

Robb Report
Home & Style

LUXURY RESIDENCES AND FINE DESIGN

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Stage Wright

✱ **Aline Barnsdall** had an overarching requirement for her architect. The heiress and actress wanted the hollyhock, a flower she loved, to figure prominently in the design of her Los Angeles house, which upon its completion would sit alongside a theater and several other structures—all part of the commission—atop



Olive Hill. Barnsdall had purchased this 36-acre site, a plot dotted with olive trees and blessed with sweeping views, for \$300,000. Building was to commence in 1919, and her architect, who was simultaneously involved in the creation of Tokyo's Imperial Hotel, at first struck a chord with his client. In *An Autobiography: Book Two*, Frank Lloyd Wright recalled some years later, "The architect's plans joyfully traveled the upward road of poetic form and delighted Miss Barnsdall. I could scarcely have keyed the 'romanza' too high for her, I found, had I made it a symphony." By *romanza*, a term he borrowed from the musical realm he so revered, he meant "the freedom to make ones [sic] own form."

In February, I visited Hollyhock House looking for that form, its unique flower. It was a special occasion, the reopening of the residence to the public after a six-year, \$4.36 million renovation by the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. If at first the project's

goal was to fix problems not easily put off, it became much broader in scope. "We fixed the leaking roofs," said Jeffrey Herr, the house's curator, before inviting members of the media to follow him inside for a glimpse just ahead of the public's admittance. "It gave us a unique opportunity to go back and find out what [the house] looked like in 1921 and restore that look." He asked us to imagine some of the complex architectural details, such as wall moldings, not being there just three years ago, because they were not. "We found clues, remnants, of what 1921 had been like," said Herr. Changes made since that time, including what Herr described as "fleshy colored stucco" applied to the exterior in the 1970s, clearly needed undoing. Now, the color "duplicates Wright's palette," he noted. "The intention was to duplicate."

That intent has translated to a faithful presentation of Wright's unmistakable design signature—and Barnsdall's influence. Inside Hollyhock, her favored bloom indeed maintains pride of place. The architect's geometric interpretation of the flowering plant with the vertical stalk lives in the living room fireplace's bas-relief (shown)—a captivating work by Wright—and in the backs of the dining room chairs, which are also his and original to the house. During my tour, I was keenly aware of hollyhocks above windows, as concrete ornaments, and underfoot, as graphic details on rugs, which made me especially grateful for the protective shoe covers I'd been asked to don upon entering.

If initially Barnsdall appeared grateful for Wright's *romanza*, in the end she was less so for the architect himself. Wright—never deficient in ego and rarely on time or under budget—soon fell out of favor with his client, who eventually fired him. Today, however, the artist in Barnsdall surely would have appreciated the global design audience that persists for Hollyhock. It is one of 10 of Wright's works recently nominated for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list. And it remains unquestionably Barnsdall's house. "Since without her it never could have been," penned Wright in his autobiography, "her spirit is manifest in it, to all."

LORI BRYAN, EDITOR

CORRECTION: Our story on the Baccarat Hotel & Residences ("Smart Showings," March/April, page 31) should have noted that Stephen Sills designed the model residence shown.