

ELMSLIE'S WORK WITH SULLIVAN

GEORGE GRANT ELMSLIE CAME TO CHICAGO FROM SCOTLAND in 1884 and sought employment in the city's building trades. During the mid-1880s, he worked alongside Frank Lloyd Wright in the office of the Shingle-style architect Joseph Lyman Silsbee. He then secured a job with Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan in 1889, helped by Wright, who had already been with them for two years. Wright left in 1893, but Elmslie stayed on. After the partnership dissolved in 1895, he served as Sullivan's chief draftsman until 1909, perfecting Sullivan's organic ornament and its application in progressive architecture. For many of



National Farmers' Bank, Owatonna
Photo: Brian Danger Hicks

Sullivan's most important commissions, Elmslie had a large hand in both developing the decorative motifs and elaborating their details.

Sullivan and Elmslie's working relationship was not without challenges—some personal, some financial. Their last major project together was the National Farmers' Bank (1907–8) in Owatonna,

Minnesota, now a Wells Fargo branch. This would be the largest and most elaborate of Sullivan's banks, and its vice president, Carl Bennett, proved to be a true progressive client. Adorned with terra-cotta, art glass, mosaics, murals, and large swirling bronze electric light fixtures, the square building suggests a bejeweled strongbox. Mundane transactions, made through bronze teller wickets with intricate foliate designs, became extraordinary. For many years Sullivan was given full credit for the bank's design, and Elmslie deferred to his mentor. After Sullivan's death, however, Elmslie stated his major role in a letter to Wright in 1936: "Not only were all the working drawings and every last detail of decoration, inside and out, mine but the main motif of the design as well."



PURCELL AND ELMSLIE BANK COMMISSIONS

AFTER GEORGE ELMSLIE JOINED THE PURCELL AND FEICK FIRM in 1910, with his experience on the National Farmers' Bank in Owatonna, the firm of Purcell, Feick and Elmslie became leaders in Prairie School bank design. In 1910 they won commissions for banks in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, and Grand Meadow, Minnesota. The next year brought the important Merchants Bank of Winona, Minnesota, and a bank project (never built) in Mankato,



Merchants Bank of Winona
Photo: William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis

Minnesota. Commissions continued at a regular pace for banks in smaller towns, most in Minnesota: Madison (1913), LeRoy (1914), Hector (1916), Mitchell, South Dakota (1916), and Adams (1919).

Purcell, Feick and Elmslie's bank designs recalled Louis Sullivan's Owatonna tour de force. Their solid brick and masonry forms seemed to embody financial stability, and the agrarian-inspired ornament inside and

out suited the farming communities where they were located. Elmslie's intricate, organic designs in terra-cotta enlivened their exteriors, and colorful geometric art-glass windows reflected and diffused the light, connecting inside and outside. More elaborate commissions like the Winona bank included shimmering mosaics, murals of local scenes, monumental lighting fixtures, and custom-designed furniture. The decoration of each bank required a high level of craftsmanship—to interpret Elmslie's delicate sketches and transform them into three-dimensional reality and then to fit all the pieces together.

On view here are items relating to the Merchants Bank of Winona, including several drawings and a chair from the directors' boardroom, and two drawings for stained glass in the Madison State Bank (the skylight is in the MIA's collection, in gallery 300).



THE PURCELL-CUTTS HOUSE AND DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE WAS THE BREAD AND BUTTER of the Prairie School. Clients sympathetic to what was considered avant-garde architecture were primarily interested in home design, and William Purcell's firms had commissions for twenty houses in the Twin Cities alone. When George Elmslie joined Purcell in 1910, he brought a number of Sullivan's clients with him. Thanks to Elmslie's broad decorative vocabulary, the houses designed by Purcell and Elmslie had richer detail than most of those built by their competitors.

Although the MIA's Purcell and Elmslie material comes largely from commercial and public commissions, the gem of its Prairie School collection is the Purcell-Cutts house, built



James, Douglas, Edna, and William Purcell at the Edna S. Purcell house (now Purcell-Cutts house), 1916
Photo: William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis

by the firm for Purcell and his family in 1913. The house is located a mile and a half west of the MIA, at 2328 Lake Place, near Lake of the Isles. Purcell's intention was to build a truly progressive home that would nurture a new, modern American family life. Correspondence between Purcell and Elmslie shows how strongly Purcell relied on Elmslie's opinion on all aspects of the building, from initial development of the plan to details of the decorative scheme. The cost of the house was approximately \$14,000.

From the outside, the earth-colored stucco walls, overhanging eaves, and large expanses of windows are the most obvious organic features. A closer look reveals Elmslie's sawed-wood decoration and the surprising "Peek a Boo" art-glass windows at the entrance. His extensive system of ornament continued inside with elaborate stenciling, art-glass windows and bookcases, delicate trim decoration, and custom furniture. Through his Chicago connections, Elmslie was able to locate Charles Livingston Bull, who painted the living room mural.

Purcell wrote in later life that the house was "perhaps the most complete dwelling" he and Elmslie had done together. On Christmas 1913, William, Edna, and James Purcell moved in. To celebrate the centenary of the house and Elmslie's major role in its design, this exhibition features an exterior panel, house plans, and drawings for furniture, windows, and sawed-wood ornament. Associated textiles and stencils and an additional chair are also displayed. Other related objects are in gallery 300.

The Purcell-Cutts house is open for public tours the second weekend of each month and by appointment. "Progressive" holiday tours are given each weekend between Thanksgiving and New Year's. Reservations can be made online, by phone, or at the Visitor and Member Services desks on this floor. The interactive program "Unified Vision" has an online tour of the house, and the summer issue of the MIA's Verso app features a curator-narrated house tour and related articles.



CIVIC DESIGN: WOODBURY COUNTY COURTHOUSE

IN 1915 THE SIOUX CITY ARCHITECT WILLIAM L. STEELE, who had worked alongside George Elmslie as a draftsman for Louis Sullivan, won the commission for the Woodbury County Courthouse, in Sioux City, Iowa. Wishing to develop a design more modern than his



Woodbury County Courthouse, Sioux City, Iowa
Photo: William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis

initial neoclassical proposal, Steele turned to the firm of Purcell and Elmslie for assistance. Elmslie moved to Sioux City from Chicago and prepared the final designs, while William Purcell consulted from their Minneapolis offices.

The courthouse design blended modern utilitarianism with civic ceremony. It had prominent elevator banks rather than a grand staircase, but preserved tradition in the central rotunda capped by a massive art-glass dome. There were five courtrooms rather than just one. Offices accessed by the public were on the lower levels, and the

rest were housed in an eight-story tower, a sort of mini-skyscraper. Combining efficiency and beauty, this building was perfectly suited to its purpose.

The exterior of locally made tan brick is adorned with strategically placed earth-toned terra-cotta reliefs and large sculptures by Alfonso Iannelli. In the rotunda Elmslie indulged his love of intricate decoration, encrusting the columns, piers, and soffits with white-glazed seedpod and floral forms to create a veritable garden of terra-cotta ornament. On the mezzanine level are colorful murals by John Norton. The art-glass dome over the rotunda and numerous windows and skylights admit natural light throughout the building.

Construction of the courthouse (1915–18) took place during the First World War. The building still stands today, a showcase of Elmslie's abilities, for Elmslie was, in fact, almost solely responsible for the planning and design. It is the only significant civic building in the Prairie School style. A number of drawings and a photograph of a terra-cotta ornament are exhibited here, along with two sample casts for metalwork.



ELMSLIE IN PRIVATE PRACTICE

THE YEARS AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR WERE DIFFICULT for Prairie School architects as period revival styles, and later the stark Bauhaus style, became prevalent. With George Elmslie living in Chicago and William Purcell now in Portland, Oregon, disagreements arose on some business ventures, and in 1921 Purcell officially dissolved the firm. Records show



George Grant Elmslie, c. 1932
Photo: William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis

that in the 1920s and 1930s Elmslie designed various projects (some never built), including college campus buildings and churches. His most distinctive later works are the banks and school buildings in which he continued to develop the organic principles that informed his earlier work with Purcell.

The First National Bank of Adams, Minnesota, was one of Purcell and Elmslie's last projects. Designed in 1920, it was completed in 1924 under Elmslie's supervision. This led Elmslie to again focus on banks, as the firm had done in the 1910s. In his writings, he talked about banks as community gathering places linking progressive architecture with social responsibility. He had explored the concept of what he called a "bank home" in the Adams bank, where he introduced elements from his domestic designs, such as a fireplace with an inglenook. The Capitol Building and Loan Association building (1922–24), in Topeka, Kansas, was an end-gabled structure designed for a client in the home loan business. Façade sketches and a lamp from the Adams bank and windows from the Topeka building are shown here.

In the mid-1930s, the architect W. S. Hutton hired Elmslie to produce unified decorative designs for a high school in Calumet City, Illinois, and for three elementary schools in Hammond, Indiana. In a creative burst, Elmslie drew a range of terra-cotta and metal ornament, and numerous sketches survive. Sculptural decoration by Alfonso Iannelli and Emil Zettler complemented Elmslie's schemes. The elementary schools (recently demolished) combined Prairie School organic design with features of early modern school design as seen in the Crow Island School in Winnetka, Illinois, by the architects Perkins, Wheeler, and Will, with Eliel and Eero Saarinen (1939–40).

