1923

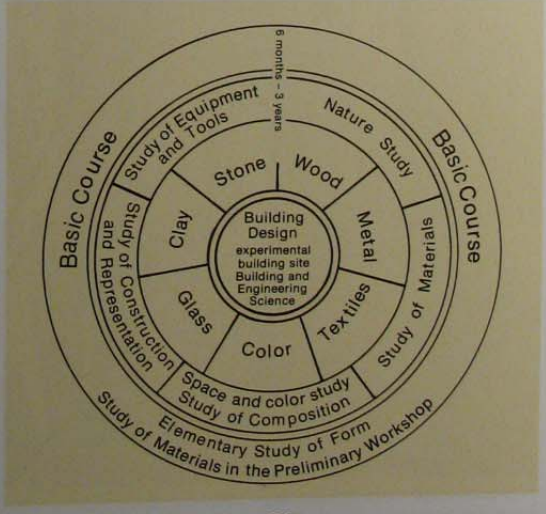
The Bauhaus, the most influential school of modernist art and design in the twentieth century, holds its first public exhibition in Weimar, Germany.

The Bauhaus was born with the Weimar Republic in 1919, and died with it at the hands of the Nazis in 1933. It developed out of the Arts and Crafts movement as the merger of the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts, begun in 1904 by the Belgian Art Nouveau artist-architect Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), and the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts, which seceded from the Bauhaus a year later in 1920. As the first director of the Bauhaus, the German architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969), wrote in 1923, "[John] Ruskin and [William] Morris in England, van de Velde ▲ in Belgium, [Joseph Maria] Olbrich, [Peter] Behrens and others in Germany, and, finally, the German Werkbund discovered the basis of a reunion between creative arts and the industrial world." But this "reunion" was the project of the Bauhaus much more than that of its Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau antecedents; indeed, the eventual embrace of "the industrial world" signaled the effective end of these prior movements.

This embrace began in 1922–3. The Dutch De Stijl leader Theo • van Doesburg had visited the school in 1921–2, and the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky also came to Weimar in 1922 for the ■ "Constructivist-Dadaist Congress" (organized by van Doesburg). But the turn toward industrial design was only clinched by the ◆ hiring of the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) as a teacher in 1923. In 1925, after a conservative change in the regional government of Weimar, the Bauhaus moved north to the industrial city of Dessau, where its involvement in industrial design deepened. In 1928 Gropius was replaced as director by the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889–1954), a staunch Marxist under whom, ironically, the school achieved its only commercial success. Due to political problems, however, Meyer was replaced in 1930 by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), who in 1932, after another conservative change in the regional government, moved the Bauhaus to Berlin. A year later, shortly after Hitler came to power, the Nazis shut it down. That the closure was among the first of the Nazi suppressions is testament to the force of the Bauhaus idea, which did not end there. Indeed, this idea spread with the emigration of teachers and students alike (Gropius, for example, was chairman of the architecture department at Harvard University from 1938 to 1952). Postwar reincarnations were attempted in the United States under Moholy-Nagy, as well as in ▲ Europe, and the Bauhaus continues to have a posthumous life throughout the West, not only in many art and architecture schools, but also in countless copies of its furniture and fixtures, appliances and accessories, typefaces and layouts.

Fundaments of material and form

On its founding, Gropius defined the Bauhaus as a "comprehensive system" with "the theoretical activity of an art academy combined with the practical activity of an arts and craft school." The Bauhaus idea was thus to unite the disciplines of fine and applied arts under that of building in a new *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of the arts"—despite the fact that the school did not have a proper architecture department until 1927. Its initial curriculum consisted of two basic parts [**1**]. The first was instruction in craft workshops: sculpture, carpentry, metal, pottery, stained glass, mural painting, and weaving—the last headed by a rare female instructor, the gifted Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983). The second



1 • Curriculum of the Weimar Bauhaus, 1923

▲ 1920a ● 1917, 1926, 1937b ■ 1926, 1928 ◆ 1929, 1947a ▲ 1947a, 1957a

was instruction in artistic "form problems": study of nature and materials; teaching in materials, tools, construction, and representation; and theory of space, color, and composition. "Workshop masters"—craftsmen—led the first instruction, while "form masters"—artists—led the second, although several of the latter also participated in the workshops. Despite attempts at equality, the workshop masters have remained obscure, while the form masters include such renowned twentieth-century artists as
▲ Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.

In 1919 Gropius could afford only three appointments: the mystical Swiss painter Johannes Itten (1888–1967), who developed the first preliminary course required of all students; the German-American painter Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956), who developed a Cubist style with angular, quasi-Gothic lines [**2**]; and the German sculptor Gerhard Marcks (1889–1981), who became master of pottery. The next wave of recruits brought the best-known Bauhausians. Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943), who arrived in late 1920, became master of sculpture and, after 1923, master of theater as well; he also did murals (several within the Bauhaus), for which his abstracted marionette figures in shallow geometric relief were well suited. Klee came in late 1920, too, followed by Kandinsky in early 1922. Although the Expressionist beginnings of the Bauhaus conflicted with its Constructivist leanings after the arrival of Moholy-Nagy, most of its artists were modernist in the sense that they all sought to reveal the fundamentals of materials, forms, and processes. It was this inquiry that drove the core curriculum of the Bauhaus—and all the later institutions that it inspired. This is true of the craft workshops as well: "We did not found our [weaving] workshop on a sentimental romanticism nor in protests against machine weaving," Stölzl remarked in retrospect. "Rather, we wanted to develop the greatest variety of fabrics by the simplest means, and thus to make it possible for the students to realize their own ideas."

The variety of this inquiry can be evoked through the courses offered by its most celebrated figures. Klee and Kandinsky taught a design course in tandem. Both had metaphysical tendencies, but they could also be analytical. For Klee, theory had to emerge from practice; "intuition joined to research" was the credo of his teaching as well as his art. He encouraged students to develop artistic techniques analogous to natural processes—to find "the becoming of forms," "the antecedents of the visible." Like Kandinsky, he began with the basics of point and line, which he saw as either active, passive, or neutral. Even as he valued affective variety in line (his famous definition of a drawing is "a line going for a walk"), he prized compositional harmony above all. So did Kandinsky, and in this regard both men took music as the paragon of abstract art (Klee was also a gifted violinist).

▲ Like Klee, Kandinsky developed a psychology of pictorial elements, but his pedagogy was more dogmatic, in part because he was well established as artist and professor alike (he had set up the
• program for the Moscow Institute of Art and Culture—Inkhuk—in 1920). His teaching focused on the analytical aspects of drawing and the emotive effects of color. In the first course, Kandinsky required students to abstract from a given object: first to reduce a still life to a simple form, then to render this form in a drawing, and finally to mark the tensions in this drawing as the basis for an abstract composition. In the second course, Kandinsky taught a theory of color structured on such opposites as yellow and blue (he saw yellow as warm and expansive, blue as cold and recessive), with the idea that a visual language could be developed that was more immediate than any verbal communication. He posited a similar psychology of line (for instance, verticals as warm, horizontals as cold) and combined these notions of color and line in a general theory of composition. A questionnaire circulated by Kandinsky suggests its flavor: he asked fellow Bauhausians to fill in a blank triangle, square, and circle with the colors that each form elicited; his own (correct) answer was yellow, red, and blue respectively. For all its claim to system, then, his theory remained subjective, not to say arbitrary, as did the painting that evolved from it. Indeed, what both system and painting bespeak, more than an "inner necessity" of spirit or a universal law of composition, as

2 • Lyonel Feininger, *Cathedral of the Future*, 1919
Woodcut for the 1919 Program of the Bauhaus; dimensions unknown

▲ 1908, 1913, 1916a, 1922

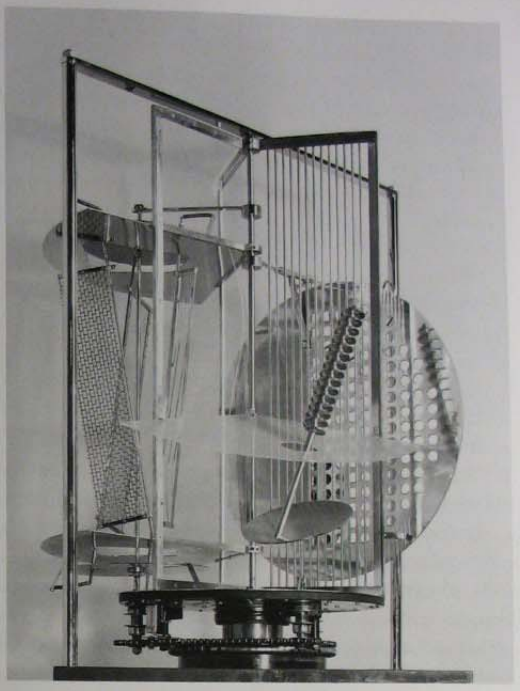
▲ 1908, 1913 • 1921

he claimed, is an anxiety about the arbitrariness of abstraction, and an attempt to reground it in apodictic meaning.

From craft to industry

The real battle of the Bauhaus occurred not in these design classes but in the *Vorkurs*, a six-month probationary course required of all new students. Its first instructor was Itten, who, influenced by Kandinsky before his arrival, also investigated the psychological effects of line and color, which Itten understood in almost mystical terms. Even as his students investigated natural materials and drew diagrams of Old Master paintings, they were asked to capture the spirit of these things. When Moholy-Nagy replaced Itten as head of the *Vorkurs* in 1923, everything seemed to change—except perhaps the ethical basis of the instruction. Where Itten had dressed like a monk and abhorred machines, Moholy-Nagy looked like an engineer and declared the machine "the spirit of this century." Out went the meditative exercises with natural materials and Old Masters; in came a Constructivist analysis of new media and industrial techniques. Self-taught, Moholy-Nagy was protean in his production. ▲ He made collages and photomontages, photographs and photograms (cameraless photographs in which various objects are placed on coated paper and exposed to light), metal constructions and "light-space modulators" [3] (kinetic constructions with lights), and so on. Whereas Itten had diagrammed masterpieces, legend has it that Moholy-Nagy once ordered geometric paintings from a sign factory—he literally phoned the order in. Yet in all these experiments Moholy-Nagy was fiercely analytical and logical, committed to understanding "the new culture of light." If the students had tired of the cultish behavior of Itten by the time of his resignation in October 1922, they were shocked by the rationalist rigor of Moholy-Nagy. But when he resigned in 1928, this rigor had become synonymous with the Bauhaus idea, and it was carried on by Josef Albers, his collaborator in the *Vorkurs* and fellow promoter of • Bauhaus principles in the United States after World War II.

All histories of the Bauhaus remark on its pedagogical shift from preindustrial craft to industrial design. The first stance was manifested in the 1919 program written by Gropius to announce the school ("Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the crafts!"); while the second is dated to 1923, when Gropius delivered a new position paper, "Art and Technology: A New Unity," at the first Bauhaus exhibition, which was intended to demonstrate the new approach. Specific studies only nuance the shift as a progression from an early medievalist notion of craft to a later industrialist idea of craft. The first was advanced immediately after World War I in order to escape the "dilletantism" of academic art, to reunite artistic disciplines and artisanal practices under the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of building, and so to reconnect not only artists to craftsmen but both of these groups to workers and the *Völk* (the people) as well. The second was advanced in the mid-twenties as a necessary preparation for the new artist-as-designer now that industrial production had recovered somewhat after the war.



3 • László Moholy-Nagy, *Light-Space Modulator*, 1930
Kinetic sculpture of steel, plastic, wood, and other materials with electric motor, 151 x 70 x 70 (59½ x 27½ x 27½)

4 • Joost Schmidt, poster for the Bauhaus Exhibition, held in Weimar, July–September 1923

Evidence of this transformation is extensive. The original seal of the Bauhaus was an Expressionist stick figure with craft emblems under a wood frame designed by Karl Peter Röhl (1890–1969); in 1921 it was replaced by a confident Constructivist profile with Bauhaus lettering designed by Schlemmer. In 1919 the Bauhaus proclamation was illustrated with a Gothic-Cubist woodcut of "the cathedral of the future" by Feininger [**2**]; in 1923 the Bauhaus exhibition was announced by a rationalist lithograph poster by Joost Schmidt (1893–1948) that extended the Constructivist visage of Schlemmer into a figure that is at once human, machine, and architectural plan [**4**]. Until this time the emblematic building of the Bauhaus was an Arts and Crafts loghouse built in Berlin by Gropius and Adolf Meyer (1881–1929) for the timber merchant Adolf Sommerfeld; in 1923, for the Bauhaus exhibition, Georg Muche (1895–1987), who had arrived at the Bauhaus as much a mystic as Itten, modeled a steel-and-concrete "machine for living in." But the real mark of the pedagogical shift was the replacement of the mystical Itten and his core course based on meditative exercise with the technophilic Moholy-Nagy and his course based on structural analysis. The transformation was made institutional in 1925, when the Bauhaus moved to a modernist plant designed by Gropius in Dessau [**5**], and was renamed an "institute of design" replete with a new program, and established a limited company for trade and patents.

The transformation, then, is not in dispute; the question is how to understand it. Neither an overnight coup nor an orderly transition, the shift from "craft" to "industry" was driven by contradictory forces that preexisted the Bauhaus. (These forces were also active, for example, in the Deutscher Werkbund, an association of artists and industrialists founded by the architect Hermann Muthesius in 1907, in which Henry van de Velde argued for a craft basis for design, while Muthesius insisted on industrial prototypes.) Thus, more than a personal opposition, Itten and Moholy-Nagy registered a historical contradiction, as did the discrepancy between the early craft advocacy of Gropius and the technological commitment of his architecture, both early and late (as in his great Fagus shoe factory of 1911). In principle, the Bauhaus was always socialist, but its socialism changed as the socioeconomic contradiction developed. In its first moment, even as the Bauhaus looked to past models like medieval guilds, it also proclaimed a future utopia of artist-craftsmen united under building. In its second moment, however, this futuristic alliance became one of fellow producers in industrial design. In a sense, its historical contradiction is captured in the very term "Bauhaus": even as it invokes modernist design for us today—rationalist architecture, tubular furniture, sans-serif typography, and so on—the name actually derives from the medieval *Bauhütte*, or lodge for masons.

5 • Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus buildings, Dessau, c. 1925

Crisis and closure

"Originally the Bauhaus was founded with visions of the cathedral of socialism, and the workshops were established in the manner of the cathedral building lodges," Schlemmer wrote in November 1922. "Today we must think at best in terms of the house.... In the face of the economic plight, it is our task to become pioneers of simplicity." As Schlemmer sensed at the time, the two basic positions of the Bauhaus responded to two different Germanys: an anarchic country of 1919 that, torn by a lost war, an abdicated kaiser, and a failed revolution, was desperate to restore cultural community; and a fragile republic of 1923 that, wracked by inflation, was equally desperate to modernize industrially. Far from dead in 1919, the Art and Crafts movement was revived as a salve to the labor divisions and class conflicts exposed by the war. Such artist-architect associations as the Novembergruppe (named in honor of the failed November 1918 revolution in Germany) and the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Workers' Council for Art) kept a "romantic anticapitalism" in the foreground of debate when the Bauhaus was founded. "For all its evils," Gropius, who belonged to both groups, wrote in 1919, "Bolshevism is probably the only way to create the preconditions for a new culture." What happened by 1923 to make him ditch his craft romanticism, propose a "new unity" of art and technology, advocate industrial design, and seek capitalist partnership?

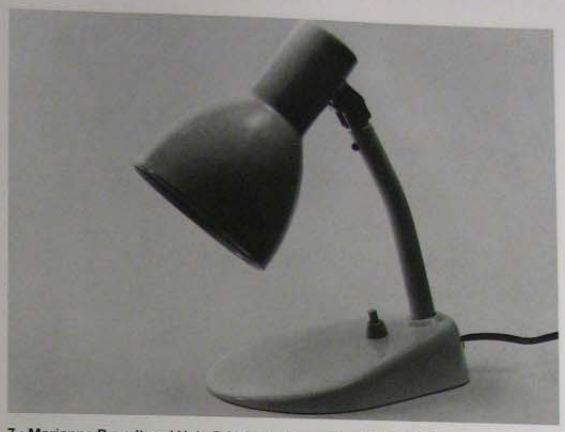
More tactician than opportunist, Gropius had to struggle to keep the Bauhaus open through crisis and controversy, both internal and external. Before 1923, as inflation crippled the German economy (the Bauhaus student/teacher Herbert Bayer [1900–85] designed a one-million-mark note for general circulation in 1923), a craft program made perfect sense. By late 1923, however, the currency was reformed, and in early 1924 the Dawes loan plan from the United States began; German industry slowly recovered and soon boomed with foreign investments and new technologies. It was in this brief period of relative prosperity, which continued until the Wall Street Crash in 1929, that the Bauhaus shifted toward industrial design. The paradoxical position of Germany in between East and West helped its reorientation: the cultural experiments of Russian Constructivism inspired great interest (witness

6 • Marcel Breuer, *Slat Chair*, 1922
Pearwood

▲ again the repeated presence of El Lissitzky in Germany), but so did the industrial techniques of American Fordism (the autobiography of Henry Ford was a bestseller in Germany in 1923). In effect, the Bauhaus adapted the ideological look of the former to moderate the economic logic of the latter—but then what could it do after a failed revolution in a state controlled by capitalists? In any case, upon its move to Dessau, "masters" became "instructors," workshops centered on the experience of material became technical laboratories based on the principle of function, and training was soon divided into two types—work on building techniques and work on industrial prototypes. Practices like woodcarving, stained glass, and pottery were dropped, metal and carpentry shops were combined, and the print shop was given over to design (in which Bayer in particular excelled).

Nevertheless, actual interaction with industry was limited, though not as limited as in Russian Constructivism, which dealt with an industry starved of raw materials and suspended between • rigid Communist and reformist capitalist policies. As of 1924 the Bauhaus had only twenty contracts with German firms, much of which was publicity work. This is not to deny the sheer brilliance of Bauhaus design or its great influence on subsequent production. Besides the famous fixtures of Moholy-Nagy and chairs of Marcel Breuer (1902–81) [**6**], the work of Marianne Brandt (1893–1983) is

▲ 1926 • 1921



7 • Marianne Brandt and Hein Briedendiek, bedside lamp, 1928
Designed for Körting and Mathiesen

extraordinary in quality and variety; though best known for her tableware, her greatest successes were her lighting fixtures (with its wedge base and bell shade to focus light, her reading lamp [**7**] set the standard for decades to come, and she also innovated with other task lamps, as well as ceiling lights set in opaque globes and frosted glass). It is only to suggest that the new goal of industrial participation was no more realized than the old goal of craft rehabilitation. For both were responses to a historical problem that the Bauhaus alone could not solve: how to address the division of labor between artistic disciplines and artisanal practices on the one hand, and to adapt both of these to the capitalist modernization of Germany, which was intensive because it was tardy, on the other. The Nazis had a different solution, in which the polar forces that the Bauhaus attempted to moderate—the atavism toward a mythical Teutonic past and the acceleration toward a capitalist industrialist future—were forced together in a deadly compound.

FURTHER READING

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