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Marion Mahony Griffin: a Woman Apart

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“An artist’s limitations are his best friends.”¹ For many artists, this statement is perhaps true, but throughout history, one limitation has proven fatal: gender. The perspective on female artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was merely an extension of historic acknowledgements of female inferiority; this general mentality towards women in general only exacerbated the struggle for aspiring females in the realm of advanced professions, and specifically within the realm of architecture. Looking back at prominent architects throughout history, one can hardly identify a single female architect of note. One such tragedy in the history of females and architecture is Marion Mahony. She was the second woman to graduate from M.I.T, the first licensed architect in the United States, and was Frank Lloyd Wright’s primary assistant for over a decade. These facts alone should have been enough to ensure her a place on the canonical list of prolific architects; however, they did not.

Few academics have acknowledged her existence in scholarly texts, let alone recognized her contribution to the history of art as a female architect. How can it be that general audiences and historians alike do not know this talented woman? My assertion is that Mahony was stripped of her potential for individual success; not by her inept abilities, nor by her lack of creativity, but rather by her gender—her socially conditioned position as a woman in a male dominated profession and in a Wright dominated Oak Park Studio. Through an analysis of Mahony’s architectural designs, one can readily identify not only that her works are worthy of scholarly attention, but also that the mature Prairie style of Frank Lloyd Wright, and later style of Walter Burley Griffin, owe much to Marion Mahony.

As illuminated in “The Magic of America,” an unpublished manuscript available at the New York Historical Society in New York City, Mahony engaged in architectural design in the United States, Australia, and India, and completed various projects ranging from furniture to houses to plans for entire cities.

The best illustration of her creativity and ability as an architect can be seen in the design for the *Adolf Mueller House*, Decatur, Illinois, 1910. With this design, Mahony extrapolated exterior motifs on the interior arguably better than did Wright. Mahony allowed the prominence of the low gabled, Japanese-influenced roof to maintain prominence throughout the home. Further, Mahony used more complex designs for decorative elements that create a fascinating juxtaposition of contrasting lines. For example, she designed the windows, lights, carpet, doors, and other decorative elements to mirror the diagonal motif that mirrored the pitch of the roofline. Her complex, detailed scheme of motifs that weave through the interior and exterior led to a successful design that took the holistic, organic approach to architecture even further than did Wright.

¹ Frank Lloyd Wright, “In the Cause of Architecture.” *The Architectural Record*, 23 (1908), 164.

She continued to develop her own style and was recognized for her design abilities when Wright left America for Europe, leaving his studio to Mr. Von Holtz. In 'The Magic of America,' Marion Mahony wrote: "Later this architect [Wright] went abroad... Mr. von Holz, who had taken over, asked me to join him so I did on a definite arrangement that I should have control of the designing. That suited him. When the absent architect [Wright] didn't bother to answer to anything that was sent over to him... For that period I had great fun designing."² During this period of complete creative control of Wright's studio, what the public perceived as structures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, were in fact designed solely by Marion Mahony. However, she received no credit for these designs. Perhaps Mahony was either forced, or was content to remain obscure, and her genius and creativity were rewarded only by her personal association to the greatest architect of her time.

Frank Lloyd Wright exploited this. Another example of this can be seen in the Wasmuth Portfolio, a template book of Prairie Style house plans printed in Germany. While Wright and his assistants were feverishly attempting to finish the plates for publishing, they traced Mahony's designs and renderings and Wright claimed them as his own. Upon publication of the work, over half the designs and under drawings were rendered by Mahony, yet she received no credit or royalties for her work.

Further, it was after his return to Europe, and after Marion Mahony left him to help her husband, architect Walter Burley Griffin, that Frank Lloyd Wright experienced what some would call an identity crisis, or a mid career crisis. It would not be inconceivable that this career slump was merely an absence of the creative genius of Marion Mahony. Thus, what was termed by Wright scholar Paul Kruty as the "lost years" of Frank Lloyd Wright, may in fact have been the years of adjustment and reevaluation following Mahony's departure. After Mahony's marriage to Griffin, her position and level of recognition did not change within his architectural studio. Mahony was indeed Griffin's primary assistant, and the chief creator for most commissions, but Walter Burley Griffin took all of the credit. Also, as Wright experienced a great loss, Griffin received a great boost in creativity and design ability in his new wife and associate, Marion Mahony; this assertion is further validated by the notion that Walter Burley Griffin received significant commissions and the most notoriety and recognition only after Marion Mahony joined his creative team.

Many will categorize Mahony in the traditional role of "assistant." They will assert that Mahony's hand in Wright's masterpieces was like so many Raphaels and Rembrandts that were incorrectly attributed to the master painter rather than the assistant- but Mahony's case is unique. She was creative and innovative enough to stand on her own, and we have physical evidence of that individual ingenuity. How great was her influence on the style of Wright and Griffin's designs? Are there other, more prominent designs by Wright and Griffin that were actually Mahony's? What might her potential have been? The world will never know. This woman apart, like so many extraordinary woman who preceded her, remains unknown, unsung, and undistinguished for her unique contribution in a world dominated by men. But it is within our realm of change to give her credit where it is due, and to acknowledge her as a strong woman, as a gifted architect, as beacon of hope in an architectural realm dominated by men—as Marion Mahony, truly a woman apart.

² Ibid., 170.