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Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

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city, with “shining gold and ivory, reliefs and panels.”¹⁸ Well, Wright might have said, at least Ansell’s paper offered old tasteless spice to the affair.

Wright received twenty guineas or about US\$100 for the cablegram. “In the circumstances,” he said, “a touching affair—that check.”¹⁹ What that meant is anyone’s guess.

24 AIA Gold

Patterned after the RIBA, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) began awarding its own Gold Medal in 1907. The first award should have been an announcement of national and professional pride, but instead the medal went to an Englishman, Aston Webb, R.A., RIBA, etc. Other foreign architects were honored in succeeding years, without much misgiving but no doubt with factional and personality problems. So it was when the controversial Wright became again controversial during deliberations for the American medal. His receipt of the AIA Gold Medal in 1949 is well outside the decade under study here. However, some knowledge of how it came about, if only in outline, allows an interesting comparison to the British honor and exposes causes initiated in the late 1930s. The equanimity of the British architects in determining Wright as their medalist for 1941 was not evident with the American professionals. Richard Guy Wilson, historian of the AIA medal has noted that in spite of the fact that Wright had never become a member of the Institute and had often publicly criticized the average professional and most twentieth-century American architecture, thereby implicating many of its architects, his “omission from the AIA Gold Medal list became embarrassing,” to use the AIA’s words.

Just two years after Wright received the RIBA tribute, in 1943 architect Ralph Walker proposed him for the AIA Gold Medal of 1944. Also nominated were Louis Sullivan (posthumously) and the West Coast architect Bernard Maybeck. Various local and state Institute chapters and members submitted letters of endorsement. As the minutes circumspectly recorded, “letters opposing this award were also submitted.” Both Wright’s and Maybeck’s nominations were subsequently ruled incomplete; supposedly they lacked portions of a biographical statement and a “history of attainments.” Perhaps in response to other problems with his nomination, in 1945 Wright replied to a query of the AIA as to why he was not a member. His response was as might be expected: he was interested in Architecture, not the Profession; he was a freelancer and an anathema to the old guard; no man can cooperate and still maintain independence “of his Spirit”; the Profession is for personal gain not for Principle; and so forth. In the past and when asked, however, he had never refused “the boys” anything “on decent terms.”¹

Wright was again proposed in 1946 together with Eliel Saarinen and Charles D. Maginnis by a Gold Medal committee on which Walker served. Saarinen won the 1947 medal to be followed the next year by Maginnis. At the June 1948 annual meeting where Maginnis received his award, a member's petition was presented asking the Institute's board of directors to give the next Gold Medal to Wright: attached were 140 signatures of members, friends, and students. Such a petition publicly presented was a rather special occurrence.

The board was sympathetic to the petitioners but not all directors were convinced. Further, William A. Delano was also nominated for the 1949 medal. At the December board of directors meeting, Joseph D. Leland, chairman of the Gold Medal committee, "summarized the extensive correspondence received with regard to Mr. Wright" and announced that most were in favor, "few opposed." As president of the Institute Douglas William Orr spoke strongly in favor of Wright's nomination, mentioning that the AIA's image might suffer if it denied the award to one of the very few American architects who had received international public acclaim and recognition. Was that the all of the arguments? (It is most interesting to note that a similar discussion took place when Wright was nominated for the AIA's Centennial Gold Medal; see Appendix G.) A few board members were opposed and, as Wilson recorded, they "discussed Mr. Wright's morals (personal) and his unethical conduct, such as stealing jobs, bidding for work, and undercutting other architects in his quest for desirable commissions." It is not known if these serious allegations were substantiated, for if not they most certainly should have been withdrawn and so recorded. They seemed to grow out of hearsay that began early in his career and proceeded through the 1930s.

Anyway, the Delano nomination was dispensed with and there remained a single holdout who was strongly opposed, Brandon V. Gamber, personal architect of Henry Ford. Understanding the mood of the board, Gamber "announced that he would absent himself from the room, and in his absence The Board could take a vote!" The board then voted unanimously (sic) to give Wright the medal. A very tricky question now arose. In view of his antipathy to the Institute, would he accept? The Board wanted to be able to privately rescind the award if he refused. A hurried telephone call was made and Wright accepted.² These machinations from 1944 to the boardroom affair in 1948 were conducted—performed—by mature-aged professionals. As with the RIBA, an elite board determined the medal in secrecy, not the members.

When the medal was finally presented at the next annual meeting Wright made another of his off-the-cuff ("extemporaneous") talks. It included an opening remark to the effect that it was about time he received the medal, and words such as "I really feel touched by this token of esteem

from the home boys.”³ But Wright had heard about the allegations, so to his colleagues he said that beginning in the Oak Park days and since, his services remained at ten percent. As far as stealing jobs was concerned he maintained he had never competed for services, had never hawked himself “on the curb.” He spent nearly one quarter of his rather short speech defending that position; one quarter was about the sad state of architectural design (Houston was the bad example), and one third about the cold war and the House Un-American Activities Committee’s action of the day. From his temporary pulpit before professional colleagues he offered them salvation in honor: honor of self and of nation. It could only be achieved through truth and creed, through philosophical constancy and through the daily living of it all. With great pride—and *not* in reference to architecture—he announced, “I have built it. I have built it! That is the source of my arrogance.” That was why, he said to them, I can “look you in the face and insult you.”⁴ He did not need to add that they knew this was true.

And so finally Wright was officially recognized by his professional brethren not so much in acclamation of his architectural genius and good deeds for architecture (and therefore for America) but out of embarrassment: everyone in the world had honored him except the “home boys.” How sad. But of course none of this was revealed when President Orr read the award’s citation to those gathered at the annual meeting in Houston, Texas. The first three lines read:

Prometheus brought fire from Olympus and endured the wrath of Zeus for his daring: but his torch lit other fires and men lived more fully by their warmth.

To see the beacon fires he has kindled is the greatest reward for one who has stolen fire from the gods.

Frank Lloyd Wright has moved men’s minds.

A belated but fitting tribute.

In relation to the British medal a couple of further observations can now be offered. If Wright was true to his beliefs and very serious concerns about the British and their involvement in the war, then how could he reasonably accept their medal? Rather should he have overtly protested in some significant manner? His emphasis on a strangely argued theory about English culture opposed to or oppressed by British imperialism was more or less correct but appeared polemical at best, self-deceit at worst. As esoteric as it may have been, Ruskin’s example offered him a respectable yet potentially dramatic model for protest. For instance, England’s aggressive defense against the imperialism of Hitler witnessed the destruction of thousands of beautiful old buildings.

In their name and in the cause of peaceful construction, he could have refused the medal. Or more to his point he could have rejected it on grounds that it was offered by a nation who used war in the attempt to solve problems.

Was his passion tempered by practicality? Answers cannot be accurately gauged for lack of evidence but two possibilities converge to suggest probabilities. First, his ego—so brittle as often revealed in his writings—would not allow rejection of such a high kudos. The RIBA medal was after all the most important international recognition that can be given an architect. Second, by accepting gold his words and beliefs (regardless of the subject) might gain more authority in public arenas. It is not difficult for the knowledgeable observer to believe Wright capable of conceiving such a calculated plan. After accepting the medal his activities with a political bent, together with his verbal strutting, increased. He seemed to gain confidence in his already imperial vision, in his intellect and self-announced influence. If the British were using Wright as one element in an attempt to win America and also trying to gain Wright's support of the war, then they failed as evidenced by the *News-Chronicle* article and thereafter. Wright's thank-you to the RIBA was to more openly attack Britain, its war effort, and its attempts to engage the United States against Hitler.