

The McArthur's Lasting Mark on the Biltmore's Storied Legacy

BY ERIC HISS

Anyone who has ever pulled up to the grand front entrance of the Arizona Biltmore immediately knows they have arrived at not only a refined resort, but a haven of artful design and architecture. Much of this enduring legacy is obvious: the stately exterior, embellished with elegant Biltmore Blocks, each pre-cast by hand from Arizona sand almost a century ago; the magnificent lobby featuring a gold-leaf ceiling and priceless Maynard Dixon tapestries; and the original ballroom, the Aztec Room, with its resplendent gold leaf dome.

Exploring the hotel, one can't walk down a hallway with its cantilevered lineaments, pass by a window with its Craftsman-style panes, or stroll the sculpted, manicured grounds without seeing and sensing the design legacy of the magnificent property. But what remains hidden from view is another important part of design history lying just beneath the surface that even many long-time visitors may not realize.



The hotel design itself was the singular vision of Prairie School architect Albert Chase McArthur. Mentored for several years by one of the 20th century's greatest architects, Frank Lloyd Wright, Albert McArthur left his own indelible mark in the geometric lines and cryptic motifs that are an homage to his famous teacher. The most renowned of the motifs is the ubiquitous Biltmore Block which can be found everywhere from the exterior of the buildings to tile treatments in hotel suites.

What's obscured by the years, however, is the source of this enigmatic design. Depending on which source you reference: Wright's last wife Olgivanna; the widow of Emry Kopta, the artist who sculpted the blocks; or McArthur family records, the story varies from stylized palm or cactus to a visual interpretation of a logarithm related to sound and light theory. One thing everyone agrees on is the Biltmore Blocks are an exquisite and essential element of the Arizona Biltmore.

THE INVENTOR BROTHER

But another fascinating design story largely lost to history is related to one of McArthur's two younger brothers, Warren, who helped raise the original funds for the hotel's construction. More than just an entrepreneur—he started the first radio station in Arizona along with brother Charles, and opened what became the largest auto Dodge dealership in the Southwest—Warren was a trained mechanical engineer and relentless inventor.

During the hotel's construction in the late 1920s, Warren had leased space with a local steel fabricator to build the wrought iron chairs, tables, lamps, planters and other accoutrement needed for the hotel. With the fabrication capacity and materials at hand, he began experimenting, creating table prototypes with tubular legs of steel, copper and a novel, newer material, aluminum. Fusing his engineering talents with his creative artistic vision, Warren McArthur in the process gave birth to a uniquely American modernist design aesthetic.

Although he had the opportunity to initiate his experiments in design, construction and materials while at the hotel, the Great Depression of 1929 put an end to his time in Arizona. Landing on his feet in Los Angeles, his work



blossomed in the California sunshine. Taking the lessons he learned from his early prototypes, Warren McArthur's furniture interpreted in its own stylized way the sweeping curves, sleek lines and rounded geometrics that defined the Art Deco era's best design in everything from automobiles to appliances.

Being located in Los Angeles, he soon attracted a celebrity clientele that included top stars such as Marlene Dietrich and Clark Gable, as well as winning major commissions such as furnishing the dining cars of the Union Pacific Railroad and the executive offices of the Chrysler Corporation.

A VISION COMES TO FRUITION

While in Los Angeles, McArthur also perfected the use of anodized aluminum, creating a silky, burnished finish that eclipsed anything that had been done before with the metal. It was also during this era that his designs found their way back to the Biltmore, where the furniture was used extensively on the property in areas such as the lobby and pool areas.

Though the McArthurs no longer had a stake in the hotel—it had been acquired by the Wrigley family not long after opening—the creative vision of

both Albert and Warren was showcased throughout the property and serves as a testament to their vision.

After moving his operation to New York in the late 1930s, McArthur used his engineering skills and ability to coax incredible strength, lightness and ergonomic design out of his creations to win major contracts with the U.S. government in time to help the war effort. During World War II, his company designed 500 models for aircraft seating and built an estimated 70 percent of all the aircraft seating for the Navy and Army Air Corps, the forerunner to the Air Force. In all, the prolific McArthur authored 1,600 design patents.

Today, Warren McArthur's legacy lives on, and indeed seems to be growing. Original pieces, which can command prices as high as \$20,000, are avidly sought by collectors, and traveling exhibitions of his works have been mounted. Though only a few pieces remain at the Biltmore in non-public areas, licensed reproductions by a European company, Classicon, and availability of originals through trusted dealers, such as New York-based Stuart Parr, ensure that Warren McArthur's bold, innovative designs will remain in the public eye, enduring symbols of a true American original. ●

