



Image Credit:  
Brad Angelini

# Slusser House

1223 Pontiac Trail

## ARCHITECT:

George Brigham, 1939

## Frances Wright

Jean-Paul Slusser, a professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan and the first director of the UM Art Museum (1947-1957<sup>1</sup>), was a

painter of some note and a teacher whose students included Raoul Wallenberg. Before the construction of his house, Jean-Paul Slusser lived up the street at 1324

<sup>1</sup> Susan Wineberg and Patrick McCauley, *Historic Ann Arbor: An Architectural Guide*, 2014, Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Historical Foundation, page 41.

Pontiac Trail, in one of the apartments in the Lund House, an 1847 Greek Revival structure.<sup>2</sup> One day, he noticed Henry Ford sitting in his car across from 1223 looking at the Greek Revival Sinclair-McCollum House that then occupied the site and realized that the house was doomed. As expected, Ford moved it to Greenfield Village in 1936.<sup>3</sup>

Slusser hired architect George Brigham to design a house for him on the now-unavailable Sinclair-McCollum and moved into the house in 1938.<sup>4</sup> Brigham re-used the 19th-century house's foundation for the new structure, which is why there is a root cellar in the house.

Accordingly, the house is built for a painter, with a very large, north-facing window in the main living room, a place to store framed and unframed paintings, and a tall bookshelf whose top shelves are accessed from a loft behind them. The tall, slim window on the Pontiac Trail side opens to that storage and loft space. The main entry was located on the south side of the house facing the lawn and garden. The west half of the house is a split-level arrangement, with a ground floor kitchen, a bedroom and a bath up a half flight and also down a half flight. The cellar is another few steps below the lower bedroom. The garage at the back is contemporary to the house.

This house, though still mid-century chronologically speaking, pre-dates the post-World War II houses that we think of as mid-century modern. Yet, Brigham continued to practice and the Slusser House is quite modern in form as it is simple, cubic, and flat-roofed. It is undecorated except, perhaps, for the green-painted window, door, eave, and downspout trim that stand out from its cladding in rough, dark-stained wood boards. There is no fussy detailing, no large expanses of glass, nor does the house spread over a sloping site, elements that typify the later houses. Instead, the Slusser House recalls the compact wood-clad and shingled houses of the San Francisco Bay Area of the early and mid-twentieth century; before coming to Ann Arbor, Brigham practiced and taught in California, so he was likely aware of architectural work there. ●

<sup>2</sup> "Jonathan Lund House, 1847," *Ann Arbor District Library*, accessed July 13, 2023, [https://aadl.org/buildings\\_1324pontiactrail](https://aadl.org/buildings_1324pontiactrail). The house was built by Robert and John Davidson.

<sup>3</sup> "David McCollum's House," *The Historical Marker Database*, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=181980>. The restored house can be visited at Greenfield Village, where it is known as the Robert Frost House, after the poet who lived there in the mid-1920s. The Henry Ford anecdote was related to the author by Jean-Paul Slusser. There is a photo of this house accessible at "Robert Frost Home on Original Site, Ann Arbor, Michigan, circa 1923," *The Henry Ford*, accessed August 13, 2023, <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/388721>

<sup>4</sup> In a conversation with the author, Slusser said that in 1940 he took a sabbatical and rented the house to W. H. Auden, UM poet-in-residence at that time. Auden later moved to Burns Park but left his cane in the house, which, according to Slusser, he kept and used.