

Interesting. From her talk to guides.

Modelling the Head of Frank Lloyd Wright
by
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Though I had done a few portrait heads of various people at Taliesin off and on over the years, it was solely for fun as the process of modelling a portrait head became more and more fascinating to me ever since my first attempt when I did a head of Kenn Lockhart. The second portrait head I modelled was that of Frank Lloyd Wright. Mr. Wright's head, however, was not done solely for pleasure, but in response to Mrs. Wright's asking me to do it.

It was in 1956 as I recall, at a time in Wisconsin when the tax authorities were coming to check us out and look over Taliesin to see whether we should be tax exempt as Mr. Wright had claimed we should be. That year, shortly after we arrived in Wisconsin, Mrs. Wright asked to see a number of us apprentices. She wanted to get people started in different areas of work besides the usual studio work, to show the tax people all that the Fellowship did. I remember Mrs. Wright asking Joe Fabris to set up the looms right after she asked me to do a head of Frank Lloyd Wright, not waiting for me to reply. That's how it all started.

Having had no previous training in the art of sculpture or any experience other than modelling Kenn's head, I was aghast at the thought of doing a head of Mr. Wright, but I could not argue or protest. It would have been totally inappropriate. And so, using a 10 X 12 photograph of Mr. Wright front face, by Karsh I believe, and a small profile on the back of a book cover of The Natural House I started immediately the work of building up the head in plasteline.

Much earlier that year I had watched Franco D' Ayala Valva working on a head of Mr. Wright. Dean Boris Blai from Temple University had asked and received permission to come to Taliesin West, for the purpose of doing a bust of Frank Lloyd Wright. At the same time that Mr. Wright sat for Dean

Blai, in the beautiful little room that used to be the dining room , several people from the Fellowship took advantage of the circumstances, set up their stands and worked on heads, too. These people to my knowledge included Joe Fabris, Giovanni Del Drago, Franco, Steve Oyakawa, and Kay Davison (now Rattenbury).

When Dean Blai finished his bust and left the desert, Franco was the only one who continued to work on Mr. Wright's head. I would occasionally go in to watch him. He explained to me how to "read" a photograph telling me that every change in light and shadow meant a change in contour, that lines in themselves were unimportant. Months later when I was working on my head of Mr. Wright in Wisconsin, I remembered clearly all that Franco had said even though at the time God knows I had no idea I would find myself in such a position.

In my inexperience and naivete, I didn't have any preconception about how I wanted the head to look; nor did I have any technique. At one point I was having trouble getting a likeness of Mr. Wright's nose. Somehow it wasn't right. At that time Mr. & Mrs. Wright were in New York, so I was forced to depend on the photograph and my memory. Then I noticed Eric's nose; it was just like his grandfather's. I asked him to sit for me, which he did and that was just what I needed. I was grateful.

I must mention , however, that at the other end of the Roberts' Room where I was working sat Franco's head. While still in the desert, Franco had abruptly left the Fellowship and gone to Mexico; something personal had come up which required his immediate attention. His head of Mr. Wright was packed up, taken to Wisconsin and put into the Roberts' Room. So there it sat the whole time I was working on my plasteline model. Everytime I "read" something new in the photograph, I would rush over and check out Franco's head. Sure enough, he had everything I ever saw, maybe more. His head and mine, however, were very different.

Mr. Wright himself sat for me only once when I was more or less through because I did not have his neck right. It was too thick, he said. Of course he was right and I quickly fixed the neck. I think Mr. Wright really preferred Franco's head; it was heroic in size and had an interesting rough surface texture. Mrs. Wright however, said she liked mine. Once I overheard Mr. Wright saying to Mrs. Wright, "But, Mother, did you see what she did to my hair?" I'm sure Mrs. Wright urged him to give me an acknowledgement of the work, a Chinese jade pendant on a black cord. I treasure it, of course.

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Because I had done a few portrait heads (I mean about six or seven including Mr. Wright's) during the mid-fifties and into the seventies, Mrs. Wright decided I was capable of teaching a class in sculpture. I was stunned and felt totally inadequate. I was never one with much self confidence or high self esteem. How could I, who was just finding my own way through the process of learning by doing, suddenly "teach" that thing to others? There was no arguing with Mrs. Wright, however.

So I had my "classes", but I did not pretend to teach. I merely told what I knew from my limited experience (and this I could say in about five minutes) and I tried to motivate people to make a sculpture of their choosing. We had the early morning time to work. During that time in Wisconsin, these classes took place on the balcony of the Hillside Living Room in the space used as a library during the Home School days. And so we had time to work and to think. I did not realize at the time how important that thinking was.

Mrs. Wright, knowingly or not, was very instrumental in helping me find my way ultimately into becoming a sculptor, a decision made quite deliberately by me in 1978 at which time I realized I would not make it in architecture. I had spent so much of my time in other areas, primarily in dance, drawing up costumes, writing dance notes, etc. and not enough

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must
have
been
about 1970*

time and effort in the drafting room. Not that I regret anything; on the contrary, I loved dance, and all those experiences and others went into making me what I am. But came that day in 1978 when I said to myself, what am I going to do for the rest of my life? And that's when I said to myself, I think I may have some talent in sculpture. (Was that my solar angel talking to me, urging me in this direction?) From that day on I worked, driven only by myself, to become a sculptor.

Looking back in retrospect, I see that in deed all things are possible and one can be whatever one chooses to be if you work hard enough in the right or Wright direction. Even though I chose sculpture and not architecture, it was clear that those things Mr. Wright talked about to us, especially on Sunday mornings, those basic organic principles and spiritual ideals applied to every kind of creative work. That inspiring background I received from Mr. Wright was always fundamental in my work, in my thinking.