

“WRIGHT, MOTHER AND MIRIAM”

*The following excerpt of my research notes begins shortly after the Taliesin murders in 1914 and gives the feeling of how Wright's mother, Anna Lloyd Wright, was involved in the relationship between her son and Miriam Noel.....*Anthony Alofsin, FAIA

In the aftermath of mourning, Wright received the first note from Miriam Maude Noel. “I hunger for the living touch of someone—something, immediately peculiar to myself—invariably ‘mine.’ Yes—at time almost anyone or anything,” Wright wrote to her before Christmas, 1914. Miriam likened the architect to a Greek warrior: “Let me crown your head with a wreath of violets and bind your hair with filets of gold, like Alcibiades at the Feast of Agathon.” Noel was desirous, yet cautionary: “I kiss your feet with my trembling lips. I will come into your life for a little while, and then I will lose you because you will never understand, and then like Hagar I will go forth to hunger and thirst in the wilderness, alone with my Ishmael, the poor frail child the world calls love.” So began their life together, two protean figures burning with passion and both needy, vulnerable and on the rebound from lost love. They would spend much of the next eight years together, often in Japan, but with occasional visits to Taliesin and even to New York.

Wright was always open with Anna, his mother, about his lovers, sharing his private fears and hopes about Mamah, and now his relationship with Miriam. Despite the architect's adultery, his mother stuck very close to her adored and only son, becoming quite involved in this newest relationship.

“Had I the power to express myself clearly I know I could convince you of my loyalty to you and to Frank,” Anna wrote to Miriam in July 1918. “Miriam,” she continued “you may go a long way before you find the sweet true spirit he manifests. There are few men as clean and pure in his conceptions of life, hence his artistic skill.”

Anna was even more intimate with Frank, particularly when her letters were intended for his eyes alone. In October 1918, just before he and Miriam were to depart again for Japan, Anna encouraged her son.

“Even through our mistakes, Frank dear, your life is so wonderful to me,” Anna wrote. “You were so richly endowed by the Loving Father of all power. And so wonderfully supported and guided through all your mistakes. When I think of it all I bow my head before a mysterious

power that is beyond my power to understand. I only have unbounded faith that Frank Lloyd Wright will ultimately triumph and be worthy of the Lloyd for which he was named and the love and care which surrounded his boyhood and youth...”

After Wright and Miriam arrived in Japan, Anna, still involved in their relationship, included them both in her letters but began getting worried about their happiness. In November 1918, just after Thanksgiving, she sent her son another note.

“Dear dear boy, you and Miriam unless you can be happy and genial to each other don’t wear each other out. If Miriam can’t be happy with you she better go home.... There is no happy life when we are tarring each other,” she added. The relationship was rocky, but she continued supporting and praising her son: “ My Dear ones in Japan, You are far far away yet I feel you by my side... I hope you are well happy and prosperous... Your work is your salvation, a constant renewal of your souls no mistakes or curses need to cast one down...I have faith to believe that good will come from the chaos and darkness.”

When Wright and Miriam returned to America at the end of August 1919, they embarked on a hectic travel schedule, moving between Los Angeles, Taliesin, and New York. At Thanksgiving Anna again doggedly pursued the prospect of marriage.

“My Dear Frank and Miriam, although I do not want to crowd things on Miriam that she does not care to hear, but I want her to understand that I am anxious to take her as my own.”

On Wright’s next return to Japan in January 1920, he came down with the flu in Tokyo. Fearing he might die as others had in the pandemic, Wright’s eighty-year-old mother left Wisconsin for Japan, bringing a doctor along to nurse her son. She traveled to Vancouver, then sailed to Yokohama arriving on March 2nd and stayed at the Imperial Hotel. But she herself fell ill with various ailments and spent four weeks in bed. At the conclusion of her visit Wright and his mother returned to America together, leaving from Yokohama on June 16, 1920, and arriving in the United States about two weeks later.

By the time Anna returned to America her attitude about the couple had changed. In trying to take care of Frank in the presence of his lover, she had supplanted Miriam’s primary role as his mate and partner. Seeing the extraordinarily deep bond between mother and son could only infuriate the sensitive Miriam. For Anna, the time spent together confirmed the tensions between the couple. Their usual problems were amplified by Miriam’s jealousy at the thought that Wright was interested in another woman, a Russian aristocrat staying at the Hotel. Anna

shifted from the warm accepting mother-in-law to cool skeptic. Her answer to their problems still lay in getting married, and she applied more pressure.

During the five and a half months from summer and late fall of 1920 when Wright and Miriam were between their Japanese and American residencies, Anna visited them at Taliesin. She now addressed Miriam formally, as if she were a stranger. “Madam Noel do you do you [sic] love Frank enough to marry him,” she asked. “Frank, do you love Madam Noel enough to marry her? If that is the case do you not see how many people you are wronging by living as you do now?...Your children Frank, Madam Noel’s children, your mother, your sisters. Oh Frank they have loved you and are worthy of you. You have your theories Frank. You have had reason for many of them. But that will never make them right and put you in a position worthy of yourself.”

Even more was at stake in resolving domestic strife. Wright’s aunts Nell and Jane had died and left their Hillside Home School derelict in 1915. He told his mother he had plans for it, giving the first hint of the endeavor that would in twelve years become the Taliesin fellowship. In this initial indication that Wright wanted to use the campus to train young people in his ideology, Anna asked how he could possibly propose such an undertaking with his own personal affairs unsettled. Once again she insisted that marriage was the answer.

“You talk of an Architectural School of thirty young men,” Anna chided. “Do you realize the responsibility of such a school? Where could you in your present situation draw the right kind of people to run such a school or would people like to send young men to such a school? With you in your present situation as their leader. But if you were free and you and Madam Noel quickly marry what change would come over us all.”....

[Quotations in Fair Use from letters in The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives (The Museum of Modern Art | Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York)]