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Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity

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Exhibitions

Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
8 November 2009–25 January 2010

Twenty-some Bauhaus exhibitions took place last year: in France, Italy, Poland, Israel, Germany, and the United States. Germany housed the largest number; there, 2009 was officially styled “the Bauhaus year,” and German governments and Bauhaus-related museums and foundations subsidized celebrations of the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the school. Some of these shows focused on individual teachers or students: the Kunsthaus in Apolda on Lyonel Feininger and László Moholy-Nagy, the Städtische Museum in Jena on Vasily Kandinsky, the Schlossmuseum in Gotha on Marianne Brandt and Wolfgang Tümpel. Many celebrations took place in Weimar, the birthplace of the school; Weimar’s Neue Museum staged a commemoration of Bauhaus designers who participated in resistance to Hitler’s government after 1933.¹ The Erfurt Kunsthalle emphasized controversies over the Weimar Bauhaus, while the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau mounted an ambitious exposition entitled *Bauhaus City*, with tours of the many recently restored Bauhaus buildings in and near Dessau, discussions of the history of the school under the GDR, and an international symposium. The Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt am Main presented a traveling

display that stressed the legacy of the Bauhaus for later modernism (reviewed in this issue of the *JSAH* by Wolfgang Sonne). In Berlin, the three largest of Germany’s Bauhaus institutions launched the most comprehensive Bauhaus exhibition ever held (reviewed in this issue by Karen Koehler).² And the Museum of Modern Art in New York put together a much smaller presentation, commemorating not only the founding of the Bauhaus, but also the seventieth anniversary of its own (and only previous) general exhibition on the Bauhaus, in 1938. A good deal of Bauhaus history has been made, and re-made, in these shows of 2009.

The Museum of Modern Art exhibited upwards of four hundred works, of which more than one hundred had never been seen in this country before. (A great number, in fact, had never before been exhibited outside the European collections that own them.) The show was accompanied by workshops for visitors and scholars, by film clips, lectures, symposia, and a concert; by a lavish, beautifully illustrated catalog; and by a wonderful byproduct of the electronic age, a fully illustrated and freely downloadable “checklist of the exhibition.” Anyone who wants to can now learn a great deal about the Bauhaus—or at least about the Bauhaus as represented by the Museum of Modern Art—in record time.

At the Museum of Modern Art, exceptionally handsome displays of objects, printed matter, drawings, and paintings spanned the history of the school from 1919 to 1933. The methods of display were particularly commendable: wide spacing on the walls, projecting mounts for some images, glass cases for especially rare and fragile works, a variety of platforms and low- and mid-level risers permitting close observation of individual objects. The

exhibition quite properly refrained from representing some of the violent chronological divisions that have been asserted over the years by scholars: among Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin, for example, or between Expressionism and New Objectivity, between handcraft and prototypes for mass production, or between the first three years and everything else. Instead, a loosely chronological arrangement was adopted, corresponding to the early years, the middle years, and then the years when Hannes Meyer and then Ludwig Mies van der Rohe succeeded Gropius as director (1928–33). The materials from the early and middle years were the strongest: these included the time in Weimar (1919–24), marked by political revolution and economic upheaval in Germany as a whole, but also by utopian hopes for a new society, together with the first period in Dessau (1925–28), when the new German republic entered its only peaceful and prosperous period and there was plenty of money for buildings, publications, and exhibitions. The years of Meyer’s and Mies’s directorships were dominated by renewed political and economic catastrophe in Germany: little was built, and the school was subject to ever-increasing political opposition and crises in funding. Perhaps in consequence, this period in the exhibition was much less interesting than the rest.

Of all the displays at the New York show, the section that dealt with the beginnings of the school was the richest. Here, of course, was the first Bauhaus manifesto of 1919, with Lyonel Feininger’s woodcut of a medievalizing cathedral, illustrating Gropius’s exhortation to “architects, sculptors, painters” to “return to the crafts, joining in “a new guild of craftsmen” to create “the new building of the future,” “which will rise one day toward heaven from a million

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Figure 1 Lyonel Feininger, Bauhaus manifesto, April 1919 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum. Gift of Julia Feininger)

hands as the crystal symbol of a new faith” (Figure 1).³ But in New York it was possible to see the manifesto in the context of other work of the time: Johannes Itten’s cover for a planned periodical called *Utopia: Documents of Reality*, Lothar Schreyer’s tempera design for a coffin (*Death House of a Woman*, displayed in its own sarcophagus-like case), woodcuts by Gerhard Marcks that illustrate warlike scenes from *The Wieland Saga of the Elder Edda*, Marcel Breuer’s “African” or “Romantic” chair, and Theobald Müller-Hummel’s carved and painted wooden propeller blade, titled *Pillar with Cosmic Visions*.

Nearby were depictions of the Sommerfeld House (Berlin-Steglitz, 1920–21), the little-known log house for Adolf Sommerfeld that was the first building venture of the new school. In the “Invitation to the Toppling-out Ceremony” (*Richtfest*) of December 1920, we see the house sending forth streams of light not unlike those in the Feininger manifesto image, suggesting the dawn of a new era (Figure 2). Contemporary photographs showed exteriors of the house (no longer extant), some of its interior carvings by Joost Schmidt, furniture and textiles by Marcel Breuer and Dörte

Helm, and Josef Albers’s stained-glass window for the staircase area, while drawings showed the designs for the vestibule.

Even less familiar were the images of the first prospective *Siedlung* (housing group, settlement, colony) in Weimar, which included, in one of Walter Determan’s plans, sixteen wooden houses, and in another, a central administration building. Determan also painted a colorful, highly geometricized “site plan” for the *Siedlung*, with a monumental crystalline form dominating its central plaza. That a *Siedlung* was planned in 1920, so early in the history of the Bauhaus, is especially important to understand, because it shows that the leadership was already thinking of the “cathedral of the future” as embodied in housing, and particularly in groups of replicable housing units. The manifesto, the Sommerfeld House and Determan’s *Siedlung*, together with surrounding broadsheets, pottery, and painting, strongly evoked the spirit of the early Bauhaus. At the beginning, teachers and students were inspired by a heady mixture of primitivism, Expressionism, dark memories of the recent war, nostalgia for an archaizing medievalism, commitment to revolution in architecture and the applied arts, and determination to build buildings for a new and better society in some kind of a utopian future.⁴ The Museum of Modern Art’s 1938 exhibition neglected this early period in the history of the Bauhaus (as did Walter Gropius in most of his writings), so it was particularly valuable to see so much of it now.

Other elements of great strength in the exhibition were the works by women, as teachers and students, and the designs for and about children. Textiles were especially well displayed. It was a special pleasure to be able to appreciate the size of the immense wall hanging of 1923 (ca. 4.5 × 9 ft.), depicting a birdlike creature enmeshed in a vibrantly colored abstract pattern, probably by Klee student Else Mögelin. In general, Klee was splendidly represented, in rarely seen puppets and puppetlike figures (many of them recent reconstructions), and also by paintings, designs, and teaching documents executed over fourteen years.

The arrangement of objects and images was not confined, however, by this loose



Figure 2 Martin Jahn, Sommerfeld House, Berlin-Steglitz, invitation to the Topping-out ceremony (Richtfest), 18 Dec. 1920 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin)

chronology. Early works appeared midway in the show, later works sometimes appeared rather early. A few oddly extraneous objects found their way into the displays, too: Mies's "Weissenhof Chair," for example, designed at least three years before Mies came to the Bauhaus, and two works by Klee executed before he joined the faculty in 1921. But if the principles of selection and arrangement were not always clear, the results sometimes produced important aesthetic insights. It was possible, for example, while looking at the luminous "lattice pictures" by Josef Albers (1921), which were placed almost at midpoint in the displays, to look back at the early images and imagine the "crystal" building predicted by the manifesto as infused with color, like that of Albers's stained glass windows in the Sommerfeld House. It was also possible, while looking back toward Farkas Molnar's brilliantly colored *Red Cube*, a project for the exhibition of 1923, to begin to understand how strong color and cubic forms began to dominate the architecture of housing at the Bauhaus and elsewhere in Germany in the early and middle twenties. The geometries and strong colors of the typography on the covers of the Bauhaus publications, displayed a little farther on, reinforced this insight, as did Kandinsky's compelling *Red Square* painting of 1928. As we know from general histories, many German architects in the 1920s saw

brightly patterned color in housing design as an outgrowth of the crystalline forms of "glass architecture"; the thoughts inspired by the Albers paintings suggest that this idea was probably already implicit in the Bauhaus manifesto.⁵ It is very satisfying to be provided with this kind of evidence of continuity in Bauhaus design history.

Still, if this insight was intended by the curators, the viewer was not told about it. In fact, after the splendid display of materials related to the Sommerfeld House, architecture (or "building" as it was usually called) came off quite poorly at the Museum of Modern Art show. The serial housing models (*Baukasten*) of 1921, planned for ultimate prefabrication and exhibited in 1922 and 1923, were not shown. Except for a plan, neither was the Experimental House (*Versuchshaus*), which together with another projected *Siedlung*, formed the centerpiece of the large exhibition in Weimar in 1923. Many of the chairs, tables, toys, textiles, and ceramics on display in New York were specifically designed for the *Versuchshaus*, yet this was not made clear either. This is too bad, since "the cathedral of the future" (or "cathedral of freedom" or "cathedral of socialism," as it was sometimes called at the Bauhaus) was thought of as a "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Einheitskunstwerk*), a "new architecture" (*Neues Bauen*) that would comprise

new kinds of design for everyday objects, assembled in new kinds of spaces. At the Bauhaus, these everyday things were never thought of as stand-alone art objects. But this is how they were shown in New York.

The buildings and interiors at Weimar and Dessau were tirelessly publicized by the Bauhaus itself, in the large exhibition catalog of 1923, the Bauhaus Books series (1925–30), the Bauhaus magazine (1926–31), and in a well-known survey of the buildings at Dessau, written by Gropius in 1930.⁶ If the curators had wanted to show contemporary images of the buildings, these publications could have offered an ample selection. The volumes would have had to be shown open to the buildings, however, not closed, as they were in the New York displays. Residing in elegant glass cases, the Bauhaus publications could be admired for the typography and design of their covers, but their contents were not visible.

To complete the insights about glass and color available from the vantage point of the Albers grid pictures, one needed not only more visual documentation of the *Versuchshaus* and the projected Weimar *Siedlung*, but also a much fuller presentation of the buildings at Dessau. One should have been able to look ahead in the exhibit and see the treatment of glass in the workshop wing of the Bauhaus in Dessau, with its combination of reflection and transparency, its small panes looking almost faceted or crystalline in certain lights. One also should have been able to view in detail the exteriors and interiors of the Masters' Houses built by Gropius for himself and six Bauhaus teachers, and then to see exterior and interior views of *Siedlung Törten* at Dessau, together with its methods of construction, widely publicized in the twenties and thirties. These buildings, after all, were the culmination of Bauhaus efforts to produce a new kind of architecture and a new kind of housing.

Unlike the Sommerfeld House and the *Siedlung* planned for Weimar, the Dessau buildings still exist; they have been restored, or are being restored, and can be visited, if one is able to travel to Dessau. (I first saw the excellent GDR restoration of the school buildings in the winter of 1990–91, when I was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.) Hannes Meyer's



Figure 3 Lucia Moholy, Bauhaus Dessau, workshop building from below, Sept. 1926. Gelatin silver print, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{11}{16}$ in. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther collection, gift of Thomas Walther)

German Trades Unions School buildings in Bernau near Berlin (1928–30) have also been very recently restored. Extant buildings of this size and importance cannot be adequately documented, especially for non-German viewers, by small archival photographs, many of them very partial, a few plans and isometrics, and a small-scale (1:100) model from 1999. The rather few original photographs of the Dessau school that were shown in New York, such as the view of the workshop wing by Lucia Moholy, are important to study, but they do not represent the buildings well (Figure 3). Meyer’s building fares somewhat better in contemporary images, but here too, the results are inadequate. Meyer’s school was very different from the Gropius buildings in materials and architectural expression, and this is almost impossible to appreciate without modern color photography.

Some additional imaginative reconstructions were badly needed in New York: a life-size model of a portion of the workshop wall in Dessau, for example, or a full-color installation showing an interior of one of the Masters’ Houses—perhaps from Klee’s house—complete with furnishings and fittings (specially constructed replicas, presumably). Failing such models or installations, at the very least one should have been able to see recent images showing the colors and materials employed in the painstaking restorations that have taken place in Dessau and Bernau.⁷

The curators decided not to attempt to convey the long-term influence of the Bauhaus after its closing in 1933. (A symposium in January dealt with the “diaspora” of teachers and students “to the Americas, Palestine, South Africa and elsewhere.”) The work and experiences of those

Bauhäusler who remained in Germany under the Nazis, a subject dense with controversy, is neither discussed in the catalog nor represented in the show. Nor do we learn of the post-1945 history of the school in Dessau, or its imitators in Weimar and Ulm, before the fall of the East German GDR in 1989–90. These are complex matters, about which there is little consensus among scholars; perhaps these subjects might have overburdened the 2009 New York exhibition. But what about some indication of the role of the Bauhaus in its own era? Bauhaus ideas about housing and its contents paralleled the work of Ernst May in Frankfurt and Martin Wagner in Berlin; the housing at the Weissenhof *Siedlung* at Stuttgart (1927), directed by Mies and participated in by Gropius, seemed to contemporaries to be directly related to Bauhaus ideas. The Bauhaus in Dessau was a pilgrimage site not just for Philip Johnson and Alfred Barr, but also for German, British, and East European architects, designers, and typographers, and not least for visitors from the Scandinavian countries, for whom its ideas and works had special resonance.⁸ Sorting out these parallels and mutual influences is difficult, and the subject has not yet been thoroughly studied, but some reference to the issues involved would have enriched the materials shown in New York.

In addition, Bauhaus design ideas for objects of use had gone into production in Germany by 1927–28; their designers were often former Bauhaus students and teachers, but other industrial designers also displayed the growing influence of Bauhaus ideas during the years 1927–33. The ubiquity of Bauhaus forms in ordinary objects today—chairs, lamps, toys, glassware, ceramics, fabrics, table settings, and cookware—has many of its roots in this first period of Bauhaus influence in Europe (Figure 4). It would have been enlightening to see more of this work, and could have helped to provide a much-needed sense of closure to the exhibition.

What does it mean, though, to talk about “the ubiquity of Bauhaus forms in ordinary objects today”? Some of the writers for the Museum of Modern Art catalog speak of the “commercialization” of Bauhaus design over time, while a significant theme at the Berlin show had to do with the



Figure 4 Marianne Brandt and Hin Bredendieck, desk lamp, 1928, manufactured by Körting & Mathiesen (Kandem no. 756), 18½ in. (Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, photo courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

“trivialization” of the Bauhaus legacy. Is there a Bauhaus legacy in building and the applied arts, and if so, is it worth having? If there is such a legacy, is it the product of nostalgic revivals, or is it part of a continuous evolution? Does it come to us only from the Bauhaus, or from a much broader group of design and building efforts in Germany and other countries in the twenties and thirties? And how has it been transmitted? By contemporary shows and publications, by individual émigrés, by the Museum of Modern Art in 1938 and other museums since that time, by political patronage during the Second World War and the Cold War era? Or by underlying forces of modernization over the last ninety years? No one of the exhibitions of the “Bauhaus year” approaches more than a few of these questions, but collectively they do shed light on many of them. Maybe the time is ripe now for a new, comprehensive, and scholarly history of the school, its origins, development, context, and heritage—a history that now more than ever needs to be written.

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Related Publication

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Notes

1. For some of the ambiguities involved in this theme, see Nicholas Fox Weber, “Deadly Style: Bauhaus’s Nazi Connection,” *New York Times*, 27 Dec. 2009.
2. The Berlin Bauhaus-Archiv/Museum für Gestaltung, the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, and the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
3. Literally, “from a million craftsmen’s hands”; but “craftsmen” means here the new kind of craftsmen that would soon be created by the Bauhaus curriculum. “Craftsman,” *Handwerker*, also had overtones of “laborer” in German revolutionary writing of the early years after the First World War. Perhaps for this reason, the catalog of the Museum of Modern Art’s 1938 exhibition, edited by Gropius, translated the phrase as “from the hands of a million workers.” Walter Gropius et al., *Bauhaus 1919–1928* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 18.
4. On the relationship of the Bauhaus to the romantic medievalism and archaism of the period 1900–1914, see Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On interpretations of the manifesto, see Karen Koehler, “The Bauhaus Manifesto Postwar to Postwar,” in Jeffrey Sautnik and Robin Schuldenfrei, eds., *Bauhaus Construct* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13–36.
5. For a recent survey of these issues, see Lane, “Modern Architecture and Politics in Germany,” in Lane, ed., *Housing and Dwelling: Perspectives on Modern Domestic Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 259–71.
6. *Staatliches Bauhaus, Weimar, 1919–1923* (Weimar-Munich: Bauhaus Verlag, 1923; Adolf Meyer, ed., *Ein Versuchsbaus des Bauhauses in Weimar, 1925* (Munich: Albert Langen [vol. 3 of the *Bauhausbücher*], 1925); Walter Gropius, ed., *Internationale Architektur* (Munich, Albert Langen, 1925 [vol. 1 of the *Bauhausbücher*], 1925, 2nd ed., 1927); *Bauhaus: Zeitschrift für Gestaltung* (Bauhaus, Dessau: 1926–31); Walter Gropius, ed., *Bauhausbauten Dessau* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1930). The Bauhaus originated, or participated in, at least thirteen exhibitions between 1922 and 1930: see Ute Brüning, “Exhibitions at the Bauhaus,” in *Bauhaus*, ed. Jeannine Fiedler (Cologne: Könemann, 2006), 614–15.
7. See <http://www.meisterhaeuser.de/de/bildarchiv.html> (accessed 3 Jan. 2010) for views of the reconstructions of the Masters’ Houses. The Dessau buildings and the *Versuchsbaus* in Weimar are now UNESCO World Heritage sites; recent restorations have taken place in consultation with ICOMOS.
8. See, among others, Lucy Creagh, Helena Käberg, and Barbara Miller Lane, eds., *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008).