



## Pries, Lionel H. (1897-1968)

by Jeffrey Karl Ochsner

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Lionel H. "Spike" Pries was a noted architect and artist, who is now primarily remembered for his legendary teaching career at the University of Washington. Arrested in California in a vice sting in the late 1950s, Pries lost his job, a victim of that era's hysteria over homosexuality. Thereafter, his contributions to Pacific Northwest architecture were largely forgotten, except by his former students.

Pries was born in San Francisco on June 1, 1897. He was raised in Oakland. His father worked at Gump's, the well-known San Francisco importer of European and Asian arts and crafts, so he was exposed from childhood to a wide range of fine art objects.

Pries graduated with a B.A. in architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1920. He then studied at the University of Pennsylvania, under the legendary teacher Paul Cret. He received his M.A. in 1921.

At Penn, Pries won the LeBrun Traveling Scholarship, which allowed him to spend thirteen months in Europe in 1922 and 1923.

Pries began his own practice in San Francisco in 1924. In 1925, following the Santa Barbara earthquake, Pries relocated to that city to design projects for the Bothin Helping Fund (a foundation that had invested extensively in Santa Barbara real estate). Over the next year he was responsible for about ten buildings in Santa Barbara.

In 1926 he returned to San Francisco and for the next two years carried out projects in the Bay Area.

In early 1928, Pries moved to Seattle to join Penn classmate William J. Bain in the firm Bain & Pries. Over the next four years, this firm designed roughly 60 projects of which 30 were built.

Most of these were single-family residences, although the firm also did apartment buildings, fraternity and sorority houses, and small commercial buildings. As the firm's lead designer, Pries was primarily responsible for the character of this work. However, by the end of 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression, with no work in hand, Bain & Pries dissolved.

From that time Pries was primarily an educator who occasionally took on architectural commissions.

He had begun teaching architecture at the University of Washington in fall 1928, and soon emerged as the inspirational leader of the program.

He was known as a demanding teacher, but with his extraordinary skills in drawing and rendering he was able to demonstrate to students how they could develop their projects. His virtuoso critiques, in which he would sketch or paint, often directly on the students' work, would still be recalled by his students decades later.

Pries was an elitist, and he pushed all his students, especially those with talent, extraordinarily hard. He also welcomed students into his home near campus--his evening soirees introduced the students to fine art, music, culture, and design. As Pries was single, he also offered lodging to a few architecture students each year.

Within the university community, Pries was deeply closeted, as were most professionals during the decades before and after World War II.

Among his noted students were architects Minoru Yamasaki, A. Quincy Jones, Perry Johanson, Victor Steinbrueck, Paul Kirk, Roland Terry, Fred Bassetti, Wendell Lovett, and Disney art director Ken Anderson, among many others.

In the late 1920s, Pries began visiting Mexico for several months each summer. Through his friendship with William Spratling, a gay American architect who moved permanently to Mexico and is best known for his revival of the silver crafts of Taxco, Pries was introduced to the circle of Mexican artists and intellectuals who were interested in developing a new art and architecture that was at once modern and also Mexican.

This idea of an approach to modernism that wedded it to a particular place strongly influenced Pries's subsequent designs. By the late 1930s, he was beginning to develop an approach that was modern but specifically appropriate to the Pacific Northwest.

Pries often shared his designs with his students, many of whom would become leaders in the development of Northwest regional modernism in the years after 1945.

From the late 1920s to the 1940s, Pries was an exhibiting artist, showing his oils and watercolors in the annual exhibitions of Northwest artists and at Seattle galleries. From 1931 to 1932, he served as Director of the Art Institute of Seattle (predecessor to today's Seattle Art Museum).

For a time he was close to Seattle gay artists Morris Graves and Guy Anderson, who lived together in the 1930s.

Pries also developed an interest in printmaking and made drypoint prints that he often gave to friends and clients. A noted collector, Pries exhibited his collections of pre-Columbian, Native American, and Asian artifacts in Washington and California in the 1940s and 1950s.

After World War II, Pries began one of his most successful periods of architectural practice, designing a series of notable regionally appropriate modernist houses in the Northwest. These houses were well-integrated with their sites and often featured sloped roofs, a mix of natural and industrial materials, and large areas of glass.

However, as the architecture program at the University of Washington expanded rapidly, Pries's position changed. The new faculty and new students were much more interested in International Style modernism and the pedagogy of the Bauhaus than in Pries's romantic version of modernism.

In response to this marginalization, Pries became an exceptional figure in the department, teaching a more artistic approach to architecture, in contrast to his younger colleagues who were much more interested in technology and social issues.

In summer 1958, while on a vacation in California, Pries was entrapped in a vice sting in a Los Angeles park. He was charged with a misdemeanor, paid a small fine, and was released.

However, as was customary at the time, when homosexuals were regarded as a security threat and a danger to young people, a report was sent to his employer. The president of the University of Washington, Charles Odegaard, decided that Pries had to be let go. On October 31, 1958, he was forced to resign from his faculty position.

The reason was concealed--all anyone knew was that, after 30 years of teaching, Pries was suddenly gone. It would be close to 40 years before the full story would be told.

Suddenly unemployed at age 61, Pries worked as a drafter for five years until he was able to retire in 1963. He never set foot on the university campus again.

In his last years, he lived quietly, taking on an occasional design project. Freed from the constraints of the university, he developed a circle of gay friends, who often met on Sunday afternoons for drinks, dinner, and conversation.

Pries died of a heart attack on April 7, 1968. He pointedly did not leave his collections of rare books, art objects, or papers to the University of Washington. Later, however, friends and former students donated material to the University Library's Special Collections Division to establish a Lionel Pries Collection.

Lionel Pries was a key contributor to the development of Pacific Northwest modern architecture, both through his own work and that of his students. After his death he was occasionally cited in books by or about his students. It was not until the 2007 publication of a monograph about Pries himself that the full story of his departure from the university was revealed.

The tragedy of his last years is a reminder of the precarious position of homosexuals in the repressive era of the mid-twentieth century.

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## **About the Author**

**Jeffrey Karl Ochsner** is Professor of Architecture at the University of Washington, where he teaches architectural design, architectural history, and related subjects. His books include *H. H. Richardson: Complete Architectural Works*, *Shaping Seattle Architecture: A Historical Guide to the Architects*, *Distant Corner: Seattle Architects and the Legacy of H. H. Richardson*, and *Lionel H. Pries, Architect, Artist, Educator: From Arts and Crafts to Modern Architecture*. His articles have appeared in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, *JAE: Journal of Architectural Education*, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, and other publications.