

**ADAH
MATILDA
ROBINSON**
1882-1962



**BOSTON AVENUE
METHODIST
CHURCH
CONTROVERSY**

Often in history, women's accomplishments are downplayed, deemed as secondary, or completely erased. One such erasure from the history books is Adah Robinson, who designed Tulsa's Boston Avenue Methodist Church, a claim that famous architect Bruce Goff made.

Adah Matilda Robinson was born in July 1882 in Richmond, Indiana. She studied at Earlham College and Chicago Art Institute, and received private lessons from noted artists Charles Hawthorne, George Elmer Browne, and John Carlson. She moved with her family to Oklahoma City at age 23 when her brother's doctors recommended that the climate there would be better for his health.

She taught art privately, then briefly taught at Epworth University (later Oklahoma City University), and in the public schools. She moved to Tulsa around 1916 to become the first art teacher at Tulsa High School (renamed Central High School in 1917). One of the pupils in her first class was the aspiring artist Bruce Goff. She also taught architect Joseph Koberling, Jr., who later worked on Will Rogers High School.

Self-educated, Goff began his career at twelve apprenticing at the architectural firm of Rush, Endacott, and Rush. At the suggestion of his mentors Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, Goff continued working at the firm instead of attending college. They felt formal education would stifle his creativity. While teaching at OU's School of Architecture in 1955, Goff, who was gay, was accused of "endangering the morals of a minor" as homosexuality was not socially acceptable and punishable by Oklahoma law. Though supported by OU President George Cross, he resigned and moved his studio to Bartlesville's Price Tower, designed by Wright.

With the help of Goff and Koberling, Robinson built her house and studio in 1924 facing Tracy Park at 1119 South Owasso Avenue. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this stucco Art Deco house has leaded glass windows, terrazzo floors and contemporary places decades ahead of its time. The two-story living room has an open balcony and a sunken conversation pit with a fireplace.

At the same time, Robinson was encouraged to help with the design of Boston Avenue Methodist Church. She submitted her drawings for a radically different church design. The committee was at first apprehensive but agreed to hire to a professional architect. Robinson's designs were so cutting edge that professional architects declined to bid on the work so she recommended her former student Bruce Goff.

The contract, signed in July 1926, stated that Robinson was "in charge of all things artistic, and for carrying out the wishes of the church", earning \$5,000. Goff's firm "furnished technical drawings and blueprints for the church, and provided supervision of the building operations." They were paid \$25,000.

In 1929, the church at 1301 South Boston opened its doors. Soon afterward, a controversy erupted about who designed the nontraditional Art Deco structure. Goff's firm claimed that he was the primary designer and insisted that his name be installed on the church's cornerstone but the church sided with Robinson. No cornerstone has ever been installed. It was selected a National Historic Landmark in 1999.

Robinson was hired in 1928 as founder of the University of Tulsa's Art Department but in 1945, the university's president Birch Pontius told Robinson that he didn't believe she designed the Boston Avenue church, saying "women don't do such things". After twenty years at TU, she soon resigned to develop a new art department at San Antonio's Trinity University, where she remained until 1959. She then returned to Tulsa, where she continued working until her death in March 1962 at age 80. The officials at Boston Avenue church still to this day say that Adah Robinson designed their church.