, as H. Allen Brooks relates in *The Prairie School, Frank Lloyd Wright and his Midwest Contemporaries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 18. C. R. Ashbee met Wright in 1898 when he visited Chicago and addressed ten different gatherings. As a result of this friendship, Ashbee wrote the forward for *Ausgeführte Bauten* in 1911.

<sup>25</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture: the Meaning of Materials," *Architectural Record*, LXIII (May, 1928).



1. East elevation, Hills House. Photo courtesy William Gray Purcell. Photos 2, 3 and 4 were taken by Wright himself during his trip to Japan in 1905. All photos courtesy the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation. 2. Stone lanterns line the outer precincts of a Shinto shrine. 3. Shinto shrine with the sacred katsuogi (logs) and chigi (crossed emblem) of the religion. The distinctive Irimoya roof is emphasized in Wright's photograph. 4. A building on the grounds of the Katsura Palace, Kyoto.





# FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S LAKE GENEVA HOTEL

by Patrick J. Meehan

*This article contains the preliminary findings of Mr. Meehan's research into the Lake Geneva Hotel. Upon completing his work, he plans a major book on the building. Anyone with additional information or photos of the hotel is urged to contact Mr. Meehan.*

The Lake Geneva Hotel for Arthur L. Richards at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, was one of Frank Lloyd Wright's largest designs for the year 1911 following his return from Fiesole, Italy, upon completing work on the famous Wasmuth editions.<sup>1</sup> However, specifics relating to the building are not well known since published material on it has been very limited. The first published drawings of the building appeared in the 1913 *Book of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Exhibition of the Chicago Architectural Club*. A review of this exhibition appeared in the June 1913 issue of *Architectural Record*<sup>2</sup> in which the reviewer commented only once on Wright's designs appearing in the exhibition: "Many warehouses and merchantile buildings are shown. . . A hotel at Madison, Wisconsin by Frank Lloyd Wright and a more informal hotel at Lake Geneva by the same architect are typical of his peculiar genius." The review article contained only early exterior perspective rendering of the Lake Geneva Hotel. The reviewer further commented on the exhibition and said that "Chicago suffers by comparison with work done elsewhere. There is no excuse in this day and age for poor classic design. . . ." Since that time, however no substantive account of the Lake Geneva Hotel has been published<sup>3</sup> other than brief articles which appeared in local newspapers.

At the time of its construction, there were only two other hotels in Lake Geneva—the Hotel Florence and the Hotel Denison. Both were old and did not offer the luxury promised by the proposed Wright design.

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The site for the Lake Geneva Hotel originally consisted of about 54,850 square feet, or about 1.258 acres, of land excluding the southerly access strip to the lagoon and outlet. It was formerly occupied by an earlier hotel called the Whiting House, which had been destroyed by fire in 1894.

Planning for the building of the Lake Geneva Hotel began in the summer of 1910 when John J. Williams, a businessman who had recently developed a hotel at Waukesha, Wisconsin, met with two Lake Geneva area businessmen. The result was Williams' association with Arthur L. Richards, president of the Artistic Building Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.<sup>4</sup> The Artistic Building Company, formed by Richards in 1906, became the official developer of the Lake Geneva Hotel.

It was reported that "Mr. Richards went to Europe during the winter to study the noted watering places of the continent. . ."<sup>5</sup> in late 1910 or early 1911. Perhaps it was this trip which introduced him to Wright's work, since the famous Wasmuth portfolio had just been published abroad at that time. I have been unable to uncover any data on Wright's initial contact with either Arthur Richards or John Williams. The earliest known plans of the Lake Geneva Hotel are dated August, 1911. However, Wright may have prepared earlier preliminary drawings for the building in the spring of 1911. On April 25, 1911, W. W. Watson, former manager of the razed Whiting House, presented plans for the Lake Geneva Hotel at the office of the *Lake Geneva News* to over twenty businessmen and the press. "The proposition was to erect a hotel with about sixty sleeping rooms, which thoroughly furnished would cost about \$60,000. . . the plans provided for additions which would give a 200 room house."<sup>6</sup> Another report of this presentation stated that the hotel was "well worthy of consideration. . . the advent of the automobile has revolutionized travel and made hotels of this character a practical necessity in any town which pretends to cater to the traveling public who seek rest and recreation at resorts. . ."<sup>7</sup> The Lake Geneva Hotel Company was formed in August, 1911, prior to construction of the building.<sup>8</sup> The company was to assume the mortgage as owner and manager of the property after the building's construction.

As stated earlier, Wright's involvement with Arthur Richards and his various companies is not precisely known. In a three-page letter dated September 10, 1911,<sup>9</sup> to Francis C. Sullivan, a Canadian architect and close friend, Wright stated that he had been on the "war path" with the Arthur L. Richards Company (i.e., Artistic Building Company) since about August of 1911. During this period Frank Lloyd Wright had his son Lloyd working with him both at Taliesin in Spring Green and at his Chicago office. He had sent Lloyd to Milwaukee to look into the matter of the Richards company and had decided not to work with the company any further. Wright had submitted a plan for re-design, but the company had "rejected it so I rejected them." Wright went on to say that he had the Richards company "enjoined by the courts—from using the plans and their material tied up by garnishee." Unfortunately, nowhere in this letter does Wright mention any specific project he was working on with Richards; however, I assume that it was the Lake Geneva Hotel.

The construction of the hotel was to be financed through the sale of \$50,000 of stock in the Lake Geneva Hotel Company

<sup>1</sup> Wright returned to the United States from Fiesole subsequent to July 24, 1910, as indicated by Wright's letter to Charles Robert Ashbee in Alan Crawford's "Ten Letters from Frank Lloyd Wright to Charles Robert Ashbee," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain*, Vol. 13, 1970, pp. 64-76.

<sup>2</sup> See Roy C. Lippencott, "The Chicago Architectural Club—Notes on the 26th Annual Exhibition," *Architectural Record*, Vol. 33, June 1913, pp. 567-573.

<sup>3</sup> This is affirmed by Robert L. Sweeney, *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Annotated Bibliography* (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, Inc., 1978).

<sup>4</sup> "Raised the Money—Lake Geneva Assured a First Class Hotel—Good Liberal Blocks of Stock Taken by Our People—Public Spirit Prevalent—All Pull Together—Excellent Work by John J. Williams in Interesting Our Citizens," *The Herald* (Lake Geneva, Wi.), December 8, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> "The Lake Geneva Hotel Opens Today," *The Lake Geneva News* (Lake Geneva, Wi.), August 1, 1912, p. 1.

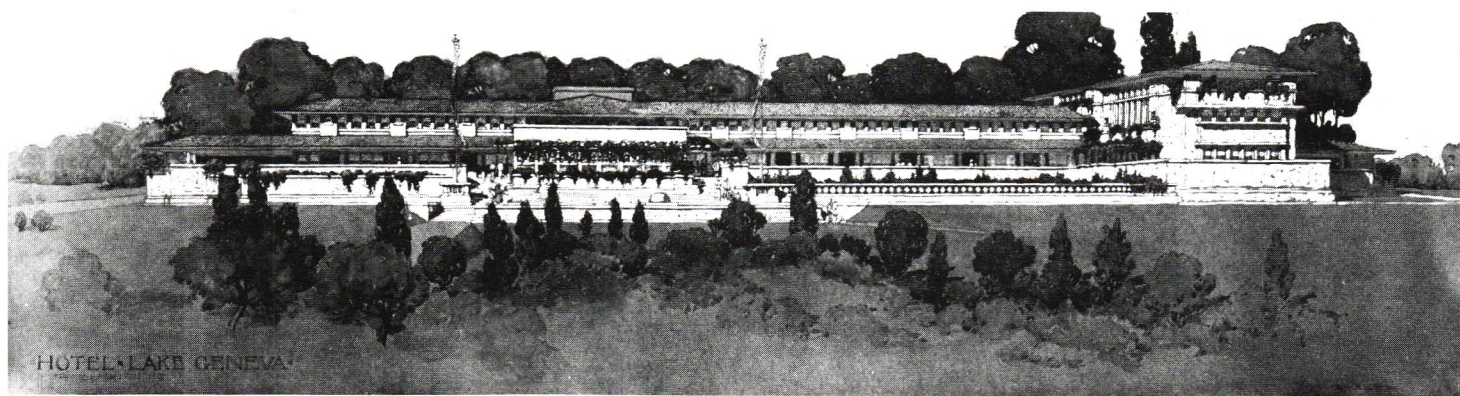
<sup>6</sup> "A Good Proposition—W. W. Watson Talks Hotel to the Citizens of Lake Geneva—Explains an Architect's Plans," *The Herald*, April 28, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> "To Build Hotel—Interesting Meeting of Subscribers to Hotel Proposition Held at News Office Tuesday Night—W. W. Watson Presents Plans," *The Lake Geneva News*, April 27, 1911, p. 1.

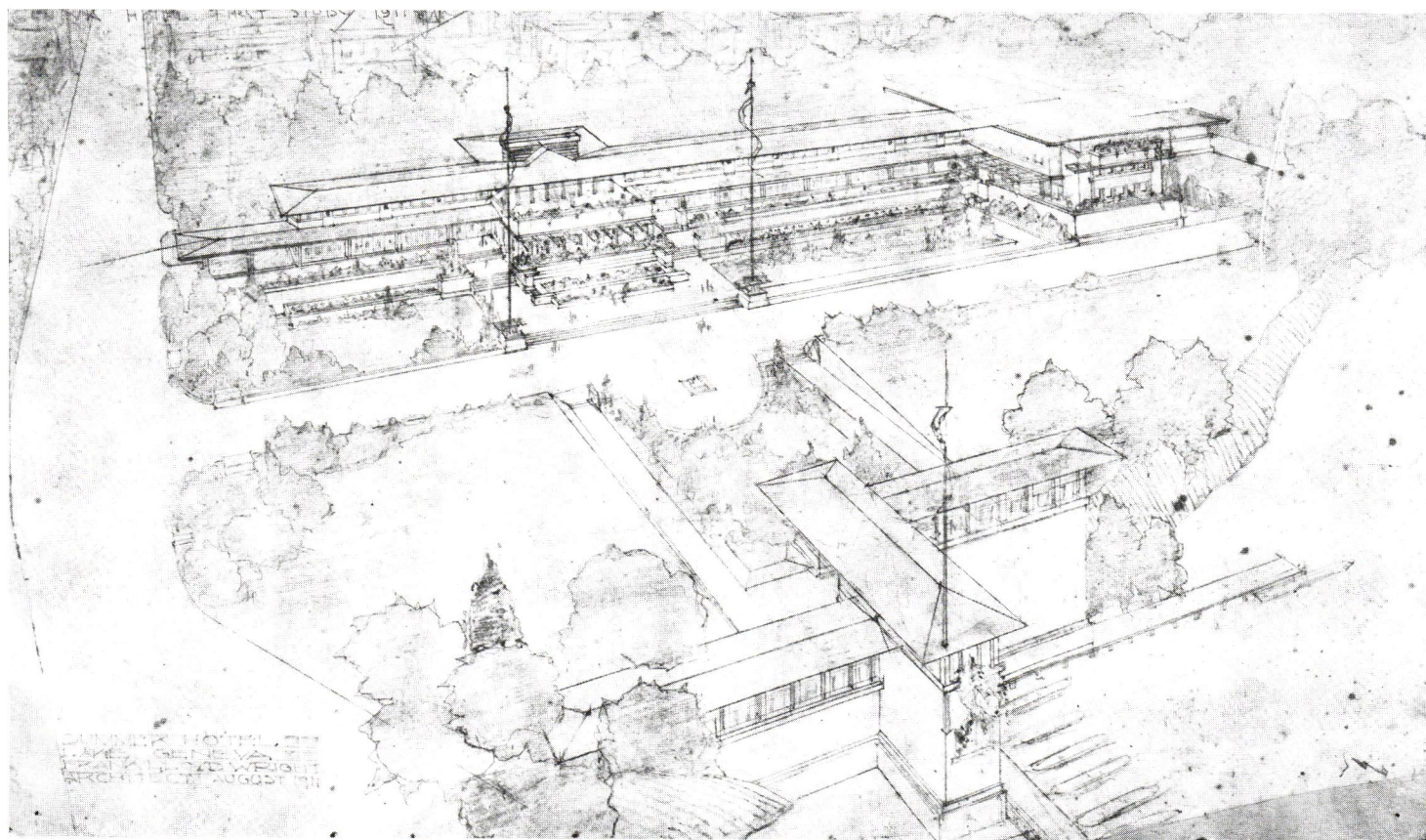
<sup>8</sup> Corporation File L-975 in the Archives and Manuscripts Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison, Wisconsin.

<sup>9</sup> This letter is housed in Folder 14 of the John Lloyd Wright Collection of Columbia University's Avery Architectural Library. I am grateful to Adolf K. Placzek, Avery Architectural Librarian Emeritus, for his assistance with this collection.





*This watercolor rendering of the Lake Geneva Hotel appeared in the 1913 exhibition catalogue of the Chicago Architectural Club. Photo by P. Richard Ellis, courtesy Milwaukee Art Center.*



*Dated August, 1911, this is the earliest known rendering of the Lake Geneva Hotel. Photo courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.*



*Photo of the hotel taken in 1967 by Richard Nickel.*





*The photos on this and the opposite page were taken in 1967 by Richard Nickel for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).*



to citizens of the Lake Geneva area. Newspaper reports at the time were very optimistic about the hotel venture and rallied for the financial support of the development through citizen purchases of the stock. In November, 1911, the proposed design of the structure was described as 360 feet long with ninety rooms (apparently enlarged from the 60-room plan mentioned in the April newspaper article) and a three story residential section of suites at one end. A local newspaper remarked, "Beauty of design was the first thing considered. Since so much beauty surrounds it in the palatial homes around the lake, and that it might harmonize with its surroundings, Frank Lloyd Wright, an architect of national, and even international reputation was engaged to design it. . . plans have already been suggested to remodel the present coal shed and ticket offices on the boat landing in conformity with the general scheme of the hotel proper."<sup>10</sup> the hotel proper."<sup>10</sup> By early December, John Williams had sold seven \$1000 subscriptions of hotel stock, fourteen \$500 subscriptions, eighteen at \$250, three at \$200, and sixty at \$100, totaling \$25,100 in one month of sale. This was an adequate amount of stock to begin the project.<sup>11</sup>

On December 27, 1911, the contract documents, including the plans and associated specifications for the hotel, were released for "inspection by tradesmen in the various lines of construction. . . ."<sup>12</sup> And, it was announced in late April, 1912, that the construction of the hotel would begin at once.<sup>13</sup> Ground-breaking was on May 8, 1912, by Leafgreen Construction Company of Chicago, the general contractors.<sup>14</sup>

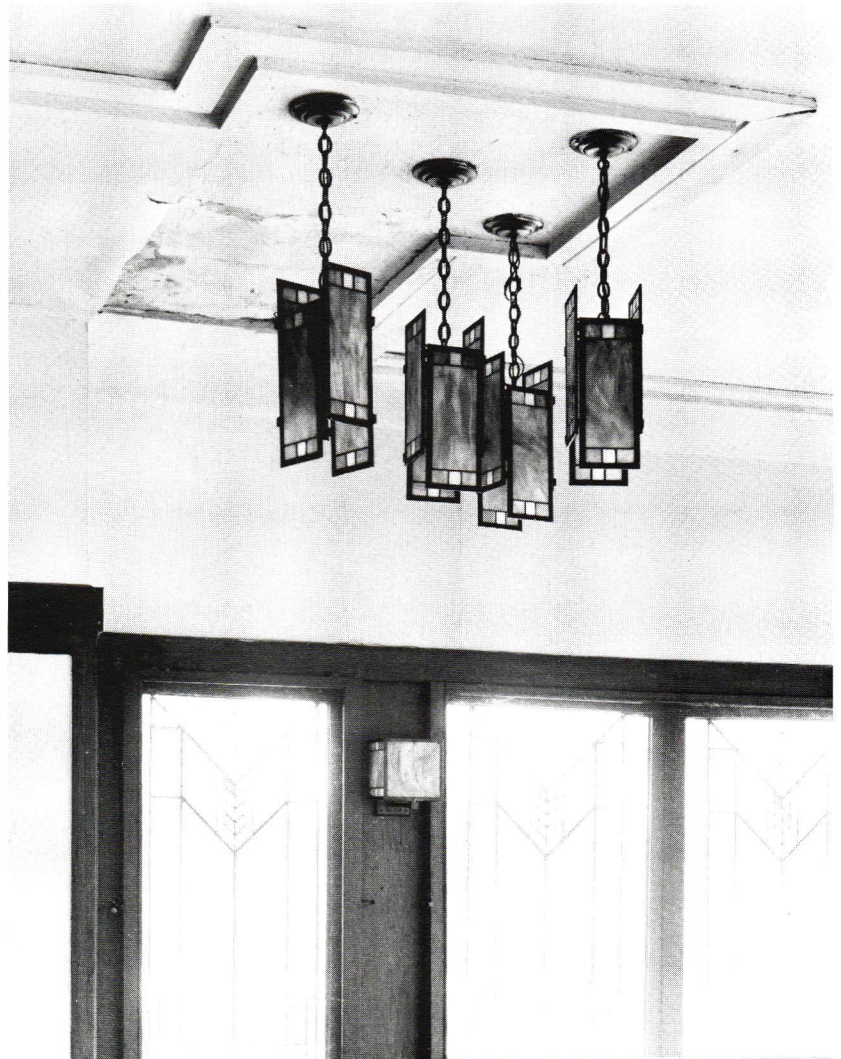
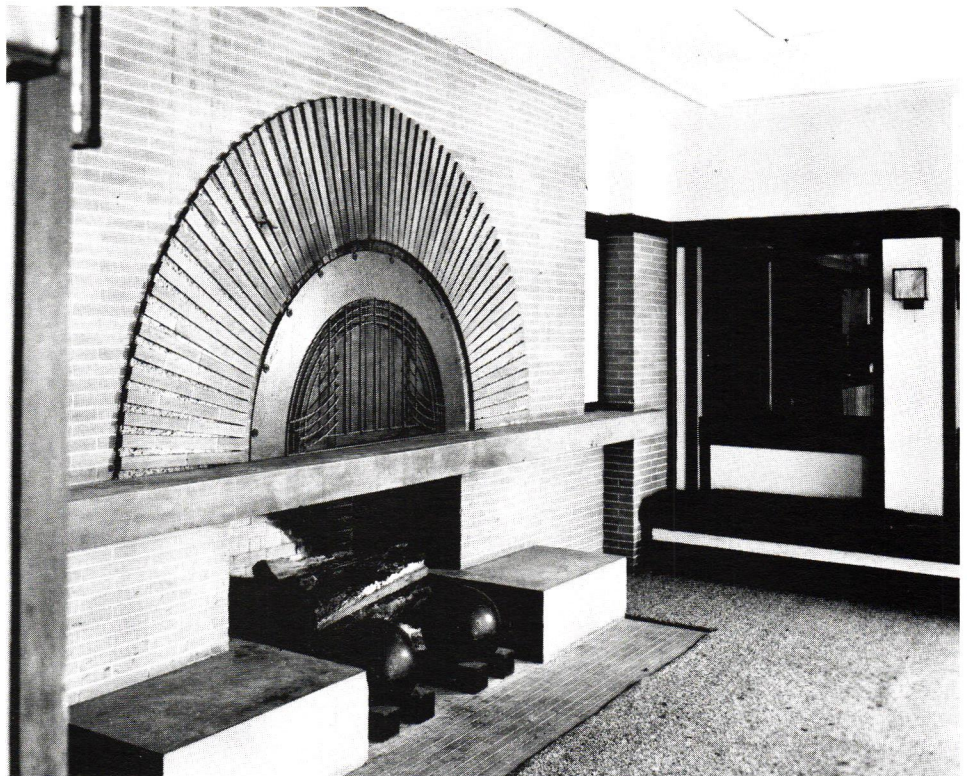
<sup>10</sup>"Lake Geneva's Proposed New Club House Hotel," *The Lake Geneva News*, November 9, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>"Raised the Money—Lake Geneva Assured a First Class Hotel—Good Liberal Blocks of Stock Taken by Our People—Public Spirit Prevalent—All Pull Together—Excellent Work by John J. Williams in Interesting Our Citizens," *The Herald*, December 8, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>"Hotel Plans Discussed—Specifications Left Here for Inspection by Tradesmen," *The Lake Geneva News*, December 28, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>"Work to Begin at Once—Hotel Company and Building Company Agree on Details and Building Will Be Pushed to Full Capacity," *The Lake Geneva News*, May 2, 1912, pp. 1 and 4.

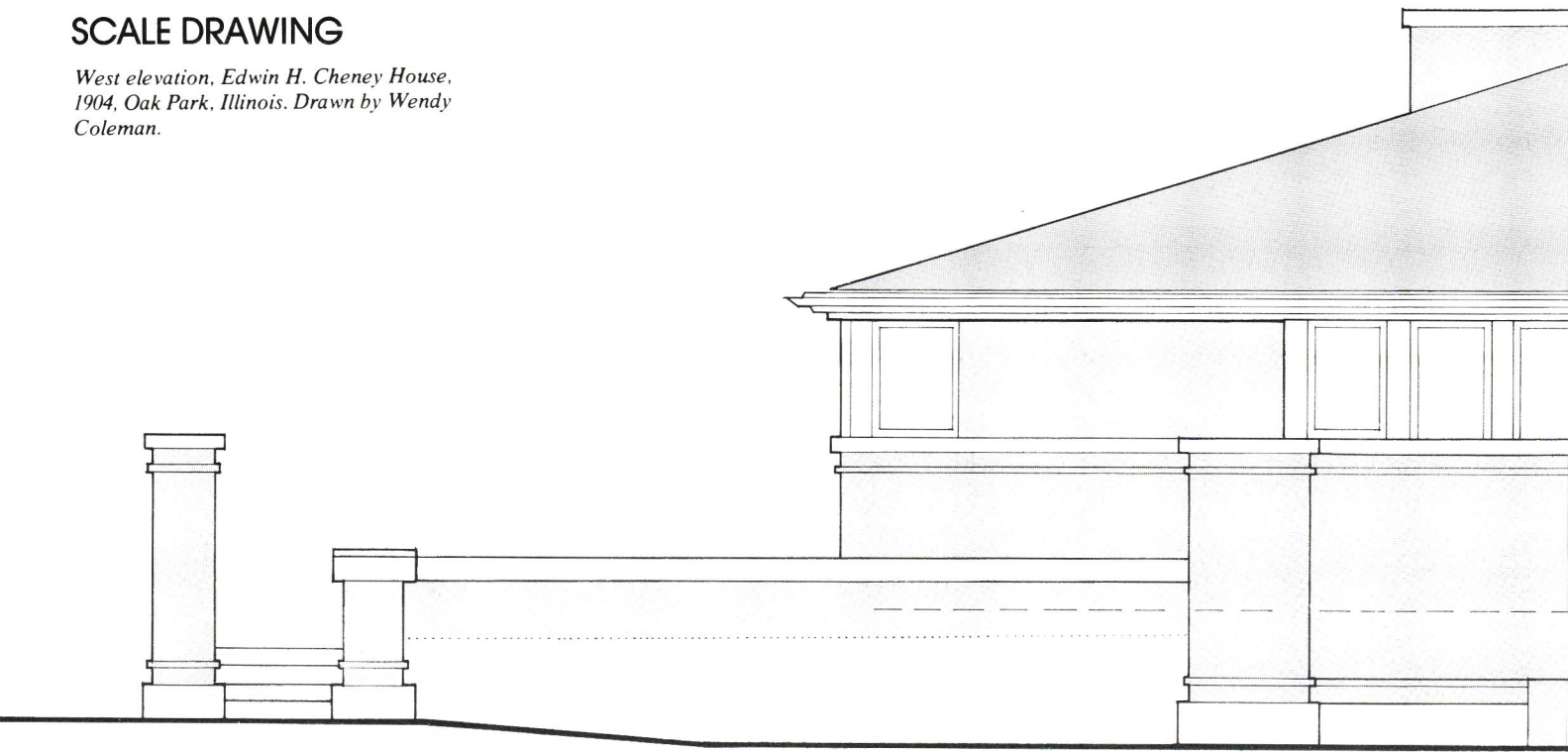
<sup>14</sup>"The Ground Is Broken—Leafgreen Construction Company Commenced Work On New Hotel Tuesday Morning—Will Rush Work to Limit," *The Lake Geneva News*, May 9, 1912, p. 1.





## SCALE DRAWING

West elevation, Edwin H. Cheney House,  
1904, Oak Park, Illinois. Drawn by Wendy  
Coleman.



### ▪ WEST ELEVATION ▪

Then began a series of changes: "the original proposition as suggested by Mr. Williams at the outset has been changed somewhat because of the inability to dispose of as large a block of stock to outside parties as he had thought."<sup>15</sup> Several weeks later it was reported that "...some changes have been made in the plans to correspond with suggestions made by the committee. The entire basement has been excavated and instead of piers under the outer walls of the eastern part of the building, a solid concrete wall has been put in under the structure. Some changes have been made also in regard to the corridors which will improve the convenience of the building when completed."<sup>16</sup> Wright's original design for the eastern portion of the hotel shows a much larger architectural mass than was actually constructed. The changes made to the design of the eastern wing may have resulted when plans to construct a three story residential section of suites were discarded. Even with this alteration in the design of the hotel, it was reported in early July, 1912, that "...nothing has been done which will mar the general artistic effect of the exterior when complete."<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, a debatable issue. It is doubtful whether Wright approved any of the major changes made to his hotel design during its construction

phase, and it has not been determined to what extent, if at all, Wright supervised the construction.

The hotel was scheduled to open on August 1, 1912, with thirty rooms ready for occupancy. The building was reported to cost about \$125,000. It was well received by the public during the first week of operation, and "since the hotel opened it has been filled to full capacity of its finished rooms and on Saturday [August 3, 1912] over fifty applications for rooms had to be turned down, while the restaurant has been serving the limit of diners. . . ."<sup>18</sup> On the first Sunday after the opening, more than 300 guests, principally automobile parties, were at the hotel for luncheon and dinner. At one time 101 "auto machines" were lined up in front of the building.<sup>19</sup> It was obviously a popular new facility.

Following the informal opening of the hotel, work progressed towards the completion at a fast pace. By mid-August of 1912 the work on the terrace and broad steps to the lobby area was well along, and the grading of the remainder of the site began.<sup>20</sup> In late August the finishing work on the hotel interior and the cement work on the terraces on the south

side of the hotel were being pushed to completion.<sup>21</sup> The building was practically finished by early September, with the concrete walks and terraces already in place and the grading of the lawn area underway.<sup>22</sup> The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Lake Geneva Hotel was formally opened on Wednesday, September 11, 1912.

It was demolished in 1970. ■

<sup>15</sup>"Work To Begin At Once—Hotel Company and Building Company Agree On Details and Building Will Be Pushed to Full Capacity," *The Lake Geneva News*, May 2, 1912, pp. 1 and 4.

<sup>16</sup>"Work On the Hotel," *The Lake Geneva News*, May 30, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>"Hotel Building Grows—Contractor Leafgreen Making Wonderful Progress in Construction—Plastering Commenced," *The Lake Geneva News*, July 4, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>"Lake Geneva Hotel—Splendid Club House Now Doing a Good Business Following Opening Last Week—Cuisine is Unsurpassed," *The Lake Geneva News*, August 8, 1912, p. 1.

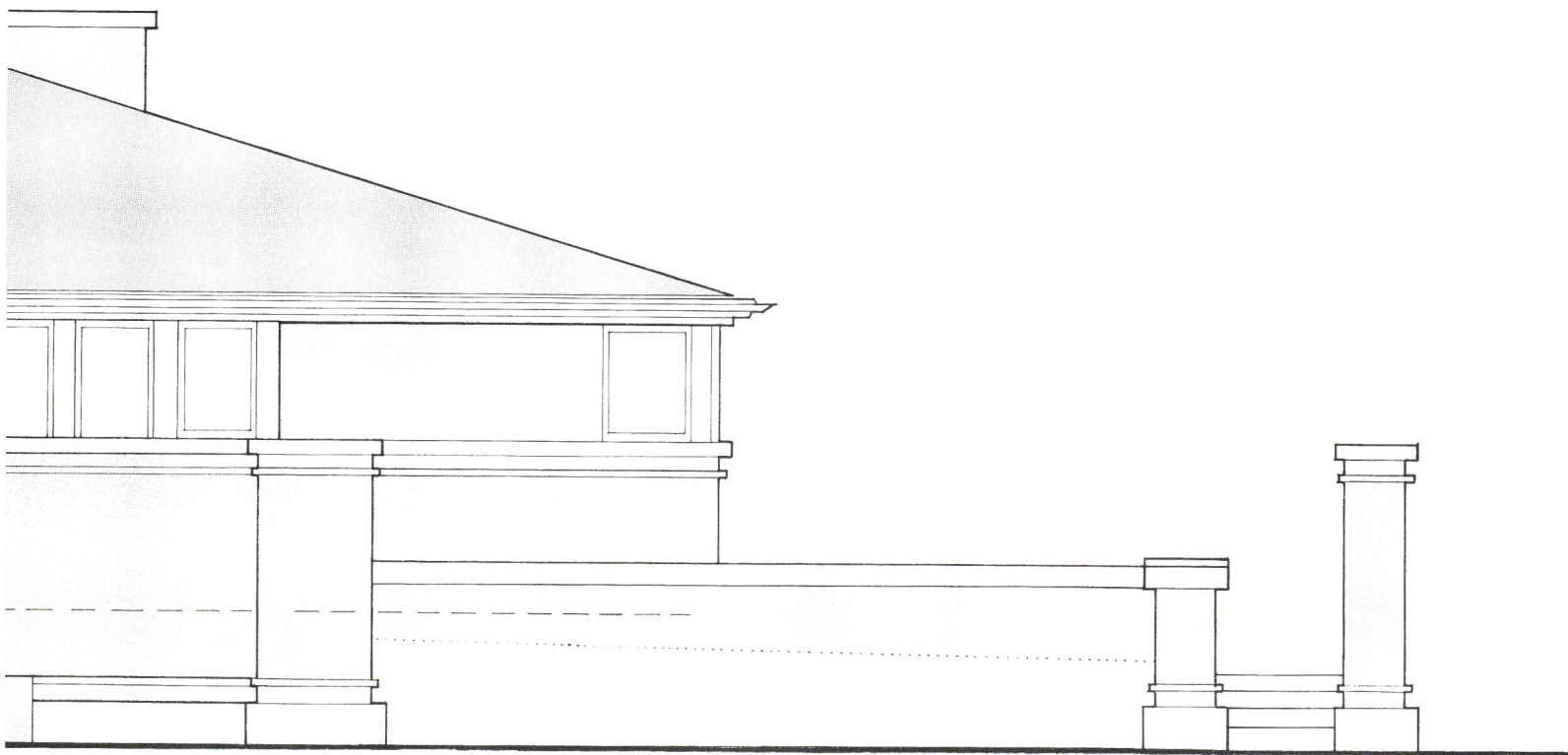
<sup>19</sup>"Strong Commendation—The Hotel Bulletin Publishes Interesting Description of Lake Geneva Hotel—Article Proof of Importance," *The Lake Geneva News*, August 29, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>"Hotel Work Progress—Another Month Will See Building Finished—Patronage Good," *The Lake Geneva News*, August 15, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup>"Terraces Are Being Built—Lake Geneva Hotel Nearing Completion Inside and Out," *The Lake Geneva News*, August 22, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup>"Formal Opening—Lake Geneva Hotel Will Give Invitation Dinner On Wednesday Evening Seven To Ten—Building Practically Done," *The Lake Geneva News*, September 5, 1912, p. 1.





## BLANCHE OSTERTAG: ANOTHER WRIGHT COLLABORATOR

by Jeannine Love

Working in Chicago during the years around the turn of the century, the young artist Blanche Ostertag revealed all the promise of a successful career ahead. Her paintings were exhibited with regularity at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago at the same time that a career in commercial art was gaining momentum. She was a recognized designer of ceramic pieces for the respected Teco pottery works and was building a reputation in collaboration with some of Chicago's top architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright. Art-oriented magazines illustrated her work—paintings, sketches, posters—and offered reproductions to an enthusiastic public via mail orders.

By the time of the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Ostertag's creative efforts had achieved an impressive degree of national acclaim. She was invited to serve on the admissions jury for the exposition in the category of "Watercolor, Pastels and

Lithographs," along with fellow artist-judges Charles C. Curran, Will Low, Charles Dana and Frederick Church.<sup>1</sup> It was an exceptionally enviable position both for an artist and for a woman.

However, these outward indications of success did not guarantee her a lasting place in the story of American art. It seems fair to say that, despite the indicated honors, her work lacked the visual staying power to carry it through the decades of the twentieth century. Yet because of the early acclaim, it is equally interesting to note that by the year 1911 Ostertag had literally disappeared, leaving few clues as to what may have happened to her artistically or personally. Intriguing as the element of mystery may be, here we are more concerned with Ostertag's documented artistic life—her work before 1911—and in her relationship with Wright and other Prairie architects in the design of residential interiors.

Accounts in contemporary periodicals by several authors confirm that Ostertag did indeed create designs for a variety of architectural interior elements for Wright, yet only one piece can be ascribed to the artist with verifiable evidence—the mosaic fireplace design for the Joseph Husser House of 1899. Documentation of this design appears in several sources: an *Exhibition Catalog* of the Chicago Architectural Club,<sup>2</sup> in an article written for *Architectural Review* by Robert Spencer,

and in Ostertag's biographical entries in the *American Art Annual*. Based on close stylistic resemblance, several similar mosaics can also be credited to her hand, as well as painted overmantel panels which her biographer, Isabel McDougall, describes. Whether these objects represent the total scope of Ostertag's collaborative efforts with Wright is not known. It is hoped that additional evidence may surface with time.

Before dealing with the designs, it might be instructive to take a closer look at Blanche Ostertag herself and the facts that have been related about her. The few known facts about her life come from two articles written by Isabel McDougall. One article was published in 1898 in the Chicago-based art magazine, *Brush and Pencil*, while the other appeared in the serial *The Book Buyer* in 1902. Omitting dates or statistics of any kind, the author states only that Ostertag was born in St. Louis of French and German parentage.

McDougall reveals more information about the artist's education. Ostertag's earliest training took place at the St. Louis Art Museum, followed by four years of study in Paris at the academies Julien and

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<sup>1</sup>William D. Gates, "Fine and Applied Arts at St. Louis," *Brush and Pencil*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (October, 1903), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Grant Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910: The First Golden Age* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Company, 1958), p. 144, note 2.



Delecluse. From McDougall's account it is not really clear whether Ostertag was enrolled in a formal course of study abroad, or simply chose to absorb instruction second hand through the studio atmosphere. At some point in her training, Ostertag benefited from an association with Jules Guerin<sup>3</sup> who permitted the younger artist to observe him at work in his studio. Guerin also offered criticisms of her work.

The author McDougall describes Ostertag's feeling toward formalized study negatively, confiding that "masters only serve to keep one within certain known boundaries."<sup>4</sup> In this attitude, Ostertag's ideas on education were not unlike those of Wright himself.

Whatever the tenor of her study may have been, McDougall relates an enthusiastic response to Ostertag's student work in Paris. After only two years of study Ostertag was determined to enter the annual salon exhibits. McDougall narrates in an amusing anecdote how Ostertag's framemaker sent some of her work to the less respected Champs Elysee exhibit by mistake. Ostertag had previously decided to test her work in the prestigious Champs de Mars, where the more progressive artists exhibited. Due to this misunderstanding on the part of the framemaker, her paintings were sent to both exhibits and accepted by their respective juries. Although this situation elated the artist, it broke an unwritten rule that an artist must choose between the two salons and not submit to both. Ostertag had little problem resolving the dilemma. Resourcefully, she listed herself in one catalog as "B. Ostertag, English," and in the other as Blanche Ostertag, American." Unfortunately, the accepted works of art are not described or otherwise identified by McDougall, so we have little idea of the style of work Ostertag was producing during those student days in Paris. The artist's entry to the Champs de Mars in the following year is identified only as a pastel of a woman. This entry also was accepted and was exhibited later in Chicago.

Returning from Europe in 1896, Ostertag opened a studio in Chicago in the Atheneum Building.<sup>5</sup> Why she chose Chicago to inaugurate her career as an independent artist is not fully explained.

It may have been the growing attraction of the city as an art center after the success of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, which served to concentrate artists and craftsmen of all kinds within this midwestern port city. At any rate, the choice was a fortunate one for the young artist.

The earlier Paris successes spilled over into the Chicago art world. By 1898 Ostertag was listed as an artist and illustrator by the *American Art Annual*, an honor accorded only recognized professionals. Her sketches and drawings consistently illustrated the pages of *Brush and Pencil*, *Country Life in America*, and other periodicals of the art and literary world. Her paintings were eagerly awaited by both viewers and critics, causing the reviewer Arthur Merritt to disappointedly report the omission of one of "the best known artists in Chicago," when Ostertag failed to enter the 1902 Chicago Artist's Exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

In subject matter Ostertag experimented with the most popular idioms of the day—portraits, French boulevard scenes, Dutch genre pictures—in oil and pastels, as well as the more innovative monotype technique. The architect Irving Pond owned one of the little French street scenes, and Hamilton McCormick, an influential Chicagoan, was reported to have purchased one of her pastels. That her work on display at the Art Institute exhibitions also attracted Wright's attention is possible, but largely conjecture.

Despite the critical recognition given her work, Ostertag soon turned to art with more commercial emphasis. Artists of the early part of the century often combined careers in commercial art along with the "fine arts," and Ostertag was no exception. A highly literate and educated public had increased the demand for magazines and printed materials, and in the process new opportunities emerged for artists and their work. McDougall reviews the artist's first work in this area, a group of illustrations for calendar designs: "Nothing more than twelve small designs. . . about the size, shape, and style of tiles, but not too desperately Walter Crane-y."<sup>7</sup> The writer's reference to Walter Crane recalls the popularity of his style in illustration art which was widely imitated by other artists of the time. When published, Ostertag's undated calendar illustrations claimed

praise from such diverse corners of the art world as the impressionist John Twachtman and Max Liebermann, one of the leaders of the Secession.

The calendar designs represented a turning point for Ostertag from the strictly pictorial to the decorative arts. Other calendars followed, as well as title pages and covers for books and posters. She illustrated several collections of folk and children's songs, including *Old Songs for Young America* in 1901 followed by two books in collaboration with Mary Holt Bacon, the popular children's author. In describing the artist's work in the commercial field, McDougall noted that Ostertag always paid particular attention to the correct architectural rendering of interiors and their furnishings: "She loves architecture so that balance and mass are in the very structure of her composition."<sup>8</sup> Whether or not this apparent attraction for the architectural was due to her nascent relationship with Wright is not known; there is no way to precisely date her collaboration with the architect except through the dates of the houses in which her work appears. By 1901, the date of *Old Songs for Young America*, Ostertag had already designed the Husser House mosaics for Wright and probably executed other commissions as well.

McDougall continues, portraying the artist's sense of color and spatial arrangement in a poster for a linen sale:

. . . a mother in a white morning robe buttoning her little girl's starched frock beside an open bureau drawer wherein piles of embroidered garments could be seen. The two dainty figures were in themselves winning, but gathered artistic forces from the child's carrotty tresses against the pink-striped wall-paper, the flowered tester

<sup>3</sup> Guerin, who later executed the exquisite renderings for Daniel Burnham's Chicago Plan from his New York studio, was in Chicago from 1880 to 1897. Although the McDougall article is ambiguous, it may be assumed that Ostertag was an "observer" in this Chicago studio.

<sup>4</sup> Isabel McDougall, "Blanche Ostertag, Artist," *The Book Buyer*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (November, 1902), p. 310.

<sup>5</sup> Ostertag is first listed in *American Art Annual* in the 1898 edition as having a studio located at 800 Atheneum Building, Chicago. It is intriguing to note that this building, at 59 East Van Buren, was just across the street from Steinway Hall, 64 East Van Buren Street. Later Ostertag is listed at 33 Tree Studio Building in Chicago.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur A. Merritt, "Work of Chicago Artists," *Brush and Pencil*, Vol. 9, No. 6 (March, 1902), p. 339.

<sup>7</sup> McDougall, "Blanche Ostertag, Artist," p. 311.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.



and hangings, the rich red brown of the old mahogany furniture. As usual in Miss Ostertag's pictures, the furniture was of correct design.<sup>9</sup>

At some point between 1900 and 1902, Ostertag moved into another area of the commercial design field and executed designs for William Gates' newly-formed architectural pottery firm. Gates had been involved with the production of ceramic pieces for a number of years. The Teco works, however, did not function officially until 1900 when Gates was encouraged by public response to the new wares through an exhibit at the Art Institute. Gates' personal Arts and Crafts philosophy found artistic expression in the moulded clay vessels with a simple, straight-forward respect of the materials. His progressive thinking also attracted a number of Chicago's innovative architects as occasional designers such as Orlando Giannini and members of the Steinway Hall group, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Hugh Garden, and Richard Schmidt. It seems likely that it was within the Gates circle that Wright and Ostertag found a common meeting ground for their ideas of functional yet beautiful domestic interiors.

There is, in any event, no way to tell just what the terms of Wright's relationship with Ostertag were. Since her name is not mentioned by Wright in connection with events in the Oak Park studio, it is probably safe to assume she worked in the capacity of an independent designer. This was not unusual, for Richard Bock, Orlando Giannini and Alphonso Iannelli executed commissions for Wright in this manner. Since Wright was seldom concerned about publicly recognizing the contributions of collaborating designers, we will probably never know the extent of her work, the variety of interior elements she may have detailed, or the number of residences in which they were integrated. Destruction or alteration of so many of Wright's original interiors has further compounded the problem. Moreover the question of attribution is complicated by parallels in the work of others who performed work for the architect during the Oak Park period. Marion Mahony, the studio's draftsman-designer, and George Niedeecken, the Milwaukee interior designer, both helped to develop Wright's interior schemes. To some degree, there are stylistic overlaps between Ostertag, Mahony, and Niedeecken.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.



*Blanche Ostertag. Source: Book Buyer, November, 1902.*



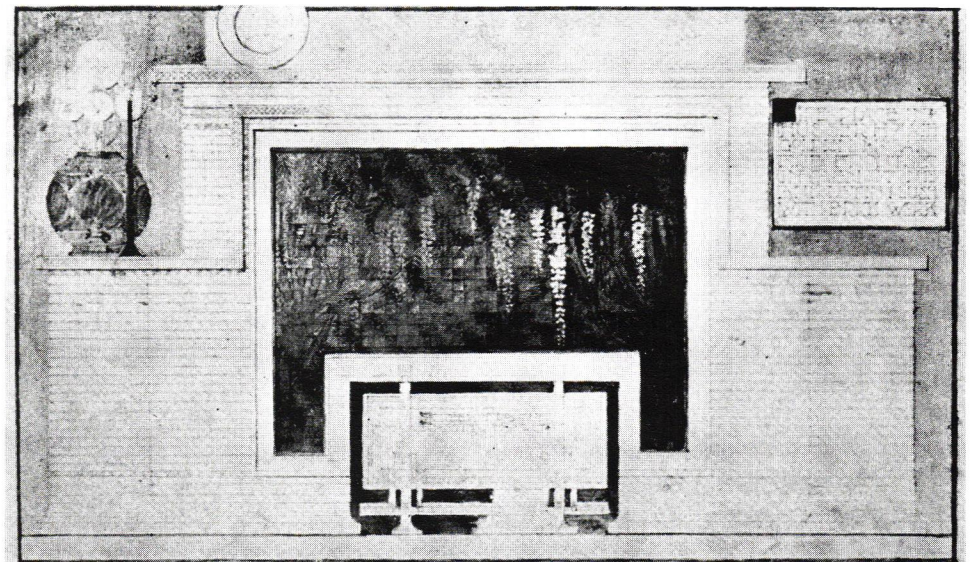
*Why do I not do there too?*  
*Illustration for Max Muller's Memories. Source: Book Buyer, November, 1902.*



*Ostertag poster for the Wulschner Music Company. Source: Book Buyer, November, 1902.*



*Illustration from Old Songs for Young America, 1902.*



*Fireplace, Joseph Husser House, 1899. Source: Architectural Review (Boston), June 1900.*



In any event, we can reliably credit to Ostertag the previously mentioned design for the mosaic fireplace in the Husser House (Chicago, 1899). In a "condensed monograph" of Wright's work appearing in the *Architectural Review* in 1900, Robert Spencer described this work in enthusiastic terms:

A very recent innovation not yet in place is the facing of gold enamel and glass mosaic for one of the Husser fireplaces. Quietly framed within broad bands of Caen stone, the combinations of gold in fusion with color on porcelain have been made to delineate vine trunks and a weeping profusion of wisteria sprays and pendent blossoms upon a ground dull gold below and bright gold above a suggested horizon. The white joints have been employed with great skill to delineate dainty stems and leaves of softer green and crackled gold. The sprays of blossoms are inlays of rosy white and pearly glass which fall in the airiest, sweetest fashion from the tangle of leaves below.

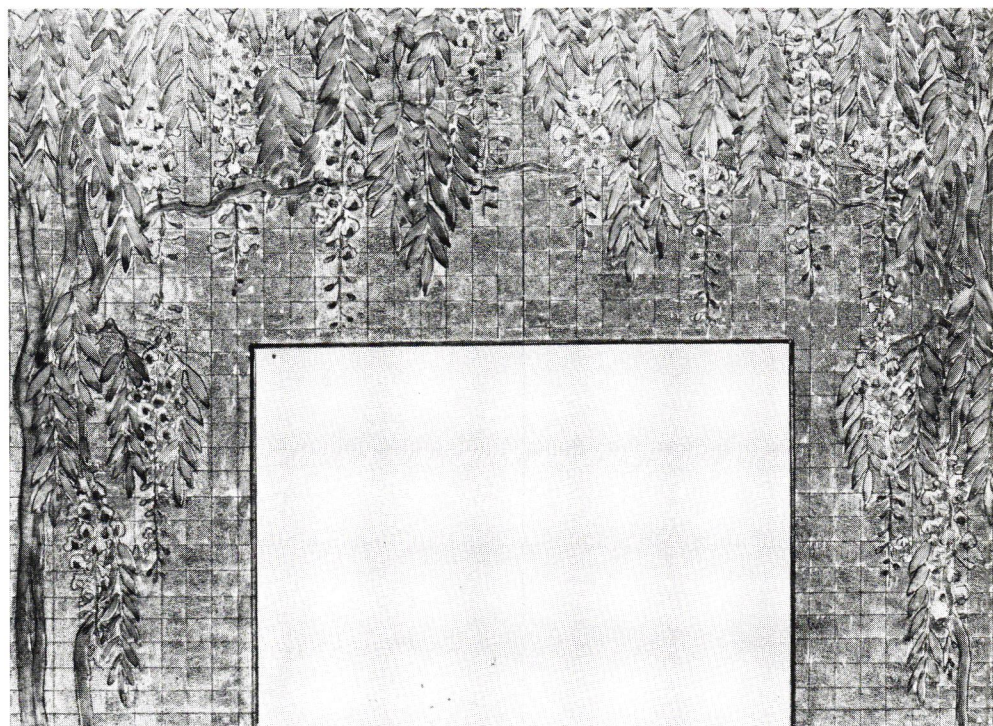
In its intended setting midst deep-toned, unvarnished wood and pale yellow brick walls, raked with burnished gold, the whole interior must have fairly glowed with richness. Spencer continues:

Mr. Wright as architect, Miss Ostertag as artist, and Mr. Giannini as craftsman and burner of remarkable enamels, have co-operated to show what may be conceived and executed here above and beyond precedent. They have more than succeeded. No monochrome can even suggest the exquisite beauty of this facing in its splendid play of iridescent color, of which the public has fortunately had a view at the recent exhibition of the Architectural Club.<sup>10</sup>

Close variations of this wisteria mosaic appear several times, the first being two fireplace facings in Wright's Darwin D. Martin House (Buffalo, 1904).<sup>11</sup> Because the wisteria motif was a popular one during the period and because Wright was not adverse to reusing a decorative design which had worked successfully for him in the past, there has been some confusion over design credit. Grant Manson, in his book *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*, states that Ostertag was probably the designer of these fireplace facings as well.<sup>12</sup> However, in Brian Spencer's recent book, *The Prairie School Tradition*, there is an undated drawing of a very similar wisteria mosaic by George Niedecken which the author identifies as the Martin



Fireplace, Husser House. Source: Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910.



Design attributed to George Niedecken. Photo courtesy the Prairie Archives, Milwaukee Art Center. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Jacobson.





Fireplace, Blinn House (now the Pasadena City Women's Club), George Maher. Photo courtesy Thomas A. Heinz.

House.<sup>13</sup> Niedecken, a Milwaukee interior architect, was often a collaborator of Wright's, coordinating some of the more complicated interior schemes.

A visual comparison from contemporary photos of the Husser and Martin fireplace mosaics as executed bear convincing evidence of a single artist's work. Furthermore, the shape of the fireplace opening in the Niedecken drawing is not consistent with the fireplace shapes in the completed Martin House. And, in an even more important artistic sense, the Niedecken drawing lacks the vitality of expression mentioned by Robert Spencer in his description of Ostertag's Husser panels. The skillful layering and interweaving of the wisteria branches is missing; the decorative details seem merely applied to the surface rather than emanating from a growing, organic source.

The Niedecken drawing may represent a project for one of his own clients, or perhaps for another less well-known Wright commission. As Wright began to rely more on Niedecken's help with the interior details of his residential projects, he may have requested Niedecken draft a design similar to the Ostertag versions.

Another strikingly similar variant of the same mosaic turns up only a few years later in a house designed by George Maher, another Prairie architect, for E. E. Blinn in Pasadena. Similar in design elements to both the Husser and Martin panels, this wisteria fireplace mosaic was illustrated in the July 1907 issue of *Inland Architect and News Record*. Although the design is not credited in the article, visual evidence of its relationship to her other mosaics suggests that this, too, is Ostertag's work. It is entirely believable that the artist who successfully juggled entries to two Paris salons could re-work the same design for two different architects.

Yet another speculative possibility remains for the appearance of similar wisteria designs. Orlando Giannini, the

<sup>10</sup>Robert Spencer, "The Work of Frank Lloyd Wright," *Architectural Review*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (June, 1900), p. 72.

<sup>11</sup>Wright's last use of a wisteria patterned, glass mosaic fireplace was in the Charles Ennis House, 1924, in Los Angeles.

<sup>12</sup>Manson, *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*, p. 144, note 2.

<sup>13</sup>Brian A. Spencer, *The Prairie School Tradition* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1979), pp. 58-59.



craftsman responsible for the execution of the Husser panels, was also a capable and trained artist in his own right. Giannini had both the ability and the means to reproduce the several variations of Ostertag's design. As partner in the architectural glass specialty firm of Giannini and Hilgart, he worked closely with a number of the Prairie architects, including both Wright and Maher. This very closeness would have discouraged any liberties in design adaptation, however, for a 1904 advertisement for the firm in the classified section of *Architectural Record* promised clients that no duplication of designs would be executed by the company. This pledge was undoubtedly important to the firm's reputation and enabled them to attract commissions from so many of Chicago's architects simultaneously.

The whole issue of design authorship, complicated as it is, is interesting because it points out the great interweavings of the Prairie architects and their collaborators and the need for additional study while tangible clues remain. Ostertag's Husser panels and those of the Martin House are now destroyed. Also, many of the finest Prairie interior details, such as the tree panels in the Martin House dining room and a number of the early furniture designs, have not been convincingly assigned either to artist or architect.

We do know that Ostertag's architectural commissions were not limited to mosaics. McDougall recalls a painted panel which the artist completed—once again for Wright—to be placed over the mantel of an unnamed suburban residence:

The tablet over the fireplace has some verses from the 143rd Psalm in gold and colors set in a thick pattern of grapes. The side panels bear each a mediaeval lady in brocade carrying a dish of fruit with the motto, "O give thanks to the Lord for He is good." These vibrate with orange, blue and green, the pigments laid on pure as the impressionists use it, and the natural golden brown of the wood cunningly planned as part of the color scheme.<sup>14</sup>

It is possible that these panels also were executed for the Husser House. The only known interior photos of the house, located in the Northwest Architectural Archives, show panels in this configuration around the dining room fireplace.

The photos are not too clear, but one can barely discern on the side panel the form of a woman in a brocade dress.<sup>15</sup>

More so than in the mosaic design, the description of this panel suggests Wright's involvement in the scheme. The architect frequently used mottos in the English Arts and Crafts manner in his early work, including his home and studio. The format of the panel is reminiscent of the medieval feast scenes popularized by the Pre-Raphaelites with which Wright was well acquainted.

It is not possible at this point to identify other works Ostertag may have carried out during her involvement with the Prairie movement, although it is likely that additional information will surface. Several undated works exist outside the Chicago area: a painting of an "Old Indian Fort" for the North West Railway Station in Green Bay, Wisconsin; a mural for an unspecified school building in St. Louis for which the artist received the Revell prize; and a mural entitled "The Sailing of the Claremont" for the New Amsterdam Theater in New York. A number of prominent artists were selected for the decoration of the Amsterdam theater project; Ostertag's inclusion indicates a widely held reputation and the many dimensions of her versatility.

Despite the emerging information, there are large gaps in our knowledge of Ostertag's life. In the years before her move to New York about 1910, the former enthusiasm of press and critics had strangely cooled; neither her absence from Chicago nor her arrival in New York evoked comment. The motivation for the move is itself unexplained. The reasons could have been career-inspired or based on more personal motives. There appears to be no connection between her departure and the break up of Wright's Oak Park studio, which occurred at roughly the same time. The relationship between artist and architect was strong during the early days of the studio, weakening considerably toward the end.

Similarly, there is no documentation of a change in personal status, such as marriage or even death, which could explain her absence from the art world. The *American Art Annual* drops her name without explanation after its 1912 entry.<sup>16</sup>

Nor has the re-examination of our artistic heritage in the light of women's movement uncovered additional information about her.

While the history of art will not likely suffer for this omission, one is reminded of the thoughts of one art historian that the works of minor artists are more subject to the influence of their situation, and, therefore, produce work more truly reflective of their times.<sup>17</sup> This sums up Ostertag's contributions rather well. Closely tied to the cultural fabric in which she lived, knowledge of Ostertag and her work adds to understanding the total extent of the Prairie School and the forces which made it great. ■

#### Articles by Blanche Ostertag:

"Monotypes," *Brush and Pencil*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (November, 1897), p. 24.

"Bruce Horsfall—a Monograph," *Brush and Pencil*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (August, 1898).

"Japanese Stencils, Collection of Mr. H. Deakin," *Brush and Pencil*, Vol. 3, No. 5 (February, 1899), pp. 283-287.

"Old English Christmas Carols," *Country Life in America*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (December, 1905), pp. 145-149.

"Old Christmas Customs and Dishes," *Country Life in America*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (December, 1906), pp. 158-164.

#### Books illustrated by Blanche Ostertag:

Bacon, Mary Holt. *Operas Every Child Should Know*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911.

Bacon, Mary Holt. *Songs Every Child Should Know*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911.

Forsythe, Clarence. *Old Songs for Young America*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1902.

Muller, Max. *Memories*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1902.

#### Other:

Cover design: "Nieuw Amsterdam, 1623." *Country Life in America*. Vol. 11 No. 2 (December, 1906).

<sup>14</sup>McDougall, "Blanche Ostertag, Artist," p. 315.

<sup>15</sup>For these photographs, refer to Irma Strauss, "Husser House Dining Room Set," *Frank Lloyd Wright Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (First quarter, 1979), pp. 6-7.

<sup>16</sup>By 1907 her address was listed in care of Doubleday, Page, New York, publishers of *Old Songs for Young America*. In 1910, her address was given as 535 West 156 Street, New York City. Her last entry appears in the *Annual* in 1912.

<sup>17</sup>G. Ellis Burcas, *Introduction to Museum Work* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), p. 69. Quoting Xavier de Salas, Assistant Director of the Prado Museum.



## THE ARCHIVES OF THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer

In a talk to the Taliesin Fellowship, at Taliesin West, in January 1951, Frank Lloyd Wright said: "Whatever disposition made of my drawings, I intended them to be kept at Taliesin (West). That is going to be the Taliesin of the future—the repository of all those drawings and of that work. You may wonder why we are spending all this time and effort in expanding and making Taliesin more or less permanent. It is because it is going to be the only repository of this work in which you have become interested and to which you have contributed. If anyone wishes to learn about it or see it first hand authentically this is where they are going to go to see it."

The Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation with headquarters at Taliesin West, is a tax exempt charitable organization founded to perpetuate and preserve the works of Frank Lloyd Wright and to educate the public concerning his important and unique contribution to architecture. This is a separate organization from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which is an architectural firm and school and successor to the office of Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation's collection of archival materials, which includes more than 19,000 original Frank Lloyd Wright drawings, thousands of his letters, hundreds of original manuscripts and historic photographs of executed buildings, as well as other related materials, has been placed at the disposal of the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation.

The Memorial Foundation is currently at work recording this collection on film and other reproduction materials, in order to catalog, identify and file a permanent record for use by qualified scholars. At least four copies are made of each item and a complete file is stored in secure vaults in different geographical locations, thus assuring that the record will not be lost.

*Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer is Director of Archives at Taliesin.*

Starting in 1974, a program of photographing each original drawing using two 4 × 5 color transparencies and two black and white negatives was begun, with 16,000 drawings to date thus recorded.

A microfiche inspector at Taliesin West makes viewing of these films simple and convenient, bringing the image up to a 22" × 30" screen, which is the full scale of the original in most cases. This equipment permits magnified study of details and notations, making possible more extensive study of each sheet than can be done using the original drawing.

The entire manuscript collection of more than 500 different documents, which is constantly enlarging as additional manuscripts are discovered in the archival collections, has been put on microfilm and copied by xerox. Study of these documents is possible by means of the xerox copies. A new program is underway to microfilm the manuscript collection once again and record it on microfiche cards for better study purposes. The microfiche inspector described above can also be used for studying the microfiche cards on which the letters and documents are recorded.

Mr. Wright's letters form a collection of thousands of documents ranging from 1887 to 1959. This collection is being sorted, indexed and recorded on microfiche cards, and made ready for study and research, using the microfiche inspector. The original letters and manuscripts themselves are being interleaved with acid-free paper, placed in acid-free boxes in a temperature controlled storage area.

To further fulfill Mr. Wright's express wish that Taliesin West become a repository of his life work, the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation is now planning to build a library-study center where all of the above mentioned materials can be housed and examined in detail by qualified scholars, and displayed in regularly changing exhibits throughout the year for the general public.

Paramount in the archives is, of course, the collection of his original drawings. The majority of these are on permanent loan by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial

Foundation for the purpose of making them available for exhibition, study, and recording on film. Eventually many of the drawings will be donated by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to the Memorial Foundation as part of its permanent collection.

On constant display in the library's general exhibition area will be models, photographs, photographs of buildings, and photomurals of rare drawings. In special light and temperature controlled areas, there will be a changing exhibition of original drawings. Private study rooms will afford more detailed examination of original documents and filmed materials. A theatre will be provided for slides, motion picture films, and lectures throughout the year to the public. Storage areas will contain drawings, manuscripts, and documents being studied and recorded. A reading room will house rare books, periodicals, journals, and doctoral theses.

Exhibition areas will include space for the showing of various articles related to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright: glass windows, furniture, fabrics, objects of the decorative arts, as well as books, journals, photographs, manuscripts, and monographs which are donated to the Memorial Foundation to help fulfill Mr. Wright's wish for Taliesin West to be the repository of his work.

The filming of the drawings and letters up to this time has been paid for by gifts from the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, a bequest from Allen Davison, and other gifts and royalties. But with the necessity of building a large library and study center to fulfill Mr. Wright's plan for the future of his work, additional funds will have to be sought. At present, the Memorial Foundation has an endowment of property from the Price family of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, which will be the beginning of the funding.

A valuable contribution by the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation to the perpetuation of Wright's work is the restoration and conservation of some 500 original drawings that were mounted in the 1930s and 1940s with rubber cement to wood-pulp boards. The combination of rubber cement and wood-pulp boards proved to discolor the drawings over a long period of time. This group of artistic



and historic drawings is being given to the Memorial Foundation which will fund the needed repair of these drawings. Such work is both time consuming and costly, and can be done by only a few conservators in the nation. One hundred of these drawings have been conserved to date, with remarkable results. This work has been financed by the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation and a substantial grant from the Graham Foundation of Chicago.

All of the drawings will be encapsulated in acid-free mylar. Started in 1980, 1,000 have been finished to date. There is a scheduled plan of encapsulating at least 1,000 more each year.

The Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation is a relatively new organization, becoming active only during the last decade. Its role in the preservation of Wright's work for future generations will be a constantly expanding one.

Requests to use these archives, which are available only from October 15 through May 15, should be addressed to Mr. Pfeiffer at Taliesin West, Scottsdale, Arizona 85258. ■

## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT WAS NOT SHORT!

by Donald G. Kalec

Frank Lloyd Wright was not short! In fact, recent research indicates that he was above average height. According to records from World War I, which was probably the first time data was collected on large numbers of men, the average height of draftees was 5'7½" in 1917. This was the height for men from 21 to 30 years of age and would have been higher than the population at large, probably 1/3 of an inch according to other data. Also, these figures were gathered in 1917, some seventeen years after Wright began his Prairie house designs. During that time the average height probably went up between 1/3 and 1/2 of an inch. This means that in 1900 the average height of

*Donald G. Kalec, a member of the Taliesin Fellowship for four years, is Associate Professor of Design and Communication at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and chairman of the restoration committee of the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation.*

men was 5'6¾" to 5'7". Frank Lloyd Wright's height of 5'8½" was about 1½" **taller** than the average man in 1900.

The low ceilings that Wright favored in certain locations such as entrys and hallways had nothing to do with the fact that he was supposedly short. He wanted the main rooms to seem higher than they really were, and to do this he made the entrys and halls very low. Wright knew that a contrast in ceiling height would not be noticed unless it was quite pronounced. For instance, the difference between an 8' and 9' ceiling is not enough to register on our consciousness as a significant variation. A ceiling has to be **really low** to have an impact on our senses.

Even today, according to figures taken in 1979, the average height of males in the United States is 5'8½" — Frank Lloyd Wright's exact height! ■

## NATIONAL REGISTER UPDATE

In Volume 3, Number 3 (Third Quarter 1980), the newsletter published a list of Wright-designed buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. The following structures have been added to the register:

### **Fasbender Medical Clinic (1957)**

December 31, 1979

### **Theodore A. Pappas Residence (1955)**

February 14, 1979

### **G. C. Stockman Residence (1908)**

January 29, 1980

## NEW VISITORS CENTER COMPLETED AT FALLINGWATER

The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, a private regional conservation agency, recently dedicated a new visitors pavilion at Fallingwater. Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh spoke at the dedication ceremonies which were attended by leaders of government, business, and the arts. Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., who entrusted Fallingwater to the Conservancy in 1963, opened a new exhibition area of the pavilion.

Despite its rural location seventy miles southeast of Pittsburgh, Fallingwater has

attracted nearly one million visitors from around the world. Previously, this stream of visitors has been accommodated in various outbuildings of the Kaufmann estate. The new pavilion, which was financed by a grant from the Edgar J. Kaufmann Charitable Foundation, will make the Fallingwater visit more pleasant, comfortable and informative.

The architects, Paul Mayen of New York, and Curry, Martin & Highberger of Pittsburgh, planned the visitors pavilion as a "non-building." Not presuming to compete with Wright's landmark, they designed the new structure to be inconspicuous but functional. The construction materials are neutral: natural cedar, cement, and glass. In order to spare as much of the native vegetation as possible, the pavilion is balanced on cement pillars which continue up through its floor to support the roof. Every attempt was made to nestle the structure among the trees and ferns of its setting. It cannot be seen from Fallingwater.

The center of the new pavilion is a large, circular area where visitors can obtain tickets and information. The sides of the central area are open so visitors can enjoy the surrounding forest while waiting for their Fallingwater tour. As tours are not conducted in winter, no heating is necessary. Fanning out from the central area on raised boardwalks are four other areas—an educational exhibition space, childcare facility, shop, and restrooms. The new visitors pavilion duplicates one which was completed in the spring of 1979, but was destroyed by fire before its opening.

The exhibition area consists of large panels with photographs, drawings, and text concerning the relationship established by Frank Lloyd Wright between the house and the terrain. Geology, local history, architectural concepts, and the daring construction of the building are all considered elements of the Fallingwater story. The exhibition emphasizes how Fallingwater embodies a harmonious relationship between man's work and nature.

Tours of Fallingwater are given daily, except Monday, from April through November. Reservations are advised. Phone (412) 329-8501 for more information. ■



*Advertisement*



from Virginia Ernst Kazor

*In 1956 Frank Lloyd Wright was asked by the Phoenix Junior Chamber of Commerce to design a float for the 1957 Rose Parade to take place on New Year's Day in Pasadena, California. The theme of that year's parade was "Famous Firsts" and Wright's float depicted Phoenix as "First in Sunshine." The float was based on the simple geometric shapes of a pyramid and a sphere connected by the "rays" of the sun. It was covered entirely in gold marigolds.*

*The design won first prize in Class A3: Cities outside of California with 50,000 to 150,000 population. The photograph was provided by Bonnie Rockwell, who along with her former husband, was instrumental in commissioning Wright to design the float.*



The opportunity is now available to enjoy the excellence of a superbly constructed Frank Lloyd Wright contemporary home on a rolling, wooded 5 acre site in BARRINGTON HILLS, ILLINOIS. Designed and built for the present owners in 1958, this is an excellent execution of the master architect's Usonian house concept. The long, low roof line with a continuous row of windows and unornamented exterior bring a tranquility to all who enter. The home encompasses a dramatic two-story living room/dining room, library, three bedrooms and two gallery areas.

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*Photo of the Taliesin Fellowship taken in the mid-1930s by Edmund Teske at Taliesin. Next year, 1982, marks the 50th anniversary of the Taliesin Fellowship. An upcoming issue of the newsletter will feature a photo essay of Teske's work from this period.*