

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

Frank Lloyd Wright versus America

The 1930s

© 1990 MIT

License Terms:

Made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/3039.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3039.001.0001)

Appendix G Centennial Gold Wright's individualism, so often gone wrong in public displays, got him little from colleagues in the profession. His derogations and, some believed, the insults uttered in the 1930s alienated him from most of his fellow professionals. Such damaging pronouncements date back to 1914 in an article in the *Architectural Record* where he attacked those who mimicked him and then the profession generally for architectural eclecticism. His harsh words and invective persisted into the 1940s and greatly affected attitudes when he was considered for the AIA Gold Medal. He said he "didn't want to accept" the medal but he did so because he "didn't want to be a cad," a statement difficult to believe.¹ His abuse continued well into the 1950s.

The AIA medal of 1949 was won through great effort not by a majority but by a coaxing minority, and a minority was again involved in promoting Wright for the AIA's Centennial Medal of Honor. Deliberations over that medal not only reflected Wright's image but highlighted a reaction to European influence in America that had begun in the 1930s. An outline of the affair should illumine aspects of Wright's career and philosophy in the 1930s.

In 1951 Ralph Walker, then president of the AIA and winner of the institute's Gold Medal in 1946, wrote in the *AIA Journal* in oblique but obvious terms censuring his colleagues for allowing the immigrants and emigés, the European "prophets" and their architecture, to be so persuasive. As far as Walker was concerned the problem facing architects at midcentury was how to "release the potentialities of the civilization developing" in America. "We cannot look to Europe," said Walker, "as it means looking to a civilization which for the last 75 years has been bent upon destroying itself, and the prophets it has sent to the United States are wholly negative in philosophy—stripping down culture to unattractive minima or in twisting neurosis into Nihilism. We must ourselves and in our own way, find the architectural answer to our needs," continued Walker, "and in the very beginning cease imitating despair and negation to find a positive way toward an architectural form. Imitation of a universal form is fatal and indicates laziness, for if truly creative men are developed by our schools, there will be little unanimity [uniformity]. We, as Americans must beware of the *Schleiermachers*, i.e., veilmakers."²

This measured statement, influenced as much by jealousy as by the impress of the U.S. Congress's House Un-American Activities Committee did not indicate a desire to return to tradition but was representative of a latent hostility to the immigrants' successes (especially with university appointments) and of reactionary attitudes within the design profession. Reactions were soon revealed architecturally in a sensuality contrary to the International Style: e.g., thin-shell concrete

domes, hyperbolic paraboloids, organic shapes, a new emphasis on natural materials and on an identifiable regionalism (therefore in opposition to internationalism).

Walker's words, although appearing to be kin to Wright's, did not represent the latter's general view; Wright did not offer opinions similar to Walker's narrowly conceived nationalism. Gropius was right to challenge Walker and to wonder why Walker could seriously question the contributions made to the profession "by men like Mies van der Rohe, Neutra, Chermayeff, Breuer" and himself.³

However, we can now more clearly appreciate why Walker supported Wright for the 1949 Gold Medal. Although Wright wryly told Walker he always counted him as a "friend for some reason—probably yourself,"⁴ Wright seems not to have warmed to him. This in spite of the fact that in 1955 Walker helped raise funds at a testimonial dinner to help Wright pay his taxes; he was again in debt!⁵

Perhaps in the view of some people Walker and Wright had similar views and indeed similar personalities, for Walker has been described as a man "whose ego knew no bounds." Obviously their *social* standing in the profession was poles apart. When it came to the Centennial Medal of Honor both men were serious contenders: Walker, the consummate New York professional, versus Wright, the consummate architect as artist. The 1957 Centennial award, offered in the year of the one hundredth anniversary of the Institute, was to be given only once to honor "the architect of the century." The fact that again the AIA's board alone made the decision was strangely elitist for an American organization.

In recognizing sentiment in favor of Wright the AIA's executive director Edmund R. Purves provided arguments very similar to those used in support of Wright for the 1949 Gold Medal: "It would be the worst kind of public relations for us to ignore the existence of the greatest architect the world has ever seen at the Centennial Celebration." But they did ignore and Walker won. His citation read in part: "In this year when the Institute feels entitled, through reaching an established maturity, to express unashamedly its affection for a favorite and gifted son, this token of its pride needs no further warrant." Walker's words against the European immigrants (regardless of why they emigrated) and for a myopic nationalism were reinforced in the AIA government's citation: "unashamedly" they expressed their "affection for a favorite and gifted son." Ironically, it was Purves's private opinion that Wright's influence was "largely synthetic" and would "not be lasting."⁶ Who now remembers Walker and if so for what reasons?

Notes

1. Pfeiffer (1988), p. 22.
2. As quoted in Hines (1982), p. 289.
3. Quoted in *ibid.*; letter in possession of Hines.
4. FLW to R. Walker, 27 May 1949, FLW Archives.
5. Actually that is not quite correct. Wright and his accountants created the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, which was incorporated in Wisconsin in 1940. As far as he was concerned he was penniless; his income went to the Foundation from which he received expenses. This was his reckoning: the Foundation was a “non-profit accredited cultural-education establishment,” and it belonged to “the Nation.” Of course as president he ran the Foundation (Twombly 1979, pp. 377–379; Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation to Headquarters, Continental Air Command, 21 July 1941, in F. L. Wright 1982; and FLW to G. Loeb, 23 December 1944). When in 1944 he sent letters to some of his wealthier clients requesting donations, as far as he was concerned the money was not to be for him personally but for the Foundation, to run the Fellowship during lean war years. He asked Edgar Kaufman for \$25,000, Herbert Johnson for \$10,000, and Gerald Loeb and John Nesbitt for \$10,000 each, and apparently he received some assistance (see, e.g., FLW to J. Nesbitt, 27 December 1944; also discussed in my “Frank Lloyd Wright versus Hollywood,” manuscript in preparation). When in 1955 he accepted money at the testimonial dinner attended by three hundred and seventy well-wishers and chaired by Walker, it was for back taxes (Twombly, p. 379).
6. The description and quotations are taken from Wilson (1984), pp. 30, 31.