

Darwin Martin House Complex

A graphic rail for an exhibit describing the astounding array of art glass, in general, and the “Tree of Life” windows, in particular, that abound in this Buffalo, New York complex designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Wayfinding signage was also designed for this complex.

Art Glass of the Martin House Complex

Frank Lloyd Wright lavished the Martin House complex with an astounding array of art glass. This array – windows, doors, skylights and lay lights – is remarkable in both its abundance and variety: 394 pieces in the Martin House complex in 15 distinct patterns, 11 in the Martin House alone. Wright created a greater number and variety of art glass designs for the Martin estate than for any other single commission in his entire career.

In the Martin House complex and other Prairie-era residential compositions, Wright refined the application of stained glass or leaded glass panels to a uniquely pure reflection of his architectural vision. He referred to these panels as “light screens.” More than just functional windows, doors and skylights, they were devices for filtering views of nature outside through abstractions of the organic geometry found there.

“(windows) are treated as metal ‘grilles’ with glass inserted forming a simple rhythmic arrangement of straight lines and squares made as cunning as possible so long as the result is quiet.”

Frank Lloyd Wright, “The Castle at Springwood,” The Architecture Record 23 (No. 2, March 1906), 101.

With few exceptions, the patterns of the art glass in the vertical plane – windows and doors – are abstractions of foliage, primarily wisteria, found on the Jewett Parkway site.

Patterns in the horizontal plane – skylights and lay lights – are abstracted representations of the plan of the Martin house itself. Each light screen may be considered a note or passage in Wright’s “domestic symphony” of the Martin House complex, with each pattern a variation on main themes.

The Martin House Restoration Corporation is fortunate to have, or have access to, most of the major patterns of art glass that were used in the complex. Art glass from the horizontal plane – lay light and skylight panels – is rarer than that of the vertical plane, having suffered from the ravages of time, gravity and water damage that occurred during the period in which the complex was abandoned.

The “Tree of Life” Window

Designed by Wright for the second floor bedrooms and first floor reception room of the Martin House, the intricate “Tree of Life” art glass pattern is one of the most well known and frequently reproduced motifs in all of Wright’s decorative design.

“Tree of Life” is a popular term that has been applied to this design since the 1960s. There is no evidence of the term being used by Wright or the Martin family. However, the term is appropriately evocative of the design: the pattern consists of a base or “pot” from which a central axis or “trunk” extends to an upper “branch” configuration of chevrons.

The colors used in the design harmonize perfectly with the earth tones used throughout the buildings and furnishings of the complex: greens, browns, yellows and golds. The changing colors of the landscape – particularly the changing seasons of Western New York – and shifting light conditions activate the colors in the glass in a remarkable display of materials harmonizing with nature.

There were over 60 “Tree of Life” windows and doors originally in the Martin house. Each window is constructed of more than 750 individual pieces of clear, iridescent, opalescent and gold leaf “sandwich” glass set in brass frames. The iridescence is present only on the outside face of the windows. Combined with the multiple planes of Wright’s design, this gives the windows a subtle function of screening the occupants of the house from the view of outside passers-by.

In 1909, seven of these windows from the Martin House reception room were returned to the Linden Glass Company to be modified in response to the Martins’ request for improved views onto the street; the large, square “pots” were removed from the lower portion of the design.

Martin House Art Glass by the Numbers

- 394 Total number of pieces of art glass originally in the Martin House complex
- 185 Total number of original windows now owned by the Martin House Restoration Corporation
- 15 Number of distinct patterns of art glass in the Martin House complex
- 1500+ Number of pieces of glass and cement in a typical “Tree of Life” window
- 66 Number of “Tree of Life” windows and doors originally in the Martin House
- 300+ Number of hours required to fabricate a “Tree of Life” window
- \$22,000 Cost to fabricate a “Tree of Life” window today

