

Victoria

Diversions for August—
an architect's wares
and Victorian treasures on view,
an old cog railway to ride.

Nature's Architect

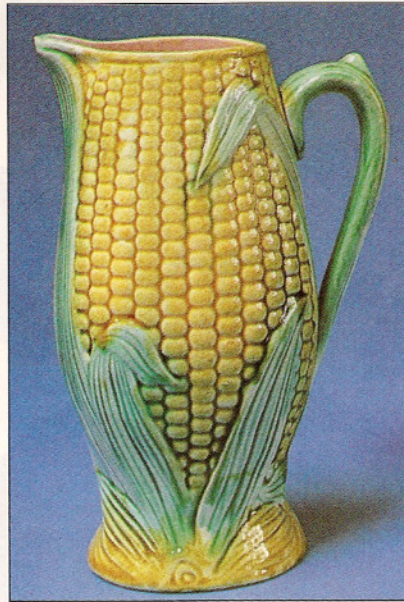
"The Decorative Arts of Frank
Lloyd Wright" at the Metropolitan
Museum of Art

"Nature is a good teacher. I am a child of hers, and apart from her precepts, cannot flourish," wrote the legendary American architect Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 1900's. A romantic idealist who spent his youthful summer days on his uncle's farm in the lush Spring Green Valley of Wisconsin, Wright drew his architectural principles early on from nature's sweet splendors.

Stridently rejecting fussy Victorian ornamentation and the rigid symmetry of the classical style, the rebellious young architect—who shocked his neighbors by allowing a willow tree to grow through his home—showed the world that boundaries need not exist between the interior and exterior environment. He believed in creating an "organic unity," where all architectural elements derive from one another and harmoniously flow together, explained Catherine Hoover Voorsanger, Assistant Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

So obsessed was Wright with orchestrating all aspects of his buildings that his work frequently extended beyond the exterior structure and seeped into the minute interior details. He took a keen interest in designing furniture, stained-glass windows, textiles, and even dishes for his projects.

His enthusiasm is vividly apparent at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's current exhibition featuring "The Decorative Arts of Frank Lloyd Wright," through September 4. Brimming with such handsome Wright-designed artifacts as geometrically patterned plates from the now-demolished Imperial Hotel in Japan and textiles from a stunning but short-lived line created for F. Schumacher and Company in 1955, the exhibit, encompassing more than 70 items, gives a glimpse of Wright's deep appreciation for the interior touches. Among the collection is a display of serious-looking chairs commissioned for numerous Wright projects. One such stiff, high-backed chair, from the 1902 Ward W.



Willits House in Highland Park, Illinois, may have led the famous architect to proclaim, "I have been black and blue in some spots, somewhere almost all of my life from too intimate contact with my own early furniture."

While at the museum, visitors should not miss the chance to step into Wright's world by viewing an actual living room created in 1912 for the home of Francis W. Little, in Wayzata, Minnesota. Now part of the permanent collection, the spacious living space with its perfectly patterned walls of clear glass, mammoth fireplace and selection of beautifully orchestrated Wright-designed furniture is a wonderful example of how every aspect of the architect's rooms blend into their environment and magically become one with nature.

The exhibit, organized by Voorsanger, is located at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10028; (212) 570-3791.

"Beasts, Bugs, and Begonia Leaves"

Victorian Majolica at Florida's
Lightner Museum

For thirty years, beginning in 1851, cupboards all across Europe and in America came alive with the gleam of such quirky items as leaf-shaped pickle dishes, bulldog, dolphin, and monkey-head humidors, cockle-shell salt cellars, "Punch and Judy" punch bowls and tea sets. Fancifully sculpted in earthen-, stone-, or Parian ware and treated to layers of opaque-col-

ored glazes, majolica designs ranged from witty renderings of popular images of the day to Rococo and Neoclassical studies that appealed to the Victorian passion for historically inspired ornamental splendor.

Today's majolica collectors and enthusiasts will be pleased to know of a new exhibit "Beasts, Bugs, and Begonia Leaves: Victorian Majolica" at the Lightner Museum in St. Augustine, Florida, which affords a look into the museum's marvelous stash of European and American designs. Well represented are English manufacturers like Wedgwood and Minton, as well as the premier American producer Griffen, Smith, and Hill, which operated out of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

As decorative-arts historian Nicholas M. Dawes notes in his collector's volume "Majolica" (Crown Publishers), perhaps the greatest boon to the development of majolica was its fortuitous introduction at a time when the decorative arts were experiencing a heyday in England. The first pieces brought out by Minton at the 1851 "Crystal Palace Exhibition" in London were, in fact, the genius of French ceramist Leon Arnoux, who perfected the colored glazes that came to distinguish English majolica: *vert bleu*, *brun chocolat*, *bleu clair*, and a sea green he called Magellan. It was not long before ceramists from all over Europe and America set about outdoing each other with ever more fanciful designs.

Among the pieces on display are some that met overwhelming response at the first American exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Sought-after designs included Rococo jardinières, wall pockets, and hanging pots to suit the conservatories that were the pride of stately homes. Equally popular were syrup pitchers and jugs modeled as corn cobs and other shapes that brought to mind the bounty of the heartland. Above all, as one newspaper recorded, "The American housewife preferred the simple designs taken from nature, and the familiar begonia leaf transformed into a pickle dish was the favorite with everyone."

The Victorian fascination with flora and fauna is represented, too, in a platter after the style of 16th-century ceramist Bernard Palissy with a sculpted salamander scuttling across the top; game pie dishes with finials shaped like dogs, cows, or ducks; and a garden seat in the shape of a monkey holding a cushion above his head. Not surprisingly, the popularity of monkey designs coincided with the publication of Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species."

Despite its popularity, majolica fell

EVENTS, OCCASIONS, CELEBRATIONS

out of favor almost as soon as it caught on. One article in the 1883 "Pottery Gazette" foretold, "A crazy teapot is an abomination not to be tolerated in any well-organized household."

The Lightner Museum is located at the City Hall Complex, King Street, St. Augustine, Florida 32084; (904) 824-2874.

The Original "Engine That Could"

New Hampshire's Mount Washington Cog Railway celebrates its 125th Anniversary

It's hard not to think of trains in human terms, particularly when their engines are as hardworking and idiosyncratic as the eight that make up New Hampshire's indomitable Mount Washington Cog Railway, a National Historic Landmark in the heart of the White Mountains. The latest descendants of "Old Peppersass"—the first cogwheel locomotive, and the original "Little Engine that Could"—the engines are, like all steam engines, "the closest things to living

organisms man has ever produced," according to their onetime repairman, Bill Sherwood. As Sherwood says, "Artificial intelligence doesn't make it—a microchip doesn't breathe and creak and have indigestion. A living organism is a messy thing. And these engines bare their primitive little souls for all to see."

The Cog, as the railway is fondly known, had its beginnings one dark and stormy night in 1852, when Sylvester Marsh, an enterprising and determined local entrepreneur, got lost climbing the 6,288-foot Mount Washington, the highest mountain in the Northeast. Following his misadventure, Marsh envisioned a railroad that would provide a safer way to get to the top than he had chosen. When his notion was presented to the state legislature for chartering, however, one legislator was heard to suggest Marsh might just as well build a railway to the moon.

One hundred and twenty-five years later, the railroad—the first, and still one of only two coal-fired, mountain-climbing steam railways in the world—is still winning hearts, huffing and puffing its way at a 25-percent-average grade up the mountainside. To keep the cog wheels climb-

ing, the greedy engines demand a ton of coal, 1,000 gallons of water, and the unflinching attention of their crews on each three-hour trip.

For train buffs, riding the Cog is a first-class chance to experience the shattering sound and jolting feel of the workings of a steam train. It also offers possibilities of watching the crews: sooty-faced "coggers" who tap their engines, listening for the dull thud of a loose bolt; hang out of the cabs to catch the telltale rhythm of the valves; throw the switches through nine intricate moves in seconds; fling shovels full of coal on blazing 2,000-degree fires; and look up at the sky to check the characteristic plumes of smoke. The trip is an opportunity, as well, to pay a call on "Old Peppersass," who holds court in retirement at the base station.

The Mount Washington Cog Railway is located at Route 302, Bretton Woods, New Hampshire 03575. Excursions start at 8:00 a.m. daily until Labor Day; at 9:00 a.m. from Labor Day to Columbus Day; 10:00 a.m. from Columbus Day till closing. For more information, call (800) 922-8825; in New Hampshire, (603) 846-5404. 🍁



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