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Local designers recreate Frank Lloyd Wright light fixture

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The Frank Lloyd Wright lighting fixture, with its clean, modern lines, looks slightly out of place surrounded by the ornate Victorian charm of the Square. Yet there it is, displayed in a window of Studio 2015 Jewelry on Benton Street. The wall sconce is an exact recreation of one that Wright designed in 1908 for the Frederick C. Robie House in Chicago.



This 2006 version of a 1908 Frank Lloyd Wright wall sconce was created by local business owners Peter Janko and Tom Dougherty.

Two local business owners collaborated on the recreation of the lighting fixture. Peter Janko, founder and president of Lumenelle, a Marengo company that designs lighting products, and Tom Dougherty, founder and president of Studio 2015, needed all of their artistic and technical skills for this challenging project.

The two worked on it off and on for the past year, after receiving a commission from the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, based in Oak Park. The trust is in the midst of a 10-year, \$8 million restoration of Wright's Robie House, which is located on the campus of the University of Chicago.

Janko and Dougherty explained that a re-creation, such as their sconce, is an entirely new object that replicates its original as exactly as possible. A recreation differs from a restoration, which involves repairing and cleaning an original object.

When the restoration of the Robie House is complete, 27 identical lighting fixtures will grace its walls. The two surviving originals will be used, along with 25 recreations. Janko and Dougherty have supplied one of them and hope to receive the commission for the rest.

Karen Sweeney, director of restorations for the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, said she selected Janko for the project, partly because of his emphasis on problem solving. She became acquainted with his work a couple of years ago when he made a presentation to an Oak Park architectural group.

Janko, who spent 20 years designing telecommunication products for Motorola before starting Lumenelle, has worked on other historic projects. He created chandeliers for the Glessner House Museum in Chicago and replaced the glass in the foyer chandeliers in the Deering Library of Northwestern University.

Janko enlisted the help of Dougherty, who has collaborated with him before. Dougherty brought to the project the same skills in design, artistry, technology and tools that he uses in creating jewelry.

The two realized immediately that they had been entrusted with something truly special. Janko called Wright's wall sconce "a signature piece."

"Robie House was unique. Frank was up close and personal with everything in it. He would have micromanaged it," Janko said.

Janko and Dougherty described some of the steps of the recreation process. First, they took apart one of the two original sconces that had been loaned to them. Then they measured it and made molds.

"Taking it apart, we got an understanding of how Frank Lloyd Wright would have done it. That's why it's a recreation. We did it the way he did. You retain the character that way," Dougherty said.

They said the exact metal that Wright used, a type of bronze, is no longer available. To try to match it, they turned to biochemistry and chemistry and also consulted metallurgists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They ended up with a custom-mixed red brass that is very similar to bronze.

"Our metal is as close as we can get," Dougherty said.

Once they had their metal, they were ready for the next challenges.



Peter Janko cleans top casting of the wall sconce.

"Some pieces were cast four, five, six times," Dougherty said. "There was a lot of hard work and lots of research, a lot of experimenting and trial and error."

Both men said they are happy with the finished product as is Sweeney.

"Now we are working with them on fine tuning the project," Sweeney said. One decision the foundation still must make is whether the lighting fixture should look new, as it did in 1908, or a patina should be applied to make it look old. If it were up to Dougherty and Janko, they would leave the sconce looking new.

Sweeney said their recreated wall sconce will be used in the dining room "prow" of Robie House.

"It's called a prow because it is an angled shape at the end of the room that is shaped like a ship," she said. "It is mostly finished. The plaster has been repaired and the walls painted. These light fixtures will be one of the last parts."

The wall sconces may serve another purpose as well. Sweeney said fundraising efforts to support the restoration include an adopt-an-artifact program. The wall sconces are among the artifacts up for adoption. Two of them already have been sponsored for \$4,000 each, Sweeney said.

For the time being, the wall sconce recreated by Janko and Dougherty remains on display in the window of Studio 2015. And for those willing to travel to Chicago, Robie House is open to the public, with tours offered seven days a week. Information about the restoration project and tours is available at <http://www.wrightplus.org/robiehouse/restoration/restoration.html>.

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Tom Dougherty, polishing the frame casting.