

Frank Lloyd Wright and the Fine Arts

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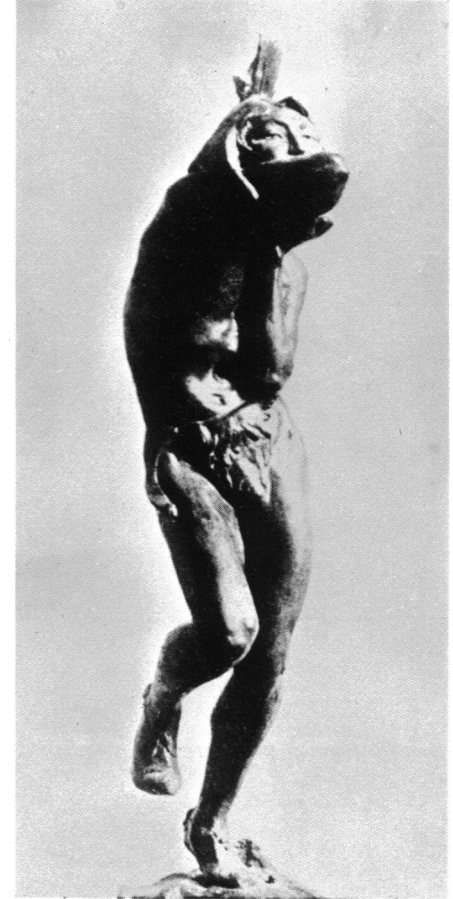
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'Primitive Chant,' by Herman McNeil, indicating the character of sculpture which Wright featured in his Winslow house and in his own residence



**Edgar Kaufmann Jr
Frank Lloyd Wright
and the Fine Arts**

Frank Lloyd Wright spent the last decade of his life blasting away at (among other things) modern art; at the same time he was engaged in a long and eventually successful campaign to build the Solomon Guggenheim Museum for modern art. On these grounds he is accused of designing the museum to show the superiority of his own art — architecture — over the arts of painting and sculpture. Now Wright dearly loved a fight and, even more, a paradox; but it never occurred to him to betray a professional trust. When he accepted a commission it was not to monumentalize himself; else he would have aimed his whole career differently. His original clients for the museum, Solomon Guggenheim and Hilla Rebay, had a specialized, didactic, and developmental program consonant with what Wright considered the hopeful aspects of modern art. With a change of clients after Solomon Guggenheim's death came the clash of purposes which transformed the Guggenheim Museum building, as it opened, into a half-thing. Even so, it has proved astonishingly vital, and in some respects is now being used more nearly as conceived.

Did Wright really hate the fine arts as competitors with architecture? A survey of his long practice, which often contrasts with his words, shows that Frank Lloyd Wright loved fine arts, that life without them was inconceivable to him. His was an old-

Studio entrance to Wright's own house; the crouching figures are by Richard Bock



fashioned love, however, with manifestations that require elucidation today. To understand them, thought needs be given to ideas of art that were current when Wright was young, particularly among people like his well-read, progressive, pious family. Wright's heritage in the arts centered on ideals common to liberal British intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century, when many able men and women (like Wright's forebears) found it necessary to leave the overpopulated homeland of the Industrial Revolution. This specific heritage has been encapsulated by one of Wright's favorite authors, Emerson, in his essay on *Art*, published in 1841. Emerson thought that rather than be imitative 'the painter should... give us only the spirit... the gloom of gloom and the sunshine of sunshine'; he should 'convey a larger sense by simpler symbols.' Yet, the writer continued, the 'office of painting and sculpture seems to be merely initial. The best pictures can easily tell us their last secret... painting and sculpture are gymnastics of the eye, its training.... Away with your nonsense of oils and easels, of marble and chisels; except to open your eyes.... Now men do not see Nature to be beautiful.... They reject life as prosaic, and create a death which they call poetic.... Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between the fine and the useful arts be forgotten.' In con-

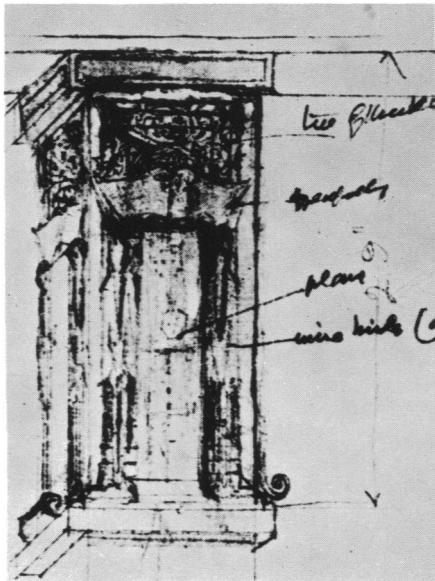
cluding the essay, he suggests that artists find holiness and beauty in new and necessary facts, in the field and roadside, in the shop and mill.... When science is learned in love, and its powers are wielded by love, they will appear the supplements and continuations of the material creation.' His last point was polemically elaborated years later by William Morris, who said: 'it is allowing the machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures life nowadays.' Wright followed these thoughts and developed them. In fact, his reactions to modern art are inherent in Emerson's formulation. To understand Wright's hopes and fears for art, one should keep in mind the Emersonian text.

Emerson represented a synthesis of attitudes built up by men like Cobbett and Coleridge, Southey and Owen. Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Pugin, Ruskin, and Morris followed. Many of these men were read by Wright as a youngster, along with Victor Hugo, penny dreadfuls, the poetry of Blake, and the *Essays* of Viollet-le-Duc. It will suffice merely to mention Wright's early fascination with Froebel's educational toys and the piano music of Beethoven and Bach, for these are well-known aspects of his education. Less notice has been taken of his childhood recreations: painting, drawing, singing, and reading aloud. To these add decorating crockery

and making Christmas trifles for pocket money, and you have the very image of a progressive, provincial upbringing in the era of the aesthetic movement. After all, it was while the boy Wright was learning physical and moral fortitude on his uncle's farm that Oscar Wilde lectured America on the beauty of the machine, and *Patience* opened in London. A few years later, when a teen-age Wright determined to seek his fortune in Chicago, his cultural baggage was pretty much that sketched here; he had acquired a knowledge of engineering, to be sure, and an enduring enthusiasm for romantic Maya, Aztec, and Inca ruins.

When he arrived in Chicago, young Wright found his place at Louis Sullivan's elbow. In the Adler and Sullivan office the great Auditorium Building was the center of activity: it was designed to be the most superb center in the new world for grand occasions — opera, concerts, political rallies, etc. It was abundantly ornamented and numerous oil paintings were commissioned as murals. Despite the results, the concept of architecture and fine arts working together was never questioned! About this time, too, the Art Institute of Chicago began to form its collections, but of course Chicago's great Impressionist paintings were just entering local private collections. The Art Institute was then holding regular passing shows of contemporary

Sketch by Wright for pilaster ornaments at studio entrance, executed by Bock



Sculpture at top of Sullivan's Bayard Building in New York



American painting, sculpture, and artistic crafts. A large collection of casts, some architectural, were also to be seen. All this was grist to Wright's mill, but perhaps even more important to him were the opportunities Chicago provided for the enjoyment of full-scale, professional performing arts. Sullivan and his friends were alert to these influences; Wright eagerly went along. Hard after the successful opening of the Auditorium came preparations for the World's Columbian Exposition: Chicago filled with aspiring artist-decorators. In 1892, while this was going on, Sullivan's firm opened the Schiller theatre building, where, not for the first time, they employed a sculptor to complete the decorations. Then, if no earlier, Wright met the sculptor Richard Bock, who later worked closely with him over many years.

Probably in the same year Wright and his friends learned to admire another young sculptor, fresh from a trip to the Indian southwest and, earlier, a student in the Paris *académies*, Hermon Atkins MacNeil. His works may be seen deliberately featured in the entrance hall of Wright's first independent house of great quality, the Winslow, and in photographs of Wright's own home, together with oriental painting and assorted bric-a-brac. Wright's statuette, a Hopi runner, was reputedly modeled

at the Villa Aurelia, where it must have looked extra exotic; it probably should be dated 1896, when MacNeil left his brief but successful Chicago career for the American Academy at Rome. In 1895 the sculptor Bock helped Wright complete the entrance to a new studio annexed to the architect's home. Flanking the entry, two covering muscle-men on plinths seem pure Bock; four pilaster caps, however, were sketched and programed by Wright. Some similar collaboration, with Wright guiding a painter, would account for a mural in a new children's playroom added to the adjacent residence about then; the correctly drawn figures seem outside Wright's skills. Within the new studio itself, early photos show a landscape in oils and numerous naturalistic statuettes. There can be no question that at this point Wright was absorbed in an attempt to combine architecture, painting, and sculpture as he had learned to do with Sullivan. Comparing Wright's use of painting and sculpture with examples from Sullivan's works in the years around 1890, one finds that Wright had a more acute sense than his erstwhile master of scale, composition, and rhythm. In 1897, when Sullivan's only New York building was going up with winged, vaguely classical figures modeled in the topmost spandrels, Bock executed very similar figures for a roof loggia on Wright's Heller

house. Such ladies, no doubt inspired by Figure 4 of Viollet's *Essay on Roman architecture*, had appeared, in flat paint only, on the Transportation Building, Sullivan's masterpiece at the Fair, and, fortunately for American art, never again flew on the top of a Sullivan or Wright building. Russell Lynes has reminded us that in 1898 Wright gave one of his popular talks at the annual meeting of the Central Art Association, on 'Art In The Home.' He lived with what he talked about; Bock even modeled Wright's young son life-size in bronze, adding wings. It was a volatile period in American sculpture.

At the turn of the century C. R. Ashbee, a leading light of the English arts and crafts movement, spent some time in Chicago; and we know that he and Wright became friendly. Wright agreed to have a committee for the preservation of historic buildings, which Ashbee wanted set up in connection with the English equivalent; and ten years later, when Wright's executed buildings were published in a German volume, Ashbee wrote an enthusiastic introduction. Likely enough, it was provoked by Wright's famous Hull House lecture on "The Art and Craft of the Machine" in 1901. This aired views contrary to Ashbee's. But by 1911, the year of his introduction to Wright's book, Ashbee announced himself ready to work with,



rather than against, the current of the times, as Wright had done at Hull House. Personal contact with Ashbee may have spurred Wright to consider how far he had drifted from the ideals of his youth, from the concepts of Emerson's essay. Anyway, over the next ten years Wright made extraordinary and remarkably successful efforts to integrate with his architecture the fine arts and the applied. Three great houses testify to this: the Dana, 1902-04; the Martin, 1904; and the Coonley, 1908; to these should be added the unique Larkin office building, 1904. Browne's Bookstore, 1908, and the Thurber Art Gallery, 1909, offered special, smaller opportunities. Even a mid-decade vacation in Japan, the first visit to a land Wright had long admired and now learned to love, exerted no perceptible effect on his work, though his ten- or twelve-year-old passion for Japanese prints increased. A great Wright building of the period, Unity Temple, 1906, was barren of fine arts, no doubt because among the clients funds and interest were equally lacking. In most cases, however, Wright was able to achieve remarkable results in the Midwest in the 1900s, working with artists considerably inferior to those whom architects in the East or in Europe could call on.

Wright's extra-legal nuptial flight to Europe in 1910 was spent largely in Florence

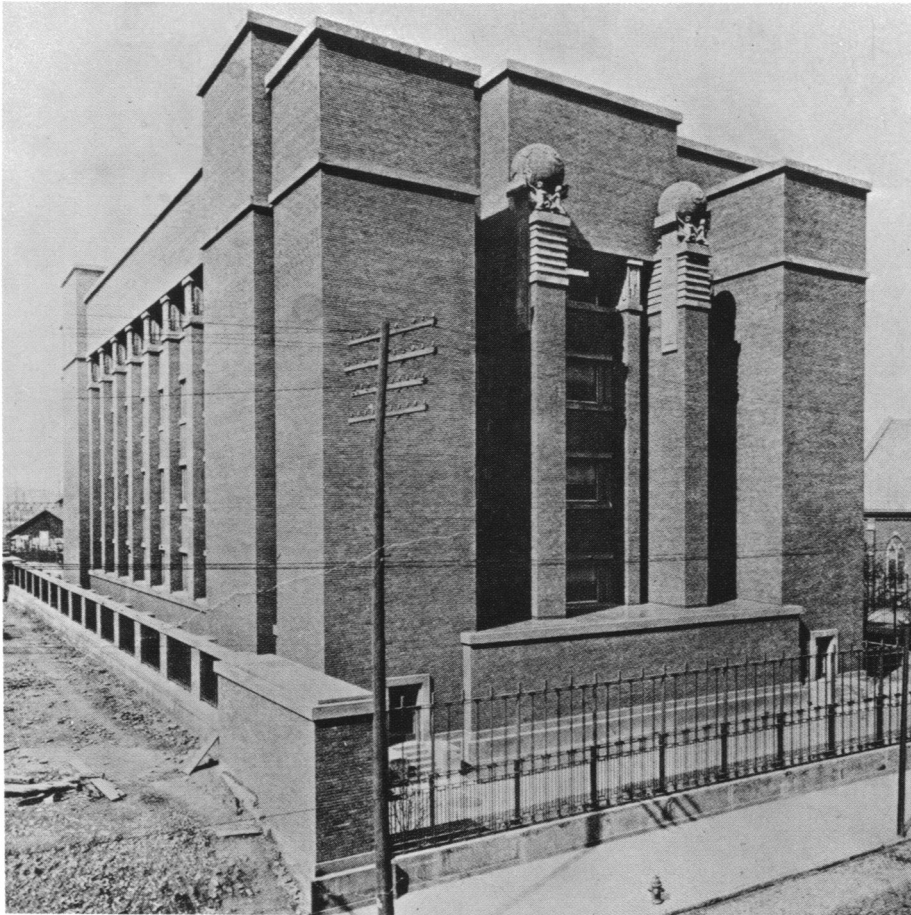
working on drawings for a luxurious publication of his works, issued in Berlin, just prior to the more modest volume of photographs that Ashbee introduced. Projects for himself — a studio in Florence and a city house in Chicago—show Wright more ready than ever to make a feature of exterior sculpture. The first country home that Wright built for himself, called, like its sequels, 'Taliesin,' after the Welsh bard, was also fully but less formally embellished. Few records of its appearance survived the fire that destroyed it in 1914. This disaster occurred just at the time of the opening of Midway Gardens, a complex of restaurants and clubs, complete with large garden and music shell; Wright had designed it with wonderful boldness. Sculpture and painting played important roles, setting a festive and exhilarating tone. Here, significantly enough, Wright seized the initiative, designing murals (and, in part, the sculptures) as abstract and asymmetric as any avant-garde European art of the moment. Midway Gardens was executed in a rush, and this may well have forced Wright to impose, rather than to elicit, the artistic qualities he desired to complete the architecture and furnishings. Whatever the cause, Midway Gardens marked an epoch in Wright's reactions to fine arts. He was forced to see that the painters and sculptors around him felt no

intrinsic affinity to his work. The teamwork of the arts that Ruskin and Morris had predicated, that Wright had witnessed in Japan and in Europe's monuments, was gone; art was intent on making "the same effort...to detach the beautiful from the useful" that Emerson had observed three quarters of a century earlier.

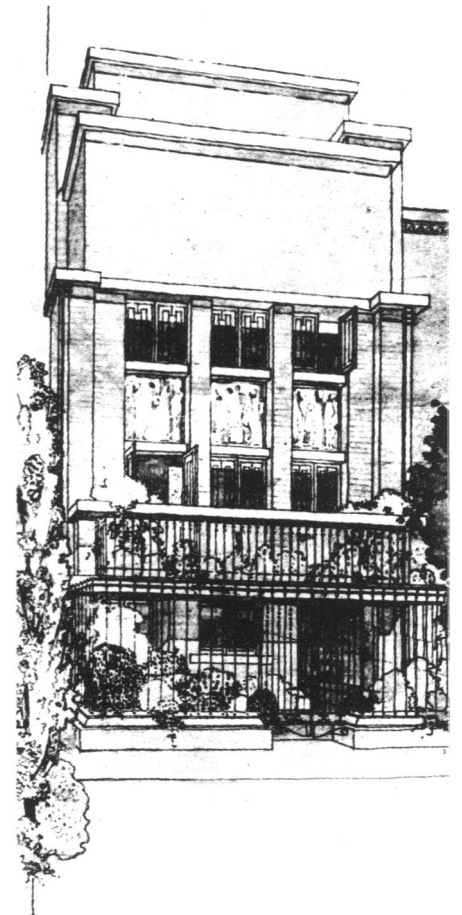
Wright's new-found skill at designing his own fine arts for his buildings can be traced back to humble beginnings in colored window compositions, abstract and in that sense derived from his Froebel training, which he had used in his own house at least as early as 1895. The earliest Wright's asymmetric abstractions for glass seems to have been made in 1911 or 1912 for the Coonley playhouse. These are exactly contemporary with the first documented European color-abstractions by Kupka, Larionov, and Delaunay. Wright designed a timidly asymmetric and very nearly abstract relief for a house in Milwaukee in 1916. Nothing prior in modern art is recalled, but an ornamental relief of 1902 in the Sezession by Josef Hoffman may have encouraged Wright, well aware of the Sezession and its works thanks to his admiration for Hoffman's teacher, Otto Wanger.

Now Japan called Wright, and the next years were largely devoted to the complicated commission of the Imperial Hotel.

Wright's Larkin Building, also adorned by Bock's sculpture



Wright's drawing of a house projected for himself, showing interest in inclusion of sculpture



Its rich ornamentation reached a peak in the ballroom. Neither Japanese influence nor the taste of the White Russian refugees with whom Wright then associated can be traced in this work. Perhaps its rather overcharged air is a reflection of psychological pressures exerted on him by an extremely erratic, bohemian mistress.

However that may be, Wright's next expansive client belonged to a similar, if less hectic, world; and on Olive Hill in Hollywood in about 1920, over the fireplace in the living room, the architect presented himself more effectively as a sculptor than perhaps anywhere else in his career. Here, his stone abstraction is as free of symmetry as his murals and glass had been long since. Indicative of his future direction, oriental art is built into the room, notably Japanese screens. Wright had found an art that—more than his own—assured the quality of repose he sought, and that—more than any modern art he could commission—seemed created according to the Emersonian recipe: 'only the spirit,' able to 'convey a larger sense by simpler symbols.' The more Wright understood Far Eastern art, the less tempted he was by the introspective trend of much Western art or by its unsophisticated abstractions, laboring under the weight of inappropriate, inherited techniques and caught in a tangle of European ideology.

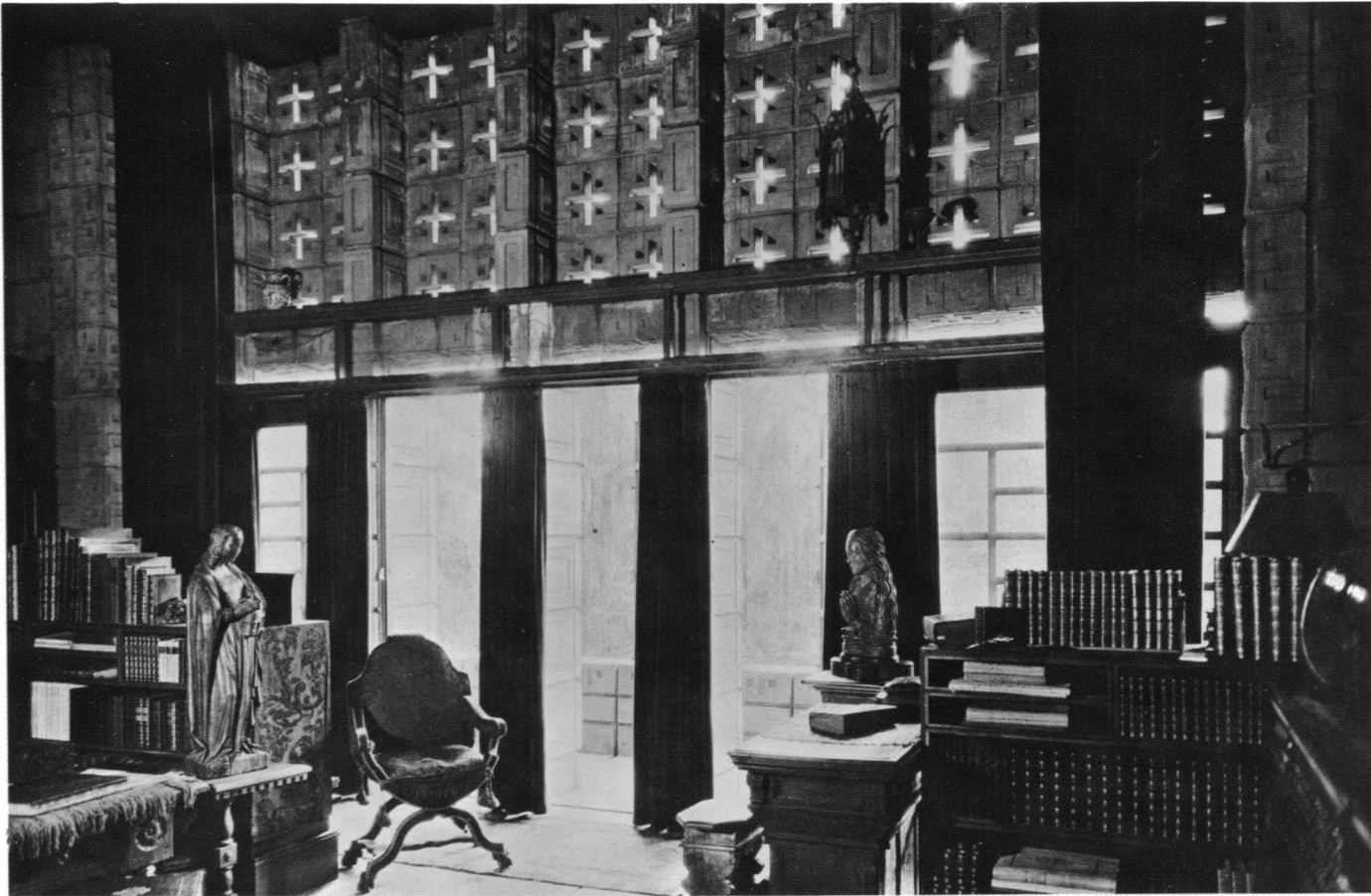
The characteristics he could admire in Western art were better deployed in Eastern.

In California, Wright then designed several houses for owners devoted to the visual arts. I remember visiting Mrs. Millard among her Renaissance antiques, which looked charmingly at home. Taliesin in Wisconsin was again rebuilt after a second fire in 1925, again replete with oriental art of every kind and of various quality. A Gustav Klimt, donated by the decorator Paul Frankl, represented modern art in a notably insufficient way; later, a handsome O'Keeffe, a gift of the artist, was in evidence.

At about this time Wright began publicly to sing the praise of the Japanese tokonoma-niche. The reserved place, a chance to group painting, sculpture, and flowers (or other fragments of nature) appropriately to a season or an event, seemed perhaps an ideal way to acclimatize the very personal quality of much modern art. Painting and sculpture thus temporarily exposed and preciously treated, were closer to the performing arts—music, theater, dance and recitation—which Wright loved and encouraged around him. He never shied away from strong, personal effects in these arts, since they could be displayed or set aside as seemed fitting. What seemed wrong to the archi-

tect was a fixed display of such effects in a home or public building (other than an art gallery). The tokonoma offered one solution to these problems, but even in Wright's own surroundings it had limited application: major works of art in both Taliesins tended to remain in place for long periods of time.

With the resurgence of interest in Frank Lloyd Wright in the 1930s—due to his remarkably winning autobiography and to better times—opportunities returned for an association of the arts in his work. Abstract pattern, like that he formerly used in ornamental glass, now was allocated graphic duties: as part titles in *An Autobiography* and on the cover of the January 1938 *Architectural Forum*. But in his seventh decade the architect increasingly looked toward broader horizons. He developed ideas of area planning and of a type home for modest living. He surrounded himself with young people, forming a community to evolve a way of life which he, like many before him, believed the necessary precondition to understanding any of the arts; performing arts and tokonoma-like arrangements were features of this life. In 1938 the community built Taliesin West, designed by Wright as its winter home; and art, mostly oriental, was of course introduced as part of the ensemble.



One of Wright's last architecturally sculptured walls was designed for my father's office; in plywood, it was more delicate than the stone abstractions of fifteen years earlier. Fallingwater, the country house for the same client, was conspicuously free of Wrightian ornament. As the years went on, Wright used to visit Fallingwater, and he always was very aware of the modern sculpture around it. Of course, he was as outspoken in our house as everywhere else, but curiously he never made a sarcastic remark about these works, nor attempted to persuade us to other tastes. However, he would invariably ask to have new statues relocated, often only a few feet from where they were. Then he would settle back to enjoy directing the sculpture into a telling position, where it accentuated a feature of the architecture and in turn gained the support of its setting. From this experience I feel sure that, to the end, Frank Lloyd Wright retained his initial enthusiasm for, and sensitivity to, the fine arts. He found the artists near him during his lifetime working on problems of their own rather than on mutual ones. When he built a museum for them, it was with equal amounts of questioning and hope, but not with disrespect. It would not have occurred to him to demean his own architecture by assigning to it the task of demeaning others' work. He was too proud and strong an artist

himself for that.

In looking back over Wright's long career, then, we see a series of episodes in his relations to the fine arts. First there are the inherited attitudes, typical of the arts and crafts era, though we found them admirably summarized forty years before in Emerson's essay on *Art*. These attitudes remained influential, though not decisive, throughout Wright's development. Then came a period of experimentation with the works of artists around him, modeled on Sullivan's usage, which was no more than a measured application of Beaux-Arts conventions. Then, in about 1900 (perhaps stimulated by discussions with the arts-and-crafts Ashbee), Wright assayed an integration of the arts, using the available but mediocre sculptors and painters to extraordinary effect. Then, in 1914, came the adventure of Midway Gardens, and the start of Wright's experiments with his own painted and carved architectural embellishments. The following years in Japan confirmed his ready affinity with certain aspects of oriental arts; yet, despite the encouragement he received by artistic and bohemian associates in Japan and in California, he continued to develop his own expressions for some time. Eventually, oriental arts proved more apt to his sense of architecture as a space for living than either his own works or any Western painting and sculpture available to him. By the

1930s, Wright's attitudes toward the arts had gelled, and the full flowering of his architecture at the end of his life had little or no effect on this aspect of his practice. Assuming the role of senior prophet, which in some degree he had earned, Wright castigated modern art for its failure to conform to that image of the arts integrated with life found in the Emerson essay. Yet, faced with particular instances of the power of modern art and its exploratory courage, Wright responded to its value. He willingly worked with modern art despite instinctive reservations expressed in verbal denunciations; he hoped to see it round the corner into a fertile relationship with architecture, which to him remained the key art in human expression. Now that the Guggenheim Museum building is more sympathetically employed, we may hope for a gradually completer demonstration of the relationship Wright believed should exist, in an era of courageous individual exploration. He deliberately designed his building as a carefully implemented apparatus for sympathetic and varied presentation of individual expressions. Thus Wright accepted the specialization of the arts, which remained irrefutable throughout his life. If he dreamed of an ideal symphony of visual arts, he was nevertheless ready to score for the operative relationships that in fact prevail.