Philbrook Museum of Art
Historic Preservation’s Gift: Waite Phillips and the Philbrook Museum of Art

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The era between World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII) is among the most challenging periods in United States history. Between the two world wars, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl ravaged the American economy leaving many in poverty. Through such highly troubling times, the emergence of beautiful, artistic structures provided society an avenue of relief. Amid the hopelessness, a few people became beacons of hope and goodwill. Such individuals possessed the means and the determination to improve the lives of their fellow man during the height of adversity. One individual in this select group was Oklahoma’s Waite Phillips. Phillips and his wife, Genevieve, were highly involved in philanthropic efforts and attempted to ease financial burdens and provide food and supplies for the general population of Tulsa. A self-made millionaire, Phillips understood the hardships of living from paycheck to paycheck and attempted to relieve the stress and adversity of people with
whom he came into contact. The Phillips family not only assisted those victimized by misfortune, but also arranged his estate to leave a legacy that empowered and enlightened future generations through historic preservation.

Thus, in his book *Epigrams*, Phillips states, “The only things we keep permanently are those we give away.”

Phillips’ generous nature fueled his philanthropy, which affected a diverse spectrum of groups, including the Boy Scouts of America in New Mexico. Reflecting on his motivation for donating his ranch to the Boy Scouts, Phillips wrote, “Real philanthropy consists of helping others, outside our own family circle, from whom no thanks is expected or required.”

Because of such actions, Phillips’ legacy endures as a monument to the preservation of the arts and history for future generations and to the Phillips family’s generous nature.

Phillips’ philanthropic nature continues through his surviving projects including the Philturn Rocky Mountain Scout Camp, Villa Philbrook, (currently known as the Philbrook Museum of Art), Philtower, and Philcade. Generous donations such as Phillips’--primarily located in Tulsa--offer a glimpse into Tulsa citizens’ altruistic past and a critical time in Oklahoma’s history that encompassed the

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golden era of the oil boom tycoons of Oklahoma. Significant buildings resulted from an era when black gold flowed freely through Oklahoma’s veins and transformed average individuals into millionaires virtually overnight. The runaway period of wealth created a rash of construction, during which many architectural marvels adorned the streets of Tulsa and became a testament to the prosperity created by the “Oil Boom.” To better understand the significant impact that buildings, such as the Philbrook Museum of Art, had and continue to have on Tulsa, one must delve into the turbulent period from 1920 to 1939 during which the structures emerged. This stimulating era shaped Waite Phillips and influenced his philanthropic activities through his attempt to extend to the less fortunate a deeper appreciation for art. A thorough exploration of the architecture, purpose, construction, and preservation of the Philbrook Museum of Art demonstrates that Phillips’ crowning glory claimed its rightful place as a notable aesthetically pleasing architectural structure in the city of Tulsa.

The era of the oil boom transformed Waite Phillips into a millionaire and, eventually, the mansion into his legacy, the Philbrook Museum of Art. To thoroughly understand this transformation, one must explore the 1920s, popularly known as the Roaring 20s, a time of endless possibilities after the Great War and a period when considerable wealth emerged in the country. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s book, *This Side of Paradise*, portrays the attitude of the 1920s when it states, “Here was a
new generation… dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.”

Waite and Genevieve Phillips were not exempt from the new prosperity as Waite’s oil company began to produce and grow. In 1920, two-thirds of the entire world’s oil was found in the United States, much under the vast green prairies of Oklahoma.

Amidst the Phillips’ good fortune, society realized unfortunate events. The fear of communism known as the “Red Scare” gripped the nation causing paranoia that communism might extinguish the very democracy that made prosperity possible. Similarly, the Ku Klux Klan was largely responsible for initiating a 24-hour reign of terror in Tulsa in one of the most devastating eruptions of racial tension in the United States history.

Occurring merely a few miles from the Phillips’ residence, the Phillips and the majority of white Americans were surprisingly unaffected by the large amount of violence taking place downtown. Despite such unfortunate events occurring in Tulsa, the 20s continued to surrender a profitable yield to many individuals in Oklahoma in the form of “black gold,” the profitable oil boom. The Phillips Company’s profit permitted frequent family trips to Europe,
allowing glimpses of the culture that would influence much of the structural design of the Phillips’ mansion.9

In addition to wealth unparalleled by any prior generation, another characteristic of the Roaring 20s included a wave of new construction incorporating new architecture and levels of grandeur that appropriately represented their wealthy inhabitants. During 1926, Phillips initiated his own wave of construction and began designing and building Villa Philbrook, which incorporated European elements, among many other influences, which survived in the memories of the Phillips’ journeys abroad.10 The Roaring 20s continued unabated into 1927, leaving few clues of the impending 1929 Stock Market crash that would eventually result in the Great Depression.

Although more fortunate than most during the depression because of wise investing, Phillips never hesitated to help people in need but liked to maintain his anonymity.11 He gave gifts ranging from donations toward the creation of a new Children’s Home for Tulsa to no-interest loans for the needy.12 The Philips’ generous stewardship was described as “…the uses to which he puts his worldly wealth constitute a richness greater than all of the gold…”13 Nevertheless, the Great Depression decimated the United States, and the government and

9 Ibid, 189.
10 Ibid, 206.
11 Waite Phillips’ Diary.
12 Wallis, 245.
13 Ibid.
entrepreneurs alike tried to stem the wave of utter poverty that was inundating the nation.

As the 1930s closed, the morale of the nation began to rise as people sensed positive changes ahead. To encourage and assist the rekindling of the renewal of hope evident in the general population, 1939 became a year of world fairs to symbolize the end of the Great Depression and beginning of a new era. As this roller coaster ride of war, prosperity, and poverty ended, the nation learned valuable lessons which became useful in the coming war. The nation bolstered citizens’ hope, strengthened resolve, and committed itself to meet new challenges.

Waite Phillips became a philanthropic hope from his youth as his thirst for adventure and travel proved a catalyst toward his eventual success.\textsuperscript{14} Waite’s interest in oil was evident as he marveled at the tales of the strange, dark substance known as “black gold,” which was assisting entrepreneurs in “…striking it rich, very rich.”\textsuperscript{15} Desiring his own success, Waite entered the booming oil business that dominated Oklahoma in 1906 and rapidly joined the ranks of the elite oil barons. Genevieve, who offered continual support and advice, was an integral component in Waite’s rise to fame.\textsuperscript{16} After their marriage, they settled into a bungalow that Waite designed and built using his oil business

\textsuperscript{14} Waite Phillips’ Diary, 1886-1889.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 95.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
profits from his leases south of Okmulgee, Oklahoma.\textsuperscript{17} Through his newfound wealth, however, the Phillips realized they had outgrown the small town where their fortune had blossomed and, thus, decided to settle down in Tulsa, the “Oil Capital of the World,” where his success flourished facilitating his interests in philanthropy and historic preservation.\textsuperscript{18}

The Phillips’ generous nature manifested itself through many acts of philanthropy beginning with the donation of 127,000 acres of Waite’s UU Ranch in New Mexico to the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Waite believed the values gleaned from working on a ranch would benefit boys who would not have the opportunity otherwise. The Boy Scouts of America named the ranch the Philtturn Rocky Mountain Scout Camp, later renamed Philmont. Another generous donation included the 23-story Philtower Building, which the BSA use as their camp’s financial center.

Perhaps Waite’s greatest philanthropic donation was the Villa Philbrook. The gift of the luxurious estate stunned Tulsa. \textit{The Tulsa Tribune}’s front-page picture of the spacious estate was a testament of the announcement’s impact on the city. According to the newspaper, the estate was to be transformed into a museum to have special emphasis on

\textsuperscript{17} Wallis, 112-113.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 154.
the arts and Indian culture.\textsuperscript{19} As with all areas of his life, Phillips preferred a hands-on approach to the design and construction of Villa Philbrook. One of Waite’s famous epigrams, “The man who never makes mistakes never makes much of anything,” provides an accurate glimpse into Waite’s construction of Philbrook.\textsuperscript{20} Phillips’ son, Elliot, explains, “My father would not follow anybody’s verbatim. He might not have done his own dental work but he told the dentist how to do it.”\textsuperscript{21}

The architect chosen to create Philbrook was Ned Delk, a seasoned traveler who was familiar with the European influences the Phillips wanted in their future residence.\textsuperscript{22} Phillips and Delk employed many sources in the development of Philbrook, from Mediterranean ports to Italian Renaissance cities.\textsuperscript{23} The influences that shaped Villa Philbrook created a mansion unique among the hoard of Tulsa mansions constructed contemporaneously. Inspirations attributed to Philbrook’s design are the Villa Guilia in Italy with its similar facades and columns surrounding the portico.\textsuperscript{24} Philbrook became not only a big house financed by an oil tycoon, but also a masterpiece constructed by a man sensitive to details. Villa Philbrook is best described as a classic Florentine villa topped with an Italianate tile roof accentuated by an

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[20] Epigrams.
\item[21] Wallis, 220.
\item[22] Ibid.
\item[23] Ibid.
\item[24] Ibid, 221.
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The gardens surrounding Philbrook were, in Herbert Hare’s opinion, modeled after fifteenth and sixteenth century gardens, such as the gardens at the Villa Lante in Italy.26

Villa Philbrook encompasses a wealth of materials from various locations around the world that provide its uniqueness and allow the materials to complement each other. The structure’s design includes many elements that, although different, collectively form a work of art. The exterior walls glitter white in the Oklahoma sun from ground white marble mixed with the stucco, thus creating a dazzling effect.27 The designer incorporated Minnesota Kasota limestone with the same color and texture as Italian travertine marble on the entrance and on walls, doorways, floors, and windows throughout the villa.28 Marble was used in the creation of fountains, fireplaces, and some floors.29 Other floor materials were teal, walnut, and oak.30 On her family’s numerous European vacations, Genevieve acquired silken fabrics used for Philbrook’s curtains, wall coverings, and draperies.31 Consistent with the desired Italian motif, the Phillips’ imported from the country most of the furniture for the Villa.32

25 Ibid, 220.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid, 221.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
The design of Villa Philbrook was also a testament to Italian sophistication and grace. Philbrook contained many rooms on three levels. The first floor Great Hall was an enormous central room containing a fireplace and an organ. Likewise, the main level boasted a living room with a coffered ceiling of large octagonal panels, a formal dining room, and a breakfast room, where sculptured cupids played in a fountain in front of large windows that greeted the sunrise, making it the family’s favorite space. The same level also accommodated the study and library, which boasted red oak flooring, walnut paneling, and a globe light hanging from the ceiling, which was made of gum timbers. Similarly, it housed a music room with a mural created by George Gibbs portraying a group of dancing girls.

On the next level were the Phillips’ sleeping quarters, guest bedrooms, and servants’ quarters. Waite and Genevieve shared a sleeping porch but had separate bedrooms. Favoring the outdoor ranch style, Waite’s bedroom featured Spanish-style furnishings, a simple version of El Greco’s fireplace, and was about half the size of Genevieve’s bedroom. Conversely, Genevieve favored a French style. Painted blue and white, Genevieve’s bedroom cozily employed four

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 222.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
goatskin rugs.\textsuperscript{39} The children each had their own bedrooms and sleeping porches.\textsuperscript{40}

A basement in the Philbrook provided a third level. Although Genevieve’s European sophistication permeated elsewhere in the house, the basement area was Waite’s domain and reflected his desire for the ranch.\textsuperscript{41} The basement rooms stored Waite’s Native American collection and other mementos, such as Waite’s hunting trophies.\textsuperscript{42} The lower rooms utilized bright western and Indian patterns, including furniture, rugs, and art.\textsuperscript{43} Genevieve’s European taste and Waite’s Southwestern style balanced the Villa Philbrook and made it unique.\textsuperscript{44}

Another singular aspect of Villa Philbrook was the immense gardens behind the house. The landscape architect, Herbert Hare, designed the formal gardens to complement the Italian Renaissance villa, and Phillip Thomas, a Tulsa Landscape contractor, initiated Hare’s designs.\textsuperscript{45} Using Villa Dante, an Italian property north of Rome constructed in 1566, as their inspiration, Hare and Delk modeled the Italian estate’s rills and diagonal walks, creating a sloping ramp that

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{45} Tom Young, \textit{Villa Philbrook} (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Philbrook Museum of Art, 2009).
instituted an extension of the Italianate atmosphere from the villa into the gardens.\textsuperscript{46}

The gardens’ design continued the Italian patina desired by the Phillips and their architects. Waite spared no expense to transform the gardens into marvels worthy of Rome. As an added personal touch to the design, Waite planted a magnolia tree beside the sunroom to collect the blooms for his wife.\textsuperscript{47}

Furthermore, Hare invented an informal rock garden using American influences to disguise the steep slope between the border of the Italian garden and the miniature gorge at the edge of the Philbrook grounds.\textsuperscript{48} Beneath the rock garden, another informal garden using the 18\textsuperscript{th} century English style focused on a sequence of two reflecting pools.

Vegetation used in the gardens included evergreens, poplars, willows, and flowering shrubs, which surrounded the swimming pool.\textsuperscript{49} These plants framed the tempietto, which scales a low synthetic knoll positioned directly above the dressing rooms provided for swimmers.\textsuperscript{50} The vegetation added an entirely new element, accentuating other components of the gardens. Beyond the gardens is Crow Creek, which flows in a north-south direction through the grounds. The remainder of the twenty-three acres included large, open lawns, woods, and a barbecue

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
pit constructed into the side of a hill located in one of the large meadows.\textsuperscript{51}

By Villa Philbrook’s completion, the residence cost $597,000, the gardens and landscaping totaled $129,000, and the grand total, including the furnishings, was more than $1 million.\textsuperscript{52} The luxurious sum lavished upon the Philbrook’s construction resulted in many critical opinions of the home, such as Ferber, who described the villa as “…a $2 million mansion fitted with gold-plated plumbing.”\textsuperscript{53} However, some individuals were simply in awe of the vastness, majesty, and extravagance of the house. One appreciative individual was Will Rogers, the Phillips’ friend, who, upon his first visit to Philbrook, stated, “Well, I’ve been to Buckingham Palace, but it hasn’t anything on Waite Phillips’ house.”\textsuperscript{54}

Waite donated the 72-room mansion and surrounding 23 acres of grounds as an art center to further educate the masses. “All things should be put to their best possible use,” Waite said in his announcement.\textsuperscript{55} “The immense house, with its spacious rooms, wide corridors and great halls, was a natural for a museum because of the villa’s steel remodeling to make it suitable for its new purpose.”\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Wallis, 223.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 224.
\textsuperscript{55} Young.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
Before the house could reopen as a museum, designers modified the rooms to create gallery space.\textsuperscript{57} However, particular areas of the house retain their original patina today, particularly the Great Hall, staircases, library, music room, living room, and the Santa Fe room.\textsuperscript{58} As for the gardens and landscaping, they remained unchanged until 2002. The Tulsa landscape designer performed a major renovation of the landscape around Villa Philbrook.\textsuperscript{59} After obtaining approval and financial support from Elliott Phillips, Tulsa witnessed the completion of the Philbrook project in 2004 at a cost of $7 million. This project incorporated an overhaul “... of the formal gardens, new disability-accessible gardens and pathways, a new outdoor allee garden for special events, reclamation and renovation of Crow Creek, renewal of the main entry and drive, a refurbished grotto, redesigned open spaces, and new lighting, fountains, and public restrooms.”\textsuperscript{60} Inducted into the National Register of Historic Places on December 1, 1978, the Philbrook Museum of Art continues to attract nationwide attention for its unique architecture, artistic contents, and beautiful gardens, and provides a glimpse of another time in the history of Oklahoma as well as the United States.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
In conclusion, the Philbrook Museum of Art is a national monument renowned for its history, architecture, and art collection. Philbrook, and its one and only owner, Waite Phillips, weathered one of the most magical and turbulent times in America’s history. Waite Phillips, a man raised on an Iowa farm, was an extraordinary man who possessed good business sense and an unshakeable work ethic that proved successful, making him a very rich man. Eventually, Phillips’ newfound wealth enabled him to build one of the most architecturally and aesthetically notable structures in the city of Tulsa. The Phillips family spent eleven years living happily in their Italian villa. However, Waite’s restlessness made the donation of the estate to Tulsa a favorable option that also exemplified his generous nature. Waite wanted the house to become an art museum to educate the masses in Oklahoma’s Native American history and garner an appreciation for art. However, one outcome Waite failed to predict was the mansion’s historical merit, which, over time, became a haven for other historical treasures in the form of paintings, sculptures, and Native American artifacts to benefit future generations in the years to come.