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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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Gold

The Sulgrave Manor Board had asked Wright to speak on the “science” of architecture and on his interpretation of “America to England in architecture” as occupant of the Watson Chair of American History, Literature and Institutions.¹ When completed, in at least one polite English opinion the lectures had “greatly contributed to the advancement of good will between [the] two countries,” this “irrespective of any question of politics.”² In Wright’s opinion it was a good show. In early June he returned to the midwestern prairies somewhat chuffed, as his British hosts would have phrased it.

Surrounded by the warmth and relative security of his home at Taliesin West in winter of 1939–40 the septuagenarian architect began to write about his London experiences of the previous spring. He wrote of those “intelligent” audiences and their “fine character.” In retrospect he enjoyed what he called their “purposeful heckling.” He remembered more seriously that the hereditary lords and ladies were “rather a bore, don’t you know.” His association with those London audiences and the RIBA was to culminate the following winter in an episode that reflected the highest level of British cultural diplomacy. He and his work were again weighed in London. If not as broadly as Wright might have wished, nonetheless after their personal experience of 1939 the imperialists were to study more closely America’s feisty living heritage. The episode that engaged Wright’s professional British colleagues was the determination of the 1941 Royal Gold Medal of the RIBA. The affair remained outside Wright’s knowledge and was not of his making: he merely accepted their offer. One immediate result of his award was an optimistic request from an English newspaper asking him to comment on how to approach postwar rebuilding. This aspect of the episode was of his making: a response that dramatically and pompously denounced the war and British society, economics, and their war effort, and supported a vocal and influential stream of intellectual argument in America against participation in the war, an isolationist view.

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In October 1940 it was time for the RIBA to begin the process of selecting a gold medalist for 1941. In March they had given the 1940 medal to English architect Charles F. Annesley Voysey. Now, because of the war, the Institute noted that there were difficulties. Just getting people together was one. More importantly it was feared that some British architects might agree to a suspension of the award for the duration of the war. The president of the RIBA was informed that there had been only two breaks in continuity in the medal’s long history. The first was when Queen Victoria died in