I don’t care what season it actually is, step into the Darwin Martin House in Buffalo (1904-05), and it’s perpetual fall. Maybe that’s because its architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, worshipped Mother Nature, and fall is when she is at her most showy and triumphant.
Like a long-shadowed stroll through a leaf-strewn park, light and shadow are more pronounced, greens give way to browns and golds, and there is a wistful feeling of loss. Yes, even after a full restoration of this treasure, this masterwork, a bittersweet feeling hangs in the air … a happy-sad realization that nothing, absolutely nothing like this could ever be built, or rebuilt, again.

But that’s not to say one shouldn’t visit. One must, when the world resets to semi-normal again.

“All those earth tones, and it brings in the outside environment and recreates it with man-made materials inside,” muses Chris Botti, the 68-year-old master glass artist who spearheaded the restoration of the home’s iconic glass mosaic fireplace. “It’s a transfiguration … a feeling that these inanimate objects can actually create that kinetic feel that nature has, that ever-moving [quality].”
Folks often use religious terminology when they speak of Wright and those, like Mr. Botti, who have been lucky enough to have worked on his architecture, will also allude to a sort of symbiosis between all parts, as if one piece cannot survive, or perform properly, without the other. Building as organism, if you will, with a Swiss watch-type precision that produces an architectural timepiece.

There is little doubt artist Jo Hormuth felt that way while peering into her microscope at small sections of the Martin house’s plaster walls. After painstakingly removing decades of paint using glue and even Gorilla tape (and finding an untouched spot behind a basement beam), she and her team were able to examine the original beeswax glazes Wright had specified.

“What they were going for was a glaze not unlike pottery glazes,” she says during a phone call from her Chicago studio. “And when you add the element of bronzing powder, and you have their reflective quality, you have the wonderful depth, and a magic that happens.”

Artist Jo Hormuth at work on replicating the house’s plaster washes and gilding.

COURTESY OF MARTIN HOUSE
To recreate that magic, however, she first had to determine to what extent the original bronzing powders had darkened because of oxidization and to isolate where coppers had become “bright green.” So, in addition to finding the various pigments to tint the beeswax – Ms. Hormuth brought in ochres and siennas from various parts of the world – she had to determine the “percentage” of bronzing powders to add to the final coat.

“And these are things that you can do only through sample testing under the microscope … and then comparing your new sample to it,” she says.

The samples given to Botti Studio of Architectural Arts were also dirty. Found in the fireplace’s ash pit by HHL Architects’ Ted Lownie in the late 1990s during early restoration work, these few dozen fireplace tiles were all that was left of the once-proud, four-sided, defining feature of the home. The gorgeous, gold-infused tiles – designed by Blanche Ostertag for Chicago art glass firm Giannini and Hilgart – had fallen off during the home’s period of abandonment (1937-54) because of a combination of flooding, freeze-thaw cycles and rogue fires set by vandals.

The technique used to create them, however, which involved “firing gold onto glass” and giving “it the effect of the veining and the look of leaves” had all but been lost.
Luckily, Mr. Botti had not only worked on a Giannini and Hilgart fireplace at the Samuel M. Nickerson mansion in Chicago, he’d grown up in a family-run architectural glass business that traces its roots to the late 1500s in Italy. And, when he was 11 years old and working alongside his father, he’d done “all the grunt work” on a South Carolina hotel with a “whole ceiling with that gold technique.”

“When [Martin House executive director] Mary Roberts approached me, it was … like something in the movies where you just start twirling around and you’re going back in your memory like in a time machine,” Mr. Botti remembers. While he admitted he was “pretty rusty,” he promised to practice applying the liquid gold to new hand-cut tiles and get back to her. “I pretty much just closed my eyes … and remembered it like how you would remember your school song.”

The replicated mosaic fireplace was installed in 2017.

With the help of a carpenter in Buffalo, Mr. Botti had an exact replica of the fireplace made—“Nothing was actually square anymore,” he says—at his studio, so that the new mosaics could be placed onto panels to ship to Buffalo, where they’d lock in perfectly.
Installed in 2017, the replicated wisteria fireplace mosaic (with the ash pit originals set in also) is once again the heart of the home. “We wanted to make it as special as it was originally,” Mr. Botti says.

This attention to detail makes executive director Roberts proud. Even over the phone, it’s evident in her voice as she recounts the story of the Ohio-based Belden Brick Co., and how they fired different colours (at different temperatures) of Roman brick in their beehive kiln in order to match the imperfect originals. And while much has been written about that new brick (as it goes back to the mid-2000s), she also points to the landscaping, which was completed just last year.

Wisteria plants are found all over the newly landscaped grounds.

COURTESY OF MARTIN HOUSE
Destroyed over the decades owing to demolition of the pergola, conservatory and carriage house for apartment buildings in the 1960s, and to a parking lot built by the State University of New York in the 1970s, “there were very few original remaining species.”

“However, over 10 years ago, knowing the restoration was going to include great disruption to the land … we knew that there were a couple of original wisteria plants that were planted in the early 1900s,” she says. So, they took them off site to nurture and propagate them. Today, looking through one of Wright's wisteria-themed windows, those plants are everywhere.

So, this fall, why not plan to have a look?

While the Martin House is currently closed because of the COVID-19 crisis, Ms. Roberts hopes to be up and running again – perhaps with smaller groups who can physically distance – by summer. Check for updates at www.martinhouse.org.