

GEORGE ELMSLIE'S PRAIRIE SCHOOL DESIGNS

This exhibition celebrates the American designer George Grant Elmslie (1869–1952) and also the hundredth anniversary of the MIA's crown jewel of Prairie School architecture, the Edna S. Purcell house—now known as the Purcell-Cutts house—designed by the firm Purcell, Feick and Elmslie.

Elmslie's mentor, Louis Sullivan (1856–1924), developed an "organic" approach to architecture, which he felt suited Americans in the Progressive Era. Buildings were to evolve according to their intended use, each with its own unified system of ornament. Early 20th-century American architecture embodying these principles was later given the name Prairie School. With single-minded commitment to this ideal, Elmslie honed his skill in organic design during nearly twenty years of working with Sullivan. It is only recently, however, that he has been recognized as a pivotal figure of the Prairie School.

The Minneapolis architectural firm of Purcell, Feick and Elmslie (1910–13), later Purcell and Elmslie (1913–21), successfully combined Elmslie's talents with those of William Gray Purcell (1880–1965). Drawings and documents in the William Gray Purcell Papers, housed in the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota, reveal not only Elmslie's deep commitment to Sullivan's progressive architecture, but also his remarkable facility in Prairie School systems of ornament. His genius for organic design is fully realized in his integrated decorative scheme for the Purcell-Cutts house, where stained glass, stenciling, furniture, murals, and sawn wood form a harmonious whole.



Purcell, Feick and Elmslie office, George Grant Elmslie standing second from right
Photo: William Gray Purcell Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis

The delicate and beautiful studies on view here were never intended as stand-alone artworks. They communicated Elmslie's intentions to his partners and to the craftsmen who would carry out the work. These drawings, many of which are highly developed abstractions of plant forms, illustrate the collaborative process of organic architecture. They were chosen for their relevance to the MIA's collection, and representative objects are also displayed here. The centerpiece is the one-of-a-kind dining room suite that Elmslie designed for Mrs. William H. Hanna of Chicago, which was recently conserved and reupholstered thanks to contributions from a number of MIA members. Elmslie's complex schemes for ornament set Purcell and Elmslie apart from nearly all their contemporaries (except Frank Lloyd Wright) and allied their work closely with Louis Sullivan's ideal of organic architecture.