

# field trip

## ARRANGING NATURE

AT MANITOGA, THEIR HOUSE AND STUDIO, DESIGNER RUSSEL WRIGHT AND HIS WIFE, MARY, RECONSTRUCTED THE LANDSCAPE; DECADES LATER THE ESTATE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, IS BEING BEAUTIFULLY RESTORED by judith nasatir

Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, Russel Wright's Dragon Rock, right, has rooms that cantilever into space, proximity to a waterfall, and a quality of being in and out of the landscape. The floor-to-ceiling windows are being restored, as is the green roof that Wright had originally planned. ■ Wright, in 1942, works on a ceramic piece, below.



DESIGNERS TRY TO persuade us to see the world their way, to change our lives. Some, like Russel Wright, succeed. In a career that spanned the Great Depression and the Bicentennial, Wright mastered the art of the inevitable, from tableware to treescapes.

Wright's legacy now lives most strongly at Manitoga, the designer's 75-acre magnum opus in Garrison, New York, comprising a house (called Dragon Rock), a restored studio, and woodland gardens. Recently designated a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center is one of the program's few twentieth-century sites and the first in Putnam County, a part of the historic Hudson Valley that is home to some of the country's great gilded-age piles, including Kykuit and Hyde Park.

In the Algonquian language, Manitoga means "place of the great spirit." It is. The property, a member of the National Trust's Artists Homes and Studios program, reveals a particularly fertile imagination at work, staging nature and man's place in it. When Wright and his wife, Mary, acquired the land in 1942, it was derelict after a century of quarrying and logging. With hubris, humility, and chutzpah, Wright coaxed Manitoga into existence for 34 years, until his death in 1976. He transformed a distressed landscape into an Eden of sorts, with echoes of Walden and of the work of such scenic shape-shifters as the Olmsteds, Capability Brown, and Humphry Repton.

Wright replanted the wooded property with native species. "He was arrested more than once on the Palisades Parkway for loading up the

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truck with native plants,” says Ann Wright, his daughter and the center’s cofounder. He threaded miles of winding paths over a diverted stream, around artfully arranged boulders, across a constructed waterfall, and through hidden outdoor rooms and the seemingly haphazard fields of ferns, mosses, wildflowers, and trees that back up onto the Appalachian Trail.

“I am amused and pleased to often be asked, ‘How did you ever find such an unusually beautiful site?’” Wright wrote in *House & Garden* in 1971. “Pleased because these friends think that I found it this way, and therefore I know that it looks natural. I began cutting views, and I am still doing this.”



With architect David Leavitt, Wright designed both Dragon Rock—set into the cliffside and completed in 1961—and the studio to disappear into the landscape. A pergola planted with Dutchman’s-pipe vines links the structures, which feature the open plans, glass expanses, and relatively modest facades characteristic of the period. Wright’s ingenious eye for detail

(every doorknob is different), sense of material adventure (early plastics encapsulate butterflies and local plants; butterfly-jointed wood sills top dados covered in inexpensive brass mesh; pine and hemlock needles are pressed into epoxy and stained green), and compulsion for the quick change (dining area curtains are five shades of white yarn for summer, three shades of red ribbon for winter) ensure constant discovery inside as well as out.

An Ohioan born in 1904, Wright was descended from two signers of the Declaration of Independence. While a student at Princeton, this theater-loving son of a judge apprenticed himself on weekends to Norman Bel Geddes, a highly regarded set designer, who, like Wright, later emerged as a founding father of industrial design.



In the kitchen, above, cabinetry fronts change seasonally, from summer white to autumn red. Wright mixed tableware with a master plan for every menu. ■ Unexpected materials, like bark veneer, left, appear frequently. ■ A tree trunk and steps, below, rise through the double-height space.



Wright dropped out of Princeton and later worked for George Cukor’s Rochester-based theater company. He married Mary Small Einstein (her father’s cousin was Albert Einstein) in 1927. The daughter of successful textile manufacturers and merchants, and a former student of Alexander Archipenko’s, Einstein was the marketing sense (and fellow designer) behind the Russel Wright sensibility. She devised the designer-label strategy, putting the Wright name on all of his American Modern designs: spun-aluminum products, blond wood furniture, and, memorably, the rimless, organic-shaped tableware considered the country’s best-selling patterns of all time, including American Modern, for Steubenville Pottery, in the 1930s; Casual China, for Iroquois China, in 1946; and Meladur plastic tableware, for General American Transportation, in 1949.

To promote a lifestyle suited to the objects, the couple wrote *Guide to Easier Living*, published by Simon & Schuster in 1950. This manifesto for the middle class championed the casual, sort of. “Formality is not necessary for beauty,” the Wrights wrote. “The new etiquette has only one basic principle: to make entertaining less work and more play for everyone concerned.”

How much less work, and for whom, seems open to question. The Wrights proposed both

the participatory guest (preparing, serving, cleaning up) and cutting the amount of china used by roughly half. At Manitoga, easier living involved labor for all. "When weekend guests came down to breakfast," Ann Wright says, "they'd find lists of the day's tasks, so someone who had only brought a three-piece gray suit might be out in the woods moving boulders." Actually, that task was done with the help of an old phone truck that Wright bought for \$50. As Ann recalls, "He'd hook up the winch line to a boulder and drag it into place. You could move about two a day, so you can begin to understand how it took years."

Those days ended, fortunately, with a cocktail walk, now a tradition for the center's members.

The public spaces seem carved out of the quarry. A free-flowing plan connects the living room, right, to the ground-level dining room, via stone steps. ■ Ann's grottolike bathroom, below, has a windowed wall by the sunken tub. Butterflies are laminated into the sliding door panels.



It was instituted by Margaret A. Doyle and Andrew Capitman, Manitoga's preservation-savvy copresidents, who, with executive director Anita Pidala and staffer Vivian Linares, shepherded Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center through the complicated journey to national landmark status. The center worked with New York-based architect Jan Hird Pokorny & Associates and cabinetmaker John Sanchez on the recent studio renovation and is overseeing the restoration of Dragon Rock now under way. Russel Wright opened Manitoga to the public in 1975, determined to preserve "this land which was not to be possessed by one but to be shared... for this generation and for those to come." In that spirit, Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center offers a curriculum of educational programs for adults and children, including its Summer Nature and Design Camp. A teenage-level nature and design program is in the planning stages, Capitman says, and will launch next year. In 2000, the center instituted the Russel Wright Awards to honor others similarly committed to design and nature.

■ Manitoga/The Russel Wright Design Center, in Garrison, New York, is open for tours daily from April through October. 845-424-3812. [russelwrightcenter.org](http://russelwrightcenter.org).

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