

Claude Bragdon (1866–1946)

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.



Above: *Shield for Song and Light Festival*, ca. 1915
Watercolor on paper, glass and lead. Gift of Chandler Bragdon, 56.91.

Right: *Song and Light Festival, Rochester, New York*, ca. 1915
Autochrome. Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester Library.

In his 1915 book *Projective Ornament*, Bragdon outlined a new language of design derived from numbers and geometry abstracted from nature. That year, he staged the Song and Light Festival, a public singing event in Rochester’s Highland Park. Bragdon used projective ornament to design colorful glass shields and Japanese-style lanterns that, lit by electricity, evoked a “cathedral without walls.” These community-building festivals soon spread throughout the northeast.

Bragdon wrote to Trautmann about the 1916 Song and Light Festival in Central Park, “My dear Trauto:...This new activity of mine is...intensely inspiring and absorbing and I cannot but feel that it is going to lead me to greater opportunities than I would have as an architect stuck in the mud of the River Genesee. Here I have never been able to do my best work: no one is willing to let me be radical enough.

This is perhaps fortunate because only since I have developed my ornament do I feel that I am ready to be radical...I can't tell you how vital this movement is—a great vortex which is going to draw in all the arts and recreate and reanimate them.”



Design for Decorative Lighting, ca. 1920s
Ink on paper. Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 44.7.

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 Ancient Wisdom 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.

In 1928, Bragdon wrote to his sister May, “I’m trying to turn an honest penny by designing some book jackets which I shall try to sell to Knopf. It’s all in the line of developing projective ornament which I consider to be perhaps the most important thing for me to keep at. If I can’t succeed in this book jacket thing I’ll try textiles, having already tried the typographers—and failed. I shall knock at every door. The next attempt will be at electric fixtures.”



Mathematical Abstraction No. 5 “Study in complementaries,” ca. 1939–1941
Watercolor, charcoal, pen and ink with red ink on thin board. Gift of Friends of the Gallery, 44.6.

Bragdon’s experimental spirit led to his *Mathematical Abstractions*, paintings he called “stills 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.” Bragdon exhibited fifteen of his *Mathematical Abstractions* in Connecticut, New York City, and Rochester in 1941–42. At the age of seventy-five, Bragdon’s uncertainty about his late-in-life innovation is reflected in a 1941 letter to Trautmann, “I do not take myself seriously as an artist. These are only experiments.” However, the exhibit was a success and Bragdon sold a number of works.

This watercolor was purchased from Bragdon for the Memorial Art Gallery in 1944 by Hildegarde Watson, a great patron of MAG and Bragdon (who once called her “my Rochester Lady Bountiful”). According to Bragdon, this painting was selected by Hildegarde Watson, Fritz Trautmann, Gertrude Herdle Moore and Isabel Herdle, MAG’s then director and curator.

Fritz Trautmann (1882–1971)

Fritz Trautmann began his career in the early years of the twentieth century as a landscape architect in Rochester. He spent years seeking alternative outlets for his creative spirit and his love for color, painting, and philosophy; he ultimately found his calling as a teacher. Over the course of almost fifty years, the artist taught painting and his unique color theory to generations of students, at the Mechanics Institute (now Rochester Institute of Technology) and the Memorial Art Gallery’s art school, the Creative Workshop.

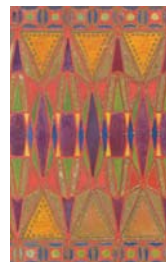


Above: *River Garden*, ca. 1921
Oil on canvas. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William G. Staudenmaier, 74.6.

Right: *Projective Ornament Design*, ca. 1915
Opaque watercolor and gold paint on thin board. Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester Library.

In November 1920, Bragdon wrote of his wife’s death to Trautmann, “my beautiful Eugenie is dead and the chapter of my life entitled Happiness is at an end.” At his request, Trautmann moved in with him. He lived for a time in Bragdon’s home in the winter and spent his summers on the farm where *River Garden* was painted. In a letter to the painting’s donors, Eva and Bill Staudenmaier, Trautmann wrote, “This is a corner of my River Road garden. I’ve made many gardens in my day, but this one gave me the most pleasure...It was located about midway between the old River Bend Inn and Balentine bridge on the east side of the Genesee River.”

The intense colors in *River Garden* are similar to those in Trautmann’s earlier projective ornament painting (right) and the frontispiece he painted for Bragdon’s book *Projective Ornament* (not pictured). Bragdon wrote, “The author wishes to express his gratitude to Mr. Frederick L. Trautmann for his admirable interpretations of Projective Ornament in color.”



Above: *The Atom (Creation of Matter)*, 1951
Oil on canvas. Bequest of Fannie Benjamin, 60.55.

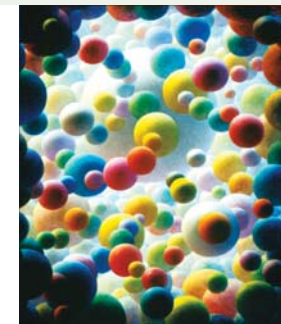
Right: Claude Bragdon’s design for Fritz Trautmann’s bookplate with magic square, date unknown.

satellites; universes of molecules, atoms, electrons, protons; universes of embryos, nuclei, chromosomes, genes...By reflection I rotate; my universe turns because I myself turn...my sphere of activity assumes an orbital motion because I am the spinning center of it.”



Fritz Trautmann was drawn to Bragdon’s use of magic squares, in which arranged numbers equal the same amount in the verticals, horizontals, and long diagonals. Projective ornament designs were derived by magic lines that followed the numbers in their natural order (1, 2, 3...). In these magic lines, Trautmann observed orbital patterns replicating natural forms. Bragdon wrote in his March 4, 1912 diary entry, “Trautman is getting great things apropos of Higher Space. He’s discovered the spiral law of space.” From this Trautmann developed the Principal of the Orbit, his philosophical explanation for creation, evolution, and existence:

“I am borne spinning along in the great whirlpool of evolution... It is because I am a child of nature that I am able to conceive only spinning and spiraling things—whirling worlds, universes of nebulae, stars, planets,



Above: *Galaxy*, 1942
Oil on canvas. Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 56.65.

Right: Trautmann with a Creative Workshop student, October 1957, Memorial Art Gallery Archives.

Bragdon encouraged Trautmann to publish his color theories in 1936, “You should have a complete and clear record of your color ‘findings’...I know that you have great contributions to make on the subject of color.” Although Trautmann did not publish the book he began writing, *Galaxy* captures the essence of his scientific and mystical approach to color:

“Galaxy...symbolizes the great truth that every phenomenon in life involves ALL of life.” Focusing on what he considered the four primary colors (rather than the traditional three), Trautmann wrote, “Each globe of Galaxy—whether red or blue or yellow or white—is composed of EXACTLY THE SAME ELEMENTS. The entire spectrum wraps itself, so to speak, around each globe with unvarying uniformity. Warm red plays across the field from the left, uniformly striking all of the spheres; bright yellow streams down from above, lighting up all the top sides; cold blue comes in from the right, and deep violet rises from the bottom.”

Despite appearances, not a single drop of black paint was used as Trautmann believed it dampened the natural vibrations of color.



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

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 congenial human being there [Rochester] that I can really enjoy being with...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 *Celestial Love*:



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

*There need no vows to bind
Whom not each other seek but find.
They give and take no pledge or oath,
Nature is the bond of both.*

*And so thoroughly is known
Each other's purpose by his own,
They can parley without meeting,
Need is none of forms of greeting,
They can well communicate
In their innermost estate...*

Episodes from an Unwritten History is the title of a 1910 book Bragdon wrote about Theosophy. As the title for this exhibition, it describes the previously unexplored relationship and mutual influence captured in the artists' works, letters and writings. A selection of representative objects and unpublished writings by Bragdon and Trautmann are featured in this brochure.

Episodes from an Unwritten History is presented in honor of Jean France, architectural historian and longtime Gallery friend.



Fritz Trautmann in front of large projective ornament painting, date unknown, Memorial Art Gallery Archives.

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

1911 CB, FT and others establish the Psychic 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.

1912–1913 CB oversees construction of Memorial Art Gallery (MAG).

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

1915 CB publishes *Projective 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 Concrest, a community of poured concrete 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, FT and other color visionaries form "The Prometheans," a group devoted to the Art of Light and to developing the color organ; FT moves to New York City and teaches painting and color theory.

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 on its gardens, the subject of *River Garden* (1921).

1920 CB's second wife, Eugenie, dies; FT temporarily moves in with CB to provide him with companionship.

1924 FT begins teaching at the Mechanics Institute (now RIT); CB moves permanently to the Shelton Hotel in New York City.

1931 FT contributes to CB's chapter on color in his book *The Frozen Fountain*.

1933 FT begins his Presidency of the Rochester Art Club (1933–35).

1934 CB's stage design drawings exhibited at MAG; FT purchases and refurbishes an old farmhouse and its gardens on Canadice Lake.

1936 December, CB writes to FT, "My life has always been... with few fixed star friendships, but of them U R L..."

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

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

1942 After traveling to Connecticut and the Ferargil Gallery in NYC, CB's *Mathematical Abstractions* are exhibited at MAG.

1944 MAG acquires its first works by CB: a *Mathematical 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.

1956 MAG purchases *Galaxy* from FT.

1962 MAG celebrates FT's 80th birthday with a party and a one-man exhibit of his paintings.

1971 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.

All excerpts from correspondence and writings are from the Bragdon Family Papers in the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, University of Rochester Library, and the Fritz Trautmann Papers in the Memorial Art Gallery Archives.

On the Cover:



Claude Bragdon, *Mathematical Abstraction No. 4 "Retinal images from looking at the sun,"* c. 1939–1941. Watercolor, pen and ink with charcoal on thin board. Collection of Jean France, promised gift to the Memorial Art Gallery.



Fritz Trautmann, *Galaxy*, 1942. Oil on canvas. Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 56.65.



Episodes from an Unwritten History: Claude Bragdon & Fritz Trautmann



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