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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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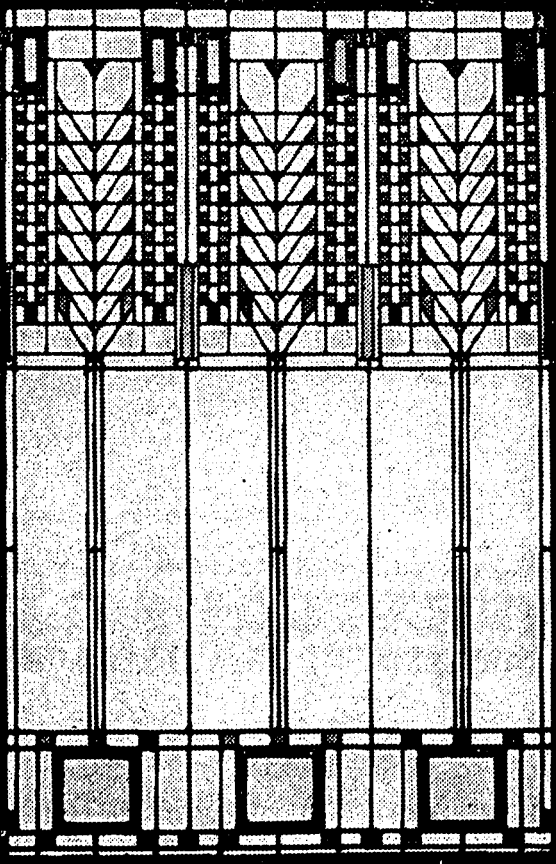

Frank Lloyd Wright: The Decorative Arts

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At Smithsonian, Decorative Art of Architect Wright

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THERE IS no excuse not to see the exhibition that just opened at the Smithsonian's Renwick Museum in Washington, called "The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright," because it will run through next July. But if you go during the holiday season, there is the bonus of the restored salon at the top of James Renwick's great stair, a grand 19th-century room furnished with what appears to be two of everything from the Smithsonian's collection of Victoriana, now dressed up with a fine pair of trees trimmed with antique paper ornaments. The overscaled, richly polished furniture is decked with holly, and the French gilt chairs seem to be waiting for a ball.

But the real reason to see this exhibition is that it is the first major show devoted to the ornament, decoration and furnishings that were so integral and essential to Frank Lloyd Wright's art. Although the display takes only half of the Renwick's ground floor, it is a compact and comprehensive presentation of an important, neglected subject. It is also the culmination of nearly a decade's independent research by David A. Hanks, who organized the show as guest curator, and whose book on the subject will be published by E.P. Dutton next year.

After Washington, the exhibition will go to New York University's Grey Gallery and Study Center, which has cosponsored the show, and then to Chicago's Art Institute.

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"The Decorative Designs of Frank Lloyd Wright" is a fascinating show, both for its badly needed documentation and the timeliness of its theme. Until now, Wright's architectural genius has been acknowledged, but his preoccupation with ornamental enrichment has been avoided, the whole subject pushed under the rug (which he designed along with everything else in his houses when clients and budgets permitted).

The Renwick's display includes chairs, tables, urns, lamps and windows from the now-classic Prairie Houses, those overwhelming residences built in what Robert Venturi, the architect, has called "the fabulous first decade of this century." There are pieces of office furniture from the Larkin and Johnson Wax Buildings, examples of china and silver (the one remaining creamer from Tokyo's demolished Imperial Hotel), fabrics and graphics.

A number of original drawings have been borrowed from obscure sources, such as the Steelcase Furniture files. The installation, by Val Lewton of the National Collection of Fine Arts, skillfully suggests Wright's small scale and flowing spaces in the Renwick's high, colonnaded rooms, while vignetting objects against photographs of their original settings.

The particular value of this kind of presentation is that it gives a clear idea of Wright's total esthetic, which can be quite puzzling when measured by textbook examples of modern design. As Mr. Hanks points out, most of Wright's interiors have been either altered or destroyed. Nothing is more vulnerable to change than this kind of design. Many buildings have been razed (the Harlan House and Francis Apartments in Chicago and the Larkin Building in Buffalo), others have been bowdlerized (the Robie House in Chicago), original furnishings have been replaced, friezes painted over and mosaics removed. Innumerable objects have disappeared.

Even conscientious attempts at preservation are often strikingly insensitive, adding up to virtual sabotage. Only a few structures, such as the remarkable Dana House of 1903 in Springfield, Ill., retain their original colors and details. The evidence suggests that Wright's color was notably gentler than current versions. The subtle harmony that he sought in his conviction that furnishings and fittings were part of an architectural whole is largely gone.

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Many of the objects Wright designed, loosed from their domestic moorings, have been avidly sought by architects or collectors; admiration for their distinctive decorative qualities has been a closet taste of modernists who have otherwise disdained such things or found them "difficult." We were treated to the spectacle, a few years ago, of disembodied, leaded glass windows from the Martin and Coonley Houses hanging in the air in a commercial gallery, where they sold for good prices to institutions and individuals. (Among the stars of this show are the superb Coonley Playhouse windows lent by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, their bright, abstract designs of circles and squares meant to suggest balloons, flags and confetti.)

But it is only when the artifacts are seen as part of the architecture for which they were planned that their art and intent are revealed. For Wright, the building and its components were inseparable. By seeing the objects with the original photographs, as we do at the Renwick, we begin to grasp the relationship between his architecture and ornament, and to really understand his style.

In fact, his style is something that we have been meticulously avoiding. The truth is that the decorative aspect of Wright's work has been both an embarassment and a dilemma to many of those who admire him. His overt love of ornament and the care he gave to its invention and execution, the transformation of naturalistic into geometric motifs much closer to Deco "modernistic" than to approved abstract art, his continuing tie to the arts and crafts movement that the machine esthetic rejected, the fact that he considered the decorative detailing as important as the architecture itself—all this has made modernists extremely uncomfortable. They have preferred to exercise selective interpretation, emphasizing such things as Wright's open planning and intersecting spatial planes.

They have been even more discomforted by Wright's rampant romanticism: all those weeds and field flowers arranged with careful nonchalance in exotic holders of the architect's design (always present in his renderings), the artful and arty studio atmosphere, the Cupid-and-Psyche kind of sculpture that he favored, the use of Japanese prints and crafts, not as a connoisseur, but as an admirer of the exotic—the

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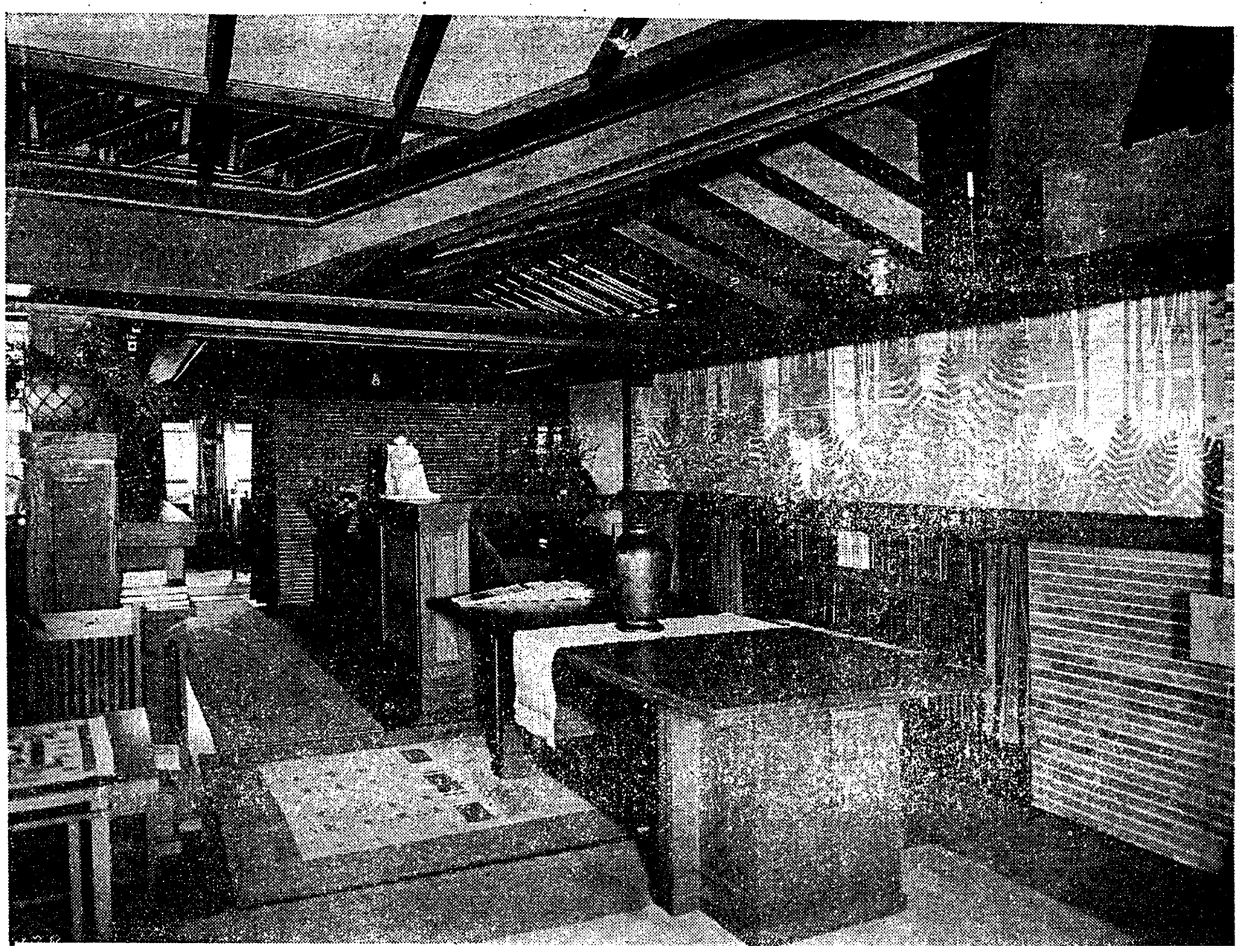
whole ambiance of craftsman-sentimentality that he never abandoned.

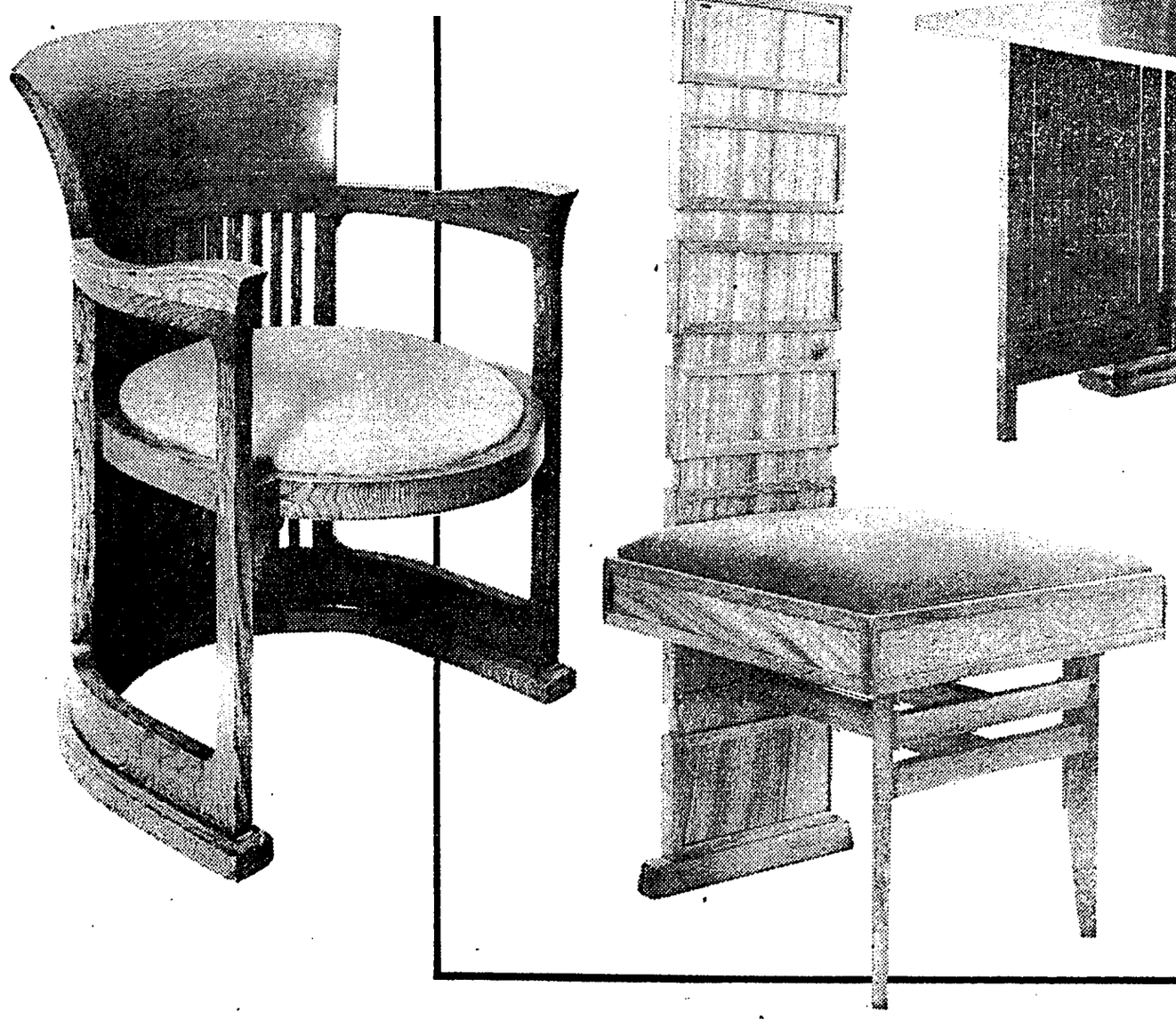
Most troubling of all to those who took their structural esthetics seriously was the casual legerdemain with which Wright turned house plans into fabric motifs, or used decorative abstractions —the circle, the triangle, the hexagon —almost indiscriminately for plans, furnishings and ornament. He simply did not play by the rules. He would not abide by accepted polemical definitions of structure and style.

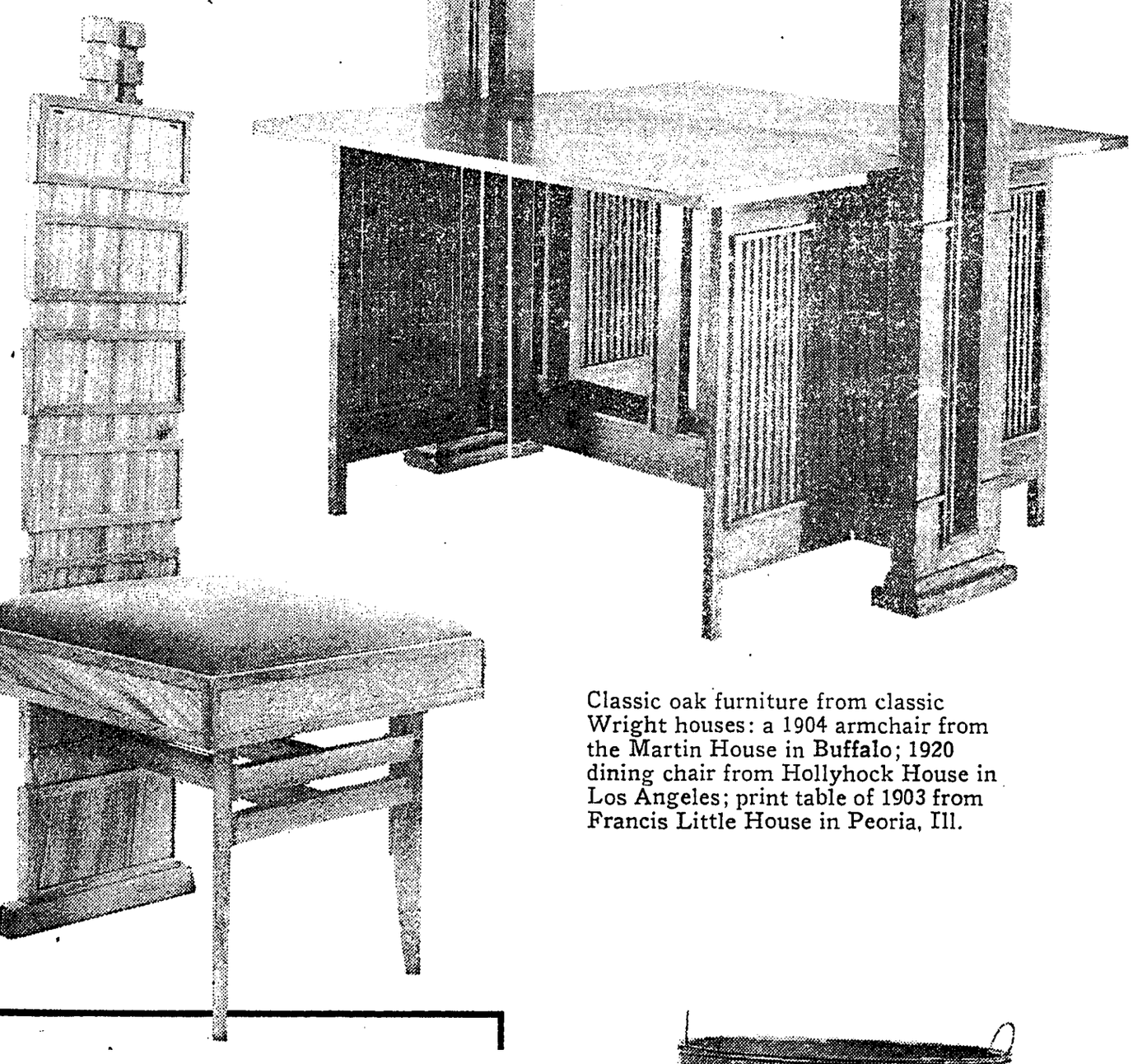
In retrospect, this attitude is also at the root of much of the beauty and wonder of such designs as Wright's "Hollyhock" house for Aline Barnsdall in Los Angeles in 1920, when that stylized flower became the dominating abstract motif of the house, inside and out; or the spectacular grace with which sumac—in geometric window-glass patterns and naturalistic wall friezes—formed an exquisite unifying theme of the 1903 Dana House. This kind of creative enrichment was brilliantly and uniquely his own.

A nostalgic, fashionable revival of Wright's decorative designs now would serve him as poorly as their previous neglect. This show that is a work of scholarship, however, offers a welcome balance and a fresh vision; it fits right into place in the current revisionist trends in art and history. We are in the process of learning much more about the marvelously complex adventure called modern architecture.

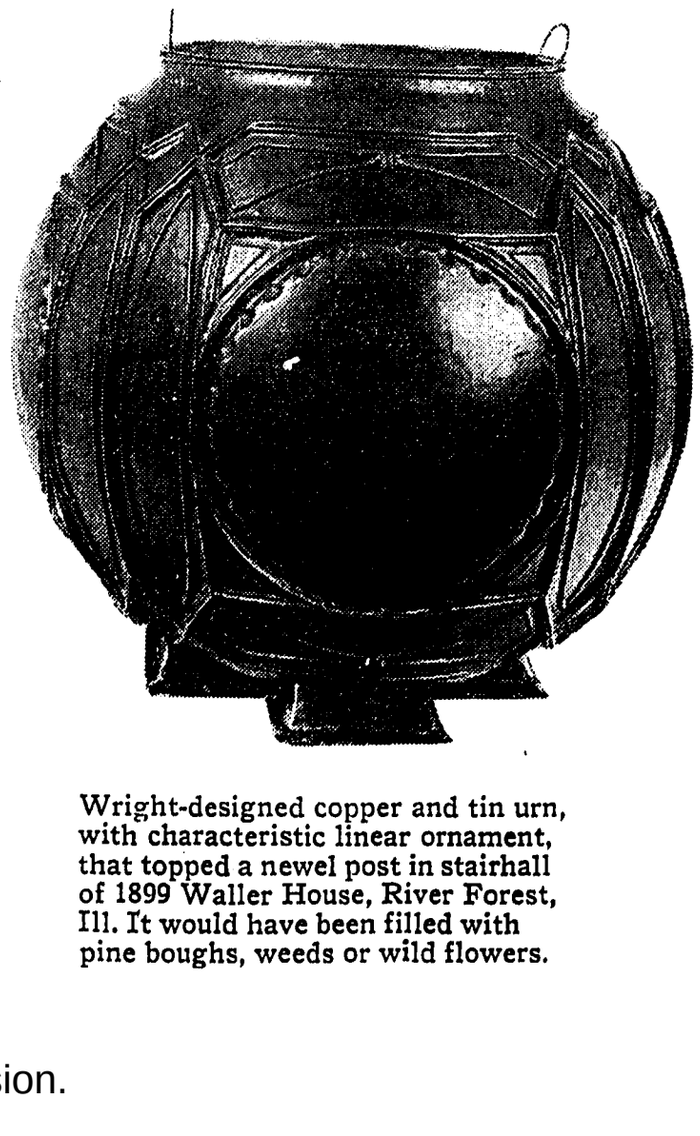


Coonley House in Riverside, Ill., one of the great Prairie Houses, as it appeared when Wright finished it in 1908, with objects designed, selected and placed by the architect. On Page C1, leaded glass window from 1905 Martin House in Buffalo.





Classic oak furniture from classic Wright houses: a 1904 armchair from the Martin House in Buffalo; 1920 dining chair from Hollyhock House in Los Angeles; print table of 1903 from Francis Little House in Peoria, Ill.



Wright-designed copper and tin urn, with characteristic linear ornament, that topped a newel post in stairhall of 1899 Waller House, River Forest, Ill. It would have been filled with pine boughs, weeds or wild flowers.