How was Frank Lloyd Wright influenced by Japan more than he admitted and how is this influence evident in his work?

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Abstract

Frank Lloyd Wright had an incredibly distinctive style of new, American architecture that he claimed to have developed on his own, without much outside influence. In fact, he only admitted to a mere three total influences throughout his entire life that helped him with his architectural career. I personally experienced some of his work in Seattle and remembered seeing something like it before, and later realized that many of his designs implement Japanese forms. He furiously denied the accusations of critics who shared similar views and, in rebuttal, stated that he visited Japan for the very first time in 1905, years after he had started to develop his unique style. However, he had many opportunities in his early life to be exposed to Japan and her people, styles, and values. Even the environment in which he was raised attracted him to everything Japanese, simply because his family shared so many of the same values with the culture. Wright also started his career in the same city that held The World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, at which the leading authorities on Japanese and oriental culture in the western world were present and giving lectures. In fact, many of the exact same observations on Japanese culture about which these authorities spoke can be found in Wright's autobiography. Throughout his career, he collected Japanese woodblock prints to which he admitted influence, but the his designs and the works he collected show that he was affected by much more than just the prints themselves; he was influenced by the entire culture, to which he denied credit. My goal is to answer the question of how he was influenced by Japan and how it is evident in his designs.

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Introduction

As I have embarked through the start of my creative career, I have been deeply influenced by architecture, but never truly understood the heated discussion around Frank Lloyd Wright's work until I experienced it personally two summers ago. I was captivated by his Griggs Residence (Figures 1[1] & 2) in Seattle from the moment I laid eyes on it. The house towered over me; its crisp, calculated edges and sharp lines contrasted with a mass of intentionally placed vines that crept up the smooth surface of the walls. I was amazed at the simplicity and cleanliness Wright had achieved through his design. I recognized something though: elements in the work looming over me seemed familiar. In that moment, I had a gut feeling, an intuitive sense that what I saw before me was not original.

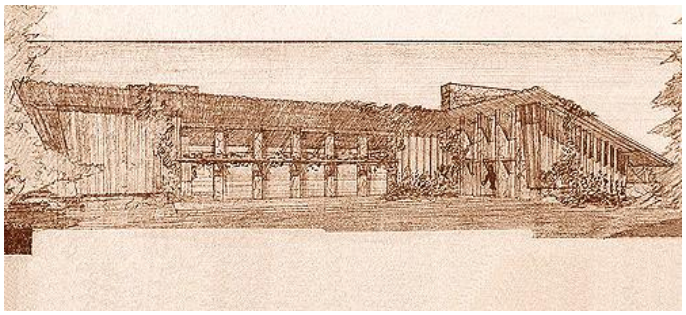


Figure 1 – a preliminary sketch of Wright's Griggs Residence

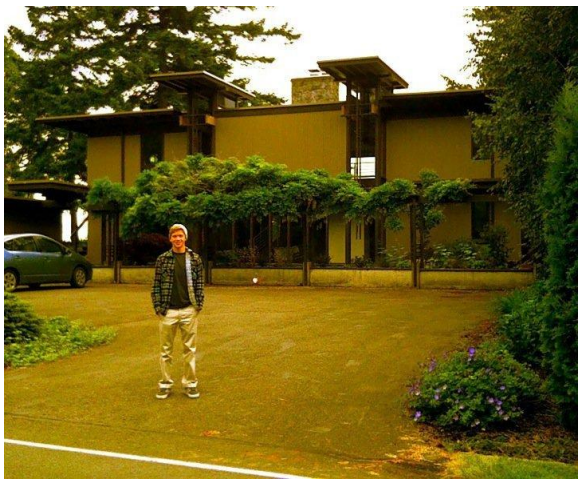


Figure 2 – myself in front of the Griggs Residence

That moment came and passed, but as I gradually exposed myself to architecture from around the globe, that gut feeling I had experienced was revived. I happened to stumble across Japanese architecture and fell in love with the purity, modesty, and tranquility that the culture promises. My

[1] Douglas M. Steiner, "Detail from original drawing," Wright Studies, The Steiner Agency Inc., accessed March 3, 2012, http://www.steinerag.com/flw/Artifact%20Pages/PhRtS290.htm.

curiosity sparked a casual obsession and I made a connection to what I had seen earlier that year in Seattle. In his book, Margo Stipe wrote this about the famous architect: "Frank Lloyd Wright admitted to only three influences: [his mentor], [a set of blocks from his childhood], and the Japanese woodblock print. Of these, the print is the most evident."[2] I would argue that he was impacted by much more than the print itself; he was influenced by the culture as a whole.

This newfound perspective was fueled by the idea that cultural pieces of art like Japanese woodblock prints are created on an infrastructure of influences rooted in the people, ideologies, and chronicles of the culture. The progress of the human race can even be explained by the influence of previous discoveries. The scientific method itself is after all, the process of testing a hypothesis based on previous observations. In fact, the way we advance through history is really an amazing feat, as we are constantly building on current and past mistakes and accomplishments. This is the idea coined by Sir Isaac Newton in his correspondence to Robert Hooke, when he wrote, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."[3] We stand on the shoulders of the giants of the past; we are influenced by our environment and our history and as a result, create, innovate, and produce. In this same manner, Wright has stood on the shoulders of Japan and has only admitted to the slightest influence, when really the culture provided the fundamental principles that made him so successful. How was Wright influenced by Japan more than he admitted and how is this influence evident in his work?

Early Influence

Wright's main argument when countering the scores of accusations others made against him regarding his Japanese influence was that his designs contained Japanese forms years before

[2] Margo Stipe, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Interactive Portfolio* (Philadelphia, PA: Running, 2004). 39.
[3] HW Turnbull, *The correspondence of Isaac Newton: Volume 1* (Cambridge, MA: The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1959). 416.

his actual visit in 1905. For example, in a tape transcript from Taliesin, Wright explains, ". . . I found in Japan, not the inspiration which everybody thinks I found . . . . What happened to me was a great confirmation of the feeling I had and work I had myself done before I got there."[4] He claims to have originally come to his designs solely from his own work. However, Wright was thoroughly exposed to Japanese culture long before his visit in 1905, and since his early childhood, various aspects of his own life and heritage proved to attract him to the nature of the Japanese civilization. He had plenty of contact with Japan and her people before physically travelling to the islands across the Pacific. Through these exposures, he was influenced to create some of America's best architecture.

In order to understand these influences and their origins, we must look at Wright's childhood and early life, before he made his first trip to Tokyo. Frank Lloyd Wright (christened Frank Lincoln Wright) was born to William Carey Wright and Anna Lloyd-Jones in rural Wisconsin in the mid-19th century. Frank spent most of his childhood following his father as he moved the family from town to town, never settling down in one place for very long.[5] Because of this recurrent traveling throughout his childhood, Frank never grew very close to his father, as he was never home, and learned to depend on his mother for his upbringing. His maternal grandfather was a devout Unitarian priest, and that side of Frank's family was greatly influenced by him. These Lloyd-Joneses were environmental, religious, simplistic, handy, well educated, hard-working, determined, and clean. They began to play a huge role in young Frank's development because of the absence of his father's side of the family and because he spent his childhood in their presence, he inherited many of their Unitarian values. This intense cultural

[4] Frank Lloyd Wright, "Japanese Culture," in *Frank Lloyd Wright: An Index to the Taliesin Correspondence*, ed. Anthony Alofsin (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1988).

[5] Stipe, *Frank Lloyd Wright: The Interactive Portfolio*, 13.

upbringing planted a seed in Frank that taught him to seek many of the same values in Japanese culture that are shared with Unitarian culture. He later obsessed over naturalism, cleanliness, perfection, and simplicity, all principles harbored by Japanese society. Edwin Reischauer explains: "the majority of Japanese – some 70 to 80 percent – even though carried on the rolls of one or more religious body, do not consider themselves believers in any religion."[6] This simplistic approach on undefined spirituality is very similar to that of Unitarian Universalism, a now popular stem from Unitarianism, that fundamentally acknowledges the possibility of an existence of a deity, claims that no single creed is correct, and places more importance on spirituality than on practice.[7] The seed planted in young Frank was essentially from the same tree as the seed that grew to become the Unitarian Universalist Association, and it is evident that this religious upbringing had played a part in his attraction to Japanese culture.

Chicago and the World's Columbian Exposition

There was another element of Wright's life that affected him more than he would ever admit in regards to his attraction to Japan: his first real exposure to the wonderfully clean and fundamentally simple Japanese culture. The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition was to be held in Chicago for the first time, which played a major role in the city's recognition as it was the first time it was viewed as an equal to the other leading east coast giants like New York, Philadelphia and Boston. Likewise, this was also the first year of Wright's independence as he had just left the firm at which he had started his career in architecture and went on to practice privately there in Chicago. The launch of his solo career could not have been in a more fortuitous time and place, as many cultural enthusiasts from around the globe were present, including the radical

[6] Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1977), 215.

[7] "Our Unitarian Universalist Principles," Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed October 8, 2012, http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles.

Orientalists, Edward Morse and Ernest Fenollosa, who had both played a major role in how Japan and Japanese art and architecture were viewed in America. They had appeared at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago serving as judges for fine arts and pottery events and were giving lectures about their studies and written works to attendees, among which was a young Wright.[8] Having already been familiar with Fenollosa[9], Wright should have had an interest in Fenollosa's close friend and colleague Morse as well. Both men were leading authorities in America for Japanese art, having previously given lectures across the country regarding the culture; Morse was considered by many architects of the time to have written the best in-depth English analysis of Japanese architecture to date, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (1886), a widely popular volume dissecting and examining the simple dwellings of Japan and their properties, purposes, and aesthetics. In *An Autobiography*, Wright voices many of the exact same observations found in Morse's book when describing the characteristics of Japanese homes, which were written over 50 years earlier. Many correlations between the books were found by Kevin Nute in his analysis of the role of Japan in Frank Lloyd Wright's life, "Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The role of traditional Japanese art and architecture in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright" and I will include just a few of them for demonstration purposes, produced below. [10]

In *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (1886), Morse describes the Japanese house:

"Upon these [*tatami*] mats the people eat, sleep, and die; they represent the bed,

In *An Autobiography* (1945), Wright describes the Japanese house:

"The floors of these Japanese homes are all made to live on – to sleep on, to kneel

[8] Kevin Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Japanese Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 49.
[9] Ibid., 36.
[10] Ibid., 37.

chair, lounge, and sometimes table, combined."[11]

"'The cleanliness of the Japanese is one of his most commendable qualities. It is apparent in his body, in his house, in his workshop and no less in the great carefulness and exemplary exactness with which he looks after his fields.'" [Morse quoting Rein, a German writer][12]

Morse continues to describe the Japanese house:

"The absence of all paint, varnish, oil, or filling, which too often defaces our rooms at home, is at once remarked . . . . On the contrary, the wood is left in just the condition in which it leaves the cabinet-maker's plane . . . ."[13]

"The first thing that impresses one on entering a Japanese house is the small size and low stud of the rooms."[14]

and eat from, to kneel upon soft silken mats and meditate upon. On which to play the flute, or to make love."[15]

"Be clean! 'Be clean' was the soul of Shinto, the ancient religion of Japan. Shinto spoke, not of a good man or a moral man – but of a clean man. Spoke of clean hands – of a clean heart."[16]

Wright describes the Prairie House:

". . . eliminate combinations of different materials in favour of mono-material so far as possible, . . . use no ornament that did not come out of the nature of materials or construction . . . ."[17]

"Taking a human being for my 'scale' I brought the whole house down in height to fit a normal one – ergo, 5'8" tall, say."[18]

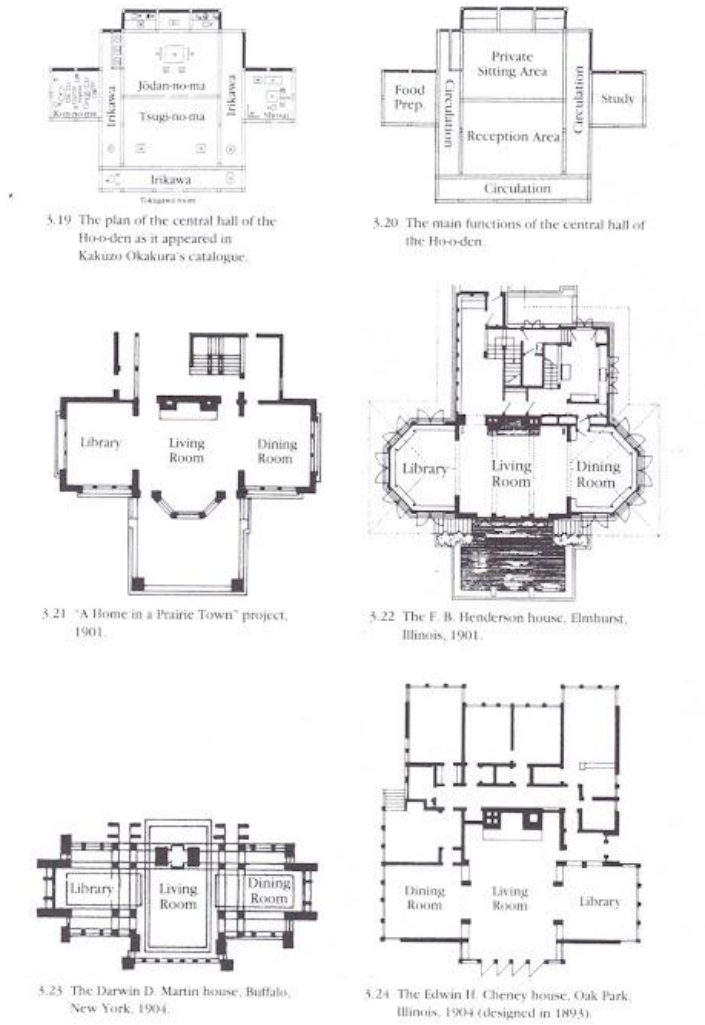
[11] Edward S. Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* (Boston: Ticknor, 1886). 124.
[12] Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, 201.
[13] Ibid., 111.
[14] Ibid., 108.
[15] Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Duel, Sloan & Pearce, 1945). 175.
[16] Ibid., 196.
[17] Ibid., 143.
[18] Ibid., 139.

It is clear after considering these comparisons and the dozens of others found by Nute that much of Wright's beliefs about Japanese culture as well as his own descriptions of his Prairie House parallel Edward Morse's descriptions of Japanese homes in the book, which he had most certainly expressed in his lectures at the exposition; *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings* was one of his most accredited works and he was widely regarded as the highest authority in the realm of Japanese domestic architecture in the western world because of it.[19] These connections are strong indications that Frank Lloyd Wright had indeed been exposed to Edward Morse and his ideas. The concepts in Morse's book are profound, and being exposed to them at such an early age, Wright was unquestionably moved by them, even if only subconsciously. They sparked an interest in Japanese culture over which Wright would later obsess, and in the writing of his autobiography, he was influenced by Morse's own observations. This influence from Morse, however, was only the beginning of Wright's exposure to Japan, and in the same 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, a Japanese villa and temple, the Ho-o-den, was specially constructed for the Japanese exhibit.

The Ho-o-den was a building commissioned specifically for the Exposition and was a beautiful rendition of traditional Japanese Architecture. The main building consisted of a study, a food preparation area, a private sitting area, and a reception area, where guests could visit, experiencing the traditional Japanese atmosphere. These rooms with were placed in a cruciform arrangement relative to each other, separated by corridors for movement. This design was purely unique to the Japanese culture, until interestingly enough, the same underlying geometry began to show up in young Wright's first prairie house designs. Homes like his "Darwin D. Martin" house, "F. B. Henderson" House, and "Edwin H. Cheney" house all feature this same cruciform

[19] Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, 36.

arrangement of the living area, dining room, and study, an arrangement, as stated before, originally unique to Japanese Architecture. Kevin Nute, again in his book, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, illustrated these stark similarities in Figure 3[20]. From viewing these floor plans, it is evident that there was significant influence from both the functions of the rooms of the Ho-o-den and the geometry of how those rooms fit together.[21] Wright obviously had contact with this culturally significant building and therefore his alibi (stated in his tape transcript from Taliesin[22] that he was not influenced by Japanese architecture because he was creating these buildings with Japanese forms before he was in Japan in 1905) is irrelevant because he had plenty of opportunities to see and be moved by Japanese architecture where he was working in Chicago.



3.19 The plan of the central hall of the Ho-o-den as it appeared in Kakuzo Okakura's catalogue.

3.20 The main functions of the central hall of the Ho-o-den.

3.21 "A Home in a Prairie Town" project, 1901.

3.22 The F. B. Henderson house, Elmhurst, Illinois, 1901.

3.23 The Darwin D. Martin house, Buffalo, New York, 1904.

3.24 The Edwin H. Cheney house, Oak Park, Illinois, 1904 (designed in 1893).

Figure 3 – Kevin Nute's Comparison between Wright's designs and the Ho-o-den

[20] Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan*, 3.
[21] Ibid., 60.
[22] Wright, *Japanese Culture*.

The Ukiyo-e Japanese Woodblock Print

After studying the Japanese influence throughout his early life, we must examine how he was influenced by the Ukiyo-e (art of the floating world) Japanese prints that he loved and relentlessly collected. Wright himself claimed to have been greatly impacted by them and in 1912, discussed the Japanese woodblock print:

"Broadly stated … the first and supreme principle of Japanese aesthetics consists in a stringent simplification by elimination of the insignificant and the consequent emphasis on reality …"[23]

He stated later:

"If Japanese prints were to be deducted from my education I don't know what direction the whole might have taken. The gospel of elimination preached by the print came home to me in architecture."[24]

Wright collected and traded these prints furiously, eventually accumulating thousands, which he would sell to museums and galleries to pay off his recurrent debt. The simplistic, romantic fantasies portrayed in the prints are what drew him to Japan, and he finally ventured to the country in their pursuit for the first time in 1905.[25] Upon his return, however, critics began to observe a rise of Japanese form in his designs, which would imply more than a simple appreciation for their prints. As we examined earlier, Wright denied these claims, stating that he had already implemented them before his trip. At the same time, however, he also affirmed his strong influence from the Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock print. Wright himself declared, as stated

[23] Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Japanese Print* (Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour, 1912), 118-119.
[24] Wright, *An Autobiography*, 250-251.
[25] Stipe, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, 39.

earlier, that he did not know where he would stand in the field of architecture if he had not studied the Japanese woodblock print, and that he partly owes his love for elimination and simplicity in architecture to this art form. However, in a cultural art movement, if one draws influence from an art piece, it does not simply stop at the work itself, as the piece is a reflection of an entire culture. The influence comes from the people, places, objects, and ideas that influenced the artist. If one was influenced by a movement of art as profoundly as Wright was the Japanese woodblock print, then it can be deduced that one would also be influenced by various elements of the culture produced the art, as most cultural art represents certain aspects of that culture. Because of this, it can then be said that if Wright was influenced by the Ukiyo-e as much as he said he was, he was also greatly affected by Japan and Japanese culture itself.

Figure 4 – Katsushika Hokusai, "Fuji from Honganji Temple in Asakusa, Edo"
1831-1833, Woodcut.
Collection of the UCLA Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum. Purchased from the Frank Lloyd Wright Collection

Wright's pieces from his own collection (sold to the Hammer Museum of UCLA) clearly show the tightly knit relationship between architecture and nature that fueled much of Wright's philosophies throughout his career. "Fuji from Honganji Temple in Asakusa, Edo" (Figure 4)[26] displays an oriental rooftop and the famous Mount Fuji, while a kite floats gracefully high above the clouds. Many forms are found in the manmade temple that have been incorporated from the surrounding area: The rooftop mirrors the mountain behind it, the curvatures adorning the roof resemble the clouds, a tree

[26] "Wright and the Architecture of Japanese Prints," Hammer Museum, Hammer, Accessed February 5, 2013, http://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/detail/exhibition_id/104.

stands centrally located on the head of the chimney looking down on the forest, and the colors of the materials used in construction are of the same tone as the natural hue of the mountain and the sky. Even the kite is in the form of a bird drifting along in the breeze. All of this is a clear demonstration of Japan's imitation and implementation of nature. Wright, in an interview with Mike Wallace, stated that, although he considered himself religious, he did not believe in organized religion. "Christianity doesn't need organizing according to the Master of it . . . Didn't Jesus say that wherever a few are gathered in my name, there is my Church?" He stated that Nature with a capital 'N' was his church.[27] This is very similar to the Japanese view on religion, as examined on page 4 of this paper, where most Japanese consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. This and many other Ukiyo-e Woodblock prints especially display this harmonious relationship between nature and man. The Japanese concept is displayed through the respectful imitation of nature by man, with an attitude of learning and appreciation.

Utagawa Toyoharu's "Interior of Shoin Style Architecture with Dancers Performing Horse Dance" (Figure 5[28]) is another print from Wright's private collection and serves as an excellent display of how a print can exhibit the cultural properties of Japan. In the print, the architecture is clean, symmetric, orderly, linear, and natural, all qualities fueled by the ideologies and values of the Japanese culture. The space is low, open, and communal, and the people pictured are visiting together on the floor while watching a cultural dance. The building appears to be made out of woods and natural dyes, and plants and bamboo adorn the walls. The room is sectioned off with lines and protruding beams on the ceiling and wall, which create noticeable divisions in the dwelling but do not restrict flow. The forms are striated and extremely simplistic

[27] Frank Lloyd Wright, interview by Mike Wallace, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, CBS, September 1 & 28, 1957.

[28] "Wright and the Architecture of Japanese Prints"

– not a single curve can be found in the entire design. Farther back and to the left, the space opens up to the garden and road that leads into the untouched forest, which shows how truly close to nature these people are.

Figure 5 – Utagawa Toyoharu
"Interior of Shoin Style Architecture with Dancers Performing Horse Dance"
1770, Woodcut.
Collection of the UCLA Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, Hammer Museum. Purchased from the Frank Lloyd Wright Collection

Figure 6 – Interior of the Main Hall in the Robie House – an example of how Wright's work demonstrates strikingly similar qualities when compared to Japanese prints in his own collection

This print from Wright's collection seems to reappear in his prairie style homes, the greatest example of which being his Robie House (often renowned as the best demonstration of the style). This house was designed and built between 1908 and 1910, 3-5 years after Wright's return from Japan. In Figure 6[29], the interior of the Main Hall is pictured, and an immediate resemblance between this and Utagawa Toyoharu's piece can be seen. The stark parallels between the two designs are obvious: the separation of space through the use of lowering and raising the roof, the linear designs, the size and shape of the room, the tall and narrow "strip" windows that open up to the natural gardens, the symmetry, and the use of natural materials all preach the same concept that is found in Wright's woodblock print. However, this Robie House design is thought to be the head of one of the most revolutionary movements in architecture and

[29] Mary Ann Sullivan, "The interior toward the prow," Robie House, Bluffton University, accessed February 5, 2013, http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/wrightrobie/robie2.html.

something purely "American," but I would argue that the bulk of what makes this design so profound is actually taken from Japan.[30]

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wright has proven to only admit to the slightest influence from Japanese art, when he has undoubtedly spent the majority of his career implementing Japanese forms into American architecture and claiming it was something 'unique' because he was creating these forms before he had visited the country. However, he was taught by his family to admire Japanese ideals, exposed to Japanese culture and art from Morse and Fellonosa, and exposed to Japanese architecture at the World's Exposition in Chicago, all before he stepped foot in Japan for the first time. He admitted to strong influence from the prints, but furiously denied "adapting Japanese forms,"[31] despite the substantial evidence to the contrary. If someone is greatly influenced by a cultural piece of art, the influence does not simply stop at the artwork; it is carried on to the people who have made it, including their customs, values, and beliefs. The art and the culture are inseparable. This is why Wright could not have simply accredited as much influence to such a culturally impacted art movement such as the Japanese woodblock print without being influenced by Japanese culture, forms, values, and architecture. He simply was too arrogant to admit that, like all great artists, his ideas had roots and did not simply blossom from nothing out of his brain. In the same interview by Mike Wallace, Wright claims his immorality is something he had achieved, by "getting so far" as he did. Perhaps this sort of arrogance is what fueled his furious defense against any and every accusation of unoriginality; being brought down to a human level terrified him. As a species, we create, innovate, and see further by standing on

[30] "Fredrick C. Robie House," GoWright.org, Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, accessed February 5, 2013, http://www.gowright.org/research/wright-robie-house.html.

[31] Frank Lloyd Wright to Charles Robert Ashbee, 26 September 1910, in *Ten Letters from Frank Lloyd Wright to Charles Robert Ashbee*, ed. Alan Crawford (Cardiff: SAHGB Publications, 1970), 69.

the shoulders of giants, but Wright falsely claimed to be the giant himself, standing on the shoulders of dwarves.

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