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A Rebirth for Wright's First L.A. Project

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in Southern California.

When Frank Lloyd Wright built the Hollyhock House, between 1919 and 1921, he couldn't have imagined it would one day appear as the Piranha Temple in the 1989 movie *Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death*. But perhaps not entirely by coincidence, he had designed it for a female client with an independent and adventurous spirit and a passion for the theatrical. And with this project—his first in Los Angeles—he was clearly beginning to explore the Mayan, or Mesoamerican, themes that would evolve throughout his work



Though a seminal project, the Hollyhock had a tumultuous history beginning with its design and construction. Later, it survived neglect and earthquakes. By the time the building—a house museum since the 1970s and a National Historic Landmark since 2007—closed three years ago for its most recent renovation, it was ready for a deep-tissue facelift. Its leaks were serious, and the exterior surfaces, slathered in fleshy beige paint, had acquired a texture that Hollyhock's curator, Jeffrey Herr, likens to "creamed cottage cheese." And the original golden shimmer of bronze flakes on interior walls was a distant memory. Clues to Hollyhock's past have since emerged. When it re-opens to the public this fall, many long-vanished features will be revived, and sparkling.

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But the stormy history that also shaped this house is its less tangible legacy, beginning with the strained relationship between the architect and his client, Aline Barnsdall (1882-1946), an oil heiress, bohemian, feminist, champion of progressive causes, and producer of experimental theater. She believed in Wright and supported his career even at his lowest moments. For the 36-acre Olive Hill site, in East Hollywood, she commissioned him to create a campus for avant-garde theater, to include her own residence (with an ornamental theme inspired by her favorite flower, the hollyhock). Soon, however, the two clashed over Wright's inattention to the project. Focused on building the Imperial Hotel in Japan, he lagged in designing her house and handed off its construction supervision to his relatively inexperienced son Lloyd and employee Rudolph Schindler. Cost overruns mounted, and Barnsdall fired Wright in 1921, before the interior was complete. (She later hired Schindler to finish it.) She never made the 5,000-square-foot house her home and, in 1927, donated it, with a portion of the land and two ancillary buildings, to its current owner, the city of Los Angeles, which has made it the Barnsdall Art Park's centerpiece.

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The \$4.39 million renovation uncovered patches of original sandy-textured, earthy-green walls that Griswold Conservation Associates analyzed and replicated. "Suddenly, with the authentic color, the house begins to blend with the landscape," Herr points out, "just as you'd expect with Wright." On the interior, the preservation team discovered a subtle range of previously unsuspected colors and application techniques: "Different planes were separately articulated in saturated greens, from silvery olive to dark teal," says Herr. "Some were painted, others were plaster with integral pigment; some were originally flecked with gold, and others not. The variation's rich and exotic."

Most of the metal flakes, however, had oxidized to a dull brown. To achieve a more lasting shimmer, the restorers substituted cosmetics-grade, crushed mica in place of tarnish-prone bronze. They also removed 1970s can lights and reproduced the ceiling moldings that define rooms, even where the fluid plan has no walls. A row of 14 oak-framed doors, opening onto the garden, was recreated—this time, with the panels of art glass that Wright drew but never executed. (Original art glass, in at least 120 windows, exists elsewhere in the house.)

A modified version of the garden Lloyd Wright created when Hollyhock was built has been replanted. And the elaborate water feature that once flowed under the house has been partially reinstated. The house's leakage has been remedied, its skewed living room re-squared, and its seismic reinforcement upgraded. After it reopens for tours and other programs, the Hollyhock will likely receive another honor: Jointly with 10 other Frank Lloyd Wright structures, it is expected to attain UNESCO World Heritage List designation in 2015.

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