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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Precedents

Frank Lloyd Wright's career in the 1930s was dramatic, vacillating sometimes violently through extremes of introspection, notoriety, self-adulation, and national and international curiosity. Social interactions activating his life fit those extremes with confrontation at one pole and quiescence at the other. Outwardly, Wright's presentation of himself before the public seems to have been paramount at all points during his career, regardless of the motivation. So it was in the decade of the thirties. In the beginning there was a desperate necessity to regain the attention required to attract clients; at the end there were rather frantic attempts to influence national attitudes and official policies, even those related to the impending war. During the 1930s he was promoted by people of influence; by institution of and participation in a series of major exhibitions; by giving speeches or "talks" to any and all who would pay; and by writing at first about himself (beginning with his autobiography) and then about architecture and cities, but mainly about American culture, politics, and economics. As a result of all of this activity he successfully secured not only national but international attention to his words and works.

A second realm of activity concerned his architectural production, either realized or projected. Few works were built until mid-decade, so proposals, ideas, and notions dominated the first six years or so. Theoretical and critical works defined a third realm; his Kahn lectures at Princeton University and the proposal of Broadacre City dominated his production in this area. Wright's professional engagements in London and Moscow resulted largely from recent publication of his theoretical works, though the underlying causes were his historical position as a founder of modern architecture and his obvious architectural genius. A fourth realm of activity was education. There can be no doubt that if all had gone well and his practice of architecture had been continuous and full, there would have been no need to create the Taliesin Fellowship. But all had not gone well. For almost two decades the emotion and toil of domestic strife had challenged his attention to his architectural practice. Somewhat related to those problems but more to his extravagances, during most of the late 1920s and into the 1930s he was desperate for money; the creation of a private school was one practical response.

While it is necessary to concentrate on the period 1930 to 1939 in Wright's biography, and while obvious publicly motivated productivities started in 1930, a vital spark had occurred in

1.1 Probably the most popular with Wright, the portrait was published often from 1931 until the 1940s, for instance in the 1932 autobiography and in 1937 in *Pravda*.



1927 and a release in 1928. Evidence of that release was found in one grand exposition executed in 1929. The decade of the 1930s was approached, therefore, with much optimism after a winter of domestic hell and near professional oblivion.

1 Olga Milan Lazovich

The spark was a divorce in 1927 from his second wife, Miriam. Their relationship and marriage had not been in any sense typical; their divorce even less so. Wright and Maud Miriam Noel, a divorcee from Bristol, Tennessee, had met in late 1914 or early 1915 more or less as a result of her overtures. From that moment until 1927 they dominated one another's social and domestic life with a constant and depressing irritation. It needs to be remembered that from 1916 to 1922 Wright resided for nearly half his time in Tokyo, sometimes with his mother and/or Miriam, while supervising the construction of the Imperial Hotel and other smaller commissions in Japan. His American professional practice did not recover from gross inattention until 1936, a period of two full decades. True, there were some interesting architectural highlights, especially in California around 1922 to 1924. They were exciting works if somewhat aberrant in the grand view of his career. The notoriety of proceedings over the divorce did not help Wright's professional practice or Miriam's health. With a troubled and unstable nine-year relationship it is not clear why Wright and Miriam decided to marry in November 1923. When five months later in April 1924 she left him it was probably not unexpected. In July 1925 it was Wright who filed for divorce, but only after he had met and won the affection of another divorcee, Olgivanna Hinzenberg.

There has been some uneasy speculation about early years in the life of Mrs. Hinzenberg, the bright young woman who became the third Mrs. Wright. It is necessary therefore, to briefly outline her relatively peculiar career for it reveals much of the character of the woman who was to play a decisive role in Wright's life and therefore his profession as it evolved during the critical decade of the 1930s.

Wright did not describe her in his 1932 autobiography, perhaps because he was still too close to and emotionally involved with the harrowing events of the divorce and his affair with Olgivanna. He only perfunctorily introduced Olgivanna and vaguely referred to her familial lineage (something important to both of them). After it was clear to Wright that the marriage was consolidated he impressionistically described Olgivanna; that was in the expanded autobiography of 1943. Impressions of their first meeting were vivid in his memory even at that date. Olgivanna was "a dark, slender gentlewoman Unobtrusive but lovely, I secretly observed her aristocratic bearing, no hat, her dark hair parted in the middle and smoothed down over her ears, a light small shawl