

PEDRO BEADE

New England Brotherhood: Sydney Burleigh, the Fleur-de-Lys House, and the Art Workers Guild

The house at 7 Thomas Street, a steep lane at the foot of College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, is a medieval surprise in an area dominated by the colonial. Flanked by older buildings of softer colors and textures, many of them of eighteenth-century vintage, the Fleur de Lys House (Figure 1), built in 1885, is a unique American example of Arts and Crafts architecture.¹ The Fleur de Lys and the spirit in which it was conceived and realized illustrate very well the sense of fun and the notion of work as play that its builders shared with the Pre-Raphaelites. The house is a lasting monument to their commitment to the union of art and work and to their energy in preserving the ideal of fine medieval craftsmanship and spontaneous, anonymous creativity in the very heart of industrial Rhode Island.

Built by Sydney R. Burleigh (1853-1931), a painter, watercolorist, and craftsman, the Fleur de Lys is now owned by the neighboring Providence Art Club, of which Burleigh was one of the earliest members after its founding in 1880. The house was designed primarily to be Burleigh's studio, which was on the main floor, while providing space for two more studios upstairs, and it still serves its original purpose. The Fleur de Lys stands on land that Burleigh leased in the spring of 1885 and bought in 1908. He later bequeathed the entire property to the Art Club.

Working with architect Edmund R. Willson, of the firm of Stone, Carpenter and Willson, Burleigh participated in the design of the Fleur de Lys. He then undertook the actual building of the house with the help of two friends, the painter Charles W. Stetson (1858-1911), and John G. Aldrich (1864-1952), an industrialist and lover of the arts. The three young friends worked from the spring of 1885 until the closing days of that year raising the half-timbered building, which became the talk of Providence before it was finished because of its colorful, medieval look, full of "pretty forms and lines," as one contemporary

critic observed (Robinson, 6).

The building has always evoked good feelings in its viewers. Stetson described his studio as a "charming workroom" with a "certain cozy solemnity about it" (295). Eldredge (37) remembered (in language reminiscent of the way the Pre-Raphaelite circle, especially Burne-Jones, described their relationship to Red House) the Fleur de Lys as "a unique and mysterious domain of art. . .beloved by us who harbor there. . ." Its half-timbered influence can be detected in many buildings on College Hill.

Stetson, a painter who produced some interesting works in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, was a reader and admirer of Ruskin, Rossetti, and Morris and often referred briefly to their work, especially their writings, in the diary that he kept for many years.² He read Morris's "Lovers of Gudrun" (Stetson, 235) and gave his wife Charlotte a copy of *Hopes and Fears for Art* (97). Stetson also read Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (314) and was particularly fond of Rossetti's life and work, especially the sonnets, which made him wish to be Rossetti's friend (89) and "long to call him brother" (102). Although primarily a painter, Stetson also wrote poetry and demonstrated skills as a craftsman in the construction of the Fleur de Lys.

The house shows, as Edgar Kaufmann has argued in his pioneering study of the building (286, 291), three of the leading tenets of the Arts and Crafts Movement. One is the unity of the arts, as opposed to the academic hierarchy, in the fusion of the useful and the ornamental. Another is the vitality of the vernacular, including peasant crafts like carving, obvious on the decorations of the Fleur-de-Lys façade. The third tenet, the notion of art as part of everyday life, appears in the do-it-yourself approach to the building of the house and in the use of common animals, both domestic and wild, in the decorations.

Burleigh apparently executed most of the wood