

2957 - Frank Lloyd Wright Benches and Table from Wright's 1951 Unitarian Church



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Item Description

This trio of hinged bench seats and one table were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and completed in 1951 for the Unitarian Meeting House, which Wright also designed, at 900 University Bay Drive, Shorewood Hills, Madison, Wisconsin. The components of each of these pieces were created at Wright's Taliesin studio and then assembled at the Unitarian Meeting House by apprentices under Wright's direction. Wright was a member of this congregation and personally helped raise funds to complete the project.

These pieces were used for over thirty years at the Meeting House. The building itself is a US National Historic Landmark.

Please see the images for photographs of the pieces in their original installations, and for authenticating documentation from the Frank Lloyd Wright Memorial Foundation.

Standard Bench: 29" high, 42" wide, 21" deep

Low Bench: 22" high, 42" wide, 21" deep

Single Bench: 29" high, 21" wide, 21" deep

Table: 25" high, 46" wide, 40" deep

Item Gallery







THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT MEMORIAL FOUNDATION

TALIESIN WEST SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA 85256

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

The hinged bench seats, now being offered for private sale, were designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1951 for the Unitarian Church at 900 University Bay Drive, Shorewood Hills, Madison, Wisconsin.

During the final stages of construction, in the summer of 1951, Mr. Wright was on the site each day with the members of his Taliesin Fellowship who completed the construction of the building and finished the interior.

The benches were delivered to the job-site in sections, and the Fellowship members assembled them, attached the chains, preserved the wood finish, and put on the upholstery under the supervision of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Sincerely,

Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer
Director of Archives

BENCH SEATING FOR THE FIRST UNITARIAN MEETING HOUSE OF MADISON, WISCONSIN

Design: Plywood bench seating was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright specifically for the Meeting House of the First Unitarian Society of Madison. No other public building by the architect, other than the Pfeiffer Chapel at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, Florida, had such an extensive use of this type of seating. The examples from Florida have been removed and replaced by theater-type seating making those from the Meeting House that much more rare and unique. Because the auditorium narrows toward the front and has raised, step-like areas at each side, custom-designed seating is essential. Four different versions of the basic bench design are required to accommodate the unusual conditions.

Construction: Component parts, sized to allow for full use of 4' x 8' sheets of plywood, were precut at Taliesin and assembled at the Meeting House by apprentices working under Wright's direction in 1951.

Materials: Although oak plywood may have been preferred as more consistent with the oak trim used throughout the building, double-faced fir plywood was used for the benches. Seats were hinged to seats at the lower, rear edge. Link chain with S hooks at both ends, at either side of the benches, allowed a further adjustment to the desired angle of tilt.

Dimensions: REGULAR BENCH—seat, 21" deep x 42" wide, the sharpness of the two front corners softened by a diagonal cut. Back, 16" high x 42" wide, with 2½" taper from lower edge to top. Height, floor to top of seat 13½", 11½" riser, 1" runner, plus 3/4" thickness of plywood. Rear support, 2" wide strip below the seat the width of the bench. LOW BENCH—same as "regular" in all dimensions except that legs are 4" high without the riser. Height, floor to top of seat, 9 3/4". SINGLE—seat 21" square, except for diagonal cuts at front corners. Distance between two "legs" is 10", plus a wide supporting board that goes almost to the floor. EXTRA LONG—seat 21" deep x 90½" wide. Back 14" high x 79 3/4" wide. Height same as for regular and single.

Cushions: For each regular double bench the original design used two, single-seat cushions, made of denim-like, aqua blue fabric. That fabric did not wear well and also faded. A later version used a single, much thinner cushion of foam rubber covered with a longer wearing, textured, aqua blue fabric. The original covering included a flap of fabric over the bench seat back which formed a pocket for books. A later back covering system necessitated drilling holes in each bench (5 in regular, 3 in single) to accommodate string ties.

Changes: As previously noted, the cushions and back covers have been replaced. (The original fabric is still under the back covering of most original benches.) On some benches the original hinged have been replaced. Flat link chains, much less sturdy though more decorative, were originally used. Wood runners, attached at the bottom edges of most benches, were not part of the original design but were added later for ease of handling and stability.

Use: The benches have provided the primary seating for the congregation for over thirty years, proving to be very adaptable to the multiple and varied uses of the auditorium space. Because they were never permanently installed, they have been rearranged for weddings, reversed for activities centered in the Hearth Room at the rear, used facing the side for plays, grouped with individual tables (also designed by Wright) to provide for dinner seating, and used with a multiple-table arrangement for committee or group meetings.