

GARDNER MUSEUM OF ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

NEWSLETTER

SPRING 1988

"LOUIS H. SULLIVAN: UNISON WITH NATURE"

The ornamentation of the architect Louis H. Sullivan will be the focus of the first exhibit at the Gardner Museum in 1988. "Louis H. Sullivan: Unison With Nature," a traveling exhibition prepared by Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, contains original ornament and reproductions of Sullivan's work, along with photo and text panels.

Born in 1856, Sullivan was raised on his grandparent's farm near Boston, where he learned to love the world of nature. It was during this time that the young Sullivan also became fascinated with the idea of man's power and ability to create. At the age of twelve he encountered the profession that he thought represented the ultimate human creativity: architecture. After informing his father of his ambition, a definite plan was laid out for his education. After his general schooling, he would attend a technical school and then travel abroad for study.

While in his second year of high school Sullivan passed the entrance examination for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he was admitted at the age of sixteen. After little less than a year at MIT Sullivan began to discover that this school did not compare to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. But, before embarking, he thought it wise to receive some practical experience in an architectural firm. He traveled to Philadelphia where he presented himself to the firm of Furness and Hewitt. Hired as a draftsman, Sullivan remained with the company for only six months when the economic panic of 1873 forced the firm to let him go. Leaving Philadelphia for Chicago, Sullivan gained a position as a draftsman in the office of Major William LeBaron Jenney, who was in need of draftsmen due to the booming building activity since the fire of 1871.

In the spring of 1874 Sullivan decided he was ready for studying abroad. After rigorous training to be admitted to the Ecole des Beaux Arts he studied there for only one year before returning to Chicago. After a series of drafting positions he joined the office of Dankmar Adler. Two years later, in 1881, he became a partner in the new firm of Adler & Sullivan. Sullivan was the designer of the partnership, and Adler the engineer. His association with Adler lasted for fourteen years, until 1895, during which time Sullivan designed one hundred and twenty buildings, including homes, office buildings, warehouses, libraries, theatres and an exposition hall. With an intense building activity, and experimentation with the tall-building form, Adler & Sullivan became one of the most productive firms in Chicago and their work extended to other cities such as St. Louis, New Orleans and Buffalo. Among their most noted buildings were the Auditorium (1889) in Chicago, the Chicago Stock Exchange (1893), the Guaranty Building (1895) in Buffalo, New York and the Wainwright Building (1891) in St. Louis. The Wainwright Building was significant in the development of the "skyscraper" form.

Adler & Sullivan utilized a steel framework which allowed their buildings to soar upward with less masonry support than ever before possible. After the partnership dissolved in 1895, Sullivan designed three more multistoried buildings: the Bayard Building (1897) in New York City, the Gage Building (1898) and the Schlesinger and Mayer Building (1899), now Carson, Pirie, Scott, in Chicago.

Soon after Sullivan joined Adler in partnership it was apparent that Adler had given Sullivan charge of design work for architectural ornament. In addition to the exterior ornament, Sullivan was responsible for interior design also. Interior pieces included newel posts, mosaic, wallpaper, light fixtures and ceiling medallions. In many of these pieces the hand of Sullivan's young proteges (Frank Lloyd Wright and George Grant Elmslie) can be seen. Wright's work shows in photographs of the Schiller Building (Garrick Theatre - 1892 - 1961). Elmslie replaced Wright



Louis H. Sullivan 1856-1924

as Sullivan's chief draftsman in 1893 and continued with the Sullivan firm until 1909. Elmslie was given a free hand in Sullivan's design during the last years of his employment. He served as chief designer for the Schlesinger and Mayer Building (Carson, Pirie, Scott) of 1895, and the heavily ornate exterior of that building may be attributed to elaboration of Sullivan's design.

After 1900 Sullivan had less than twenty commissions, and became destitute in the last years of his life. Sullivan's last buildings included a series of banks in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa, suburban residences and a music store. The banks were small square ornament encrusted gems that stood in striking contrast with their environments. Louis H. Sullivan died in 1924 at the age of 68.

"Louis H. Sullivan: Unison With Nature" will open to the public on April 9 and will continue weekends through June 26. Gallery hours will be 1 - 5 p.m.

—B.A.P.