

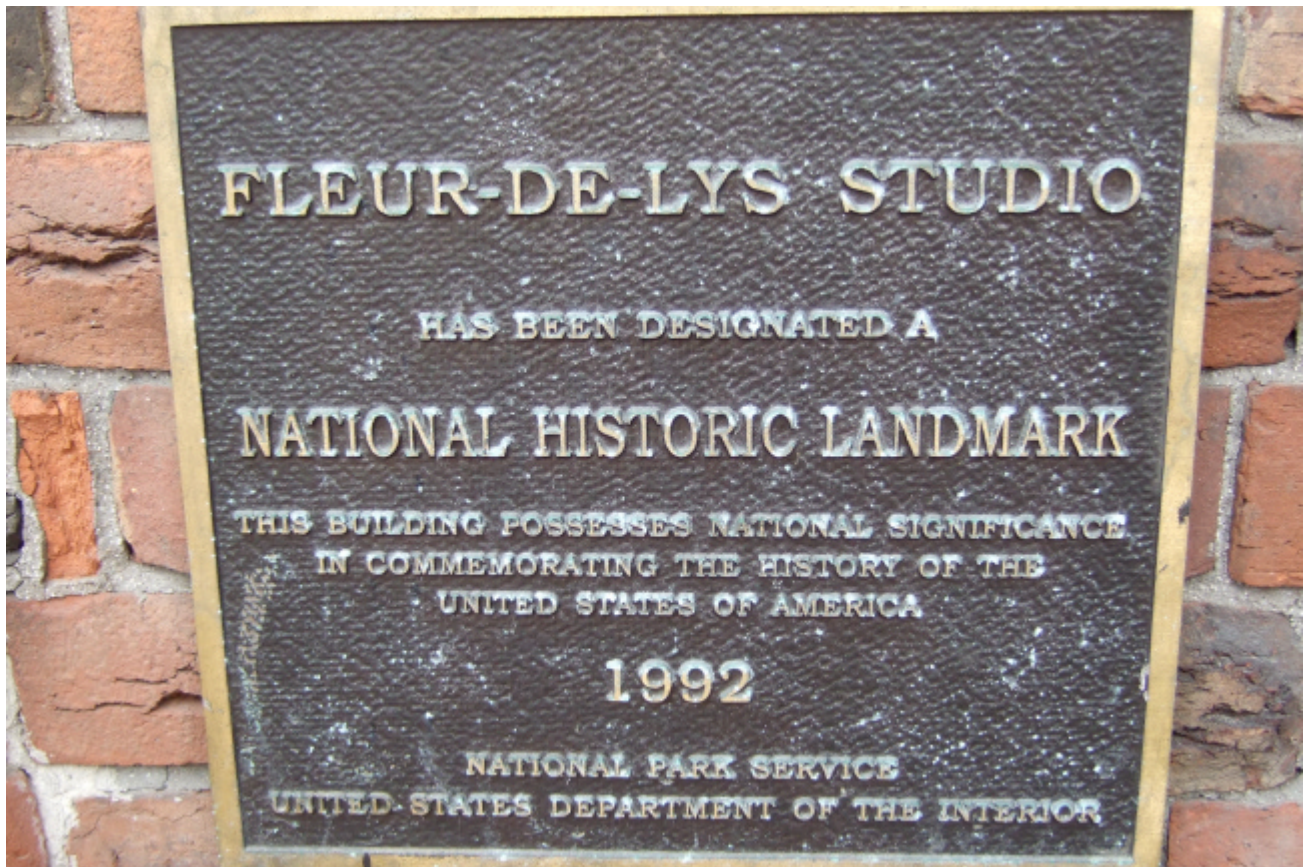
***Fleur de Lys Studio (1885):
A Site of Memory, Art and
Literature in Providence, RI***



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ARCH 1710

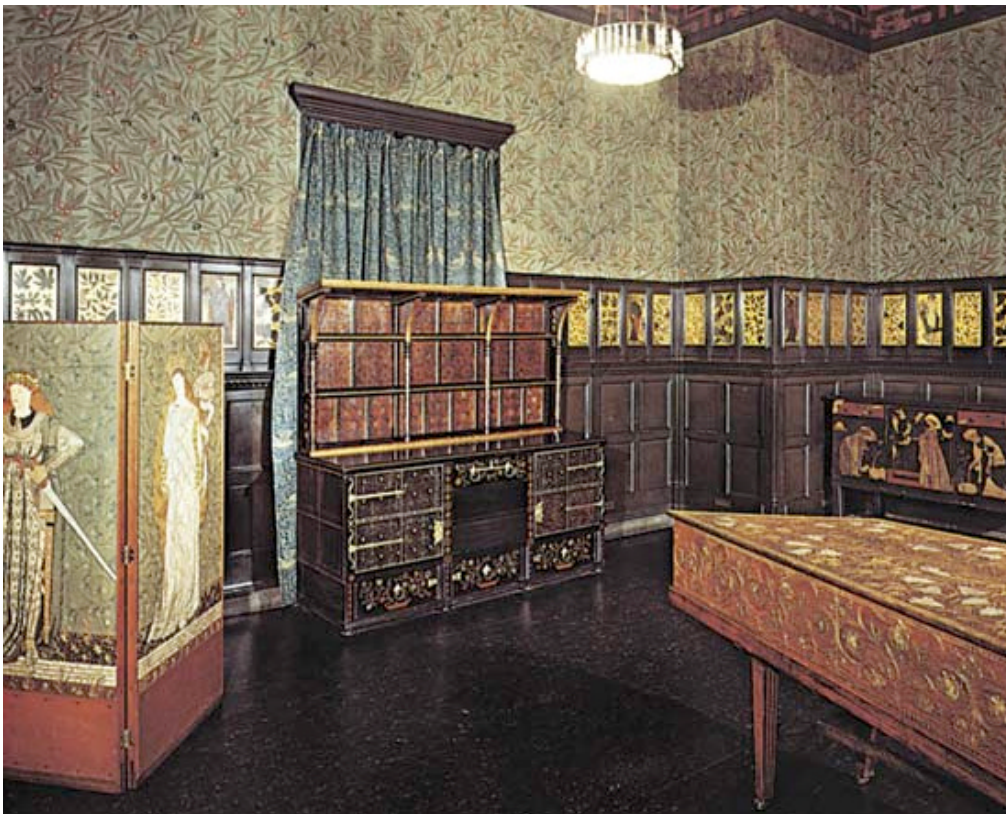
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Standing near the foot of College Hill on the north side of the densely built, one-block-long Thomas Street, the eccentric Fleur-de-Lys Studio is a two and a half-story structure designed in 1885 by renowned painter Sydney Burleigh and architect Edmund Wilson. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century dwellings line the north side of Thomas Street, once called Angell's Lane, a one-block link between Benefit and North Main Streets. Owned today by the Providence Art Club, it serves as studio space. The Fleur de Lys was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1992, as Mrs. Burleigh stipulated when she willed the building to the Art Club in 1939. Its eye-catching, distinctive Arts and Crafts-era decorative paneling and traditionally sixteenth century English, half-timber framing has recently undergone a major restoration (NHL).



The Fleur de Lys Studios is a key architectural monument to the American Arts and Crafts Movement as well as significant in the history of the movement itself, which was well established in England by the early 1880s. In general, it was a reaction to nineteenth-century industrialization and emphasized the process of producing works of art by hand. It advocated the unity of the arts and making art a part of everyday life by allowing for its public display (Kauffman). Pierre Nora would perhaps suggest that this movement intended to preserve Western European culture's collective, artistic experience by 'inscribing' its memory on the material world through design. The Fleur de Lys accomplished this goal and embodies the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement to this day.

Typical Arts and Crafts Interior



Burleigh and Wilson decorated the studio's facade with textured stucco and adorned it with proto-Art Nouveau designs and friezes of figures that ranged from those of graceful ladies to faces of men and animals in cabbages. The panels within the porch are inscribed with "Burleigh" in a cartouche and above the entrance, three quatrefoil panels bear the inscriptions from left to right, "B," a stylized fleur de Lys, and "1885". In the attic story, three large panels bear allegorical figures representing the unified visual arts: Sculpture on the left, Painting at center, and Architecture on the right (RI Home & Design).

Sculpture



Painting



Architecture



Frieze of dragon



Façade Design

Though it is interesting to perceive how the studio's unique design stands out in the traditional, historic context of Providence's East Side, it is also intriguing to consider the personal memories and histories invested in this small building. In his book, *Angell's Lane: A History of a Little Street in Providence*, Miner comments how the locals were very excited when the studio was finally completed in the winter of 1885. Drawing from Mrs. Burleigh's journal, he writes about the open house party thrown on New Year's Eve 1886, after which the first artists moved into their respective studio spaces. Everyone who knew the Burleigh's and who was 'anyone' in the Providence art scene flocked to the Fleur de Lys ball in their party dresses and "their gold braid and brass buttons" (160). The ladies gushed over the charm of the place and the men were impressed by its construction

and artistic achievement. There were five studios in the Fleur de Lys building. Burleigh himself had the first floor with its interesting mezzanine gallery where he'd store and collect a variety of interesting objects (Miner).

Up-close view of front façade

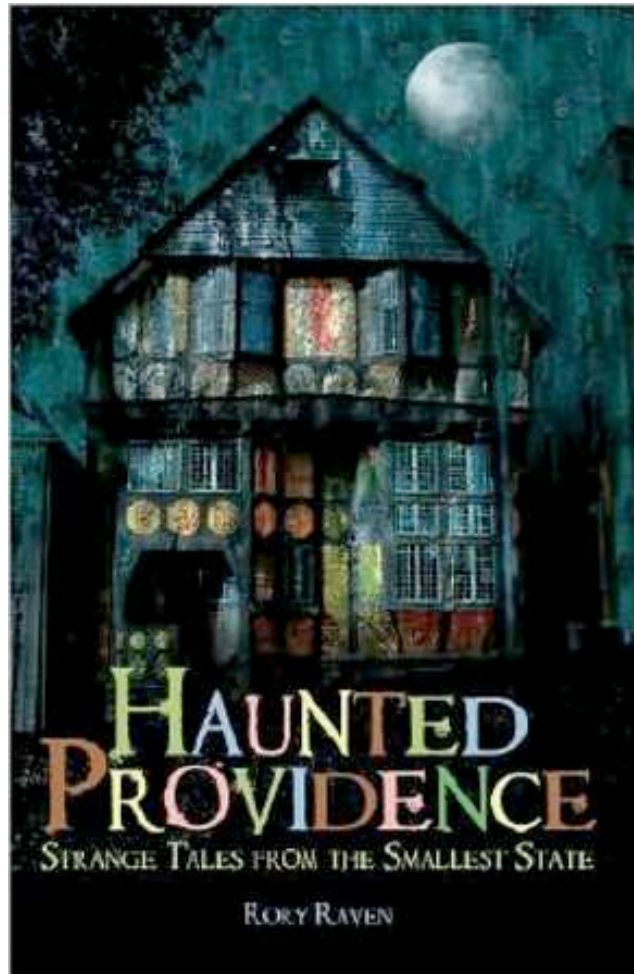


Burleigh's inscription at entrance



As can be expected of a well-known, urban cultural site like the Fleur de Lys, which is both a public and semi-private space, there was bound to be a variety of collective memories or myths associated with it. For instance, it is curiously not mentioned in Miner's book that Sidney Burleigh, though happily married until his death, supposedly carried on several affairs while living in the Fleur de Lys building. One particularly notable affair was with a talented landscape painter named Angela O'Leary, who gassed herself to death one night in the studio in December 1921. According to Rory Raven's *Haunted Providence*, O'Leary's ghost is said to

occasionally roam the halls of the Fleur de Lys. Raven also spoke with a local artist who claims to have encountered her one cold winter night in the studio (85).



Within a few years of Fleur de Lys's opening, the Providence art scene continued to thrive, particularly aided by the expansion of the young School of Design to new buildings located on opposite Waterman and North Main Streets. During this time, the studio also became known for its ambitious social programs, events and themed costume parties, which lasted through the first decades of the twentieth century. The Art Club was especially known for its annual Christmas Eve celebration that

gradually transformed into a highly anticipated night of feasting and performances. Miner describes that it was common to gather at the house, share stories and often perform a play or stage a discussion on a particular topic of interest. He writes about one particular Friday evening in 1892, when a group of fourteen men, who were regulars at the Club, sat around the fire drinking beer. They decided to host a weekly “supper with occasional papers and addresses.” Over time, these meetings grew significantly in size and would come to be known as the century and a half-old “Friday Knights,” during which the variety and number of topics discussed “could fill a book” (Miner 172-173.) This sort of collective practice is reminiscent of Connerton’s idea of the “commemorative ceremony” which creates a distinct social memory. Also, since this example is site-specific, the Fleur de Lys operates similar to Bernard Tschumi’s concept of an ‘event-place’ in which one cannot discuss the building itself aside from that which takes place within its walls. The Fleur de Lys exists in order to serve its purpose as a haven for all art and artists.

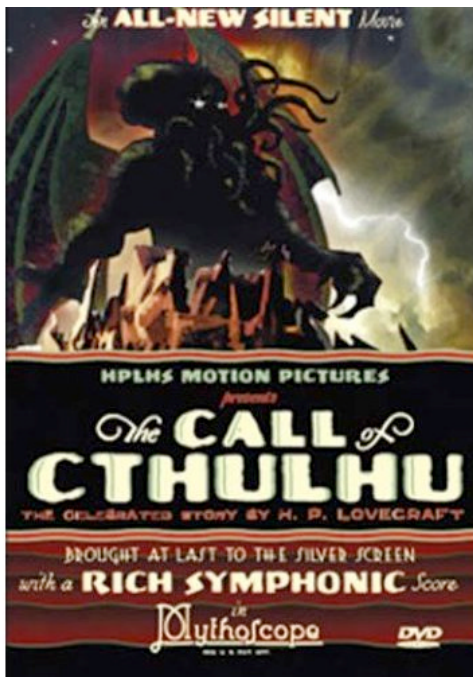
See advertisement for Friday Knights attached at end (only hard copy).

A RISD studio interior (1880s)



Lastly, it is necessary to mention the famous, native of Providence horror-story author, H.P. Lovecraft, who was captivated by the odd studio/house. In one of his most famous tales, “The Call of Cthulhu”, he writes of a character, “His card bore the name of Henry Anthony Wilcox...who had latterly been studying sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design and living alone in the Fleur-de-Lys building near that institution.” Lovecraft continues to describe an eerie bas-relief made by Wilcox that vaguely resembles one of the sculptures on the house. Lovecraft also attended exhibitions at the studio in the 1920s since his aunt showed landscapes in the galleries (Kauffman).

H.P. Lovecraft



Besides the fact that designing a public studio and living space for painters was unusual at that time, the Fleur de Lys building itself was more than ordinary as it became a public monument and symbol of the city's

progress in recognizing its blossoming art culture. Providence was growing not only in size (from 50,666 in 1860 to 118,070 in 1885) but also in complexity and sophistication (Miner). Any large population would require institutional growth, but Providence acquired a more artistic foundation than in other similar-sized cities. The late nineteenth century Rhode Island artist, Charles Stetson, referred to the Fleur de Lys as a “...unique and mysterious domain of art...a building misunderstood by the people, disliked by the perfectly modern and neat, and beloved by us who harbor there....” The old street with its charming historic houses casts a spell even on the casual passer-by. While the building was on the one hand a philosophical and architectural retreat from the industrial city for its artist occupants, it was on the other hand, a permanent cultural reminder, source of memory, and declaration of faith by the painters, sculptors, and designers of Providence in the importance of their work and its place in the community for decades to come.



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