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Frank Lloyd Wright's House Beautiful



Side chair, Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio, oak with upholstered leather seat, 57 1/2 x 17 1/2 x 19 1/4", 1895. © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Preservation Trust.

Controversial, outspoken, and prolific, Frank Lloyd Wright remains America's best-known architect, even five decades after his death in 1959. He looms so large as an American cultural legend that it's easy to forget he built his reputation by reinventing the most intimate of spaces—the family home. Curated by Dr. Virginia T. Boyd, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the House Beautiful*, a visually rich traveling exhibition ending its tour at the Portland Museum of Art (PMA), tells the story of Wright's huge impact on residential design in the twentieth century through drawings, furniture, stained glass, fabrics, carpeting, and decorative objects, some on view for the first time since the 1970s.

Rather than presenting a linear chronology, the exhibition weaves three central themes together: Wright's invention of the modern American house, his concept of organic architecture, and the democratization of his designs for a mass market. Wright's vision of modernization was originally influenced by a cultural movement called "House Beautiful," a term, coined in the nineteenth century—along with "city beautiful" and "kitchen beautiful"—that refers to domestic reforms advocated for the growing middle class. Proponents believed less in decoration for its own sake than in the material transformation of a house into a morally and spiritually uplifting family home. This was achieved by living simply and healthfully, in tune with the natural environment. A transcendentalist at heart, Wright enthusiastically embraced this philosophy and first experimented with it in the Chicago suburbs. As the exhibition reveals, Wright's designs evolved over the course of more than seventy years, but he remained true to these values throughout.

Rejecting the ornate, over-compartmentalized architecture typical at the turn of the century, Wright started building houses in the now-famous Prairie style, which was soon recognized abroad as quite revolutionary by emerging European modernists. Wright's interiors featured a long open plan that maximized a small footprint, expansive bands of windows to let light spill in, low ceilings to emphasize horizontality, exposed natural surfaces, and the total integra-

tion of all details. The show, which does not reconstruct any interiors and relies on photography and drawings to represent them, opens with several objects that reveal Wright's uniquely American spin on the prevailing Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Particularly compelling is a highchair designed in 1903 for his own children—tiny, perfectly proportioned, and a bit prim—its form obviously influenced by contemporaries such as Glasgow designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The clean lines and high back resemble those of his adult chairs, which Wright often used to delineate a dining room area in an otherwise open living space.

In a gallery devoted to the theme of organic architecture sits a slim brown obelisk anchored by a solid base, actually a hollow copper bud vase he nicknamed a "weed holder" for displaying prairie wild flowers. Understated and easily overlooked, at first it seems at odds with a nearby squat silver tureen designed for his Imperial Hotel project in Tokyo in 1915. Literally intended for two different worlds, these two architectonic objects nonetheless

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relate stylistically and typify many archetypal forms Wright explored throughout his career. The tureen was eventually reissued for public consumption by Tiffany & Co. nearly a century later, a testimonial to Wright's genius for creating designs that endure

over time and across cultures.

Wright inherited the idea of an organic architecture from his mentor and former employer, architect Louis Sullivan, but expanded it into a unique personal philosophy and even wrote a book on the subject. As PMA curator Thomas Denenberg points out, the concept does not refer to forms looking natural, but instead to "his 360-degree total design of the site, the envelope of the building and the furniture." Wright believed that imposing a sense of order throughout a house—the integration of materials, lighting, and fixtures within a carefully controlled plan—was critical to promoting an overall sense of harmony and repose.

Wright's manipulation of light is so key to the sensuous experience of his interiors that the show gives his stained glass and light-screen designs special prominence. Denenberg explains that panels, such as an iconic pair of casement

windows for the Darwin Martin House of 1905, would have receded in their original setting, whereas their pattern and coloration appear much bolder in a gallery context. Highlighted by a spotlight creating a shadow pattern, it's easy to imagine their kaleidoscopic effect over the course of the day. Because leaded stained glass was expensive, Wright made his architecture more universally available by using cheaper materials and methods for similar effects. In later houses, he substituted simple plywood silhouettes for leaded partitions and eventually used floor-to-ceiling glass to enhance a sense of open space, while exploring patterns through carpeting and fabrics. Designed to peacefully coexist in a home, in a museum setting these patterns take on a new life and become worthy neighbors of the fine artwork hanging nearby.

No fool, Wright adapted to changing times in mid-century by partnering with manufacturers on mass-produced furnishings and fabrics, named the Taliesin Line after his own famous homes, and even developed designs for early pre-fab housing. Appropriately, the only actual architectural model in the show is a paper cutout distributed by *Life* magazine in 1938 that, once assembled, offered the public a vicarious glimpse of their own Wright house. Wright even erected a house prototype on the construction site of the Guggenheim Museum, a metaphoric incubator for his design ideas that could serve future generations.

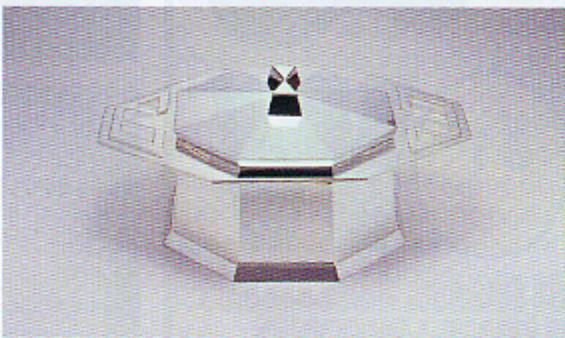
Wright's house designs were uniquely American, promoting individual freedom and personal autonomy. True to his controlling character, Wright even invented his own name for the United States: "Usonia." Maine is a particularly appropriate venue for this exhibition, according to Denenberg, since it attracts like-minded personalities who seek Wright's "kinship with the terrain" and share a love of the well-crafted object. By playing down the drama of Wright's life and focusing on his material contributions, the exhibition succeeds in explaining how he could produce some of the most comforting and soulful houses ever built.

www.portlandmuseum.org

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Carpet design for Karastan, Taliesin Line project, tempera on illustration board, 37 x 32", 1955. © Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.



Covered tureen, sterling silver, 7 x 15 1/4 x 11", original design, c.1915, produced by Tiffany & Company c.1990. Courtesy of Tiffany & Co. Archive.