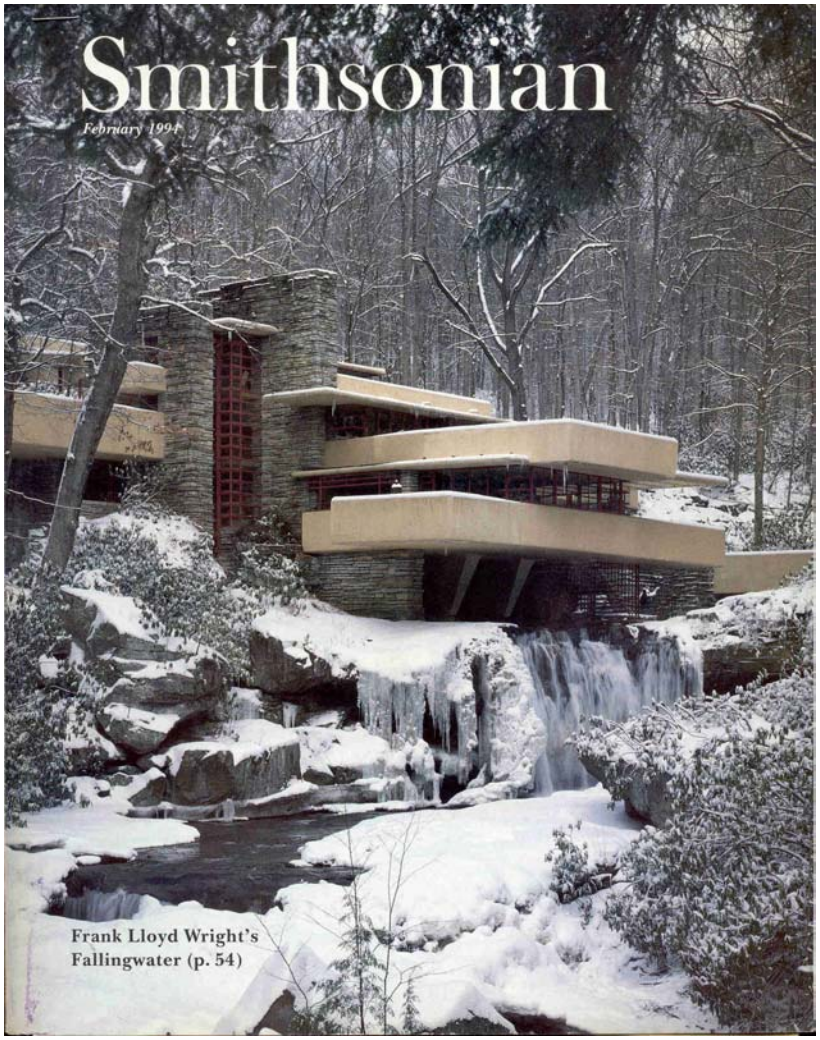
A GREAT ARCHITECT WITH LOVE FOR NATURE AND LOTS OF FIGHT

by Marilyn Secrest, *Smithsonian*, February, 1994

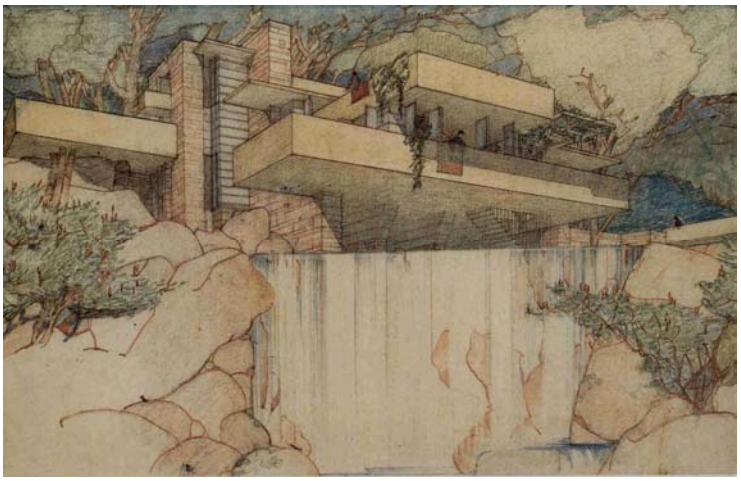
His reputation thrown into doubt after early success with his Prairie houses, Frank Lloyd Wright had a stunning finish



Fallingwater—its concrete terraces cantilevered over swift-moving Bear Run in Pennsylvania, is known worldwide. Wright's 1936 perspective view of the house is in the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Westhope, the house he built for his cousin Richard Lloyd Jones, is the subject of one of the many telling incidents in Frank Lloyd Wright's long career. Almost as soon as it was built, the roof began to leak. Lloyd Jones, in a fury, went to his desk and called his cousin. "Damn it, Frank," he raged, "it's leaking on my desk!" To which Wright calmly replied, "Richard, why don't you move your desk?"

Wright, imperious and cocksure, the architect whose roofs always leaked: this view coalesced during his lifetime. If he was anything, the great and flamboyant architect was considered a law unto himself, an aberration, a historical anachronism; hardly the seminal figure he loudly proclaimed himself to be. That was the verdict when he died in 1959. But Wright's reputation has experienced a strong revival; nowadays, few contest the claim that he is the greatest American architect of the 20th century. In recognition of his new eminence, on February 20 the Museum of Modern Art in New York City will open the largest retrospective exhibition it has ever devoted to an architect. Curated by Terence Riley and Peter Reed, it will give a complete historical overview of Wright's work. Beginning with his earliest engineering drawing of 1885, it ends with the projects he was working on at his death at age 91. The bulk of the 500 drawings, models and photographs is being lent by the archives of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona. The exhibition at MOMA will be complemented by other shows. The Metropolitan Museum of Art plans to exhibit Wright's decorative designs; the Lobby Gallery in New York City will display Pedro E. Guerrero's photographic portraits of Wright; and prints from the Wasmuth folio, a German publication famous for its 1910 monograph on Wright's work, will be on view at Columbia University's Temple Hoyne Buell Center. Further exhibitions will follow, since the archive that Wright left represents an almost inexhaustible legacy.



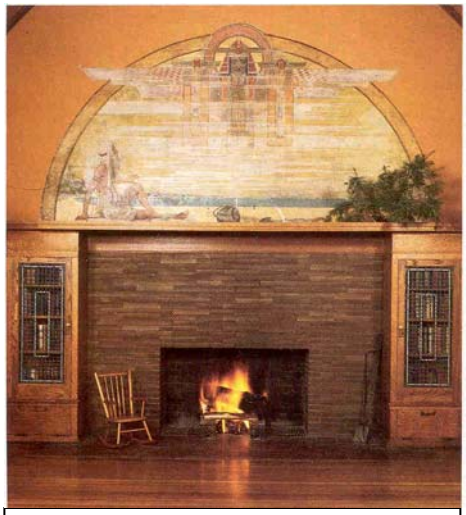
More Likable than most people realize

In 1939, with recent success of Fallingwater and other works, the confident Wright cut a dashing

Although Wright's professional status is secure, he is still often portrayed as someone so out of touch with the human needs of his clients that his houses were uncomfortable. As a person, he has been viewed as self-absorbed and egotistical, combative and deliberately contradictory about himself and his motives. There is truth to these perceptions, but a careful perusal of the voluminous letters and writings in Wright's archive, which is now open to scholars, shows a man far more tormented and likable than most people realize-one who was impulsive, mercurial and all too human, He was also absolutely faithful to his inner ideal of what American architecture should be. To the extent that Wright ever fell from grace, it was not because he had forsaken his high ideals, but because fashion abandoned him. He was always the same man, lonelier perhaps, angrier, ignored when not actually attacked, still pursuing his private demon even when none of his designs were being built. The comment once made by the late Chloethiel Woodard Smith, a Washington, D.C. architect, seems particularly appropriate: "Architects have been given the great gift of walking through golden halls that may never exist." Wright, it could be argued, was doing that almost as soon as he was born.

Wright's mother, Anna Lloyd Jones, one of a Welsh immigrant family of ten, had watched her father and brothers carve a homestead out of the wilderness, becoming carpenters in order to erect their first houses. The Lloyd Joneses had left Wales in the mid-1840s under a cloud; for generations their family had been preachers, but with such nonconformist views that they were persecuted even by other Protestants.

Anna was determined that the family would overcome its outcast status. One of her brothers, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, eventually became the minister of a famous Unitarian church in Chicago, and Anna's plan was that Frank would build churches and other noble edifices; they are just alike; only Jenkin preached, Frank builds," she wrote. The family's chapel in an idyllic Wisconsin valley near Spring Green was the first building on which Wright, as an adolescent, worked. Talking his way into a job with its architect, J. Lyman Silsbee, at draftsman's wages of $8 a week, he soon learned the basic elements of his craft. Then Wright landed an even better job with Adler and Sullivan, the largest architectural firm in Chicago. By 1887, when he was just 20, that firm was at work on the Auditorium Building, the city's largest building. Wright soon became one of Louis Sullivan's chief assistants.



A focus on the hearth, as in children's playroom of his Oak Park home, was a major theme of his work.

Sullivan, who coined the much-quoted adage that "form follows function," has been described as the primary influence on Wright's thought, but Wright's ideas had already been influenced by his freethinking Unitarian relatives, all of whom venerated Emerson, Thoreau and John Ruskin. By the time Wright met Sullivan, he already subscribed to Ruskin's belief that beauty existed in order "to convey the absolute values upon which a sound society must rest." Even the term "organic" which Wright used to describe his own work-comes directly from Ruskin. Ruskin believed that the architect had an obligation to improve society; Wright's mother drummed home the message.

Of his parents, Anna Lloyd Jones had the greater influence on Frank, not because his father lacked statute—William Carey Wright, the Harvard-educated son of a Baptist minister, became a minister himself-but because the marriage ended in divorce when Frank and his two sisters were still adolescents. Wright the elder disappeared, never to be seen again, and his mother's large family filled the gap in Frank's life.

His mother always paid his debts

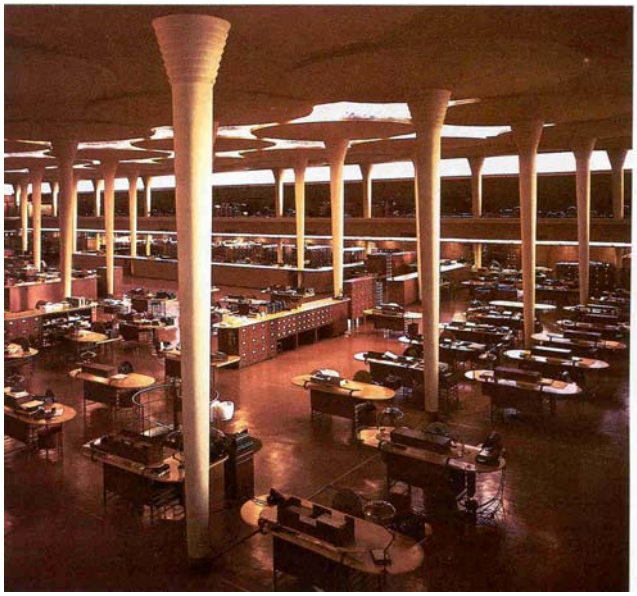
Anna sustained her son selflessly but, in her zeal to help, unwittingly encouraged him to become a spendthrift. She always paid his debts, fueling his lifelong belief that someone would inevitably rescue him from the consequences of his own folly. Perhaps not surprisingly' she set a pattern for the kind of woman to whom Wright would be attracted-artistic, idealistic, unpredictable and utterly devoted to him. In short order he married Catherine Lee Tobin, always called Kitty, whom he had met at his uncle's church in Chicago. He built a house outside Chicago, in Oak Park, and the couple had one child after another-there would be six in all.

Alteration of his Oak Park dining room in 1895 was early sign of Wright's move away from classicism.

While still with Sullivan, Wright was working in a classical tradition and was on his way to becoming, as architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock would write, the ablest academic designer in Chicago. Fired for moonlighting in 1893 in violation of his contract, he set up his own practice and soon began working in a totally new style, one that would mark his first great period as an architect. Early evidence of this radical departure came when he redesigned his own dining room in 1895 (opposite). Simplifying the decor radically, he emphasized the horizontal by means of wooden moldings, and the vertical by means of chairs of his own design with much-elongated backs composed of slats of wood. The floor was bare; the room's only concessions to decoration were some vases of flowers, leaded-glass windows with a pattern abstracted from a flower, and a carved wooden lighting grille in the ceiling.

Consistency and order, the elimination of superfluous detail, a return to natural forms, respect for materials: it sounded like the manifesto of a new order-and it was. The Arts and Crafts Movement, as it evolved in Britain in the 1880s, was a reaction against decades of mass production, and a revival of the concept of medieval guilds and beautiful handcrafted objects. The leading practitioner of the new movement was William Morris; and John Ruskin was the major theoretician.

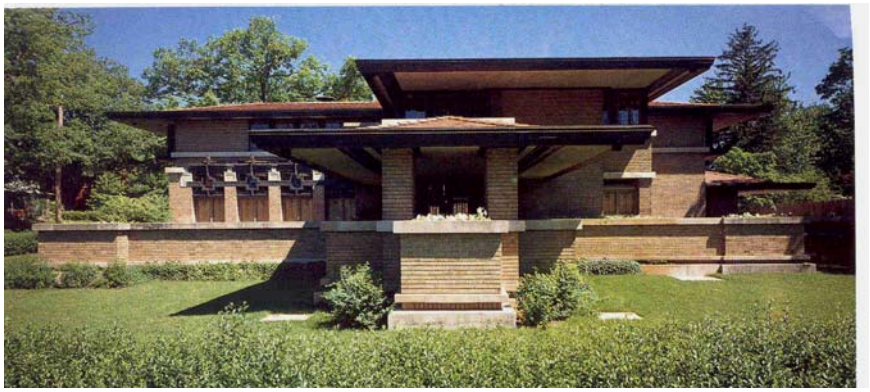
By the time Wright and his Chicago contemporaries became enthusiasts, the English style was well developed and was being shown in international magazines. Its adherents, however, espoused a set of principles rather than a style, giving Wright free rein to develop in his own direction. What he learned about unity of design would become almost an obsession, as his clients fought in vain to introduce what he considered foreign objects into his perfectly composed interiors.



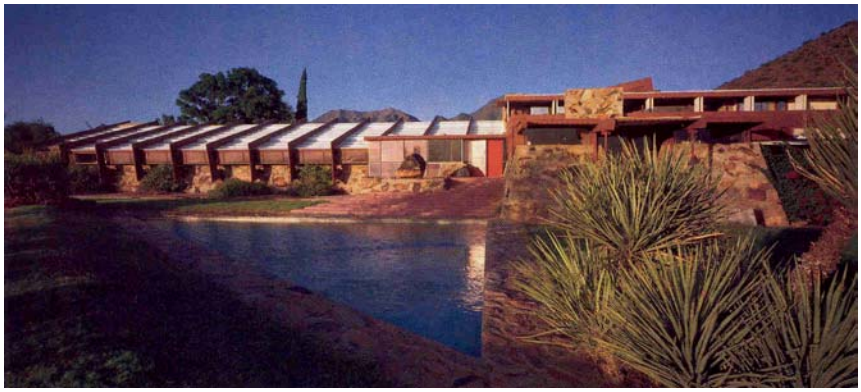
In the great workroom of the S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc. Administration Building in Racine, Wisconsin, Wright's slender "dendriform" columns bear weight, allowing him to flood the space with light.

Wright was often criticized for his low ceilings. In characteristic form, he confused the issue by claiming that, at 5 foot 8, he was tailoring them to suit his own height. In fact, he was a master of the theatrical manipulation of space. Since he realized that the eye cannot distinguish easily between slight differences in ceiling heights, he made them very low or very high. That sense of drama, the concept of a vast fireplace at the center of the house and the symbolic importance of the dining room were additional ideas advocated by Arts and Crafts architects. There were other important influences on his work as well, from the Froebel geometric blocks he had played with as a child to his lifelong love of Japanese art and design.

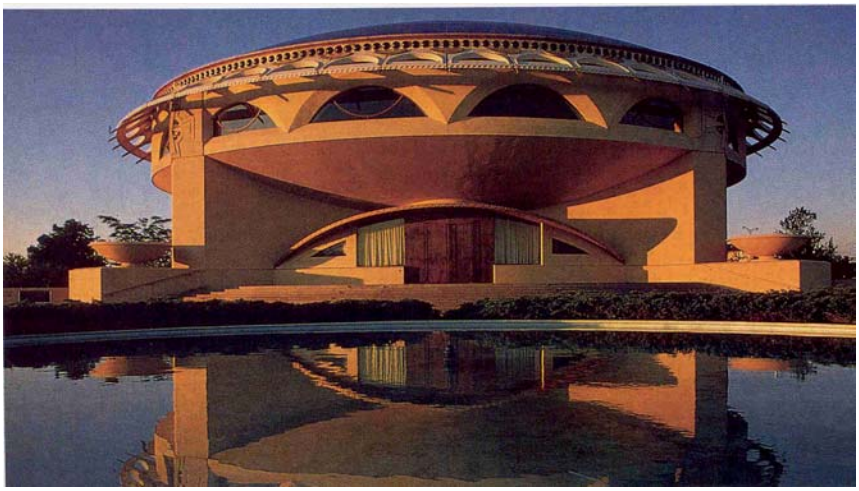
But this is not to imply that Wright was just an imitator. His great gift was his ability to transform the ideas of others and make them his own. He particularly distinguished himself in the way he integrated his "Prairie" houses with the landscapes of the American Midwest-hence the name. Stressing the horizontal with spreading roofs and bands of windows, he stretched out porches and pergolas into the surrounding gardens so that the house and setting merged into a harmonious whole.



From 1893 to 1909 Wright's firm had an astounding 273 commissions-many of them Prairie houses. It seemed, during those busy years, that he could do no wrong. No longer the outsider, he was a hardworking, upstanding citizen of Oak Park. When not hunched over his drawing board, he took Kitty to the theater, entertained, and rode his favorite horse, Kano, through the surrounding countryside. Driving his custom-made yellow sports car through Oak Park, his long hair streaming in the breeze, he presented the image of a man who had it made.



And then, suddenly, he threw it all away. Leaving his wife and children in 1909, he ran off to Europe with Mamah Borthwick Cheney, the wife of a client. He thought he could explain this act by saying the "honest, sincere thinking man" could not be governed by the rules that bound the "ordinary man." Defying unremitting public outrage, he settled down with her in 1911 in Taliesin, the house and workshop he built near the old family homestead in Wisconsin. Three years later, his life was shattered when Borthwick, her two children and four others were murdered by a crazed servant, who also set fire to the complex. The house at Taliesin burned to the ground. Only his studio survived.



Wright's search for harmony of building and setting links all his works; from the top, the Meyer May house in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1909), a Prairie house; Taliesin West in Arizona, which hugs the desert like a free-form tent; and the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a late work (1959).

During these difficult years, as his personal life disintegrated, his professional career began unraveling as well. In this country, the Arts and Crafts Movement gave way to a revival of the Colonial house, the new symbol of genteel culture. Internationally, the field of architecture was in ferment as influential Europeans such as Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe ushered in a new era. The Machine Age had arrived, confounding all the old values. The emphasis was still upon society, but it had shifted; now, instead of symbolizing national aspiration, buildings had to meet the goals of progress and social betterment for the masses. The notion that beauty existed to convey a society's absolute values had been thrown out, but Wright, to his detriment, was still wedded to it.

Wright rose to these challenges, as he would to bankruptcy, lawsuits and innumerable nuisance suits by his vengeful second wife, Miriam Noel, whom he met shortly after the tragedy at Taliesin. He wouldn't find lasting happiness until 1928, when he married Olgivanna Wright's search for harmony of building and setting links all his

works; from the top, the Meyer May house in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1909), a Prairie house; Taliesin West in Arizona, which hugs the desert like a free-form tent; and the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, a late work (1959). Hinzenberg, his partner for the remaining 31 years of his life. He survived flagging commissions after the completion of his famous Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (1923) and the ignominy of being considered, as noted architect Philip Johnson once quipped, "the greatest architect of the 19th century," with his best work behind him.

Through these years, Wright kept his courage up to "fighting pitch"; as he told his son Lloyd, "there is probably something coming before they shove your old man under." That was written in 1930; later in that same decade he would design Fallingwater in Fayette County, Pennsylvania-perhaps the greatest house of the 20th century (see cover)-and the S. C. Johnson Administration Building in Racine. These two commissions reestablished him as a major figure in American architecture.

Are Wright's buildings so impractical? Opinion is divided on that score. William Cronon, writing in the catalog for the MOMA exhibition, made Wright's leaking roofs something of a metaphor for all that was contradictory and unsatisfying about him as an architect. However, since Wright was hardly the only one designing flat roofs in the 1930s (a few others, such as Marcel Breuer, Walter Gropius and Richard Neutra, come to mind), it hardly seems fair to single him out for censure.

Daring designs, unorthodox drafting techniques

Jonathan Lipman, a partner in Prairie Architects, which is restoring Wright buildings, says that the cost of restoring these structures has been no greater than for any other historic buildings. Lipman does concede that since Wright tended to do daring things with his designs (e.g., extending roofs out to their utmost limit) some sagging is to be expected nowadays. But he denies that Wright's blueprints are hard to read, as is also claimed. Rather, he points out, Wright used unorthodox drafting techniques that his contractors could not always understand, giving rise to unnecessary problems.

There are equally convincing arguments attesting to the virtues of his buildings, particularly those of the Prairie houses. These were surprisingly warm in winter and cool in summer, thanks to Wright's attention to roof overhangs and the care he took with sources of heat and light. Yet all sides agree that Wright was primarily an esthete: his sister Maginel once found him sitting in the bathroom of his suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York, not yet redecorated to his specifications, because, he said, he could not bear the decor. The debate will probably never be settled.

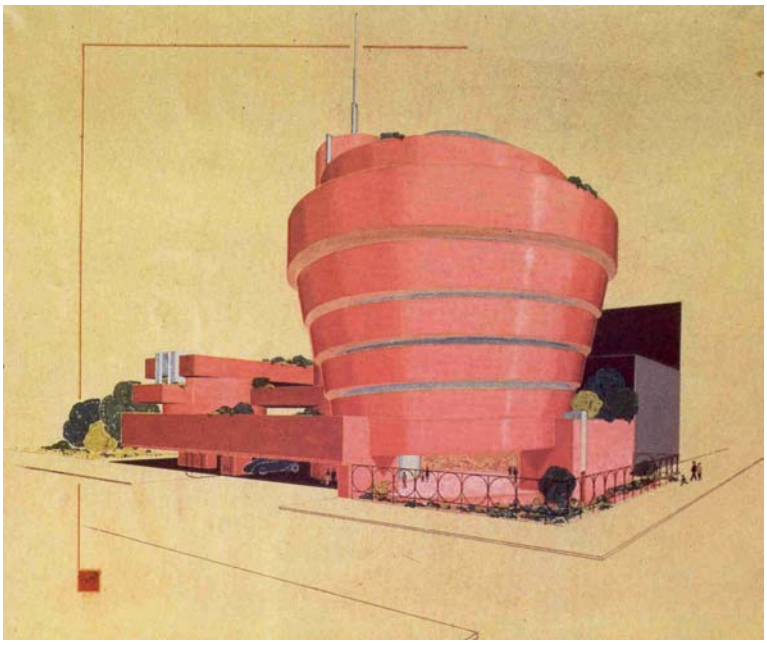
Unfortunately visitors to the MOMA exhibition will not be able to see an actual full-scale model house (something Wright provided in one of his own major exhibitions), which seems a pity. A model would help to convey a sense of Wright's masterful manipulation of space. For Washington architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen, to enter one of Wright's buildings is to embark on a voyage of exploration. "His spatial gifts were miraculous-his dramatic shifts in ceiling heights, his hidden entrances, the gift he had for making a little teeny house look five times bigger than it was," says Jacobsen. "These were great architectural tricks, and so many of us have been influenced by him, one way or another."

E. Fay Jones, the Arkansas architect who won the American Institute of Architects' Gold Medal in 1990, decided to become an architect after seeing a film about one of Wright's buildings for the S. C. Johnson & Son company. "I had to struggle not to be an imitator but to understand his principles," says Jones. Wright's sensitive response to nature and the care he took to place his buildings harmoniously on their sites, his respect for the nature of materials, and the underlying unity of his designs became Jones' lifelong goals. "Those principles are as relevant today as they were a hundred years ago," he observes.

The Balzacian scale of Wright's life and the quixotic battles fought, the "stern chase" in which he was involved, as he termed it, tested his resolve to the utmost. At one time it was fashionable to think that Wright designed nothing of value between his great Japanese work-the Imperial Hotel, which was finished in 1923-and Fallingwater in the mid-1930s. This view no longer holds, and the MOMA exhibition will place some emphasis on the works of those forgotten years when his interest moved, for the most part, from the verdant hills of Wisconsin to the West Coast. There, Wright turned for inspiration to ancient Mayan ruins, designing templelike buildings of monumental power,

such as Hollyhock House in Los Angeles. In later years Wright spent his winters on the outskirts of Scottsdale, Arizona, where he had acquired 800 acres in the desert and erected what he thought of at first as a modest camp. Taliesin West, with its slanting walls of stone and concrete, its redwood trusses and canvas roofs (later replaced with translucent white plastic), is now considered one of the inspired designs of his second golden age and is the center for his famous archive.

A triumph of organic form, the Guggenheim Museum was created by Wright (above, supervising work on it in 1957, two years before his death) around the concept of a spiral ramp; 1944 drawing (below) by Wright apprentice Peter Berndtson is in the MOMA show.



A love-hate relationship with MOMA

It is ironic that the museum that is now paying Wright its ultimate compliment should have helped convince him, during his years of obscurity, that he was being coldshouldered by his profession. When MOMA presented its first exhibition of modern architecture in 1932, featuring the International Style it fervently admired, Wright was included, not because he was part of that movement but as precursor of a style that better men had brought to triumphant fulfillment. The slight rankled for years. There was always a "love-hate relationship," despite the fact that MOMA made handsome amends in later years, says Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, curator of the Wright archives. Having felt himself to be an outsider, Wright was perhaps too easily bruised. He tended to compensate by making famously outrageous statements, such as: "Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance." One never knew the exact tone of voice used, but one guesses there was some selfmockery involved. Once, in court, he referred to himself as the world's greatest architect; when challenged about it, he said, "Well, I was under oath, wasn't I?"

What is missing from many descriptions of Wright is his personal charm, for which there are endless testimonials. (Often finding it hard to voice his anger, he expressed it in impulsive letters, full of exclamation points, which he later regretted.) His saving grace was a robust sense of humor. ("Doctors bury their mistakes; architects have to cover them with vines.") As his grandson Eric Wright once said, "After a horrible outburst he'd make some sort of witty comment and you'd have to laugh." He was, in the main, a happy extrovert, tireless, generous to a fault, and one who inspired enduring loyalty in those who came as apprentices and architects to Taliesin during the last 20 years of his life.

As many detractors as admirers

Wright's "second golden age" never came to an end. His final major work, a building for the display of Solomon R. Guggenheim's sophisticated collection of modern art, took years of thought. Guggenheim had bought the perfect site on New York City's Fifth Avenue, and perhaps for that reason Wright felt he had to design something as conspicuous as possible. For years he had been experimenting with the helix, and for the Guggenheim he envisioned the spiral form as an interior ramp that would allow for a continuous display of the museum's collection. Not only exceedingly difficult to build, the ramp's wall curved too sharply to accommodate larger paintings. People began to suspect he did not like art. The situation was not helped by Wright's fondness for walking through the collection, twirling his cane and asking, "What do you call this stuff?" Since the Guggenheim opened, it has had

detractors as well as admirers. "The debate will undoubtedly continue whether the Guggenheim is good or bad as a museum," says MOMA's Terence Riley. "What is undeniable is its sublime character-as a form and as a space."

Wright had learned, as he told well-wishers on his 80th birthday the secret of longevity: "a creative life is a young life." He had survived it all and triumphed. Six months before he died, in 1959, he was standing amid the scaffolding of the museum, wearing his characteristic broad-brimmed hat, his scarf flying around him-on top of the world.

By Meryle Secrest

Meryle Secrest's biography *Frank Lloyd Wright* was published in 1992 by Alfred A. Knopf; she has previously written four other biographies.