

From his woodsy New York retreat, designer Russel Wright helped change the American home.

Manitoga Modern

Apparently impelled by feelings of inferiority, Americans have until comparatively recently begged or borrowed much of their culture from abroad. Thus the stilted ritual of the English manor house—where life was rigidly formal and a staff of servants waited on master and mistress hand and foot—became the standard of “gracious living” for the American home. But a hard-working democracy was poor soil for this aristocratic way of life.

With that passage from their 1950 book, *Guide to Easier Living*, industrial designers Mary and Russel Wright took aim at the overstuffed chairs and superfluous forks of preceding generations and laid down the premise for a cheerful manifesto of midcentury modernism. Complete with detailed instructions about every aspect of home life—how to choose and arrange furnishings, plan and serve meals, set the table—the

best-selling book tried to coax middle-class Americans into pass-through counters and potluck suppers. Housework would be far less onerous, the Wrights noted, if the cook baked and served the casserole in the same attractive pot and chose rugs that didn't show stains. Touting the democratic spirit, the book also nudged men and children to help out the women. “After all, it is our own dishes we are washing, our own beds we are making.”

By Jane Roy Brown

Photography by Eric Roth





Wright spent much of his time in the studio, the smaller of Manitoga's two structures. Inset: Pitchers from his American Modern dinnerware show its wide array of colors.



Guide to Easier Living also served as a savvy marketing tool for Russel Wright's creations—casually elegant furniture, dinnerware, and other household accessories. The book, like so many projects the couple did together, exemplified Mary's genius for marketing her husband's forward-looking designs and their shared belief that good design—practical, affordable, attractive—could improve the quality of domestic life.

To a great degree, the book succeeded: The open floor plans and other innovations advocated in *Guide* were quickly embraced by many Americans and became standard house features. Dining habits and table settings grew decidedly more casual. Department stores sold millions of pieces of Russel Wright's sleek dinnerware, American Modern; his home furnishings and other household items also starred in the postwar market. Design historians compare the Wrights' influence then to that of Martha Stewart today.

Yet few Americans born after 1950 have heard of Russel

Wright, who died in 1976. Fewer still have heard of Manitoga, the approximately 75-acre property containing the country home, studio, and "forest garden" that he designed in Garrison, N.Y., in the Hudson River valley. Operated since 1984 as a nature-education center by an often cash-strapped nonprofit organization, the buildings and grounds were falling into decline. Now Wright's slow fade into obscurity is on the brink of reversal. New sources of funds to restore the buildings and a prestigious national landmark designation may mean that, 30 years after his death, Wright's legacy may at last be secure.

RUSSEL WRIGHT'S LIFE BEGAN IN LEBANON, OHIO, IN 1904. He could claim two signers of the Declaration of Independence in his mother's ancestry; his father, a judge, came from Quaker stock. Having studied art since childhood, Wright took a year off after high school in 1920 to attend the Art Students League



in New York City. Then, prodded by his father, he packed off to Princeton to train for the law but soon discovered theater and started working as a set designer on school productions. He briefly apprenticed in New York with visionary set designer Norman Bel Geddes before dropping out of Princeton to pursue theatrical design. His last job in the 1920s was managing set and prop construction for future film director George Cukor, who was directing a stock theater company in Rochester. But Wright burned out in his first career and returned in 1929 to New York.

Wright had married budding sculptor and designer Mary Small Einstein in 1927. Mary, whose business flair matched her sharp eye, launched Russel on a new career in a nascent profession: industrial design. She encouraged him to make objects to sell in high-end stores. His first effort, tongue-in-cheek masks of celebrities (Herbert Hoover was rendered in marshmallows), flopped, but he followed up in 1930 with a series of cast-metal circus animals, tchotchkes that proved popular. That success prompted Wright to design his now-collectible spun-aluminum serving and cocktail accessories. Continuing to influence his career, Mary stopped creat-

ing art to promote her husband's work, writing marketing copy and making public appearances.

In one of their early coups, the Wrights were among the first to display products in department store ensembles that showed how objects worked together. "They helped invent what we call 'lifestyle marketing,' a totally holistic way of marketing furniture, tablecloths, dinnerware, and so on," says Donald Albrecht, an independent curator and a member of Manitoga's board of directors. He and Robert Schonfeld co-curated an exhibition on Wright five years ago at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. Albrecht calls these themed displays "stage sets for American living."

Compared with Europe, the United States was slow to embrace modern design. During the 1920s and '30s, decades that encompassed both social change and economic hardship, Americans sought comfort in colonial revival architecture and



Russel Wright c. 1940. Opposite: A pergola links the house and studio. Below: a pitcher in Wright's Sterling China line

furnishings, which idealized the country's past. Early on, the Wrights, unlike some of their purist peers here and in Europe, understood that Americans craved familiar forms and materials as well as physical comfort. "Russel Wright had two mantras: Good design is for everyone, and buy wonderful American design," says Margaret Doyle, co-president of Manitoga's board of directors and a technical preservation consultant. But Americans needed coaching. "Colonial revival was the safe choice."

"He dubbed himself 'the 20th-century Paul Revere,'" says Albrecht. Like his contemporaries, famous industrial designers Charles and Ray Eames, Wright knew how to infuse the warmth of traditional handmade objects into mass-produced materials. This craftsmanlike quality ran through all his designs, starting with his early spun-aluminum serving accessories. "He takes a mass-produced material like aluminum," Albrecht says, "and by rubbing it with emery cloth, brings out a pewterlike finish. Therefore it will fit in with your early American home, and you don't have to throw anything out. It was brilliant marketing."

Wright's American Modern line of furniture debuted in 1935 at Macy's in New York and sold so well that the store had to reorder half the stock only six weeks later. Though lighter in weight and leaner than the overstuffed furniture popular at the time, his pieces incorporated the warmth, texture, and comfort that the middle class prized. The American Modern couch and armchair, for example, consisted of rectangular fabric cushions set in an unadorned frame of solid maple, which he advertised as "the wood of our forefathers." The narrow, wood-plank arms





Wright pioneered the use of spun aluminum, as in these circa 1930 serving pieces. Below: a teapot from the Casual China line

still enjoy the beauty of this land, the surrounding woods, the stones, the sky, the river, the animals. But I do not want this house to dominate the land. ... I love it so much that I wish this shelter to blend with the landscape."

The "shelter" consisted of two low, glass boxes with planted roofs—the house and the studio—linked by a vine-covered pergola. Constructed between 1955 and 1959, they hug a ledge next to a small waterfall that spills into a quarry pool. The core features—house, studio, pool, falls, and the quarry rim—are known as Dragon Rock, named by Ann as a child for a section of the quarry rim. From across the pool, the buildings vanish into a screen of sycamore, dogwood, and mountain laurel. Both the design and the materials used in the house and studio, which he devised with architect David L. Leavitt, reflect Wright's immersion in nature during this time.

curved down in front like hands at rest; the rear legs met the floor in a complementary curve. A trestle dining table with unattached benches used traditional mortise-and-tenon joinery, but the proportions were slimmer. "American Modern," a term coined by Mary, defined Russel Wright from then on.

Wright introduced his American Modern dinnerware in 1939. This solid-color china in nature-inspired hues and swooping shapes managed to meld the aerodynamic with the organic. The line was so radical at the time that it took years to find a company (Steubenville Pottery) to make it. Offering consumers a palette that could be mixed and matched was his way of encouraging self-expression in a conformist society. American Modern was one of the best-selling lines of dinnerware ever made—250 million pieces sold between 1939 and 1959, when it was discontinued—and made Russel Wright a household name. It remains valuable with collectors to this day.



HIS SOLID-COLOR CHINA IN NATURE-INSPIRED HUES AND SWOOPING SHAPES MANAGED TO MELD THE AERODYNAMIC WITH THE ORGANIC.

Wright never stopped experimenting with new materials, creating the first unbreakable ceramic dinnerware and one of the first plastic lines in the late 1940s and early '50s. Increasingly, his designs were inspired by the time he spent in the wilds of Garrison, where in 1942 he and Mary had bought a small bungalow on an abandoned quarry site. In 1950, the year their *Guide to Easier Living* was published, the Wrights adopted a baby daughter, Ann. Two years later Mary died of breast cancer. Russel began spending less time in Manhattan and retreated to Garrison, where over the next 25 years he created a sanctuary that blended art and nature, house and landscape.

contrasting with the sleek surface of tiny aqua tiles covering the floor and tub and the large French doors overlooking the pool. The living room floor and fireplace are made of large stones from the site. A tree trunk rises through the dining room from the bottom of the stone stairs. The cascade of steps, sprouting clumps of ferns, echoes the waterfall, visible through a two-story glass wall. Shoji-like panels throughout show that Wright was still experimenting with plastics. A white panel with a leaf-shaped pattern turns out to be made of thin slices of flattened paper-roll cores sandwiched between sheets of tinted plastic. Grasses and leaves are pressed into other panels. Like many modern designers, Wright was influenced by Japanese art, architecture, and landscape.

Andrew Capitman, Manitoga's other co-president, observes that Dragon Rock expresses three main themes in Wright's life-work: using materials innovatively, designing with nature, and teaching others how to live. "There are innumerable details that instruct us how to live well and efficiently," he says. "The kitchen drawers, for example, open both ways through the counter." And because of Wright's careful craftsmanship, "you lose the sense that the site is highly engineered," adds Capitman.

The small, intimate studio, which Wright completed first, shoulders into the slope. The front doorknob—a fist-sized

IN HIS 1958 ESSAY ABOUT MANITOGA, "PHILOSOPHY OF THE House," Wright wrote, "In a corner of this aging quarry, I would like to create a shelter in which I can live comfortably and

river stone—is one of several found objects, including pieces of quarrying equipment, that Wright used to make door handles. A wall of open shelving partitions the space into workroom and bedroom. Pine needles are pressed into the low, dark-green ceiling. Here too, the bathroom is a jewel: A door covered in a Korean print opens onto a wood-paneled tub set flush against a wall of glass.

“There’s such a difference between the studio and house,” observes Ann Wright, who still lives near Manitoga. “Russel slept in the studio. The earth comes up to the window ledge, giving it this cozy, nurturing feeling inside. The house is bigger, more grandiose, and in terms of the architecture much more interesting. But he chose the womblike space. He was a shy person. He needed to feel nestled in, protected, comforted.”

As much as the structures elicit a predictable “wow” from visitors, most experts agree that Manitoga, in Albrecht’s words, “is more about the landscape than the house.” Almost up to his death, Wright tinkered with the 80-year-old second-growth forest that covered the abandoned quarry land, creating four miles of trails and a series of forest rooms—glades of fern and mountain laurel, streamside corridors of spicebush and witch hazel, an open meadow, and dark hemlock groves. He varied the surfaces underfoot to emphasize terrain changes and pruned surprise views to the Hudson. Although he didn’t try to intensively control the landscape—in his writing, Wright described clearing existing trees, but it’s unclear how much planting he did—he designed it to be successional, to enhance the chances that certain native plant communities, especially wildflowers, would flourish as the forest grew.

UNCOMMON BEAUTY STILL HOLDS SWAY AT MANITOGA. Groups of mountain laurel bloom in June, and an emerald blanket of moss coats the bank above the quarry pool. But scores of dead eastern hemlocks disfigure the upper slopes, victims of the hemlock woolly adelgid, an insect pest. The infestation will eventually open about half of Manitoga’s canopy, altering the design that Wright carefully orchestrated, which relied on the trees to frame vistas, shade the forest floor, provide four-season greenery, and screen unwanted views. Exacerbating the problem, deer browse the forest clean of seedlings, which disrupts Wright’s planned succession of woodland plants. According to Ruth Parnall, Manitoga’s part-time landscape curator, if the hemlocks are not replaced, the ecology will continue to favor plants that thrive in more light—and those that the deer find unappetizing, such as black birch and sassafras. But this limited array of plants would not carry out Wright’s clearly documented design intent.

For the moment, urgent structural problems have forced the property’s poorly endowed nonprofit owner, Manitoga Inc./The Russel Wright Design Center, to focus on the buildings at the expense of the landscape. Wright sited the buildings



Top: A new green roof, replacing Wright’s earlier one, was installed on the studio in 2004. Middle: Open shelving divides the studio’s spaces. Bottom: studio doorknobs, including one made of a river stone, right

at the base of a slope, which subjected them to downhill runoff. That problem may have been exacerbated by recent residential development upslope, threatening the buildings with more damage to their walls and foundations.

The state of Manitoga reflects events set in motion when Wright died. He left the property, along with his New York City house, to The Nature Conservancy, which opened Manitoga to the public as a nature-education center, as Wright requested. Sale of the city house did not yield enough funds to endow Manitoga, however, and maintaining buildings and a designed landscape, also important to him, lay beyond the conservancy's mission. In 1982, landscape architect Carol Levy Franklin prepared a management guide to maintaining the intended landscape effects. Still fearing that Wright's masterpiece would be lost, an advisory board of local residents and others who had been suggested by Wright, plus the regional director of the conservancy, formed Manitoga Inc., in 1984, and the conservancy transferred the property to this new entity. The fledgling organization took years to get on its feet.

Wright's will stipulated that his daughter have life tenancy of the house, which conflicted with public use. But Manitoga Inc. was responsible for maintaining the house. In the early 1980s, when deterioration forced the board to raise \$87,000 to replace the water-damaged roof, they discovered that donors don't like to give money to a private residence. It took until 2000 to muster the funds to buy out Ann Wright's interest, allowing the organization to develop a historic house museum. In May 2004, co-president Margaret Doyle's team finished restoring the dilapidated studio (to the period of

1961-62), together with replanting its green roof. The rotting pergola connecting the house and studio was replaced that fall. Anita Pidala, Manitoga's executive director from 2003 through this past spring, says the house still suffers from major drainage problems and water infiltration into the foyer and kitchen. Ongoing repairs deal with keeping water out: restoring the building envelope, managing storm water, improving drainage, and repairing the roof, windows, and doors.

Two recent pieces of good news capped at least five years of focused effort. In October 2005, the federal Save America's Treasures program awarded Manitoga Inc. a \$250,000 matching grant for house repairs. Then, in February, the Department of the Interior designated Manitoga a National Historic Landmark, the highest level of national recognition for historic sites. The property is one of only a handful of the 2,500 such landmarks with modern buildings and landscapes. Ann Wright sees a personal significance in the designation: "Russel felt so completely American. I think he would be very, very pleased with being recognized in this way. Now Manitoga's right up there with the White House."

In September, a restoration carpenter finished repairing the windows and doors in the house. Docents are explaining the



HISTORIC ARTISTS' HOMES AND STUDIOS PROGRAM

Since 2003, Manitoga has been a member of the National Trust's Historic Artists' Homes and Studios program, which helps art-related historic sites preserve, document, and interpret both their collections and their buildings. The program's advisory committee selected Manitoga as one of America's most significant

such sites. Today, Homes and Studios provides expertise, workshops, and planning grants to 30 historic places where preeminent American artists created sculpture, paintings, ceramics, furniture, and photographs. Among the other members are the E.I. Couse Historic Home and Studio, Taos, N.M., where the painter lived; Melrose

Plantation, Natchitoches, La., home of African American folk artist Clementine Hunter; and Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, N.H., honoring sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

Manitoga collaborates with other sites in the program, exchanging information and developing a network, says Manitoga's former execu-

tive director, Anita Pidala. "We're able to visit the others, share challenges and accomplishments, and learn from each other." This year's workshop focused on building an audience; past themes include education/interpretation and marketing/public relations. "You realize you're all working toward the same goals," says Pidala.



restoration process to visitors, highlighting the innovative techniques and materials Wright used. As for the landscape, replacing the hemlocks remains the most pressing issue. After resolving the problem of how to reproduce the original effects with another species, says Capitman, “we’ll find out what reforestation costs, then approach more funders.” However, he adds, “it’s only when you clearly have the draw of the house that you can raise money for the landscape.” The “nasty initial challenge,” he says, is that Manitoga’s location in the midst of thousands of acres of public forestland makes it hard to build a case for preserving a designed woodland. The solution requires telling the story of the place. This summer, some of that story was aired when the Cultural Landscape Foundation’s “Landslide” promotion listed Manitoga as one of 18 threatened landmark gardens nationwide.

Beyond the current work, Capitman and Doyle see Manitoga Inc. fulfilling another major part of Wright’s dream—expanding the site’s educational offerings. For many years Manitoga has hosted a design-with-nature summer camp for five-to-12-year-olds; plans are to launch a similar program for high schoolers in 2007. “Our ultimate vision is that after the house and landscape are completely restored, we have an active education program and a comprehensive visitors center that tells the story of Russel Wright, so that you see Manitoga in the context of his work,” Capitman says. This could materialize within the next decade.

A well-preserved Manitoga, he adds, will boost cultural tourism in the region. “The Hudson Valley needs as many cultural resources as possible to attract tourists, so it can retain ecological balance and open space. Manitoga can be part of sustaining the valley, which already has such diverse historical sites, including the Revolutionary War heritage. It’s all part of the big American mix.”

Clockwise from opposite: an American Modern covered dish. Two American Modern chairs adorn the living room of the house. The dining area is shown before and during recent restoration work.

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