Louis Sullivan (1856-1924)  
*Circular Medallion*, 1893  
(from the Elevator Doors of the Shlesinger and Mayer Company Store, now Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co.)  
Copper-plated cast iron  
1971.450

"The function of a building must organize its form," are the words of Sullivan that best summarize his philosophy of architecture. It was a philosophy arrived at through synthesizing divergent influences from his formal education, constant reading, and discussion with other young architects.

Summers during his boyhood were spent on his grandparents’ farm near Boston where he observed nature in hours spent out-of-doors. He also studied botany and biology with great seriousness in his high school science classes. He was fascinated with the growth pattern of plants, and even more fascinated by every bridge he saw, making endless drawings of flowers, leaves, and the trusses of bridges.

At sixteen, after passing rigorous examinations, Sullivan entered MIT as a third-year student, studying for one year at the first school of architecture in the United States. A year of working for established architects -- first Frank Furness in Philadelphia and then William LeBaron Jenney in Chicago followed. A few years later, in 1883, Jenney was to design the first Chicago building with a skeleton framework. The seed of this idea was said to have been stilt houses
Jenney saw in Manila; other sources undoubtedly were Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace in London (1851) with its “neutral skin of glass stretched over a delicate frame of iron members,” and the arched trusses of suspension bridges which would so strongly influence Sullivan.

Among the young draftsmen in Jenney’s office at the time Sullivan worked there was John Edelman who involved Sullivan in a lively group of young intellectuals and athletes. Encouraged by Jenny, however, Sullivan left Chicago and his cohorts for Paris in July of 1874. After two terms of study at L’Ecole des Beaux Arts and several weeks of travel in Italy, he returned to Chicago in March, 1875, drawn by the tremendous construction boom still going on as a result of the fire of 1871. It was time for his ideas to take shape.

Sullivan, in addition to believing that “form follows function,” advocated that a building express the environment from which it grows. In America, this meant using modern technology and reflecting in his designs and ornament an industrial and democratic society, rather than copying classic structures which represented the aristocratic traditions of a bygone age. The Chicago buildings that perhaps best represent these theories are Adler and Sullivan’s Auditorium Theatre Building (1887-1889); the lost Stock Exchange (1893-4); and Sullivan’s Carson Pirie Scott (originally called Schlesinger and Mayer Company Store, 1899, 1903-4). Sullivan’s theory of ornamentation was that “its presence or absence...should be determined at the very beginning of the design...” It should not look
“stuck on” but “...seem a part of the surface...there, by the same right that a flower appears amid the leaves of its parent plant.”

In the ornamentation of Carson Pirie Scott, a department store designed to sell primarily to women, he used flowing lines and “...a delicate, airy and lacelike pattern” (VanOrmer). The display windows look like framed pictures, with the motion of the design leading the passerby to the entrance tower at the corner of State and Madison “...one of the finest transitions ever made at the corner of a building.” Surrounding the street-level windows and encrusting the entrance pavilion at the corner are design motifs derived from natural, leafy forms which seem “to bloom on the building” (VanOrmer).

Sullivan carried these motifs into the interior of the department store, where richly detailed balusters and column capitals contain stylized seed forms and interlaced ribbons on a background of geometric shapes. The elevator medallion was installed at hand height on the original cage elevators, which were removed in the 1960s for fire safety reasons. The drawings for the ornamentation were made by Sullivan, with the final detailed studies from which the Winslow Brothers foundry produced the iron work executed by George Grant Elmslie, one of his associates. In some cases, the iron ornamentation is applied in as many as three layers (VanOrmer).

In contrast, the Stock Exchange Building, largely used by men, was a heavier, more massive structure. Its ornamentation was based on geometric forms, which also are infinitely varied, but which Sullivan
had deliberately not used in the store decoration, feeling they were not sufficiently feminine. The building's elevator enclosure grilles, with their strong horizontal lines, added rhythm and grace to the Stock Exchange lobby.

Sullivan's last years were bitter ones. He felt the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 denied everything he stood for in its copying of classical styles. The Art Institute, built as a meeting place for the World's Congress during the fair, is an example of the classical concept, but whether it is more suited to its function - or less - than a Sullivan design would have been, can be endlessly debated. JC

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Sullivan's ornamentation consists of artistically designed patterns based on organic or geometric shapes. After examining his elevator medallion for Carson Pirie Scott, have students design medallions for a building in their neighborhood or city. Each medallion should be composed of natural or geometric shapes, with attention given to the overall pattern of the shapes.

2. Sullivan believed that form should follow function and that a building should express the environment from which it grows. Have students investigate contemporary examples of architecture in their community or city. What function does the building serve and (how) does its design support or relate to this function? What materials
and decorative elements have been used and what can they tell us about the technology, values, and aesthetics of our time?

3. Sullivan’s contributions to midwestern architecture were many. Have each student select a building designed by Sullivan (or Adler and Sullivan) to research. Issues for students to consider are: the building’s designated function; Sullivan’s design as it relates to the function; the materials and technology used in construction; the decorative elements; and the building’s status today.