Art: Wright Mythology

'Twentieth Century' on C. B. S.-TV Aims at Perpetuating Legend of Architect

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

OLD architects, like old generals, never die; nor, in the case of Frank Lloyd Wright, do they fade away. Almost three years after his death, Wright's image and his buildings, as vital as ever, were the subject last night of the Columbia Broadcasting System's television program "The Twentieth Century."

The show was a smoothly sentimental production with some moving moments and an impressive number of historic film clips of above-average interest on the master and his disciples at the Taliesin Fellowship.

The program was devoted exclusively to the perpetuation of the mythology of the Wright personality (what do the Russians know about the cult of personality?) presented not in the bitter brine of his own acerbic attitudes toward art and life but in sugar syrup with mood music.

A few years ago we would probably have been deeply grateful for this reverent, slickly produced tribute, when any television program on architecture represented a pioneering breakthrough for what Wright called "the mother of the arts." Now, with the art of architecture gaining constantly in popular interest and with Wright firmly established as a public personality, we expect more. But perhaps more cannot be achieved within the limits of superficial commercial competence that television has established as its standard. It is distressingly obvious that inadequate goals have been set, and that they have been met to the industry's satisfaction.

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What we were given was the legend of Wright's greatness, not the facts of it. Here was the god-genius, up to his hips in nature, appropriately orchestrated, a public-relations portrait he undoubtedly would have loved.

Handsome young apprentices, stripped to the waist, hauled rocks and raised timbers (Learning and Life music), treked to Arizona to build the celebrated home and school at Taliesin West (Open Road and Blue Horizons music), trekked to Arizona to fields, stood on hills, picked flowers, gazed at trees (Man-in-Harmony-With-Nature music in crescendo).

We never met the bitingly perceptive, supremely gifted visionary, the smasher of idols, the rebel against society, to whom tributes such as this were given only in old age and death; we never understood just how he had helped to change the face of the world and the concept of beauty in our time.

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There was no mention of his prophetic ideas on the most significant and pervasive problem of our day: modern technology; we were afforded only his endless romantic evocation of the natural universe, which was never to be swallowed whole. Swallow it C. B. S. did, and showed us shot after shot of his "natural architecture," examples in which art was far more evident than nature, where a highly sophisticated creative act achieves calculated, far-from-accidental synthesis with its setting.

This essential difference between "art" and "nature" was never explained. But it is the strength and drama of these buildings, even in the static, single-view photographs to which the film was inexplicably limited, and which seemed far less numerous than close-ups of starry-eyed acolytes that nullified, to some extent, the intervening glossy nonsense.

Far more of the remarkable quality of Wright's brilliantly cantankerous, uniquely creative mind was revealed in the National Broadcasting Company's interview several years ago.

"For five hundred years," architecture has been phony," Wright observed early in the show, referring to his own profession's history of cumulative clichés. Television has reached that point faster.