

The Frank Lloyd Wright house and studio, Oak Park

Oak Park, situated just beyond the city limits of Chicago, is a late 19th /early 20th century suburb containing a number of houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, one of the first architects to design and supply custom-made furniture in his commissions for private houses. His ideology was for complete harmony between the site, the structure and the exterior and interior design, including furniture and ornament. His goal was 'To thus make of a dwelling place a complete work of art ... this is the modern American opportunity.'¹ He did not trust his clients to furnish their homes in a way which would do them justice: 'Very few of the houses, therefore, were anything but painful to me after the clients brought in their belongings.'²

His furniture designs, both for his own home and for the Oak Park houses of the early 1900s, are influenced by both the Arts and Crafts Movement and by his enthusiasm for Japanese design seen at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. He wanted solidity and simplicity, straight lines and rectilinear forms. He favoured minimal finishing: 'Wood best preserves itself. A coating of clear resinous oil would be enough.'² And: 'Strip the wood of varnish and let it alone – stain it.'³ But, unlike the Arts and Crafts designers, Wright saw the value of machines. He admired their 'cutting, shaping, smoothing and repetitive capacity.'⁴

At his first home and studio, Wright's oak joinery in panelling, staircase, window seats and cupboards is found throughout the building. Freestanding furniture includes armchairs, beds and a dining suite comprised of a table and high-backed spindled chairs. The furniture, though good to look at, is notoriously uncomfortable: 'I have been black and blue in some spot, somewhere, almost all my life from too intimate contact with my own furniture.'²

Martin Body and Keith Robinson

1 *The Wasmuth Portfolio* (Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright) (Berlin, 1910)

2 Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography*, 1943

3 Frank Lloyd Wright, essay in *The Architectural Record*, Chicago, March 1908

4 'The Art and Craft of the Machine', lecture by Frank Lloyd Wright to the Chicago Society of Arts and Crafts in 1901



Fig. 2 (top) Frank Lloyd Wright table and dining chairs

Fig. 3 (bottom) Frank Lloyd Wright armchair