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Public Expectation vs. Free Love : Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick's Controversial Affair



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Abstract

American society had many expectations when it came to marriage, the family, and gender roles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By exploring the status of women in marriage during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, one can see particularly how the cult of domesticity, views of the “New Woman”, and the study of eugenics played pivotal roles in public expectations towards marriage. This paper focuses on Frank Lloyd Wright’s relationship with his mistress Mamah Borthwick to determine how cultural attitudes regarding domesticity, the New Woman, and eugenics influenced public opposition to their relationship from the very beginning. This paper will be using medical journals on eugenics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, secondary sources about the cult of domesticity, the “New Woman”, and about the relationship. The primary sources I will analyze are Frank Lloyd Wright’s An Autobiography, newspapers, and letters from Mamah Borthwick to Ellen Key. This project is a microhistory of one non-traditional relationship and how it became a lightning rod for public debates over marriage in a period of rapid cultural change.

Subject

Wright, Frank Lloyd, 1867-1959
Cheney, Martha Borthwick, 1869-1914
Women--United States--Social conditions

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Frank Lloyd Wright and Mamah Borthwick soon fell in love. Their romance was as scandalous for prim and proper America as it was exhilarating for the middle-aged lovers. By 1911, Borthwick had moved into Wright’s latest masterpiece: Taliesin, the home he built for Borthwick and himself in rural Wisconsin. But though Taliesin was supposed to be an idyllic retreat, it ultimately became a site of horror and tragedy. The scandalized public continued to sneer at

Wright and Borthwick's choices. Although Borthwick had divorced Edwin Cheney in 1911, Wright's wife refused to consent to a divorce. According to the mores of a socially conservative America in the early 20th century, Wright and Borthwick were irrefutably living in sin. Loving Frank is an American novel by Nancy Horan published in 2007. It tells the story of Mamah Borthwick and her illicit love affair with Frank Lloyd Wright amidst the public shame they experienced in early twentieth century America. This fictional account told from a new perspective, that of little known Mamah, is based on research conducted by first time novelist Nancy Horan. It relates events in Mamah's life as it became inextricably intertwined with that of Wright between the years of 1907 Likewise his lover Mamah Borthwick, left her husband and her two children. Long a feminist and free spirit, it appeared I read Loving Frank by Nancy Horan a few years ago and wanted to see if by chance Frank Lloyd Wright might be painted with a kinder palate, perhaps shades of pastel instead of grey and dark black. Alas, Frank remains a very complicated, narcissistic, sociopathic, intelligent user.