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Frank Lloyd Wright’s Photographic Eye

By David Joseph Marcou.

Cover photos: (Top to bottom) FLW’s 1st Wife Kitty Rds to Child, FLW, Frank Lloyd Wright, ca. 1940, by Edward Steichen.

Author David Joseph Marcou, photographer-credit Matthew A. Marcou.

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Paramount architect Frank Lloyd Wright (born in 1867 or 1869, sources vary; died in 1959) knew perfection is not viable; the ideal is. He said, "Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose honest arrogance...." (http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Frank_Lloyd_Wright; The World's Best Thoughts on Life & Living, 1981, compiled by Eugene Raudsepp; also quoted in The Michigan Daily, November 10, 1998.) Although he often touted his architectural gifts, Wright rarely praised his own photographic eye. Humble sometimes, he knew photos provide valuable details, especially for an architect. (Frank Lloyd Wright: A Biography, by Meryle Secrest, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, p. 198.)
Although semi-functional, organic design and construction is a hallmark of Wright buildings, so too is integral picturesqueness. It's relevant he was an "enthusiastic amateur photographer", as Harvey Einbinder writes in *An American Genius: Frank Lloyd Wright*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1986, pp. 100-101) Few have commented on his avid photographic interest. But his eye rarely failed him; it helped that he liked good photography and took many capable photos himself. And some of his building-designs even resemble camera structures and processes.

Einbinder states about Wright's houses, "His assistants had used his photographs to prepare perspective drawings and copied such details as trees, bushes, and half-open windows from his photographs." For his early European forays, "he utilized these perspective drawings to prepare the plates for the Wasmuth folio with the aid of tracing paper and fine quill pens."
Documentation for Wright's photos is sparse; he was a builder, not a historian. And he realized his best skills were in drafting and design, not photography -- though he took care about photos, he did not feel as technically strong there as with buildings, and possibly did not want to diminish his artistic fame by over-documenting his camerawork. Also, his inattention to non-design details may have been abetted by three fires that destroyed his headquarters and some early photos. But his early photo-experiments helped with key aspects of design. As Ada Louise Huxtable writes in *Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Penguin, 2004, p. 89): "The buildings of this period [1895-1905] would stand as icons of American architecture even if Wright had never done anything else. What they [40 houses plus Oak Park 's Unity Temple and Buffalo's Larkin Building] all have in common is a strong original vision and a faultless eye for scale and detail."

Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archivist Margo Stipe writes (in an Oct. 17, 2006 e-mail to your author): "For his buildings, at least as far
as publishing images, Wright seems to have relied on professional photographers: [Henry] Fuermann, [the photo-firm] Hedrich Blessing, Pedro Guerrero, Maynard Parker and Ezra Stoller among others. There are some early family photos and a series or two of what are believed to [be] self-portraits.... I believe the Hillside Home School photos are also supposed to be his."

Two of his aunts operated Hillside Home School on the grounds of present-day Taliesin East, Spring Green, Wisconsin. Young Wright designed and photographed it. Wisconsin Historical Society Visual Archivist Andy Kraushaar writes (in an e-mail to your author on Oct. 10, 2006) that good documentation for those collotypes is lacking, but generally the images are considered Wright's. Hillside Home School would become Wright's architectural apprentices’ school. At Hillside, Wright apparently made a distinctive photo of men and women golfing, and a photo of a girls' gym class. A nice 1905 photo of people in white
dancing round a May-pole may also have been his.

Wright also did nature studies, including photos of dried weeds that accompanied his pen-and-ink flowers in *The House Beautiful*, in 1895. It was hypocritically-fated ideas on love in the sermon there by William C. Gannett, editor of *Unity*, that later outraged Wright's first wife, Catherine, when he was having an affair with Mamah Borthwick. (Secrest, pp. 155, 193.)

In 1900, Wright made photo-portraits of his friend British architect C.R. Ashbee. The latter was a leading proponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which Wright appreciated. His best Ashbee portrait is Steichen-like. (*Frank Lloyd Wright: Europe and Beyond*, edited by Anthony Alofsin, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 125, 128.)

In 1905, Wright made his first trip to Japan and took intriguing photos of people and environments for a photo album later published as a book. (*Frank Lloyd Wright's Fifty Views of
Japan: The 1905 Photo Album, edited by Melanie Birk for the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, Pomegranate, 1996.) In his groundbreaking essays ("Wright the Photographer" for that book and “Wright’s Photography” in the January 1991 issue of Frank Lloyd Wright Quarterly), Jack Quinan states that not only was Wright an avid photographer, but a photo-innovator. Until Wright took up photography in 1890, buildings in architectural photos were often decontextualized -- with foliage, humanity, and peripheral structures erased. With Wright's informed eye, he saw the scene as a totality, with all parts integrated; Wright reversed that element in the photographing of buildings, and designed buildings for their natural contexts, too.

Quinan notes that, often, "Wright used a 4X5 camera, possibly tripod-mounted, with a wide-angle lens and an adjustment feature, such as a movable back plate, that enabled him to correct for parallax." He understood how to keep all planes of photos in focus. Quinan also states, "These are not 'art' photographs, such as Laura
Gilpin's photographs at Chichen Itza or Atget's of Paris, but they are carefully composed, sharply focused, and consistently well printed."

Born of Welsh ancestry in Richland Center, Wisconsin, to a mother who had said before his birth he'd be an architect, and a charming, penniless preacher-father banished by the mother in 1885, young Wright understood "picturesqueness". Southwestern Wisconsin has abundant picture-perfect scenery in the Driftless Region (variously affected by glaciers during the Ice Age), including rolling, tree-covered hills and stirring waters. At Spring Green, he built his first great house-school on the brow of a hill; Taliesin was named for the ancient Welsh druid-poet-mystic, whose name means "shining brow". Though Wright's widow, Olgivanna, later moved his remains to Taliesin West in Arizona, the master-architect always felt Wisconsin was his home, despite tax and divorce troubles.

Brendan Gill, in *Many Masks: The Life of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1987, p. 21), gets to the point of Wright's
interest in picturesqueness in a photo-portrait

caption: "FLW in his eighties. Pretending to
deplore the eagerness with which people sought
to take his picture, he would then pose tirelessly
for them." To cultivate and extend his image as
not only America's greatest, but the world's
greatest-ever, architect, he exercised his
photographic eye to look his best, including
superbly coiffed hair and dandyish garb, while
promoting images of himself and his works that
many still admire. And yet, fellow Wisconsin-
raised Steichen made a different photo-portrait
of Wright in 1931 making him look "about
ninety-five years old." We all age, and even the
great Wright aged, and eventually died.
Steichen's view predicted Wright's human
future, but the monumentality of Wright's legacy
is also hinted at there. (Secrest, p. 526)

Known to have a Twainian streak (hence, his
"two" birth-years), Wright enjoyed taking
photos and the occasional lark, but his own
images do not fully signify his genius as artist.
Yet, they do symbolize his skill in finding and
creating designs that fit our world – solidly enough, and beautifully.

Wright experimented photographically, but his not trumpeting his photo-talents echoes St. Augustine, "Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility." Frank Lloyd Wright knew he wasn't God, but God's right-hand; and as a photographer, he saw life from a builder's foundation, as an "anonymous" talent, which everyone likes to be at times, even God-like celebrities.

David Joseph Marcou lives/works in La Crosse, WI, not far from Mr. Wright's birthplace, Richland Center; his ancestors include explorer Louis Joliet, farmers, teachers, meat-cutters, and shop-owners; he has six siblings and a married son -- talented photographers, artists, and writers themselves. David used to teach adult writing and photo classes for Western Technical College; has authored more than 115 books (including the 'Spirit of America' series); and has also been published in the ‘Milwaukee Journal Sentinel’, ‘Wisconsin State Journal’, ‘Capital Times’, ‘La Crosse Tribune’, ‘Catholic Life’, ‘British Journal of Photography’, ‘RPS Journal’, ‘Korean Culture’, ‘New York Times’, and ‘Smithsonian’, among many. His writings have twice been nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, including his play ‘Remembering Davy Crockett’; and his photo-books twice nominated for Pictures of the Year International Awards. David has earned degrees in History(BA), American Studies(MA), and Journalism(BJ), from the
Universities of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Missouri. In Autumn 1981, he was a reporting intern for the ‘London Sunday Times’, and photographed ‘Picture Post’ star Bert Hardy for the British National Portrait Gallery Photographs Collection. Mr. Marcou’s works are also in various Smithsonian Archives (where some were displayed in the group-show ‘Gift of the Artist’), the Wisconsin and Missouri Historical Societies’ Archives, La Crosse Public Library Archives, Library of Congress, British Library, and ROK’s National Assembly Library. In January 1985 ROK, David met and photographed St. Teresa of Calcutta and later received 18 letters from her. David J. Marcou’s son, Matthew, is an Army Special Ops Combat Medic veteran and now a top Engineering student; Matt’s wife, Jessica, is a talented artist and university teacher.

Note on Photos Included Here: To the best of my knowledge, Frank Lloyd Wright took all the photos seen here (except the portrait of himself on the front-cover, taken by Edward Steichen, and the ID-photo of me on the back-cover), most from his time in Japan. Photos taken elsewhere include a portrait of man with moustache (C.R. Ashbee, his British architect-friend), his photo-portrait of two unidentified ladies, his photo of first wife Kitty reading to child, his photo of a man on ship in port, and an exterior view of one of his personal homes.—DvJM.