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# Review: Learning from Frank Furness: Louis Sullivan in 1873; Furness in Space: The Architect and Design Dialogues on the Late Nineteenth-Century Country House; Frank Furness: Making a Modern Library--From Gentleman's Library to Machine for Learning; Frank Furness: Working on Railroads; Building a Masterpiece: Frank Furness' Factory for Art; Face and Form: The Art and Caricature of Frank Furness

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admirably composed. The accompanying book identifies only Ezra Stoller, but photographs constituted the principal elements of the show. Few films gave artistic credit to their creators. The images often included dramatic tonal contrasts, night views, and unusual angles that emphasized stylistic innovations. Daylight images often glorified the brilliant sunshine of semitropical cities, or the broad white planes of fair-ground buildings, as if promising a sunny and optimistic, sanitary, wholesome future. Many pavilions were simply boxes of various shapes, sometimes without windows. Planners evidently valued the flexibility inherent in large undifferentiated spaces, and expected artificial means to control lighting and the indoor climate. Images showed transportation devices, including train engines, airplanes, dirigibles, and exciting rides in purpose-made cars or automobiles shown on real roads and imaginary freeways. Others showed assembly lines in model fairground factories, where industrialists displayed methods of production and the reassuringly clean processing of canned and packaged food. Purchasers in the 1930s still had to be persuaded that factory-made products were rational, sanitary, wholesome, and made by well-regulated white workers. Today, we notice the many industrial laborers who have been replaced by machines and robots or by low-wage employees abroad.

The objects included a large robot, Elektro Motor-Man, an aluminum chair, various domestic consumer products such as dishwashers and nylon hosiery, and several architectural models. For the Chicago fair, Frank Lloyd Wright's former sculptural collaborator, Alfonso Iannelli, designed a Sunbeam toaster and a coffeemaker. Museum visitors saw dramatic (although not entirely explicit) photographs of the Ford Motor Company's Road of Tomorrow, General Motors' Futurama, or less immense pavilions sponsored by Wonder Bread at the modest end and by governments at the grandiose end. Playful small pavilions and innovative small houses attracted a largely white public, if the photographs of fairgoers are representative. Larger, often more formally planned pavilions were meant to impress people with the power, authority, and strength of a government

that was rescuing the country from economic calamity.

The last point is made clearly by the exhibition's linkage of the fairs to city planning. In New York City, the peripheral benefits of the World of Tomorrow included the elimination of the trash dumps in Flushing Meadows in favor of fairgrounds and the present park, the development of LaGuardia Airport and the Grand Central Parkway, the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge, the Whitestone Expressway, the IND subway system's present E, F, M, and R lines, and the provision of a site for the 1964 World's Fair. The other fairs had fewer far-reaching urban consequences, but San Francisco's fairground development of Treasure Island, a landfill operation, allowed for its rapid naval military occupation during the Second World War.

The exhibition ended intelligently with a section devoted to the present state of each fairground. Probably the visitors in New York most appreciated the presentation of Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, an active recreational area serving a large population that includes ethnic groups barely represented in the city during the 1930s. The park long retained a few structures from 1939 and the fairgrounds provided the layout for the 1964 fair, itself almost a half century in the past.

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#### **Related Publication**

Robert W. Rydell and Laura Burd Schiavo, eds., *Designing Tomorrow: America's World's Fairs of the 1930s* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), 224 pp., 30 color and 102 b/w illus. \$45.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780300149579

#### **Learning from Frank Furness: Louis Sullivan in 1873**

Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia  
6 October 2012–30 December 2012

#### **Furness in Space: The Architect and Design Dialogues on the Late Nineteenth-Century Country House**

Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
14 October 2012–21 December 2012

#### **Frank Furness: Making a Modern Library—From Gentleman's Library to Machine for Learning**

Kroiz Gallery, Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia  
5 October 2012–18 January 2013

#### **Frank Furness: Working on the Railroads**

Library Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
17 September 2012–19 April 2013

#### **Building a Masterpiece: Frank Furness' Factory for Art**

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia  
29 September 2012–30 December 2012

#### **Face and Form: The Art and Caricature of Frank Furness**

Athenaeum of Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
30 November 2012–19 January 2013

To mark the centennial of Frank Furness's death, a number of educational and cultural institutions in and around Philadelphia collaborated on *Furness 2012*, a series of exhibitions, a symposium, and a website that sought to place the architect, and by extension the city, securely within the modernist narrative. A quirky individual, Furness (1839–1912) wrestled with nearly every major building type of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Banks, railroad stations, libraries, educational and medical institutions, clubhouses, places of worship, urban townhouses, and country estates all bear his unmistakable stamp. Among his American contemporaries, only H. H. Richardson equaled Furness in both range and creativity. Why is Furness not better appreciated outside his native Philadelphia? That is the question *Furness 2012* attempted to answer, and, in large part, it succeeded.

Furness was born into a prominent and accomplished Philadelphia family in 1839, just as the city was transforming itself from a cultural capital into an industrial metropolis. He exhibited a temperamental personality, even at a young age, and he was slow in settling on a career path. A three-year placement in the Philadelphia office of the Scottish émigré architect John

Fraser eventually led to a longer and more pivotal stay in the experimental New York atelier of Richard Morris Hunt, who had just returned to the United States from his studies at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Meritorious service in the Union cavalry during the Civil War interrupted Furness's studies permanently and marked his life indelibly.

Not long after his discharge, Furness began working again with Hunt in New York, this time as an assistant, but the lure of his native city soon proved irresistible. By 1866 he had returned to Philadelphia and formed Fraser, Furness & Hewitt, in partnership with his former employer and a former assistant to architect John Notman. Dropping the older partner from the masthead, the firm of Furness & Hewitt went on to win the prestigious commission for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1871–76). Other commissions soon followed. The firm expanded to include several draftsmen, including a young Louis Sullivan, who joined in 1873 before decamping for better opportunities in Chicago in the aftermath of that year's financial panic.

Clients, many of whom were drawn from Philadelphia's industrial and commercial elite, clamored for Furness's idiosyncratic touch, which fit their modern aspirations while rendering stylistic categories inadequate, even by the eclectic standards of the day. One might characterize the Furnessian mode as an exaggerated version of Hunt's Neo-Grec that was initially fired by the Victorian Gothic and later tempered by the Romanesque and classical revivals. Furness broke with Hewitt in 1875, practicing solo until, in 1881, he formed Furness & Evans, a new partnership with former draftsman Allen Evans that would be expanded and renamed Furness, Evans & Company five years later. To this phase belongs Furness's late triumph, the University of Pennsylvania Library (1888–90). Although in his later years Furness adopted a tamer, more classicizing design approach in response to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, he received fewer and fewer commissions even as he suffered a number of devastating professional setbacks before his death in 1912.

Historians were slow to recognize Furness's original, if unconventional, contribution to American architecture. Were it not for Sullivan, who provided a vivid character study of his former employer in *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), Furness might have slipped into obscurity. A new appreciation for the architect began to take root with the rise of postmodernism, a movement that, significantly, was led by fellow Philadelphian and avowed Furness admirer Robert Venturi. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania Library—renamed the Fisher Fine Arts Library—were both restored in time for their centennials. The scholarly literature deepened substantially with the publication of James F. O'Gorman's *The Architecture of Frank Furness*, a catalogue issued to coincide with a groundbreaking 1973 exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. With the appearance of George E. Thomas's 1991 catalogue raisonné, *Frank Furness: The Complete Works*, and Michael J. Lewis's 2001 biography, *Frank Furness: Architecture and the Violent Mind*, the architect's reputation has been firmly secured.

The premise of *Furness 2012* was not to reproduce the scale and scope of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's earlier exhibition but rather to consider different aspects of Furness's life and work in venues across the city, many of them enhanced by being located in his buildings. Small to medium in size, the exhibitions diverged somewhat in the quality of their installation, but of those that I visited, all provided differing—and welcome—perspectives on the architect.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art built its intimate exhibition, *Learning from Frank Furness: Louis Sullivan in 1873*, around a desk and bookcase originally designed by Furness in 1870–71 and executed by cabinetmaker Daniel Pabst for the Philadelphia townhouse of Furness's older brother, Horace Howard Furness, the noted Shakespearean scholar. Once part of a comprehensive, Moorish-inspired library interior, the desk in particular is a tour de force of architectural cabinetry. The base and desktop are treated as a quasi altar, with an oversized keyhole arch framing the knee-hole, and the back piece conceived as a

tripartite Gothic reredos. Incised panels contain abstracted foliate patterns. Most amusing are the three voluptuous muses mounted on the back piece, the center one holding aloft a clock and those flanking it, gaslights. It is not difficult to imagine how Horace was inspired by these figures while at work on his famed *Variorum Shakespeare*. On an adjacent wall were hung front and side elevations of the desk in Frank Furness's hand alongside ornamental drawings in Sullivan's hand, as well as a baluster from Sullivan's Schlesinger and Mayer Department Store in Chicago. The juxtaposition essentially reinforced the organic connection between employer and one-time employee in terms of their approach to ornament, although, regrettably, not structure. Fortunately placed just beyond the cozy alcove containing the exhibition, Thomas Eakins's *A May Morning in the Park* (1879–80), with its subject of engineer Fairman Rogers driving his four-in-hand coach, reminded me of the interconnected social circles in which Furness lived and worked. Rogers's sister was married to Horace Howard Furness, and Rogers chaired the building committee for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Many of the *Furness 2012* exhibitions viewed Furness through the lens of building type. For example, *Furness in Space: The Architect and Design Dialogues on the Late Nineteenth-Century Country House*, a small exhibition at Bryn Mawr College's Canaday Library, traced the morphology of Furness's suburban houses, many of which were in neighboring "Main Line" communities, using detailed real estate maps, plans, and photographs. I was left marveling at the tightness of Furness's formal geometries, his open floor plans, and his environmental sensitivities. It is especially noteworthy that undergraduate students at the college were responsible for the bulk of the research exhibited here.

Nearby, the Kroiz Gallery of the University of Pennsylvania's Architectural Archives mounted *Frank Furness: Making a Modern Library—From Gentleman's Library to Machine for Learning*, a modest exhibition of drawings and photographs of Furness's libraries, ranging from the tiny octagonal municipal building for New Castle, Delaware, to the hulking Fisher Fine Arts Library

of which the Kroiz Gallery is a part. The standout from this exhibition, curiously, was not a historical document. Rather, it was a seductive late twentieth-century watercolor rendering of the library's apse and tower by former University of Pennsylvania Fine Arts Dean Lee Copeland, an eloquent reminder of how this building has profoundly inspired generations of faculty, students, and alumni.

The Library Company of Philadelphia, once housed in a building by Furness that was demolished in 1940, chose to highlight Furness's work for the city's major railroads. *Frank Furness: Working on the Railroads* chronicled Furness's relationship, first, with the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad Company, for which he designed a slew of modest but innovative passenger stations for a variety of cities, towns, and suburbs in southeastern Pennsylvania in the early to mid-1880s; second, with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, for which he designed major stations in Wilmington, Delaware, and downtown Philadelphia in the mid- to late 1880s; and third, with the Pennsylvania Railroad, for which he designed a major addition to the Wilson Brothers' Broad Street Station in the early 1890s. The Library Company exhibition included a number of informative drawings and blueprints, but it was the three-dimensional artifacts, including signs, emblems, and a mantel shelf from the ladies' waiting room of the Broad Street Station, that truly energized it. Most astonishing was the presence of an intricately detailed N-scale model of Broad Street Station itself. Built by a dedicated hobbyist, the model conveys the power and scale of the multiblock station and adjoining shed in way that no drawing or photograph could ever match.

Several blocks north, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts organized *Building a Masterpiece: Frank Furness' Factory for Art*, a small exhibition of Furness & Hewitt's drawings for its own building, hung upstairs in the museum's main "nave." The title, while an obvious pun on Andy Warhol's much later New York "Factory," served to focus the viewers' attention directly on the complexities of the building's program, including its structural, mechanical, and ventilating systems. Nevertheless, the exhibition's centerpiece remained the firm's split

elevation drawing of the main façade. Often reproduced, but seldom explained, the divided rendering shows the building as executed in its full polychrome glory on the left and an alternate grisaille scheme, thankfully not executed, on the right. An unsuccessful competition drawing by Henry Sims, depicting a quasi-ecclesiastical domed design, underscored how modern Furness & Hewitt's building truly is.

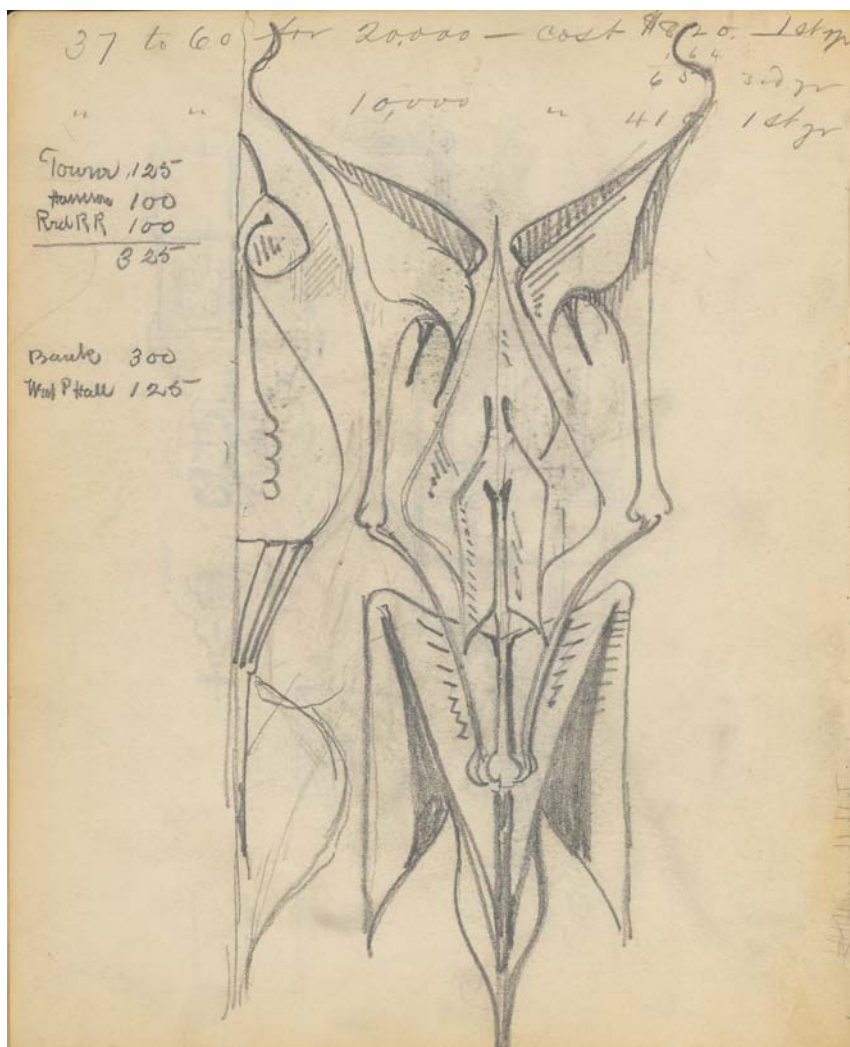
The one exhibition that best summarized the breadth of Furness's achievement was paradoxically the most intensely personal: *Face and Form: The Art and Caricature of Frank Furness* at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. The Athenaeum's claims on Furness are less tenuous than they might initially seem. Its building was designed by Notman, Hewitt's former employer, and it is located just across Washington Square from the site of Horace Howard Furness's demolished townhouse. Based largely on Furness's sketchbooks, which remain in his descendants' possession, the exhibition revealed the architect to be both an exquisite draftsman and wicked caricaturist in the manner of Honoré Daumier. No one was spared Furness's pen: family members (Horace, who was mostly deaf, appears with an oversized ear trumpet), friends, clients,

professional associates, assorted animals, and not least, himself (Figure 1). The architect treated figures like architectural elevations and faces like geometric patterns, and these anthropomorphic connections to his buildings were reinforced by carefully selected illustrations (Figure 2). Some key artifacts, most notably ceramic tiles from the demolition sites of both the Provident Life and Trust Company and the Guarantee Trust and Safe Deposit Company vividly conveyed the color and richness of Furness's ornament. That the late Penelope Batcheler, an architectural historian with the National Park Service, salvaged these items lent their inclusion an added poignancy. The exhibition's didactic text panels were especially noteworthy for their concise explanation of the theoretical and biographical underpinnings of Furness's designs.

The image of Furness as a provincial American architect has persisted in academic and professional circles largely because his output was confined, with rare exceptions, to the Delaware Valley. Yet few would level the same charge against Antonio Gaudí and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, more celebrated and equally idiosyncratic European architects who were as wedded to



**Figure 1** Frank Furness, *Self-Portrait with Caricatures*, n.d. (Furness Sketchbook, private collection. From the exhibition *Face and Form: The Art and Caricature of Frank Furness*, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia)



**Figure 2** Frank Furness, *Designs for Ornament*, n.d. (Furness Sketchbook, private collection. From the exhibition *Face and Form: The Art and Caricature of Frank Furness*, the Athenaeum of Philadelphia)

their respective cities of Barcelona and Glasgow as Furness was to Philadelphia. On Saturday, 1 December 2012, the Athenaeum hosted a symposium, *Frank Furness: His City, His World*, that sought to place Furness within a national and international context. The symposium featured talks by Martin Bressani, Jeffrey A. Cohen, Michael J. Lewis, George E. Thomas, and Maria M. Thompson, several of whom were among the organizers of *Furness 2012*, as well as a plenary address the previous evening by Andrew Saint, all with an eye toward possible publication. Such a collection would add enormously to an already rich literature on Furness and the city he filled with so many boisterous designs.

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**Related Website**

<http://frankfurness.org>