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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- The Pope-Leighey House
- No Ordinary Clients:
The Story of Luis and Ethel Marden
- An Interview with James Kimsey
- “Coonley” and “Wright”

No Ordinary Clients

The Story of Luis and Ethel Marden

by Martin Moeller

FAMED FOR HIS BRILLIANCE AND ECCENTRICITY, Frank Lloyd Wright seemed to attract clients who were extraordinary in their own right. It would be impossible, of course, to state definitively which of his clients was the most fascinating, but there can be little doubt that Luis and Ethel Marden, of McLean, Virginia, would be prime candidates for that distinction. Anyone lucky enough to have met the Mardens could recount numerous tales of their improbable exploits: how Luis personally discovered the wreck of the infamous H.M.S. Bounty, for instance; or how Ethel set the women's record for underwater diving; or how the two of them fearlessly challenged the academic establishment by declaring that the long-accepted account of Christopher Columbus's first journey to the New World was all wrong, and that he actually made his initial landing far away from where most experts believed.

Luis Marden, who died in 2003 at the age of 90, has been called "the epitome of the Geographic man." The epithet alludes not only to his 64-year career as a writer, photographer, and senior editor with *National Geographic* magazine, but also to his intrepid spirit, his insatiable curiosity, and his vast knowledge spanning a wide range of disciplines.

Born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, to Italian parents, Luis was originally named Annibale Luigi Paragallo. As a teenager, he became proficient in five languages, learned Egyptian hieroglyphics, and wrote a book called *Color Photography for the Miniature Camera*, which may have been the first ever published on the topic of 35mm color photography. He was soon invited to host a radio program about photography, a position that led to his name change—the station owners thought his name was too difficult for his audience to understand (although one wonders now if they simply felt it was too "ethnic" given the

above / Exterior view, with Potomac River at right.

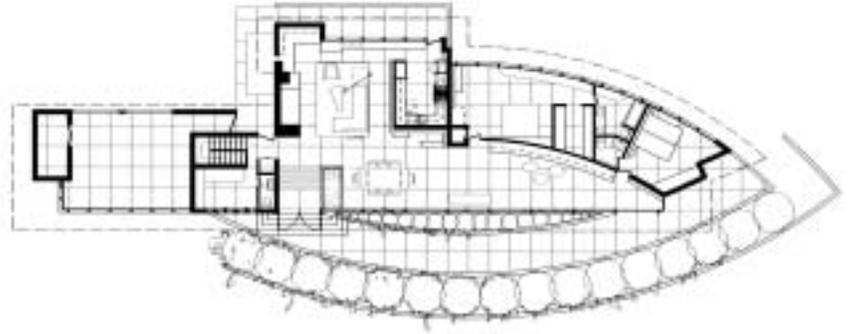
Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.



prejudices of the era), so he chose “Luis,” as a variation on the nickname “Louis,” which he already used, and then picked the surname “Marden” at random out of a telephone book.

Luis moved to Washington in 1934, when he was only 21 years old, to accept a job with *National Geographic*. Despite his youth, he almost immediately had a profound influence on the character and reputation of the magazine, thanks to his introduction of the use of lightweight, 35mm cameras and Kodachrome film, which provided richer color than the film the magazine had used previously. Later, his many notable achievements in various areas brought added luster to the magazine. While exploring with Jacques-Yves Cousteau (who became a life-long friend of the Mardens), Luis developed innovative techniques for underwater photography, and thus introduced the magazine’s readers to images of a heretofore unknown submarine world. He even had the distinction of having both a species of orchid (*Epistephium mardenii*, which he discovered while on assignment in Brazil) and a sea flea (a parasite that lives on lobsters) named after him.

The biography of Luis’s wife, Ethel, who now lives in an assisted-care facility in Arlington, Virginia, is equally remarkable. Born in Texas, she studied both mathematics and English, and as a young woman moved to Washington, where she got a job with the Federal Communications Commission. She was considering pursuing a doctorate in mathematics when she was offered the opportunity to join the National Bureau of Standards to work on the development of one of the earliest true computers. Like her husband, Ethel held a pilot’s license. She also loved sports cars, and in her heyday, she could be seen zipping around the Washington area in her MG (she later owned an Austin Healey and a Jaguar). In an interview conducted as part of the Frank Lloyd Wright Archives’ Oral History Program in 2001, she said, “I admire anybody who has done something for the first time... anyone who has been a pioneer in something.” It is hardly surprising that she and Luis enjoyed each other’s profound respect, nor that both would find themselves drawn to a larger-than-life figure such as Frank Lloyd Wright.



The Mardens married in 1939, just one day after Luis returned from an extended trip to South America, where he had been working on a series of articles for the magazine. They settled into a new apartment, but soon began to discuss the idea of commissioning Wright to design a house for them. In March of 1940, Luis wrote the first of several letters of inquiry to Wright, but the architect was enjoying one of the busiest periods of his career, and even though he soon accepted the commission, it was more than ten years before he was able to begin the design of the Mardens’ house, and nearly twenty years before its construction was complete.

When Luis first wrote to the architect, the Mardens did not yet own a piece of land on which to build their dream house, but in 1944, while fishing along the banks of the Potomac—it was wartime, and they did not have enough gasoline ration coupons to drive to a preferred fishing spot along the Shenandoah—the couple became entranced by a site on the Virginia side of the river just above Little Falls. The next day, they called a real estate agent and learned that a property in that area was for sale, and they bought it shortly thereafter.

Finally, in 1952, Wright produced a design for the Mardens’ house. Because he was so busy with high-profile projects such as the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and advancing age made it increasingly difficult for him to travel, Wright had worked primarily from topographical maps of the Mardens’ property (on his sole visit to the site before construction began, Wright had been unable to reach the main viewpoint because the terrain was too steep for him to negotiate). When the



top / Main floor plan.

Courtesy of Richard Williams Architects.

above / Frank Lloyd Wright examining joints in the concrete block at the Marden House.

Courtesy of the Estate of Mr. & Mrs. Luis Marden.



top / Living area, showing clerestory windows with ornamental screens. Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.

above / View of the main living area, looking toward the fireplace. Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.

Mardens received the architect's initial drawings, Luis was quite displeased with the design. It was apparent that Wright had merely recycled a scheme for one of his somewhat formulaic "football" houses — a term referring to the shape of the plan — and only slightly adapted it to fit the site overlooking the Potomac. In the interview for the Wright Archives, Ethel explained that the design "would have been fine on the prairie . . . but it wasn't suitable at all for our place because it didn't take advantage of the river." This initial design had rooms on one side and a serene pond and a terrace on the other. Ethel added, "[M]y husband was indignant and wrote Mr. Wright and said it was ridiculous to put a placid lily pond above a roaring cataract. And we didn't hear from Mr. Wright for a while after that."

Wright had appointed his apprentice Bob Beharka to oversee the Marden project, and it was he who gingerly presented the clients' specific concerns to the architect. Grudgingly, Wright agreed to eliminate the "placid lily pond," and to honor the Mardens' request for a "straight glass wall" overlooking the river. Once construction was well under way, Wright visited the site again. This time, he was able to reach the viewpoint, and upon doing so, freely admitted, "I had no idea it was so dramatic."

By then however, major changes to the design were no longer possible. Miraculously, despite what would seem to be a significant lapse in the architect's understanding of the site, the completed house nonetheless appears to be well integrated into its landscape and takes excellent advantage of the spectacular views to the rapids below.

In April 1959, as their house was nearing completion, the Mardens traveled to Phoenix for a conference, and while there, Ethel decided to visit Wright's compound at Taliesin West. Wright sent word that he was unable to join Ethel for lunch because of another appointment. Ethel later learned that the appointment had been with his doctor; Wright died on April 9, two months short of his 92nd birthday. The Mardens moved into their house on May 31.

Over the next four decades, Luis and Ethel enjoyed their home to the fullest. They dubbed the house "Fontinalis," a Latin term meaning roughly "at the spring" or "by the stream." Not coincidentally, *Salvelinus fontinalis* is the formal Latin name for the brook trout, which was the Mardens' favorite fish. As much as they loved the house, they rarely entertained, and indeed were reluctant to have visitors in general. Friends of the Mardens generally attribute this to the fact that the house was always so cluttered with diving equipment, books, and countless souvenirs from their explorations. Given Wright's insistence on orderliness, they may have been slightly embarrassed to be using the house so vigorously. As a result of the Mardens' desire for privacy, their house remained one of Wright's lesser-known works.

In 1998, Luis, who had developed Parkinson's Disease, moved to a nursing home. Ethel remained in the house, but she realized that the time was approaching when she and her husband would have to come to terms with the fate of their beloved house once neither of them could live there. In prosperous Washington, there were plenty of people who could afford to buy such a house. But who among these prospects would be willing and able to provide the proper stewardship for such a landmark?

Eugene Smith, a retired banker and executor of the Mardens' estate, was aware that James V. Kimsey, co-founder of the company that became America Online (AOL), had bought the property next door to the Marden house and was building a palatial new residence for himself. When Smith ran into Ted Leonsis, another AOL executive at a party, he took advantage of the opportunity and asked Leonsis to approach Kimsey to see if he had any interest in acquiring the Marden house. Kimsey's positive response came quickly, and in 2000, the purchase went through.

Kimsey knew that he would need a talented and knowledgeable team to oversee the restoration of the Marden house. He asked a number of people for recommendations, and one name kept coming up: Bailey C. Adams, of Adams General Contractors, Inc., in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Adams already knew the house well; he had met Luis Marden a number of years earlier when he was looking for some rare Brazilian rosewood for a project on which he was working. As in so many areas, Luis had expertise in tropical woods, and was able to advise Adams on obtaining the wood he wanted. Kimsey interviewed Adams and concluded that he was the ideal person to handle the complex project. Richard Williams Architects served as preservation and interior architects, while



above / View from the Marden House toward the rapids of the Potomac River.

Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.

below left / Living and dining areas.

Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.

Robin Rose, co-owner of the Cantilever art and design gallery in Bethesda, and Daniel Donnelly, who owns an eponymous shop in Alexandria, consulted on furniture and upholstery.

The results of the team's efforts speak for themselves. The restored house is simultaneously authentic and fresh. Kitchen appliances have been upgraded, and a copper roof replaced the original tar covering, but on the whole, the building has been faithfully restored. Period furniture, though much of it is not original to the house, fits comfortably. The interior is inviting and livable.

Now that the project is finished, Kimsey is making good use of Wright's work as a guesthouse and as an unparalleled venue for entertaining. It is not open to the public, but thanks to Kimsey, everyone can now at least get a glimpse of this residence through photographs such as those that accompany this article, which convey the house's warmth, elegance, and timeless beauty.

Luis Marden supposedly once declared that "One lifetime isn't enough." Fortunately for those who admire the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, however, the Marden house has now embarked on its second life. •



The Marden House: An Interview with James Kimsey



above / Living area, with bookshelves at left.

Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of Lautman Photography.

Martin Moeller: How did your purchase of the Marden House come about?

James Kimsey: The Marden House is hard by my house. Every morning when I shave I'm looking out my window at that house, which has been a constant reminder that I needed to do something with it. When attorneys for the Mardens approached me to buy the house, Luis had moved into an assisted-living facility, Ethel was still living in the house, and they were both in their nineties. Given the amount of money that a house on the river costs, and given the amenities that were in that house, there was a concern that whoever would buy it wouldn't really live in it, so how would that work? The fact that I happened to live next door, and built a monument to wretched excess, which was my own house, made me the clear and logical buyer for it. So before the [high-tech] bubble burst, I said, "Sure, I'll buy it." "And can Mrs. Marden live in it?," they asked. "Sure," I said.

I never saw the inside of the house until maybe six months to a year after I bought it. I went over to meet Ethel Marden, who I figured to be a very frail woman in her nineties, and instead I met this very robust woman who showed me around, and ended up taking my house manager and me to lunch at the Cosmos Club.

MM: The Mardens themselves were clearly an extraordinary couple – as fascinating as Wright himself. In what ways did the house reflect their character?

JK: I think if you did some kind of Freudian study on the gene pool of Wright's clients, the graphs would look different from those of normal folks. I never met Luis Marden, and I'm sorry that I didn't get to know him a bit, but Ethel is really interesting. She held the women's

underwater diving record at one point. They were buddies with Jacques Cousteau — there's a picture of him that Luis took while diving. Philippe Cousteau, Jacques's grandson, spent a lot of his young childhood in the Marden house.

The house was full of stuff when I walked in for the first time. I could tell that Ethel went to some trouble to tidy it up to greet me, but the place was still packed with stuff. Not a square inch of anything didn't have stuff on it. Now, we have put her husband's picture up, and have some of his possessions still on display, so while it's clearly a monument to Frank Lloyd Wright, I think secondarily it's a monument to the Mardens.

We also kept a lot of Luis's books, so just looking at the library he left, and walking around the house, there is always some little quirk to dig down into. I came across a picture of me in Vietnam — the Mardens had put it in a Frank Lloyd Wright frame. I don't even remember that picture! It's me sitting with an AK-47 reading a *Playboy*. It was 1965. A 41-year-old picture of me — it was rather shocking when I saw it. They had found it somewhere.

It's fascinating to see how this couple lived in this house for almost 50 years — you can really just see how it worked for them.

MM: After you bought the Marden House, were you besieged by preservationists and Wright aficionados eager to tell you what to do with it?

JK: The article in *The Washington Post* [August 21, 2005] made it sound as if I had this Greek chorus behind me, but nobody ever sat me down and lectured me about the house. Some people actually even said they had ideas of how I could change it. But if I renovated and changed it, over time, it would lessen its value — and I don't mean monetary value. It would be a Frank Lloyd Wright house modified to suit my taste. Well, nobody cares about my taste. They all care about Frank Lloyd Wright. So I made a very conscious decision that I should restore it.

This became clear to me when I would go over there and I would say, "Maybe I should turn the garage into a bedroom, or maybe I should take this closet out and put in a window or cut a hole in this wall,"

and there were gasps of horror that I would even contemplate changing a line of a Frank Lloyd Wright work. This was probably a binary decision—either I would restore it faithfully, or I would screw with it and risk the ire of a whole Frank Lloyd Wright cadre. Well, the thing of it was, what’s the point of having a Frank Lloyd Wright house if it’s not a true Frank Lloyd Wright house?

So other than taking off the tar-and-gravel roof and putting the copper roof on, which I think was aesthetically good for me, because that’s what I look at every morning when I shave, there have been very few changes. Friends gave me some cute metal birdhouses for the house, there’s been some general landscaping to brighten it up with flowers, but mostly it’s faithfully restored and I’m very happy with it. Obviously I have added some electronic stuff that Wright couldn’t have conceived of. I put a TV in, but it’s behind a cabinet. We had to find one that fit the cabinetry, which we did.

MM: Were you a Wright fan before you undertook this project?

JK: I certainly knew who Frank Lloyd Wright was, and had a sense that he was the inspiration for Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. This guy’s always been kind of fascinating to me, but I wasn’t an addict. I made it a point to go to a couple of exhibitions about Wright’s work—it was kind of interesting to see his stuff. Now I’m beginning to understand the cult that surrounds Frank Lloyd Wright. I am going up this summer sometime to see Fallingwater, which I’ve never seen. I’ve seen the Pope-Leighey House. I did deliberately go to Taliesin West when I was out in Arizona, and I’m glad I did because I spent the whole day there. They were very nice to me, showed me around, and took a lot of time. Proximity has made me appreciate the Marden house, and though I wasn’t involved hands-on in much of the restoration process, I found myself wanting to go over and see it more and more, and put in my two-cents’ worth here and there, but it was really in a delicate mode.

MM: How did you find Bailey Adams, the contractor who oversaw the restoration?

JK: References, word of mouth. A number of people said, “If you’re going to do that, here’s the guy who ought to do it.” I met him, he made a proposal, and clearly he was the most knowledgeable. I think for him it was more than just a job.

MM: How are you using the house, now that the renovation is done? Have you had a chance simply to enjoy it?

JK: I have special dinners over there. I’ve had some quiet time—an hour here and there—and sometimes I’ll be like Squire Worthy and walk the properties. It’s not a consuming passion of mine, but owning a Frank Lloyd Wright house is pretty cool, I have to say. Somebody I know was explaining my life to someone who didn’t know me, and he went through the whole litany of explanations and ended up saying that I have a Frank Lloyd Wright house, and the other guy looked at me and said, “Okay, that does it. Nobody has a Frank Lloyd Wright house!”

Actually the first guest to spend the night there was Patti Austin, the singer, who said it was a Zen experience for her. She lived there for about a week. You do get a different feeling when you’re in that house—certainly different from being in my house. As I’m sure you know, *Taliesin* [the name of Wright’s compound in Wisconsin] is Welsh for “shining brow,” and he loved to build on the brows of hills. The Marden House is sited that way, and it is so arranged as to really bring the river into the house. In pictures, you can see that expanse of glass that sits right on Little Falls, though you really have to see it first-hand to appreciate what Wright did. In short, for me, it’s been a joy, as it was for the Mardens. They had a wine cellar down in the basement with a little plaque on the door that said *Hic habitat felicitas*—“Here resides happiness.” •



above / Living area.
Photo by Robert C. Lautman, courtesy of
Lautman Photography.