Claude Bragdon was a prolific writer. He often illustrated his books with projective ornament designs. This design begins the chapter “The Eternal Feminine” in Old Lamps for New: The Avant Garde in the Modern World (1925). Bragdon envisioned projective ornament as a universal design system for all facets of life from architectural environments to book jackets, from clothing to lamps.

Claude Bragdon explained in a letter to the painting’s owner that “you have great contributions to make on the subject of color.” Bragdon encouraged Trautmann to publish his color theories in 1936, “although Trautmann did not publish the book he began writing. Galaxie captures the essence of his scientific and mystical approach to color.”

Bragdon’s experimental spirit led to his Mathematical Abstractions, paintings he called “still lifes for color symphonies.” Earlier efforts to create “color music” were described by Bragdon as “my idea of what music might look like when translated into terms of form.”

Claude Bragdon excelled in multiple careers and disciplines—primarily known as an architect, he was also author, philosopher, and theater designer. One of his most significant innovations was a system of modern design called “projective ornament.” In this and in other creative endeavors, he sensed deep organic connections with the natural world that were informed by his belief in Theosophy, his sympathy with Eastern thought, and his desire to unite a society fractured along lines of race, gender, class, and religion.
Journeys Through Time and Space: Bragdon, Trautmann, and MAG

1908/1910 Claude Bragdon (CB) and Fritz Trautmann (FT) meet. FT sets up shop as a landscape architect in the Carter Building downtown Rochester where CB’s architectural practice was located.

1911 CB, FT, and others establish the Psychiatric Research Society to share ideas about the fourth dimension and practice thought transference.

1912 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1913–1915 CB oversaw construction of Memorial Art Gallery (MAG).

1914 CB becomes MAG board member (1914-1921).

1915 CB publishes Prismatic Ornament through his own Manas Press. MAG exhibits CB’s projective ornament illustrations. CB stages the first Song and Light Festival. Highland Park. FT helps conceptualize Canandaigua, a community of purposeful homes in East Rochester.

1916 FT receives favorable reviews for modernist paintings at the Art Center Rochester. FT moves to Toledo, OH.

1919 CB begins working in theater, stage design on a production of Hamlet in New York City. CB and FT contribute their first work to the Sloan Gallery: a projective ornament drawing.

1920 FT opens a school for landscape painting and color theory in a farmhouse along the Genesee River in Brighton and spends a great deal of time in its gardens.

1921 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1922 FT begins teaching at MAG’s Creative Workshop as Instructor in Painting and Drawing.

1923 FT continues teaching at MAG’s Creative Workshop as Instructor in Painting and Drawing.

1924 FT contributes to CB’s chapter on color in his book The Frozen Fountain.

1925 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1926 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1927 CB visits Rochester to lecture at MAG and visits FT at his country house on Canadice Lake.

1928 FT begins his Presidency of the Rochester Art Club (1928-33).

1929 FT helps conceptualize Concrest, a community of purposeful homes in East Rochester.

1930 CB’s stage design drawings exhibited at MAG. FT purchases and refurbishes an old farmhouse and its gardens on Canadice Lake.

1931 CB visits Rochester to lecture at MAG and visits FT at his country house on Canadice Lake.

1932 CB’s stage design drawings exhibited at MAG. FT purchases and refurbishes an old farmhouse and its gardens on Canadice Lake.

1933 CB visits Rochester to lecture at MAG and visits FT at his country house on Canadice Lake.

1934 FT begins his Presidency of the Rochester Art Club (1934-35).

1935 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1936 December. CB writes to FT, “My life has been utterly and completely focused on your friendship, but I’ve realized it [is]...”

1937 FT visits Rochester to lecture at MAG and visits CB at his country house on Canadice Lake.

1938 FT begins teaching at MAG’s Creative Workshop as Instructor in Painting and Drawing.

1939 FT becomes CB’s immediate successor as President of the Rochester Art Club.

1940 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1941 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1942 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1943 FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1944 MAG acquires its first works by CB: a Modernist abstraction watercolor and a projective ornament drawing.

1946 September 17. CB dies in NYC.

1950 FT’s Galaxy (1942) is a visitor favorite at MAG’s Finger Lakes exhibition. FT purchases an old farmhouse and its gardens on Canadice Lake.

1956 MAG purchases Gallery from FT.

1958 CB’s stage design drawings exhibited at MAG. FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1962 CB’s stage design drawings exhibited at MAG. FT assists CB with the color selection for the interior of the New York Central Railroad Station.

1963 November 12. FT dies the day after teaching his Wednesday afternoon “Drawing, Oil Painting and Color Theory” class. His entire estate is bequeathed to MAG.

On the Cover:


Claude Bragdon, Mathematical Abstraction No. 4. “Retinal images from looking at the sun,” 1930-1941. Oil on canvas. Albert E. Maylock Memorial Fund, 58.85.

August 13–December 12, 2010

This exhibition showcases Rochester artists and visionaries Claude Bragdon and Fritz Trautmann, whose long friendship was fueled by their shared ideas about creativity, philosophy, and the relationship between seen and unseen worlds.

In a 1929 letter from Bragdon to his friend Cleome Carroll, he wrote, “Fritz is the only original human being I know. [Rochester] but I see only two others. Because, we believe in the great organic spiritual laws, we want to know them, obey them, and operate according to them to the extent that we are able.” To reinforce their mystical connection, he quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem, “Nature’s Law.”

Claude Bragdon (CB)

Fritz Trautmann (FT)

Claude Bragdon, Claude Bragdon on roof of Shelton Hotel, 1939, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester Library.

Fritz Trautmann, Watercolor, pen and ink with charcoal on thin board. Collection of Jean France, promised gift to the Memorial Art Gallery.

Episodes from an Unwritten History: Claude Bragdon & Fritz Trautmann

Journeys Through Time and Space: Bragdon, Trautmann, and MAG

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