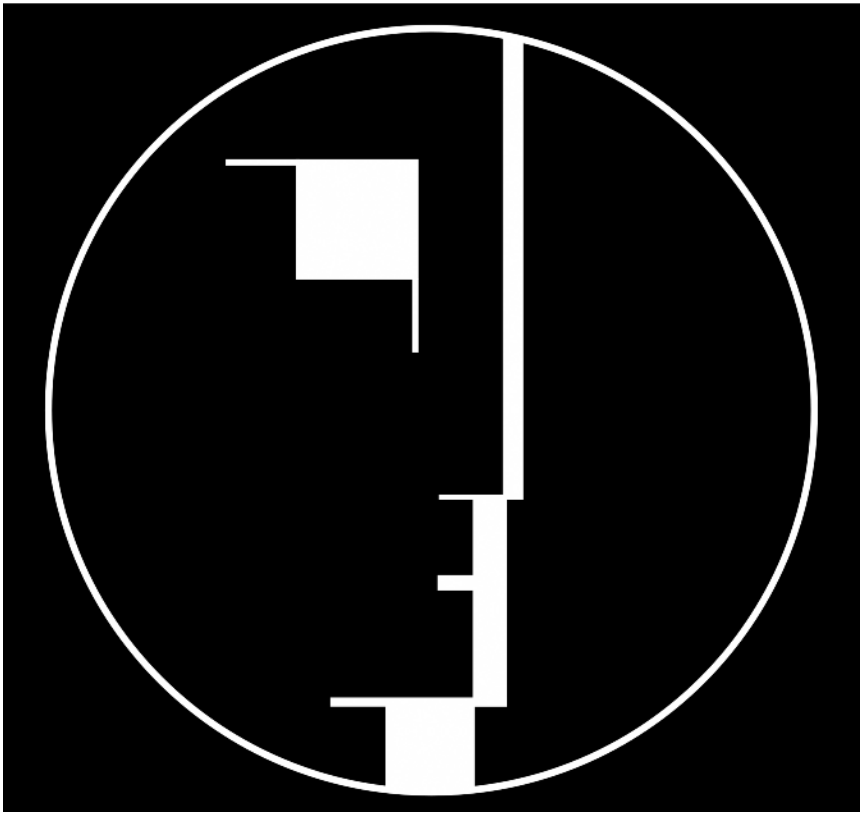
The Bauhaus 1919-2019: One Hundred Years of Modern Design

Background Notes

Dr Anne Anderson - 15 January 2020



Bauhaus Man

WAHG
Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

Modernism: Searching for Utopia

V&A website:

'At the core of Modernism lay the idea that the world had to be fundamentally rethought. The carnage of the First World War and the Russian Revolution led to widespread utopian fervour, a belief that the human condition could be healed by new approaches to art and design. Focusing on the most basic elements of daily life – housing and furniture, domestic goods and clothes – architects and designers set out to reinvent these forms for a new century.'

According to Simon Jervis, 'The new approach to design found its ideological base in functionalism. The German word *sachlichkeit* (objectivity) made clear that the goal was not a new style to add to the museum of historical styles, but an inevitable and rational response to Modern needs using modern materials. Idealism, iconoclasm, puritanism, socialism and for some revolution were all involved in this pursuit. The vision of a brave new world of justice, light, health, equality and order, stripped of the clutter of the past seemed a real and enticing prospect.'

This approach had been developing prior to WW1. In Vienna **Otto Wagner, Josef Hoffman** and **Koloman Moser** practised an abstract rectilinearity; the **Deutsche Werkbund,** founded in 1907**,** identified industrial products as the proper province of the designer. **Adolf Loos,** influenced by his time in America, prioritised function, declaring ornament was outmoded. After the First World war there was a division between **Modernism,** which was intellectual, reforming, demanding a style which reflected modern technology and working life and **Art Deco,** which had no manifesto and was essentially high fashion, luxurious and hedonistic.

A shared understanding of the principles of function, standardisation for mass production and democracy of use, resulted in a similar visual language. Modernism is not a style; it is a theory that reflected the conditions of modern life, or, as Le Corbusier stated, of 'living in one's own time'. Functionalism was a key concept in the evolution of Modernism. The idea of the logic of construction as the basis of architectural design has a long history. In the 19th century designers and theorists such as AWN Pugin, John Ruskin, and Eugene Viollet le-Duc had all favoured the development of structural honesty in buildings and products. In 1895 the American architect Louis Sullivan coined the phrase **'Form follows function**' – ornament was increasingly under attack around 1900. Functionalism encouraged the use of pure simple forms and favoured the machine-made. Functionalists like Le Corbusier admired structures like grain silos, aeroplanes and ships.

Modernism was fuelled by the desire to start life anew, wipe the slate clean, after the First World war. In Holland, the influential **De Stijl** movement flourished during the war years, as its intellectuals, painters and architect-designers were protected by their country's political neutrality. A revolutionary theory and practice evolved, under the leadership of the avant-garde Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. Their approach was based on linear abstraction and bold primary colours. J. J. P. Oud and Gerrit Rietveldt translated elements of this abstraction into architecture and design.

Bauhaus

As the First World War came to an end, members of the *Deutsche Werkbund* were preparing to establish a school for the fine and applied arts. In 1919, the two art schools in Weimar were merged under the directorship of Walter Gropius, (1883-1969) to form the *Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar*. Gropius' mission was to reform art education; initially craft based training dominated. The Bauhaus motto declared **ART AND CRAFT - A NEW UNITY**. Inspired by the apprenticeship principles of William Morris, Gropius organised the Bauhaus as a community of masters and students, working together in order to formulate new ideas and forms for industry. Through theories of form, colour, art and craft, and through the understanding of materials, the school aimed to prepare students for the design demands of industrial manufacture.

But in 1922 the Bauhaus changed direction. Its new mission was **ART AND TECHNOLOGY - A NEW UNITY**. Acceptance and application of technology lies at the heart of Modernist thinking. The aim of the Bauhaus was to produce prototypes for mass production. Notable Bauhaus faculty and student members included the artists Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, artist and theorist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, architects Gropius, Hannes Meyer, Herbert Bayer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and applied and industrial designers Marcel Breuer, Marianne Brandt, Welhelm Wagenfeld and Gerhard Marcks. They contributed to innovation in design theory and practice within specialised areas: furniture, metalwork, textiles, ceramics and architecture. The Bauhaus studios became laboratories where prototype designs for machine manufacture were evolved. The characteristic Bauhaus style was impersonal, geometrical, and severe, but with a refinement of line and shape that came from a strict economy of means and a close study of the nature of the materials. While few products developed at the Bauhaus moved beyond proto-type stage, the application of *form to follow function* theory, and the commitment to well-designed goods at reasonable cost to the consumer, transformed earlier, proto-modernist ideals to a new level of attainability. A firmly held belief in the 'democracy of design' reflected the socialist political leanings of both the Bauhaus' masters and students.

Wassily Chair

Wagenfeld Lamp

Tea Infuser

In 1925, the Bauhaus moved to Dessau; the school had met with hostile criticisms from conservative Weimar politicians. Within the climate of early 1920s German National Socialism, the Bauhaus was viewed with suspicion; its principles and practices were misunderstood, mistrusted or rejected. The progressive profile of the Bauhaus at Dessau resulted in several projects that did realise industrial production. Pioneered by Mart Stam and Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer's cantilever chairs perhaps are the best-known examples of successful Bauhaus manufacturing output. The use of new technologies, such as chromium-plated, tubular steel, combined with simplicity of design, have become symbols of classic modernist practice.

Bauhaus Dessau

In 1928 Gropius left the Bauhaus to concentrate on his own architectural practice and was succeeded as director by the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer (1889-1954). He in turn was replaced by another architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, in 1930. Organised by Mies van der Rohe, the *Deutscher Werkbund* exhibition *Die Wohnung* [The Dwelling]), held in Stuttgart in 1927, created a model suburb *Die Weissenhof Siedlung.* This signalled that the modernist aesthetic was a universal possibility. As Jonathan Woodham in *Twentieth Century Design* states:

"The modernist forms seen in the architecture, furniture, and fittings did much to establish the notion of an 'International Style' as critics were able to see that the work of architects and designers from a number of countries, including Germany, was stylistically homogeneous."

By the early 1930s, the future of the Bauhaus, now based in Berlin under the directorship of Mies van der Rohe, was threatened by Hitler's Nazi regime; in 1933 it was closed. Following this dissolution, the emigration of staff and students helped to disseminate Bauhaus ideas in many countries. They had an enormous influence on art education throughout the Western world. Many of the Bauhaus's teachers and students escaped first to Britain and then, finding little scope for their radical ideas, moved on to America. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1923 to 1928 and edited a series of books with Gropius, founded the New Bauhaus (which became the Institute of Design) in Chicago in 1937.

The young, American architects Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock invented the term **International Style** in 1932 to disseminate knowledge of European advances. From the 1930s to the 1960s the International Style was characterised by asymmetrical composition, general cubic shapes, an absence of mouldings, expanses of window, often in horizontal bands, the use of industrial, reflective materials, and of reinforced concrete. Mies van der Rohe, considered one of the greatest masters of the style, articulated this economy of ornament and form first in his 1929 German Pavilion, for the Barcelona Exhibition, and in his campus designs for the *Illinois Institute of Technology* (1938) in Chicago.

Barcelona Pavilion

The key figures included the painters Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky and architects and designers Wilhelm Wagenfeld, Marianne Brandt, Marcel Breuer, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, Hannes Meyer, Mart Stam and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe:
Walter Gropius, 1883-1969
Wassily Kandinsky, 1866-1944
Paul Klee, 1879-1940
Marianne Brandt 1893-1983
Marcel Lajos Breuer, 1902-81
Herbert Bayer, 1900-85
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1886-1969
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1895-1946

Reading

Bauhaus Archive Berlin, Museum of Design-The Collection, Berlin: Bauhaus Archive, 1999.

Banham, R., *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, 1960.

Crouch, Christopher, *Modernism in art, design and architecture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

Forgacs, E., *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics,* Oxford, 1995.

Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.

Jervis, Simon, *Penguin Dictionary of Design and Designers*, London: Harmondsworth, 1984.

Naylor, Gillian*, The Bauhaus*, 1968.

Naylor, Gillian, *Bauhaus Reassessed,* London, 1985.

Overy, Paul, *De Stijl*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1991.

Pevsner, Nikolaus, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936. Reprinted as *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius,* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.

Rowland, Anna, *Bauhaus Source Book,* Oxford: Phaidon, 1990.

Wilk, Christopher (ed), *Modernism: Designing a new World 1914–1939*, exhibition catalogue, London: V&A, 2006.

Whitford, Frank, *Bauhaus,* London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

Master's House Dessau