

The Influence of Japanese Art and Architecture on Frank Lloyd Wright's Designs.

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ABSTRACT

Although Frank Lloyd Wright is commonly recognized for establishing a unique American style, he drew a great deal of inspiration from Japanese art and architecture. Throughout his life, Wright was a collector and a dealer of Japanese art. He especially enjoyed the Japanese woodblock prints, known as *surimono* and *ukiyo-e*. Wright took charge of his designs down to the very last details, and often he integrated Japanese prints into spaces. However, it was not only the art but principles which Wright admired. Many of the principles which Wright integrated into his designs stem from Japanese principles such as simplicity, horizontality, asymmetry, and a connection with nature. He mixed Japanese ideas with abstraction and cubism to create buildings which were an abstraction of nature and reality. Inspired by the Japanese connection with nature, Wright established his own principles of “organic architecture.” He believed a building should be a part of its surroundings, rather than defying them. Because of this, he used organic materials such as wood, cement, stone, and canvas, and he used colors such as red and yellow which reflected nature. He believed that the Asian cultures were able to create poetic interpretations of nature through art and architecture, while the western cultures were painfully literal. Thus, he shied away from Western principles and drew his inspiration from the Japanese. He also put new ideas behind aspects of classic Japanese architecture, using sweeping roofs, horizontal lines, and small windows in abstract forms. Wright moved away from box-like Victorian homes, and instead strived to create more flowing, unified, and flexible spaces. Because of his adoration of Japanese art and architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright managed to draw from old ideas and create new, abstract representations of them and define a new style of architecture.

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INTRODUCTION

Frank Lloyd Wright was one of the most revolutionary architects of his time. In the late 1800's through the mid-1900's, he defied the increasingly popular International Style to create a fresh, new American style that was all his own. However, throughout his lifetime, Frank Lloyd Wright was deeply influenced by Japanese art and architecture. He acquired a vast collection of oriental screens, paintings, and various other commodities, but the items which influenced him the most were the Japanese surimono and ukiyo-e woodblock prints. He began collecting them early in his career, and he integrated them and their principles into his structures and interior designs. Wright was not only a collector, but also a dealer. He returned to Japan numerous times to trade, sell, and buy Japanese prints. Because he became so involved in trading Japanese art, he was asked to help design a new Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.

Wright's fascination with Japanese art and architecture relates to their underlying principles. First and foremost, he admired the Japanese connection with nature. The majority of his Japanese prints had organic elements to him, and he saw in this a poetic abstraction which he thought that Western artists were not able to capture. He also loved how Japanese architects incorporated the surrounding landscape into their structural designs. They had gardens and verandas which blurred the line between the indoors and outdoors. He called it a "living sympathy with nature," and tried to mimic it in his own designs. Wright kept to his own principles of organic architecture, which state that the structure should be the product of its environment. Like Japanese architects, he used organic materials, primarily wood, to construct his buildings. He believed that art is an

abstraction of nature and reality, and that the Japanese were able to achieve this with poetic beauty.

The art form which particularly inspired him was Japanese surimono and ukiyo-e prints. They are small drawings, approximately fourteen by eighteen centimeters in size, which were mixed with poetry. The most common kind of poetry used in these prints was called *kyōka*, consisting of thirty-one syllables. Surimono and ukiyo-e became popular in the eighteenth century during the Edo period of Japanese art. However, Frank Lloyd Wright's favorite artists, particularly Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige, printed in the nineteenth century. Wright regarded Hiroshige as one of the greatest artists of all time, and he liked to imitate his prints when creating his own presentation drawings. Common themes in the surimono prints were the New Year and the spring season. They were also created to commemorate special occasions. Surimono were made as farewell presents or to mark the anniversary of a friend's death. They were private prints, whereas the ukiyo-e were commercially sold and traded.

Wright also took inspiration in the Japanese style of architecture. The Japanese architects were able to create flexible spaces that mixed harmoniously with their surroundings. H. Mack Horton describes the Japanese style as one of contradictions. He says, "At one pole is the Sukiya style with its simplicity and understatement, its refined sense of design and exploitation of natural, unadorned materials. At the other is the Toshogu Shrine at Nikko, a riot of polychromy and sculpture that covers nearly every inch of available surface" (Horton 8). Wright incorporated both of these styles in his own buildings; structures such as Taliesin and Fallingwater have simple, clean lines, while structures such as Midway Gardens are full of ornamentation. Both Japanese artists and Frank Lloyd Wright used

natural materials in their architecture, favoring wood over everything else. Another aspect of Japanese architecture is that they favored rectangular shapes over curves and arches. Their structures were primarily single stories, but their use of horizontal lines and versatile furniture made their spaces seem spacious and flexible. Perhaps one of the most striking features of Japanese structures is their large, overhanging roofs. The eaves began as straight lines, but soon became curved due to the influences of Buddhist temple architecture.

Wright was drawn to the Japanese culture because he admired the harmony in their art and architecture. The deep connection and appreciation for nature is apparent in their works, and this was drastically different than contemporary American and European architects of that time. Wright felt that aspects of the Japanese style gave structures a distinct beauty and personality. He was an avid collector and dealer of Japanese art, and his own designs began to take on Japanese characteristics while still remaining uniquely American.

WRIGHT THE COLLECTOR

During his lifetime, Frank Lloyd Wright amassed an impressive collection of Japanese art. He became both a collector and a dealer of Japanese woodblock prints known as surimono and ukiyo-e. Nobody is sure when Wright first took an interest in the art of Japan, but he made his first trip to Japan in 1905 in pursuit of Japanese prints. Afterwards, he made multiple other trips to Japan to trade and deal these prints and other artwork. By 1908, he had such a large collection that he collaborated with Frederick Gookin to put on

a large Japanese print exhibition at the Art Institute in Chicago. He especially admired the work of Ando Hiroshige because of the spiritual and organic appeal of his work.

Wright liked to live surrounded by beautiful things, and consequently he often lived beyond his means. By his death, he had amassed enormous debt because of his expensive tastes. He did not keep all of his Japanese art in a vault, but rather incorporated them into his rooms. When he designed rooms for his clients, he would also sell them Japanese prints to display on the walls. When building Taliesin West, Wright actually built many of his Japanese ceramic sculptures into the outer walls. He felt that people should be able to enjoy beautiful things on a daily basis, even though this resulted in the accidental ruin of many of his pieces.

Because he became so obsessed with Japanese culture and artwork, it began to show in his work. The presentation drawings that he drew of his structures greatly resembled the works of Hiroshige in the way they were arranged. Wright preferred to use asymmetrical compositions, and he drew his structures with lush foliage around the edges to create a sense of continuing space. He also used some of the same drawing techniques as Hiroshige, with striated skies, a square red seal, and generally flattened style (Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese Prints 51). Between 1904 and 1906, he had his assistant, Marion Mahoney, render the presentation drawings for him. On the drawing for the 1906 De Rhodes House, Mahoney drew the house surrounded by trees and birds, making the house seem one with its surroundings. Wright even wrote on the drawing: "Drawn by Mahoney after FLW and Hiroshige" (Frank Lloyd Wright and Japanese Prints 51). The overhanging foliage in this drawing is reminiscent of Hiroshige's Maples at Mamma.

WRIGHT'S PRINCIPLES

Frank Lloyd Wright once admitted, "I have never confided to you the extent to which the Japanese print has such inspired me. I never got over my first experience with it and I shall never probably recover" (Japanese Print 116). Many of the principles that Wright applied to his structural designs were inspired by these Japanese prints. The most apparent principle that he took from them was simplicity. He loved how the Japanese artists could stress the beauty of a single element, such as a sandbank, a weed, or a bridge. He said it was the elimination of the insignificant which drew him to Japanese artists such as Hiroshige and Hokusai. In his 1912 essay, "The Japanese Print: an Interpretation," Wright wrote, "(The Japanese print has) spread abroad the gospel of simplification as no other modern agency has preached it and has taught that organic integrity within the work of art itself is the fundamental law of beauty" (122). Wright integrated this principle into his spaces by taking control of every detail from doorways to chairs and lamps. Closet spaces were also limited, forcing families that moved into his houses to cut back on superfluous possessions. In his structural designs, Wright preferred the use of simple, horizontal lines. This gives a building a more spacious feel in a smaller area, which was something that he believed the prints achieved as well. However, Wright did experiment with curvilinear forms later in his career in buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum. This building is one large spiral which contradicts the Japanese geometry which he frequently used in his structures.

Wright also admired the Japanese artists for their connection with nature. He once wrote, "Using this word Nature in the Japanese sense I do not of course mean that outward aspect which strikes the eye as a visual image of a scene... but that inner harmony which

penetrates and the outward form or letter and its determining character" (Japanese Print 118). All of the prints which he collected emphasized simplicity and the beauty of nature. Their art was a reflection of reality, and he integrated this principle into what he called organic architecture. According to this, the building should be a reflection of its environment and seem as organic as everything around it. This would give the building its own distinct character and allow it to exist harmoniously with nature. Organically inspired ornaments alone would not make organic architecture because it is the structure itself that must seem natural. Wright took in the surroundings when considering the design of a new building. For example, the cantilevered floors of Fallingwater are an abstract imitation of the waterfall on which it stands. Wright also stuck to his organic principles when choosing his building materials. He used primarily wood, and in the beginning of his career he also relied on cement, stone, and canvas because elements such as steel did not stick with his organic principles. He even shied away from using too much glass in his designs. In building Taliesin West, Wright used stone that was native to the area concrete made out of local materials. The stone and concrete were such a dominant part of the structure that it was a reflection of the rocky desert which surrounded it.

Like the Japanese artists, he wanted his designs to be a reflection and abstraction of nature, because he believed that beauty itself comes from natural elements.

Wright observed that, "With all of its informal grace, Japanese art is a thoroughly structural art" (the Japanese Print 117). Indeed, the structure and underlying geometry is one of the aspects which drew him to Japanese prints. The prints consisted of primarily rectangular forms and straight lines. Wright believed that structure created beauty, so he

often used the same kind of geometry in his structures. He favored asymmetrical compositions and horizontality, but in some of his later works, such as the Guggenheim Museum, rely on curves and arches. One of Wright's principles of design was form over function. This meant that comfort was sacrificed for artistic quality and beauty. Wright designed every aspect of his homes, and the chairs were often stiff and uncomfortable to sit in for long periods of time. However, his designs are artistic and reflect the beauty and serenity which he admired in Japanese artwork. The beauty in these prints came from their simple, natural compositions, and he tried to mimic that in his architecture. This gives his buildings character and a personality of their own.

INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

Frank Lloyd Wright was deeply influenced by principles of Japanese architecture as well as art. Although his buildings are not necessarily oriental in appearance, critics have observed many aspects of Japanese architecture that Wright integrated into his work. Japanese homes are famous for their flexibility of space; the interior of a room can be altered for different occasions by using screens and furniture while still harboring a unified feel. Wright designed the interiors of his buildings down to the very last details, so he designed the furniture to have that same sort of flexibility. He rejected the Victorian idea of a house being a set of box rooms, so he used open spaces, doorways, and screens to unify the spaces while still keeping the feel of a room. In effect, Wright designed homes have a more spacious feel to them. Wright designed Usonian homes for middle-income families. These were smaller, but he used the Japanese principle of flexibility and open space to make them feel spacious.

Wright also mimicked the Japanese use of straight lines and horizontality. Japanese buildings were single story structures, and they preferred to build horizontally than vertically. The influence of this shows in Wright's Prairie Houses, which have flat horizontal lines designed to blend in with the flat country around them. They are an example of his organic architecture principles merging with the ideas of classic Japanese architects. Wright also liked to emphasize the horizontal joints rather than the vertical ones, as is apparent in the 1904 Larkin Building. This was an office building with multiple stories, but Wright used horizontal lines to lessen its vertical appearance. Horizontal lines in architecture have the tendency to make a building appear more spacious, and Wright disliked the modern skyscrapers and the International Style because they stressed vertical lines that stressed height rather than space.

Wright's work often appears to be more abstract than oriental; however, his love of cubism actually stems from his appreciation for the Japanese art and architecture. He wrote, "A Japanese artist grasps form always by reaching underneath for its geometry... By this grasp of geometric form and sense of its symbol value, he has the secret of getting to the hidden core of reality" (The Japanese Print 118). He believed that the structure of a thing enhances its beauty, and he thought that the Japanese were masters of this principle. Geometry was one of the main elements which drew him to the Japanese art and architecture as a source of influence. When designing the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Wright kept in mind the traditional Japanese style, but also the geometry that was apparent in their works. He designed the rugs of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Japan with squares in the center as a dominant motif. This motif, which resembles the Ichikawa

family crest, shows how Wright was able to modernize old Japanese ideas, and also in corporate cubism and abstract themes into an Oriental-inspired building.

Some other aspects of Wright's architecture are clearly influenced by the Japanese style. Many traditional Japanese structures sport large, sheltering roofs which Wright liked to incorporate into some of his buildings. Wright's own home at Oak Park as well as his prairie houses feature low hipped roofs that hang over and protect the windows. Spencer Hart, an architect critic and author, observed the similarities between Japanese architecture and the style of Frank Lloyd "Including small windows covered by rhythmic wooden grilles; bold, geometric structural forms; flexible, translucent screens in place of interior walls..." (17). Wright took classic Japanese ideas and utilized them in new ways. His stained glass window designs are a modern take on the wooden grilles of Japanese structure, and he also took the geometric designs to new levels in creating cubist art. He also designed furniture that reflected Japanese style. A notable example of this is the wooden floor lamps in the Sherman W. Booth house, which are designed to look like Japanese print stands (Hart 10). In the Peter A. Beachy house, the ceiling beams that support hanging lamps remarkably resemble a Shinto torii, or temple gates.

THE ROLE OF NATURE

Frank Lloyd Wright had a reverence for nature that appeared in many of his designs. He said, "Although our practice for centuries has been, for the most part, to turn from (Nature), seeking inspiration in books and adhering slavishly to dead formulae, her wealth of suggestion is inexhaustible" (Levine 10). He believed that Japanese artists achieved better interpretations of nature because their work was more poetic, while the

work of westerners was painfully literal. Thus, Wright shied away from Western form and searched for the aesthetics which would make his buildings works of art. He used his principles of organic architecture to create new abstractions and interpretations of nature and reality. According to these principles, a structure should grow naturally out of its surroundings; or rather, the architect should use the surroundings to form the building. His prairie houses were low and horizontal, reflecting the low, flat grasslands which surrounded them. When designing Fallingwater he used cantilevered floors to mimic a waterfall and when designing Taliesin West, he used stone and concrete to mimic the rocky desert. Wright thought of the name for the original Taliesin, meaning shining brow because it was built on the side of a hill. He felt that when a house is built on top of a hill then the hill is lost. This also shows how in touch he was with nature, building structures to compliment rather than destroy it.

Some of Wright's earlier landscape designs are referred to as garden rooms because they blur the lines between the home and the outdoors. The living spaces were extended into the environment by use of terraces, balconies, and semi concealed entrances. An example of this is the Darwin D. Martin house in New York. This house includes a hundred foot gallery enclosed by an opening to a conservatory. Wright believed that landscaping should supplement, not implement nature. He strove to keep his landscape designs as natural as possible, using native plants that would thrive. These garden rooms are similar to Japanese style architecture. The architectural critic H. Mack Horton wrote, "There is moreover a fluidity in Japanese architecture between inside and out... The veranda therefore serves as a transitional space, regarded as part of the building when viewed from the exterior, and as part of the outside world when viewed from within" (10).

Wright strove to achieve this kind of living sympathy with nature and fluidity which he admired in Japanese structures.

The influences of Japanese culture and nature are particularly apparent in the architect's use of color. The most prominent and widely used color was red; this was an important color in Japanese society as well as a natural element. Taliesin West especially showcases a large amount of red: percales, doorways, and furniture were all designed using red accents.

This is inspired both by Asian influences and the reddish stone of the Painted Desert. In Taliesin West's Cabaret Theater, all of the furniture and accents are red. The doors are bright red with oriental-style carvings on the handles and backs. All of the structures at Taliesin West are abstractions in which Wright was able to incorporate themes from the desert with his love of Japanese art. Wright used a variety of other natural tones in his designs as well. Spencer Hart wrote, "Certain colors recur frequently in Wright's work, most of them drawn from nature: the rich golds of sunlight, autumn and prairie grass seedheads; the olive green of various trees and wayside plants; the soothing muted tones of winter landscapes; and bright splashes of pumpkin orange, cerulean blue, and Cherokee red" (12). Wright uses these colors to highlight form and keep with the composition of the structure's surrounding. Much like the principles of Japanese art and architecture, Wright kept his designs close to nature in his use of color and form.

Part of the Asian culture which enhances their relationship with nature is the Buddhist and Taoist beliefs. Although Wright was not a very religious man, he wrote, "The expression we seek and need is that of harmony or of the good; known otherwise as the true; often spoken of as the beautiful, and personified as God" (The Japanese Print 123).

This direct correlation between beauty and God can be seen in how the Asian religions portray nature in art and architecture. One of the goals of Buddhism is to reach a state of nirvana, where one transcends the suffering of life and becomes one with nature and the universe. Thus, these artists have a great reverence for and connection with nature.

Because they are more closely connected with nature than some of the western cultures, the Japanese are able to reach poetic interpretations of reality whereas westerners interpret nature more literally. Japanese artists use the form and geometry which they find in nature, and this is also what Wright tried to incorporate into his organic architecture.

CONCLUSION

The designs of Frank Lloyd Wright helped to create a uniquely American style, but throughout his career, the architect was deeply influenced by Japanese art and architecture. He took inspiration from the principles of the Japanese culture and worked them in with his own ideas to create buildings that were an abstraction of nature and reality. Wright admired the Japanese connection with nature, so he stuck with his principles of "organic architecture." He believed that the Asian cultures were able to create poetic interpretations of nature, while the western cultures were painfully literal. Beauty came directly from nature, structure, and geometry. Wright used organic materials and principles to make his buildings more natural. He believed that they should be a natural product of their surrounds, so he designed landscapes to supplement the environment around his structures. His color choices reflected the environment as well with yellows, oranges, and browns. His favorite accent color was red, which has importance both in nature and in the Japanese culture. Wright also successfully integrated

nature into his designs with his garden rooms, which were strikingly similar to the Japanese verandas. Both of these tended to blur the distinctions between the home and the environment.

Japanese surimono and ukiyo-e prints particularly inspired him. From them he was able to build his own design principles that would keep the beauty and integrity of the environment. The prints stressed simplicity and natural beauty, which Wright integrated into his structures by using straight horizontal lines and little ornamentation. Of course, some of his structures are exceptions to these principles, but for the most part they reflected Japanese ideas. He used these classical ideas in new ways. Wright's work was often abstract, and he was a fan of cubism. He believed that the underlying structure and geometry of the Japanese prints made them beautiful, so his buildings became very geometric and asymmetric.

Wright used aspects of classic Japanese architecture in new ways as well. Roofs, horizontality, and small windows are just some of the aspects of his work which parallels Japanese structures. Wright admired how the Japanese were able to create flexible spaces, so he did the same by using screens. He rejected the modern International Style and the old, boxy Victorian style of architecture. He created open floor plans which helped the rooms to flow together to create a single unified space. This also made his rooms feel more spacious. Using such Japanese principles, Frank Lloyd Wright was able to create a style of architecture that was neither European nor Asian, but simply American.

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