

FRANKLEUDREIT



A Review of:

Frank Lloyd Wright: A Study in Architectural Content

By Norris Kelley Smith

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During the last 50 years, there have appeared about a dozen books on architectural history that can justifiably be described as masterpieces. This is one of them. It is quite short, but in it Professor Norris K. Smith expounds with sparkling lucidity an interpretation of Wright that not only clarifies numerous hitherto apparently inexplicable facets of Wright's life and work, but deftly pulls the rug from under the whole cumbrous intellectual superstructure published so far in honour of the master.

The chapter titles are, respectively: "The Cause Conservative," "Wright and Romanticism," "The Oak Park Years," "Crisis," "A New Beginning and Its Destruction," "Depression and Resurgence," and, finally, "Assessment." But the book is dominated by two grand themes. The first is that of the fundamental and dramatic antagonism that rends assunder the personality of any proselytizing nonconformist; for, obviously, the more he finds that success crowns his preaching, the less nonconformist he becomes himself. The second theme is the influence on 20th-Century architecture of non-Hellenic modes of thought. I shall not discuss the first theme, since any commentary might diminish the intensity of the reader's pleasure when confronted with Professor Smith's impeccably organized and inspiring prose. However, the second theme is susceptible of constructive comment, since it is more controversial than the author's plausible presentation may lead one to suppose.

Basing his deductions on Thorlief Boman's *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* (a book originally written, it should be noted, in German), Professor Smith writes: "What

I shall try to demonstrate is that (Romanticism and Classicism) derive from the two main sources of Western thought, the Hebrew and Greek respectively" (pg. 36). He then convincingly quotes Bowman to show that the Greek concept of "being" implied something objective and inert, and the Greek concept of "form" implied tranquility, moderation, and the harmonious expression of the intellect, whereas the Hebrew concept of "being" implies becoming and "the Israelite finds the beautiful in that which lives and plays in the excitement and rhythm" (pg. 40). Professor Smith approvingly follows Boman in commenting that the beginning of St. John's gospel (which, in English, is translated as, "In the beginning was the Word," and, in German, as "*Im Anfang war das Wort*") is rendered by Goethe ("who goes back to the Hebrew (Aramaic) original," pg. 56) as, "In the beginning was the Deed"—a curious sort of corroboration in that (a) Goethe was not exactly an authority on Aramaic, (b) St. John's gospel was written in colloquial Greek, and (c) the quotation is from the Poodle scene in *Faust*. But from all this, and much more evidence, Professor Smith concludes that "Wright thought in Hebrew" (pg. 39).

Now it is incontestable that a person's thoughts are intrinsically affected by the language in which he thinks them, and thus one cannot thoroughly understand any architect's thoughts unless one is familiar with the language in which they were expressed. But Wright, unlike St. John, not only shows no evidence of ever having thought in Hebrew; he was, if anything, antisemitic. The phrases with which, in his *Autobiography*, he describes the Jewish draftsmen who were working for Adler (who was the son of a rabbi); his offensive description of Ottenheimer; even his taut reference to his Uncle Jenkin's

friend Rabbi Hirsh, demonstrate this conclusively. How, then, are we going to reconcile Professor Smith's conclusions abstracted from Boman with the demonstrable facts concerning Wright's intellectual growth?

The solution of this dilemma is not, I think, hard to find; and, if correct, must have important implications for the historical interpretation of the whole evolution of contemporary architecture. My contention is that, whereas it is true that Wright and especially Sullivan were primarily stimulated by the writings of—or conversations with—Jewish intellectuals, both these men were essentially stimulated by *Germans*, whether of Jewish or Gentile blood; and though there may well be a large element of Jewish influence in 19th-Century German aesthetic philosophy (stemming, for example, from Moses Mendelssohn), it is not hard to prove that the more obviously non-Classical aspects of Wright's philosophy, of the Bauhaus philosophy, and indeed of Le Corbusier's philosophy, stemmed essentially from a century-old synthesis of German mystical and philosophical beliefs.

As regards Wright, he himself states in the *Autobiography* that he was mainly influenced by Carlyle, Coleridge, and Emerson; in other words, by the three 19th-Century writers most keenly engaged in promoting translations of German thought into English. As a young architect, he came under the influence of a superman who, from the beginning, he significantly refers to as *Lieber Meister*—a term of respect easy to understand when we realize how much Sullivan owed to his German-Jewish friends Edelman and Adler. It was Edelman who taught Sullivan "the highest transcendentalisms of German metaphysics" (i.e., Kant's doctrine that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was an architectonic plan for a new science) and introduced him to Wagnerian opera, just as it was Edelman who "led Louis to Adler" (*Autobiography of an*

Idea). Sullivan certainly did not have much respect for Adler's racial origins, since he referred to him as a "short-nosed Jew"; but Adler obviously had a great influence on Sullivan's mind by introducing him to the works of Gottfried Semper. And Goethe, Wagner, Semper, Adler, and the Bauhaus all have this and only this in common—they were associated with Weimar.

In Professor Smith's final chapter, "Assessment," quoting Karl Löwith, he calls the Communist creed "a pseudo-morphosis of Jewish-Christian messianism." But it seems more important to emphasize that, although Karl Marx's father became a Christian and cut himself off from the Jewish community, Karl Marx thought and wrote in *German*. And it was the affinity of Marx's abstract politico-historical theories with the Teutonic philosophy of his age that made Wagner the leading exponent of the artistic implications of *The Communist Manifesto* and caused Gottfried Semper to flee from Saxony after the revolution for which the "Manifesto" was written and seek protection through the British Prince-Consort, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Indeed, when Semper published his first book (based on his experience in organizing the 1851 London Exhibition), this book, which was the ultimate source of Arts-and-Crafts philosophy, was written not in English but in German, and printed in Brunswick.

Professor Smith is absolutely convincing in his assessment of the reasons that prompted Frank Lloyd Wright, in 1909, to desert his family and architectural practice and go into voluntary exile in Europe. But I am less surprised than he that Wright handed over his practice to "a German-born architect who had no particular knowledge or sympathy for Wright's work." Nor am I surprised that when Wright left the shores of America, he went straight to...Berlin.

