



[above left] EDGAR MILLER molded plaster and stained glass. Living room, 1734 N. Wells. (photo: CB)

[above right] EDGAR MILLER wood divider on staircase, 1734 N. Wells. (photo: CB)

[below left] EDGAR MILLER three decorative details from 1734 N. Wells with recurring animal motifs; stained glass, wood, and ceramic tile; (photos: LZ)

[below right] portrait of Edgar Miller; 1988 (photo: Paul Hansen.)

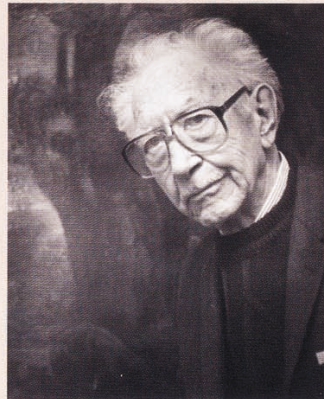
# EDGAR MILLER:

## 20TH CENTURY RENAISSANCE ARTIST



By Larry Zgoda

We have a mission ahead of us if we can imagine understanding the artist Edgar Miller. Enigmatic might be an initial description, since in his early years he was considered quite avant-garde, only later to reject many of the precepts of modernism. Despite that, many of us love his art. An account of his life and art may begin to explain the contradiction, while celebrating his work, for the many dedicated enthusiasts.

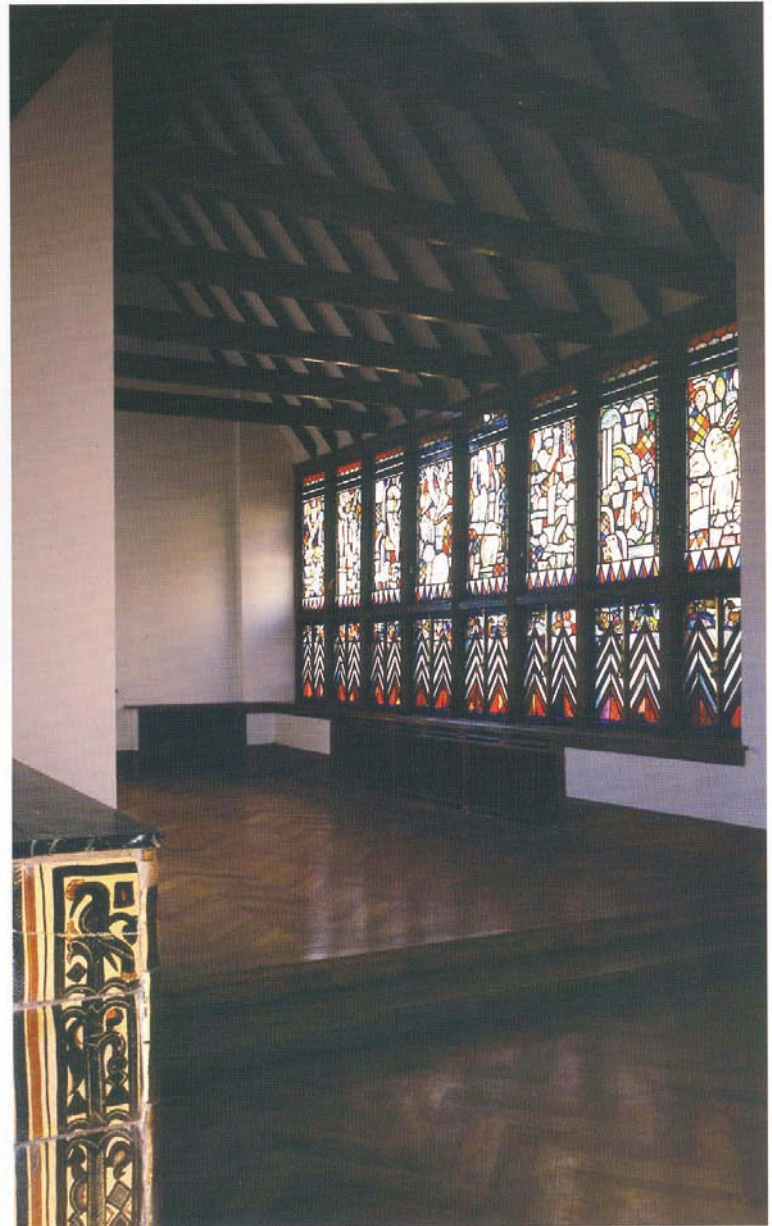
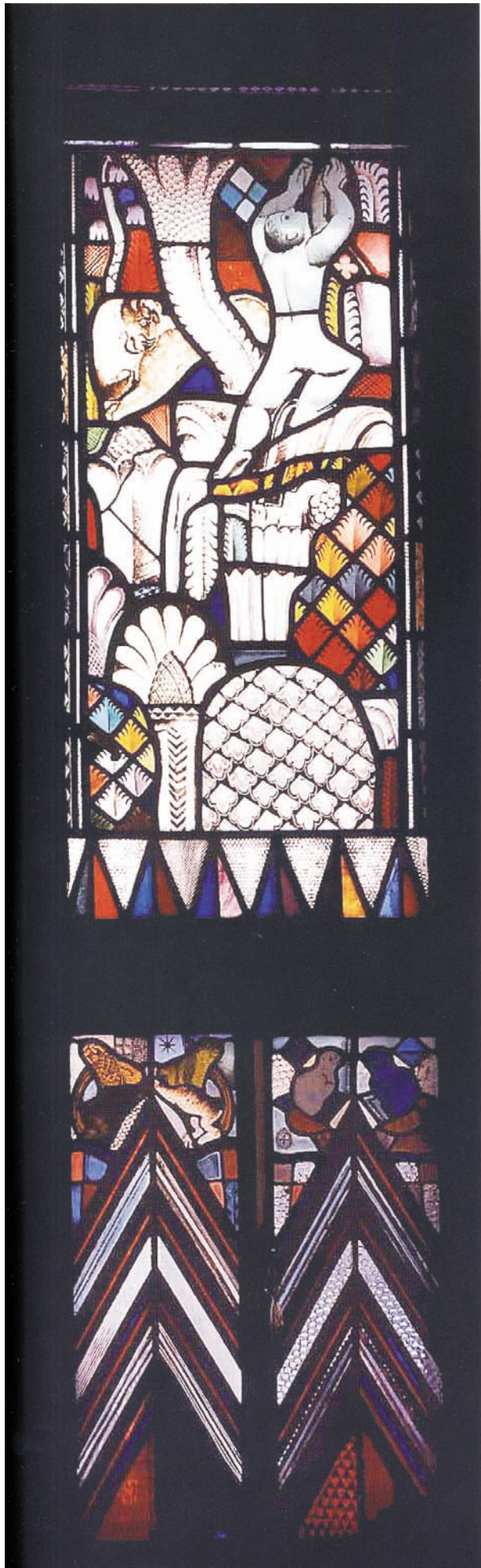


Born in the waning weeks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Miller created art in every decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Determined to be an artist by the age of four in his home of Idaho Falls, Idaho, he was especially impressed

with a painting that was displayed in a local saloon. The painting was Custer's *Last Charge*. The vitality and expression of the subjects inspired a determination to create, and create is what he did from that point on.

Miller's youth was filled with drawing and painting many of the subjects of his western surrounds. One early mentor, Joe He, lived alone and built his own house on the Snake River. He made everything he needed, including saddles and iron implements and would be an inspiration of self-reliance today. When the young Miller studied china painting he offended his instructor with pictures of cowboys, Indians, horses and wild animals. The instructor felt that flowers and the like were a more appropriate subject for the dining table.

At age eleven Miller was apprenticed briefly to the architects Soderlund & McGrue. He was delighted with the assignment of watercolor washing the master's studied drawings. The architect would cringe when Miller took a big dollop of color and spread it over a long worked presentation perspective. The results, however, were positive.



[LEFT AND ABOVE] This dining room in one apartment of 1734 N. Wells is illuminated on the east wall by eight vertical glass panels depicting scenes of the Garden of Eden. A row of smaller geometric glass panels embellished with various animal motifs run below those. This group constitutes Miller's most brilliant stained glass windows and is titled *Garden of Paradise*. (photos: CB)



Edgar Miller: 20th Century Renaissance Artist

EDGAR MILLER, interior fresco, 155 W. Burton St (photo: LZ)



EDGAR MILLER, staircase, 155 W. Burton St. (photo: cb)



EDGAR MILLER, exterior with ceramic relief sculpture, 155 W. Burton Pl. (photo: BJ)



EDGAR MILLER, detail, stained glass., 1734 N. Wells St. (photo: BJ)



EDGAR MILLER, painted ceramic plate (photo: BMJ)



EDGAR MILLER, portion of stairway, 155 W. Burton St (photo: BJ)

When they were teenagers, Miller's father decided to take his two older sons, Edgar and Frank, with him on a research trip to Australia. The year was 1915. The senior Miller, in addition to being an optometrist, was an enthusiastic amateur beekeeper. He had heard reports that the honey yields in Australia were extraordinary. Unfortunately, a severe drought brought about the demise of the beekeeping enterprise and it took much effort for them to get back to the States. While in Australia, however, Edgar Miller spent every day immersed in drawing, painting and carving natural subjects in the new and unique environment. Though sent to the Ballarat School of Mines, he soon became bored with art education there and found work in a lithography company. Edgar Miller often attributed his life-long love of nature and art to the Australia experience.



EDGAR MILLER, 155 W. Burton Place (photo: LZ)

At the age of seventeen, Miller arrived in Chicago to attend classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. He did not stay there long, again finding art education inadequate for someone who already has a good idea of what he wants to do. It was, however, at the Art Institute that he met another rebellious spirit, Sol Kogen. They would later focus their mutual ambitions in the creation of artist studios in Old Town. Edgar Miller was hired as an instructor at the Art Institute a few years after leaving.

It took little time for Edgar Miller to establish his presence in Chicago. Towertown was the name of a near-north community in the vicinity of Michigan and Chicago avenues and home to artists, bohemians and fellow travelers. It was here that he occupied a string of studios within a short distance of notorious haunts like the Dill Pickle Club, Tree Studios and the Italian Court building. It was here that Edgar Miller met many of his associates. Alphonso Iannelli was



EDGAR MILLER, mosaic, 1734 N. Wells (photo: LZ)



EDGAR MILLER, wood block print of 1734 N. Wells St. (photo:LZ)

greener pastures. After spending two years in Paris practicing his art and observing the way artists live there, he was fascinated by the idea of artist studios. Upon returning to Chicago he bought a building to remodel into such an environment. Since Miller was well versed in the many skills involved in assembling a studio, Kogen solicited his friendship and talents. They agreed to be partners and with a handshake, Miller embarked on what is probably his most visible and well-loved achievements: Carl Street Studios (now 155 W. Burton Pl.) and Kogen-Miller Studios (1734 N. Wells St.).

a well-known sculptor and industrial designer for whom he worked while in his early twenties.

In one of his studios, known as The House at the End of the Street, Miller ran an art gallery, showing works by several artists who would later become well known. These include Albert Bloch, Erich Menelsohn, John Storrs and Lionel Feininger. Located in a barn at 19 E. Pearson, the building also housed the studio of the sculptor Leon Hermant.

Working mainly in painting and printmaking, Miller explored a variety of craft arts including batik, stained glass and pottery at the Hull House Studio. He was becoming known as an artist who remodeled his own studios and it was this that would soon bring him back to a friendship with Sol Kogen.

Kogen had run his family's dry goods business and managed to attend the Art Institute for a while. He led a small group of rebels called the Independents and left there for

These old buildings were dramatically reconfigured. Ramshackle Victorian townhouses were altered into modern, rental units, each a duplex with an interior stairway to access a sleeping loft. Large windows, usually steel casements, let in air and natural daylight and were glazed in textured glass to provide privacy. The opportunity for stained glass must have been obvious. Each unit was built with a fireplace for warmth and ambiance. Rich, elemental materials such as wrought iron, tile, marble, hardwoods and copper were creatively engaged. Common brick, granite pavers and limestone flags feature prominently in the masonry.

Integration of the individual units into the overall building was done with a result similar to a Chinese puzzle, where any wall, ceiling or floor might be adjacent to a neighboring space in unpredictable ways. Many old-world architectural features such as arches, passageways, and niches were employed for dramatic effect. Several of these features—stepped arches, half-timbering and vaulted ceilings—suggest theatrical sources. The courtyard area, accessible only to the residents, was enclosed with a masonry

wall and a locked gate. Much detail was brought into the courtyards. Sculpture, fresco, mosaic and tiling, reminiscent of Gaudi, supplement the fertile landscaping and craft a rich, almost antediluvian milieu.

Miller and Kogen worked together along with a number of other artists on these two buildings for less than ten years. Although other artists worked there, and antique architectural fragments were sometimes used, Miller's art stands out in the midst of it all. Another building, 2150 N. Cleveland, was also converted into artist studios around the same time. Miller worked extensively on the Frank Fisher Apartments at 1209 N. State Parkway with architect Andrew Rebori. While Miller worked at Burton Place and later at Wells Street, he usually lived in one of the units that were currently in the process of being remodeled. When the space was finished and rented, Miller moved to the next unfinished space. While



EDGAR MILLER, detail, painted leaded glass, 155 W. Burton St (photo: LZ)

living in these "works in progress," he also carried out a successful career as a sculptor, illustrator, muralist, and stained glass artist. Some significant projects of the early Old Town years are stained glass for Oakridge Mausoleum, etched glass panels for the Diane Court of the Michigan Square Building, and a mural for the Rock Island Railroad exhibit at the Century of Progress Exposition. Murals entitled *Love through the Ages* for the Tavern Club and illustrations for Marshall Field's *Fashions of the Hour* magazine lead us to understand Miller's willingness to work in a range of media and scale.

Miller and Kogen went their separate ways in 1935. Miller did not return to Burton Place until the 1980s, decades after Kogen had passed away. Late in his life, reflecting on those years, Miller claimed that he was in fact just having fun. Although he stated that he was never monetarily compensated for the many artworks in the Old Town buildings, he did not really hold any animosity toward Kogen.

While never formally trained as an architect, Miller worked in that capacity in the design of these buildings. The plans and elevations of the four buildings so far mentioned are absolutely attributable to Miller. He worked intermittently on a number of buildings with his long-time friend, Andrew Rebori. Many of his commissions were a result of a close association with other leading architects of the day, including

Howard van Doren Shaw, Thomas Tallmadge, John Holabird, and Samuel Marx.

Subsequent to Miller and Kogen initiating their Montmartre fling, others have gleaned inspiration from their achievements. Old Town, Lincoln Park and other areas of Chicago have exotic looking, remodeled buildings that often are visually derivative of the Burton Place and Wells Street studios. Some observers have gone so far as to label these buildings "organic" architecture. Since much of their built structure is composed of reclaimed material we can safely say that they fall into the "green" camp.

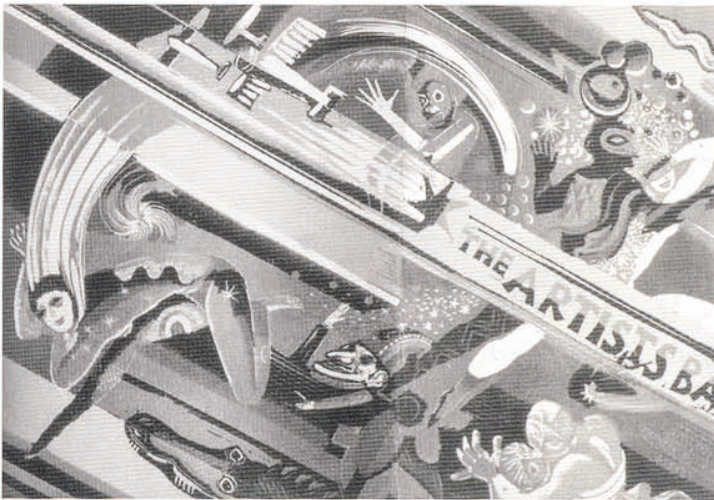
After parting ways with Kogen, Miller went on to be a successful practicing artist and worked in many media for decades to come. These include graphic design, portrait painting, prose and poetry, jewelry, and woodcarving. He lived in the Normandy House Restaurant building for many years and embellished every aspect of the gastronomic environment from the menus to the interior design, the waitress attire to the signage. Kogen continued to live and work in Old Town for many years, remodeling buildings and establishing much of the romantic myth that continues to surround these pieces. Kogen passed away in 1957.

The high points of Miller's illustrious life in the arts include: sculpture for the North Dakota State Capitol building, sculpture for Northwestern University College of Technology, murals for Conrad Hilton Hotel, sculpture for U.S. Gypsum Corporation, and stained glass for Barrie Byrne's Christ the King Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. However, a fertile artistic life includes more than the headline-grabbing,

monumental projects. Much of the visual richness of Miller's art manifests in the small works. For many years he created graphic arts on a woodblock press in his own studio. These include hundreds of greeting cards, announcements, advertisements and invitations. They are often executed in vivid colors that coalesce with beauty and charm. Over the years he painted hundreds of china dishes to commemorate Christmas and other special events. There are stories where a gathering would be held in the Miller home and guests were invited to take home the plate on which they had their meal, a painted, original creation!

Miller embraced modern art as a young man. As he grew more mature, it began to be apparent that modernism was a limitation of the possibilities in art. He saw art as a vital aspect of cultural abundance and drew inspiration from thousands of sources that had nothing to do with modernism. His view was that art is a visual language as fundamental as our spoken word. Unfortunately, more people can read the visual language than can speak it. The artist speaks the visual language fluently; modernism speaks but one syllable.

Miller also saw modernism as having rejected beauty and nature in art. He would no sooner paint a deliberately ugly



EDGAR MILLER, wood block print. program for Artists' Ball (photo: LZ)

picture than eat a bad tasting meal. Might not art be a way of nourishing the soul, beauty being the enticement, just as food is a way of nourishing the body, good flavor being the lure?

One thing that is apparent about Edgar Miller's life was his love for nature. His stories as an older man often had to do with animals, people, and art that celebrate life in harmony with a living cycle on a living planet. The color, the line, and the images of his art continue for many of us to be a celebration of life. ■

Larry Zgoda is an artist of stained glass and mosaic in Chicago. He became enamored of the Old Town studios in 1980 and was one of several individuals key in bringing Edgar Miller back to Chicago. He worked with Miller; fabricating many Miller works in stained glass between 1984 and 1991. Edgar Miller passed away in 1993 at the age of 93.

photocredits: CB – Carla Breeze; BJ – Bennett Johnson; LZ – Larry Zgoda

A DIGITAL CATALOG of nearly 2,200 images of Edgar Miller's art and architecture will be accessible to the public in the Art Institute of Chicago's Ryerson Library beginning in fall 2006. This catalog was compiled by Larry Zgoda and Trish Vanderbeke. The Graham Foundation for Advanced studies in the Fine Arts provided financial support for this project.



EDGAR MILLER, wood block print for illustrated children's book *Animals and Things*. (photo: LZ)



EDGAR MILLER, detail, stained leaded glass 1734 N. Wells St., (photo: BJ)

## Location of art works by Edgar Miller (in Illinois unless otherwise noted)

### Privately owned residential buildings in Chicago:

155 W. Burton Place  
1734 N. Wells St.  
1209 N. State St.  
2150 N. Cleveland St.

### Buildings in Chicago:

JANE ADDAMS HOUSING COMPLEX, Throop & Taylor streets  
limestone animals intended for children to play upon  
201 TOWER BUILDING, Lake and Wells streets  
cut lead windows  
HOTEL INTERCONTINENTAL, 520 N. Michigan Ave.  
stained glass in banquet hall  
LAWSON YMCA, 30 W. Chicago Ave.  
stained glass in chapel  
CHURCH OF THE EPIPHANY, 201 S. Ashland Ave.  
stained glass  
KELVYN PARK HIGH SCHOOL, 4343 W. Wrightwood Ave.  
stained glass in library  
TAVERN CLUB, 333 N. Michigan Ave.  
murals  
MADONNA DEL STRADA CHAPEL, LOYOLA UNIVERSITY,  
6525 N. Sheridan Rd.  
stained glass, sculpture and mosaics  
ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, 111 S. Michigan Ave.  
etched glass panels from Diana Court of Michigan  
Square Building; stained glass; watercolors and  
etchings

### Outside Chicago:

ST. DAVID'S CHURCH,  
701 N. Randall Rd., Aurora  
stained glass  
CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH,  
Route. 31 & Main St., Batavia  
stained glass  
CUDAHY MAUSOLEUM, CALVARY CEMETERY,  
301 Chicago Ave., Evanston  
bronze doors, stained glass window  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
1427 Chicago Ave., Evanston  
carved wood altar and surrounds  
TECHNOLOGICAL INSTITUTE, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY,  
2145 Sheridan Rd., Evanston  
sculpture on façade and entry  
ST. MARY'S CEMETERY,  
W. 87th St. & Hamlin Ave., Evergreen Park  
sculpture  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,  
300 Laurel Ave Highland Park  
carved and painted reeredos and altar surround  
OAKRIDGE MAUSOLEUM, Oakridge Cemetery,  
4301 Roosevelt Rd., Hillside  
stained glass  
CANTIGNY FARM, 151 Winfield Rd., Wheaton  
granite sculptures of Col. Robert R. McCormick's  
dogs on his tomb  
PABST BREWERY, Milwaukee, WI.  
murals