Art OF OUR TIME

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

Ulrich Museum of Art | Wichita State University
in association with the University of Washington Press
From the early 1890s until about 1918, Frank Lloyd Wright created a series of houses that were dramatically simple and spare compared to their still-popular Victorian-era counterparts. Likening their low horizontal lines to the dominant landscape of his native Midwest, he called them his "prairie style" homes. Inside, he erased traditional room divisions to create free-flowing interior spaces and designed furniture to work harmoniously, both in form and function, within them. "The most satisfactory apartments," Wright claimed, "are those in which most of the furniture has been built in as a part of the original scheme . . . as it is the only means of arriving at the very best results." Ultimately, he sought to make exterior and interior merge so that all parts of the home would interweave in a seamless whole.

Wright and his frequent collaborator George M. Niedecken created the present dining set for the home the architect had produced in 1915 for the Wichita newspaper publisher (and later Kansas governor) Henry J. Allen and his wife, Elsie. A Milwaukee–based designer, Niedecken partnered with Wright on eleven houses over fifteen years. Like Wright, he collected Asian art and sought artistic inspiration in nature; his straightforward furnishings reflected the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement as well as Wright’s desire to integrate all aspects of a home.

The Allen House furniture comprises pieces originated by Wright, originated by Wright and modified by Niedecken, and originated by Niedecken. He modified Wright’s dining-table design by lowering the chair backs, adjusting their rear stretchers, and altering the table’s extension system. With five leaves, the table expands to fill the dining room and accommodate up to a dozen people, who would sit below twelve wood-framed art-glass lighting panels. The table and high-backed chairs further delineate the space, creating a hallmark Wright effect – that of an intimate room within a room.

Wichita State University once owned the Allen House; it is now a historic-house museum run by the Allen-Lambe House Foundation. In addition to the dining set, the Ulrich Museum has a dressing table, a cabinet tabouret, and two twin beds on loan to the foundation. The Allen House and the Corbin Education Center on the Wichita State campus are the only two Wright-designed buildings in Kansas.

Emily Stamey


Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwartz is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwartz, won the Hendrickson Book Award and Prize.


About the Contributors

Advisory Board and Staff

Ulrich Museum of Art
Advisory Board, 2009–10

Carol Wilson, Chair
Joan S. Beren, Vice Chair
Martin Bauer
Kelly Callen
Ronald Christ
J. Eric Engstrom
Dr. Alan Feuer
Sonia Geretman
Edward Hilty
Lou Heldman
Trish Higgins
Jacque Kouri
Dr. George Lucas
Nancy Martin
Mike Michaelis
Jane C. McHugh
Jane F. Paulsen-Polk
Bruce Schreck
Shoko Kato Sevart
Chris Shank
Dwayne Shannon
Ann Townsend

Ex-Officio
Ted D. Ayres
Dr. Elizabeth King
John More
Dr. Patricia McDonnell
Dr. Gary C. Miller
Dr. Rodney Miller
Dr. Martha Shawver

Ulrich Museum of Art Staff

Linda Doll, Assistant Director of Finance and Management
Amee Geis, Curator of Education
Mark Janzen, Registrar and Collection Manager
Angela Lemine, Administrative Specialist
Dr. Patricia McDonnell, Director
Kevin Mullins, Curator of Exhibitions
Dr. Emily Stamey, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Teresa Veasey, Public Relations Manager