

EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPED WRIGHT'S WORK

Many experiences of Frank Lloyd Wright's life helped to shape his architectural philosophy and work. Here are a few:

FAMILY

Wright's mother's family, the Lloyd Joneses, had a strong belief in hard work, education and a love of nature. They were Unitarians and principled people. They lived by the family motto: "Truth Against the World."

Speaking of his grandfather in his autobiography, Wright said: "Relentlessly he taught his children to add tired to tired and add it again." Wright himself began learning "the gospel of hard work" when he spent summers on his uncle James' farm near Spring Green. He never lost his enthusiasm for work, often rising at the crack of dawn to begin an important project. Wright worked continuously until his death.

Lessons from nature and the natural world were always a part of Wright's early life as he explored the Wisconsin countryside. His mother, Anna, would often decorate the family home with branches and weeds, a practice Wright later adapted in his own homes. Wright admonished his own apprentices to "study nature, love nature, stay close to nature, it will never fail you." Wright believed that man developed spiritual benefit by living close to nature. His architectural designs are noted for bringing the occupants closer to the natural world.

And education played an important role. Wright's two aunts as well as his mother were teachers. Through his mother, Wright was introduced to the Froebel Kindergarten Blocks and later to the writings of Thoreau, Emerson and Blake. Wright carried on the family interest in education by starting his own school, the Taliesin Fellowship.

JAPANESE PRINTS

Wright was an avid collector of Oriental art objects, especially the Japanese prints. Both his homes *Taliesin* and *Taliesin West* are filled with objects from his collection. Wright did not view these valuable objects as something to be hidden behind glass cases or locked away. Rather he lived with them, often incorporating them into the very fabric of the buildings. Folding screens were built into the walls of *Taliesin* in Wisconsin, textiles were tossed over furniture, and valuable ceramics were placed on shelves. This is striking, particularly at *Taliesin*, where Wright retrieved Oriental treasures that had been destroyed by the fires and incorporated them into the walls of his home.

In his autobiography Wright recalled that "the Japanese print intrigued 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....And ever since I discovered the print, Japan has appealed to me as the most romantic, artistic, nature-inspired country on earth."

Wright made his first trip to Japan in 1905 in search of prints. A year later he staged an exhibition of his early collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. He also authored a book on the Japanese print.

Wright once wrote that the Japanese print is "one of the most amazing products of the world, and I think no nation has anything to compare with it." Between 1912 and 1922 he became one of the foremost experts and a merchant of the Japanese print. He would often discuss the beauty of the prints with his apprentices at "print parties" -- complete with traditional sukiyaki dinners -- held during the 1940s and 1950s at *Taliesin*.

The prints, with their asymmetrical composition, may have taught Wright to see things differently. He once wrote, "If Japanese prints were to be deducted from my education, I don't know what direction the whole might have taken."

THE FROEBEL GIFTS

In 1876 Wright's mother, Anna, discovered the Froebel gifts at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. These early teaching tools introduced Wright to geometry and spatial relationships at an early age. In his 90s, Wright said that he could still feel the shape of those maple blocks in his fingers. The blocks were developed in the 1830s by Frederick Froebel, the founder of Kindergarten. The blocks were one part of a system of Froebel training aids that included colored yarn and cardboard shapes placed on a grid.

By means of this system, Wright was taught to see abstract, geometric patterns in nature. Subsequently, he learned to create beautiful geometric abstractions based on natural motifs. This fusion of nature and geometry is evident in many of Wright's designs including the sumac windows and the butterfly lamps for the *Dana House* in Springfield, Illinois; the abstracted concrete "hollyhocks" for *Hollyhock House* in Los Angeles; and the abstract pine tree cut outs in the clerestory windows of the *Seth Peterson Cottage* in Wisconsin.

The geometric shapes were also used later by Wright as he developed floor plans based on a geometric grids. In addition to more standard grids, Wright also developed floor plans based on triangular shapes (*Richardson House*) circular shapes (*David Wright House*) and hexagonal shapes (*Hanna House* -- often called *Honeycomb House*.)

MUSIC

Wright had a life-long love of music -- especially the music of Beethoven -- that was instilled in him as a child by his father, a musician and composer. In later life, Wright recalled that his father had helped him to understand the structural similarities between music and buildings, by teaching him to regard a symphony as "an edifice of sound." According to Carla Lind in The Wright Style, "Music did not merely entertain him, but also enriched his life in many ways. It provided an analogous system that he could use to help translate his ideas into another art form, architecture."

In a talk with his apprentices Wright discussed the connection of music and architecture: "It seems to me that music is a kind of sublimated mathematics. So is architecture a kind of sublimated mathematics, and in the same sense. There lies the great relationship and warm kinship between music and architecture. They require very much the same mind." Wright said that both a composer's and an architect's thought process was a "building process. It was a proceeding from generals to particulars.... And that is why I like Beethoven so much, because I could see Beethoven build."

There were always several grand pianos in use at *Taliesin* and Wright would often sit down and play, sometimes improvising. At one time, he installed loud speakers on the top of *Romeo and Juliet Windmill* connected to a phonograph at *Hillside School*. There he would endlessly broadcast Beethoven throughout the surrounding countryside for all to hear, even the apprentices working in the fields.

LOUIS SULLIVAN

Sullivan was one of the few individuals that Wright ever acknowledged had influenced his work. Wright worked for the firm of Adler and Sullivan for six years, starting in 1887. He often referred to Sullivan as his "Lieber Meister" -- beloved

master. Sullivan was known for his architectural ornamentation based not on historical precedent but rather on geometry and stylized forms from nature. From Sullivan, Wright learned about integral ornament - ornamentation that was part of the building itself. Sullivan published two books, An Autobiography of an Idea and Kindergarten Chats in which he argued in favor of an indigenous American architecture not based on tradition or historical styles.

CONCLUSION

Although some historians have indicated various influences on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, Wright himself denied it. "Resemblances are not influences," he often said. He made his point more clearly when he stated: "To cut ambiguity short, there never was exterior influence upon my work either foreign or native, other than that of Lieber Meister (Louis Sullivan), Dankmar Adler (Sullivan's partner) and John Roebling (engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge), (the poet Walt) Whitman and (essayist and poet Ralph Waldo) Emerson, and the great poets worldwide. My work is original not only in fact but in spiritual fiber. No practice by any European architect to this day has influenced mine in the least. As for the Incas, the Mayans, even the Japanese -- all were to me but splendid confirmation."