

Florence E. Wright

1894 — September 29, 1983

The death of Florence E. Wright, at the age of eighty-nine, on September 29, 1983, in Bowling Green, Ohio, closed the long, dedicated career of a professional and pioneer in furniture restoration. Miss Wright is remembered throughout New York State for her warm personality, teaching skill, professionalism, and perfectionism. Through Cornell Cooperative Extension she made an impact upon thousands of families.

Florence, a native of St. Cloud, Minnesota, obtained a diploma in art education in 1917 and received her B.A. and M.F.A. degrees in 1924 and 1927, respectively, from Teachers College, Columbia. She taught school in Minnesota and was a supervisor of art in Ames, Iowa, public schools. Her college teaching included being an instructor at the State Teachers College in St. Cloud and at the School of Art in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She was an assistant professor at the University of Texas in Austin before coming to Cornell University as an associate professor in the New York State College of Home Economics and as a home furnishings specialist for cooperative extension in 1929.

Florence was interested in having people enrich their family life through the home environment. Thus she taught homemakers and extension home economists all facets of interior design. However, she was better known for her work related to furniture restoration, the art of stencilling, and the study of antiques. Since the economy did not permit new furniture acquisitions, she inspired people to appreciate their home furnishings and develop the skills to improve the quality of their possessions. She was a recognized authority in the furniture industry and was able to translate industry's vocabulary and methods to homemakers for use when refurbishing their home furnishings.

Florence, through her teaching, had the ability to instill high standards and aid those with talent to advance their knowledge and skill. She developed a leadership program and criteria for the selection of leaders who, when they had completed the course, taught others. This system of teaching others to teach became a model in other state cooperative extension programs and in other educational programs.

In addition, Florence inspired students to attain standards of excellence in their work. She was actively involved in the establishment of the Esther Stevens Brazer Guild. Many students, inspired by Florence's confidence in them, established thriving businesses focusing on stencilling furniture and restoring and selling antiques. This added to many family incomes during the depression years.

Her bulletin *Three Centuries of Furniture* was a resource for over thirty years for individuals, dealers, and collectors. Very few extension bulletins can boast of a distribution record equal to *Three Centuries of Furniture*. The bulletin *How to Stencil Chairs*, published first in 1949 and then renamed in 1982 as *Stencilling Chairs*, sold ten million copies. It is another well-known resource for people interested in the art of stencilling and in developing this skill.

In 1947 Florence was recognized by Epsilon Sigma Phi and given the Award of Merit for the highest achievement in written materials for advancing the work of cooperative extension. Three years later, in 1950, Florence received the Superior Service Award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in recognition of her outstanding teaching program in New York. In addition, she wrote articles for many periodicals. Among the best known is the chapter "The Empire Period Produces the Golden Age of Stencilling" in the book *The Ornamental Chair*, published by the New York State Historical Society of Early American Decoration.

Florence, in spite of her heavy teaching and travel schedule, had time for community activities. One of her greatest contributions was at the Southside Community House in Ithaca. She served on the board of directors in the 1930s and was chairperson of the refurbishing committee.

After retirement from Cornell University, in 1951, Florence continued her interest in furniture restoration. She was co-owner of The Workshop in Penn Yan for nine years. From 1951 to 1976 she also responded to requests to teach adult education classes in New York and Michigan because of her desire to interact with people and stimulate their interest in preserving antiques. She was frequently called upon to serve as a speaker, judge, and consultant and also served as a member of various community agency boards of directors and volunteered for church and public health programs.

Florence's interest in contributing her knowledge about early decorated furniture continued until her death. She planned to do a publication on the history of painted furniture and document it with photographs that she had taken. It was her wish that photographs and stencils of designs on early decorated furniture be given to the New York State Society of Early American Decoration if she did not complete her plans. All who came in contact with Florence Wright or her work can appreciate the legacy she leaves for future generations.

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