Frank Lloyd Wright (1867 - 1959)
Desk and chair for the S.C. Johnson and Son Administration Building, 1939
armchair: painted steel tubing, maple armrests, upholstery; desk: painted steel tubing, maple work surface, with later laminated surface manufactured by Steelcase, Inc.
Gift of the Johnson Wax Company 1972.310 and 1972.311

Moving through the Depression era (1929 - 39) with style, American designers incorporated the speed and efficiency of machine-age technology with sweeping horizontal lines, rounded corners, and metallic materials. Automobiles such as Chrysler's Airflow, trains such as the Twentieth-Century Limited, airplanes, skyscrapers, alarm clocks, toasters, refrigerators, desk, and chairs alike sported this sleek new streamlined look. For a country in the throes of economic turmoil, streamlining optimistically suggested the power of technology, industry, and consumerism to overcome the hardships brought on by the stock market crash of 1929.

Introducing streamlined forms into the modern home and workplace harmoniously integrated American domestic life with the rapidly changing technological world. Frank Lloyd Wright's desk and chair for the "Great Workroom" of his Johnson Wax building in Racine, Wisconsin (1936 - 39), headquarters of a major American industry, reflect attributes of the machine -- speed, shiny surfaces, and
precision -- that relate art and industry to life. In fact, the desk and chair were designed to "fit" with the design of the building itself, to form a totally integrated environment, just as the many mechanical parts fit together to form a functioning machine. Wright designed all of the building's interior elements with a uniform whole in mind -- the mushroom-shaped columns, glass tubing, walls, skylights, heating and lighting systems, and furniture.

An early design for the desk and chair (published in *Architectural Forum* in January 1938) shows that Wright originally thought about welded heavy sheet-aluminum components. The tubular steel version was certainly cheaper to produce and was perhaps suggested by Steelcase or Warren McArthur, the two firms which submitted prototypes for the project. Tubular steel furniture had been designed by Marcel Breuer in 1925, and shortly thereafter by both Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and LeCorbusier.

Executed by Steelcase, Inc., Wright wanted the desk and chair to reflect both the mushroom shape of the columns and the cantilevered quality of the building itself. The three-legged chairs for the secretarial pool were made of russet-painted steel tubing and matching upholstery. Wright believed that the design would allow employees free movement of their feet and promote better posture. The desks, with swinging undertables for typewriters, were supported by tubular steel and had maple work surfaces, with a cantilevered shelf to hold files (the worn work surfaces were later laminated with a plastic surface.) A wastebasket is supported by the tubular steel frame. In their completeness and self-sufficiency, the
desks and chairs are early expressions of the now-common idea of modular furniture used in open office planning.

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to imagine sitting in and using the Frank Lloyd Wright desk and chair. How comfortable/practical are they? If a visitor to the United States in 1939 toured the Johnson Wax building, what impression might a room filled with the desks and chairs have made? What message might the Great Workroom have conveyed about the country’s technology? work ethic? future?

2. Wright’s desks and chairs, while still being used in the Johnson Wax building today, were obviously not designed in 1939 with the computer in mind. Individuals today, with modern technology and fast-paced working styles, use desks in ways unique to the 1990s. Have each student sketch a design for a desk and chair to meet his/her working needs and styles. What form and features will each have? What materials will be appropriate and durable?

3. Have students research Frank Lloyd Wright’s contributions as an architect. How does his philosophy of architecture relate to that of Louis Sullivan (slide 12)? What elements of his architectural style are apparent in the desk and chair? Have each student select one Frank Lloyd Wright building to study in depth. If possible, tour some of his buildings in the Chicago area.