

## Synopsis

The Bauhaus was the most influential modernist art school of the 20th century, one whose approach to teaching, and understanding art's relationship to society and technology, had a major impact both in Europe and the United States long after it closed. It was shaped by the 19th and early 20th centuries trends such as **Arts and Crafts** movement, which had sought to level the distinction between fine and applied arts, and to reunite creativity and manufacturing. This is reflected in the romantic medievalism of the school's early years, in which it pictured itself as a kind of medieval crafts guild. But in the mid 1920s the medievalism gave way to a stress on uniting art and industrial design, and it was this which ultimately proved to be its most original and important achievement. The school is also renowned for its faculty, which included artists **Wassily Kandinsky**, **Josef Albers**, **László Moholy-Nagy**, **Paul Klee** and **Johannes Itten**, architects **Walter Gropius** and **Ludwig Mies van der Rohe**, and designer **Marcel Breuer**.

## Key Ideas

- The motivations behind the creation of the Bauhaus lay in the 19th century, in anxieties about the soullessness of manufacturing and its products, and in fears about art's loss of purpose in

society. Creativity and manufacturing were drifting apart, and the Bauhaus aimed to unite them once again, rejuvenating design for everyday life.

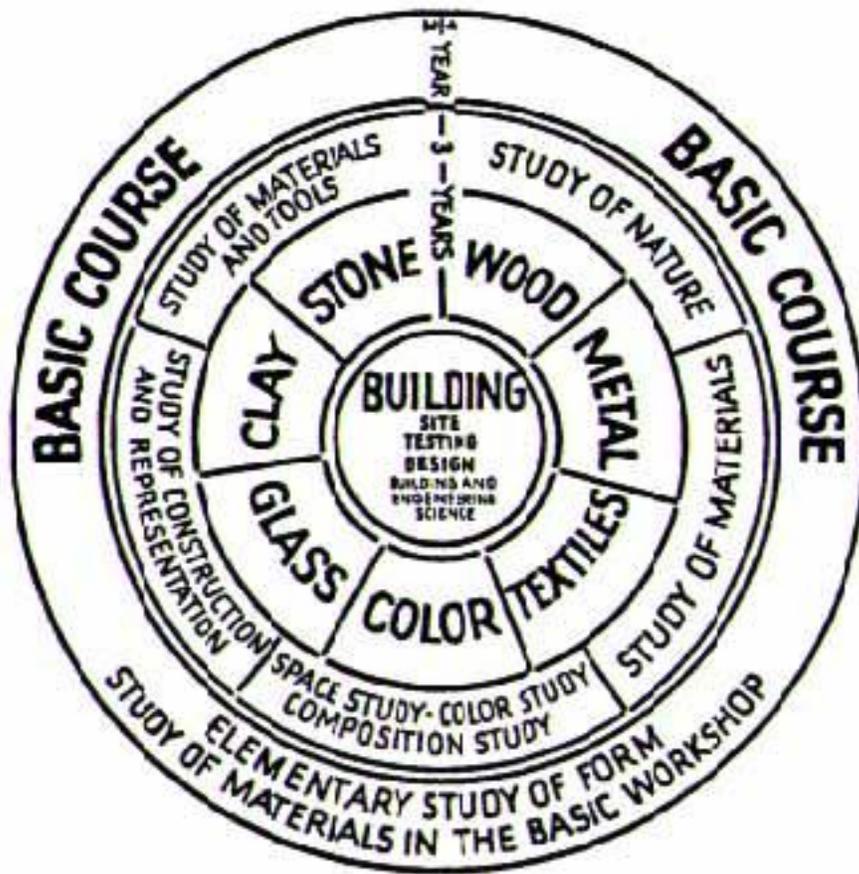
- Although the Bauhaus abandoned much of the ethos of the old academic tradition of fine art education, it maintained a stress on intellectual and theoretical pursuits, and linked these to an emphasis on practical skills, crafts and techniques that was more reminiscent of the medieval guild system. Fine art and craft were brought together with the goal of problem solving for a modern industrial society. In so doing, the Bauhaus effectively leveled the old hierarchy of the arts, placing crafts on par with fine arts such as sculpture and painting, and paving the way for many of the ideas that have inspired artists in the late 20th century.
- The stress on experiment and problem solving at the Bauhaus has proved enormously influential for the approaches to education in the arts. It has led to the 'fine arts' being rethought as the 'visual arts', and art considered less as an adjunct of the humanities, like literature or history, and more as a kind of research science.

## Beginnings

The Bauhaus, a German word meaning "house of building", was a school founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany by architect **Walter Gropius**. The school emerged out of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century desires to reunite the applied arts and manufacturing, and to reform education. These had given birth to several new schools of art and applied art throughout Germany, and it was out of two such schools that the new Bauhaus was born.

Gropius called for the school to show a new respect for craft and technique in all artistic media, and suggested a return to attitudes to art and craft once characteristic of the medieval age, before art and manufacturing had drifted far apart. Gropius envisioned the Bauhaus encompassing the totality of all artistic media, including fine art, industrial design, graphic design, typography, interior design, and architecture.

## Concepts and Styles



Central to the school's operation was its original and influential curriculum. It was described by Gropius in the manner of a wheel diagram, with the outer ring representing the *vorkurs*, a six-month preliminary course, initiated by Johannes Itten, which concentrated on practical formal analysis, in particular on the contrasting properties of forms, colors and materials. The two middle rings represented two three-year courses, the *formlehre*, focused on problems related to form, and *werklehre*, a practical workshop instruction that emphasized technical craft skills. These classes emphasized functionalism through simplified, geometric forms that allowed new designs to be reproduced with ease. At the center of the curriculum were courses specialized in building construction that led students to seek practicality and necessity through technological reproduction, with an emphasis on craft and workmanship that was lost in technological manufacturing. And the basic pedagogical approach was to eliminate competitive tendencies

and to foster individual creative potential and a sense of community and shared purpose.

The creators of this program were a fabulously talented faculty that Gropius attracted. Avant-garde painters **Johannes Itten** and **Lyonel Feininger**, and sculptor **Gerhard Marcks** were among his first appointments. Itten would be particularly important: he was central to the creation of the *Vorkurs*, and his background in **Expressionism** lent much of the tone to the early years of the school, including its emphasis on craft and its medievalism. Indeed, Itten's avant-gardism and Gropius's social concerns soon put them at odds. By the early 1920s, however, Gropius had won out; Itten left and was replaced by **Lázsló Moholy-Nagy**, who reformed *vorkurs* into a program that embraced technology and stressed its use for society. Other important appointments included **Wassily Kandinsky**, **Paul Klee**, **Georg Mucbe**, and **Oskar Schlemmer**.

In 1925, the Bauhaus moved to the German industrial town of Dessau, initiating its most fruitful period. Gropius designed a new building for the school, which has since come to be seen as a landmark of modern, functionalist architecture. It was also here that the school finally created a department of architecture, something that had been conspicuously lacking in an institution that had been premised on the union of the arts. But by 1928 Gropius was worn down by his work, and by the increasing battles with the school's critics, and he stood down, turning over the helm to Swiss architect **Hannes Meyer**. Meyer headed the architecture department, and, as an active communist, he incorporated his Marxist ideals through student organizations and classroom programs. The school continued to build in strength but criticism of Meyer's **Marxism** grew, and he was dismissed as director in 1930, and after local elections brought the Nazis to power in 1932, the school in Dessau was closed.



In the same year, 1932, it moved to Berlin, under the new direction of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, an advocate of functionalism. He struggled with far poorer resources, and a faculty that had lost some of its brightest stars; he also tried to remove politics from the school's ethos, but when the Nazis came to power in 1933, the school was closed indefinitely.

## Legacy

The Bauhaus influence travelled along with its faculty. Gropius went on to teach at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, Mies van der Rohe became Director of the College of Architecture, Planning and Design, at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Josef Albers began to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy formed what became the Institute of Design in Chicago, and Max Bill, a former Bauhaus student, opened the Institute of Design in Ulm, Germany. The latter three were all important in spreading the Bauhaus philosophy: Moholy-Nagy and Albers were particularly important in refashioning that philosophy into one suited to the climate of a modern research university in a market-oriented culture; Bill, meanwhile, played a significant role in spreading geometric abstraction throughout the world.

*Original content written by Larissa Borteh*

## QUOTES

"The ultimate aim of all artistic activity is building! ... Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all get back to craft! ... The artist is a heightened manifestation of the craftsman. ... Let us form ... a new guild of craftsmen without the class divisions that set out to raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artists! ... Let us together create the new building of the future which will be all in one: architecture and sculpture and painting." - Walter Gropius 1919

### Key Artists:



#### Walter Gropius

The German architect Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus school of art and design in Weimar Germany. Along with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, he is regarded as one of the pioneers of modern architecture.



#### Paul Klee

The Swiss-born painter Paul Klee worked in a variety of styles, including expressionism, geometric abstraction, and collage. His most famous works have a mystical quality and make use of linear and pictorial symbols.



#### Marcel Breuer

Marcel Breuer was an architect and furniture designer. He was an influential Hungarian-born modernist of Jewish descent. One of the masters of modernism, Breuer displayed interest in modular construction and simple forms. Breuer studied and taught at the Bauhaus in the 1920s.



#### Lyonel Feininger

Lyonel Feininger was a German-American painter and caricaturist. Feininger was associated Die Brücke and Blue Rider. He designed the cover for the Bauhaus 1919 manifesto. Feininger was one of the very few fine artists also to draw comic strips as a cartoonist.



#### Josef Albers

Josef Albers was a German-born American painter and teacher. Celebrated as a geometric abstractionist and influential instructor at Black Mountain College, Albers directly influenced such artists as Rauschenberg, Twombly and Ray Johnson.



#### Anni Albers

German designer and textile artist Anni Albers was the wife of Josef Albers and an influential artist in her own right. Her work reflects the Bauhaus design ethos, where she studied before moving to the United States.



### **Wassily Kandinsky**

A member of the German Expressionist group Der Blaue Reiter, and later a teacher at the Bauhaus, Kandinsky is best known for his pioneering breakthrough into expressive abstraction in 1913. His work prefigures that of the American Abstract Expressionists.



### **Gerhard Marcks**

Gerhard Marcks was a German sculptor, who is also well-known for his drawings, woodcuts, lithographs and ceramics. In 1919, when Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus, Marcks was one of the first three faculty members to be hired. He served as Form Master of the school's Pottery Workshop.



### **Naum Gabo**

Naum Gabo was a Russian sculptor associated with the Constructivist movement, and was a pioneer in Kinetic sculpture. Gabo was a key avant-gardist in post-revolutionary Russia, and later played an influential role in the De Stijl and Bauhaus schools of art.



### **Oskar Schlemmer**

Oskar Schlemmer was a German painter, sculptor, designer, and choreographer associated with the Bauhaus school. In 1923 he was hired as Master of Form at the Bauhaus theatre workshop. Schlemmer became known internationally with the première of his 'Triadisches Ballett' in Stuttgart in 1922.



### **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy**

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was a Hungarian painter, photographer and teacher at the Bauhaus School. Moholy-Nagy was influential in promoting the Bauhaus's multi- and mixed-media approaches to art, advocating for the integration of technological and industrial design elements.



### **Piet Mondrian**

Piet Mondrian, a founding member of the De Stijl movement, was a Dutch modern artist who used grids, perpendicular lines, and the three primary colors in what he deemed "Neoplastic" painting.



### **Joost Schmidt**

Artist and graphic designer Joost Schmidt was a Bauhaus teacher who is most known for designing the famous poster for the 1923 Bauhaus Exhibition in Weimar, Germany.



### Georg Mucbe

Georg Mucbe was a German artist and member of the Bauhaus. Georg Mucbe left the Bauhaus in 1927 to teach at a private art school founded three years previously by Johannes Itten. In 1960 Georg Mucbe moved to Lindau on Lake Constance, where he worked freelance as a painter and graphic artist.



### Johannes Itten

Swiss expressionist painter and color theorist Johannes Itten was an influential teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar Germany.

## Major Works:



**Artist:** Walter Gropius

**Title:** Bauhaus building in Dessau, Germany (1919-1925)

**Description:** Gropius's complex for the Bauhaus at Dessau has come to be seen as a landmark in modern, functionalist design. Although the design seems strongly unified from above, each element is clearly divided from the next, and on the ground it unfolds a wonderful succession of changing perspectives. The building consists of an asphalt tiled roof, steel framework, and reinforced concrete bricks to reduce noise and protect against the weather. In addition, a glass curtain wall – a feature that would come to be typical of modernist architecture - allows in ample quantities of light. Gropius created three wings that were arranged asymmetrically to connect different workshops and dormitories within the school. The asymmetry expressed the school's functionalist approach and yet retained an elegance that showed how beauty and practicality could be combined.



**Artist:** Marcel Breuer

**Title:** *Club Chair (Model B3) (The Wassily Chair) (1925)*

**Materials:** Tubular steel chair

**Description:** The sleek design and innovative use of materials in the "*The Wassily Chair*" are typical of the groundbreaking developments in design that made the Bauhaus famous. It is lightweight, easily moved, easily mass produced, and its components are arranged with a clarity that makes its structure immediately legible. It also employed new materials: Breuer constructed the chair using recently developed seamless-steel bent tubing that could endure physical tension without faltering. The structural design resembled Breuer's bicycle handlebars that were crafted from the seamless material. Although Wassily Kandinsky was interested in geometric abstraction at the time he was teaching at the Bauhaus, the chair only came to be popularly associated with him decades later, and by accident, when it was reissued and promoted as the Wassily Chair by an Italian manufacturer.



**Artist:** Herbert Bayer

**Title:** *Universal Bayer (1925)*

**Materials:** Typography

**Description:** Bayer was an Austrian artist and designer who had originally come to the Bauhaus as a student, and later took a teaching position when the school moved to Dessau. Many German designers attempted to encourage changes in national customs of printing in the 1920s. Hitherto, the most popular German typefaces had been influenced by medieval script, but artists such as Bayer tried to supplant them with simpler, more classical designs. This design employs a minimal, sans-serif typeface. Instead of having two alphabets, one uppercase and one lowercase, Bayer reduced the typeface to only lowercase letters. He believed the uppercase was redundant, since the distinction between upper and lower case conveyed no phonetic difference. Bayer's typeface has since become synonymous with the Bauhaus, though it was never manufactured as a metal font for printers.



**Artist:** Marianne Brandt

**Title:** *Model No. MT 49 (1927)*

**Materials:** Silver plated brass and ebony

**Collection:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art

**Description:** An understanding of fundamental geometric forms lies behind this design, resulting in a tea-pot which is less a feat of fine craftsmanship than a demonstration of how basic forms can be combined to produce beautiful objects for everyday use. The simple elegance of Brandt's tea infuser exemplifies the functionality of Bauhaus design. As the sole woman in the metal workshop, Brandt mastered the art of design through the experimental Bauhaus philosophy and approach. The semi-circle handle and silver cylindrical spout are inventive in design and can be reproduced with ease.



**Artist:** Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

**Title:** *Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light Space Modulator)* (1930)

**Materials:** Aluminum, steel, nickel-plated brass, other metals, plastic, wood, and electric motor

**Collection:** The Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy worked with engineer Istvan Sebok and technician Otto Ball to realize the *Light Prop*. Uniting the artist's enthusiasm for the look of machines, and for material innovation, it is one of the most famous early examples of kinetic art. It went on to be presented in many different ways: as a free-standing and immobile sculpture, as a device for experimental theatre, and as the protagonist of a short experimental film, in which it is shot from different vantage points. The film captures the reflections and shadows created by the spinning sculpture, at times giving the impression of a functioning machine, a factory, or even an urban landscape.



**Artist:** Josef Albers

**Title:** *Homage to the Square: Dissolving/vanishing* (1951)

**Materials:** Oil on masonite

**Collection:** Los Angeles County Museum of Art

**Description:** Josef Albers described his most famous series, *Homage to the Square*, as "platters to serve color." He began the series in 1949 and worked on it until his death in 1976. This early version demonstrates his systematic approach to investigating the

optical effects of colors. With this series, Albers explored how colors change depending on their placement within the composition. Although the series was created several years after the Bauhaus movement, the work is typical of the experimental, modernist approach to form and color that underpinned Bauhaus teaching. Teachers at the school believed that colors and forms could be reduced to essentials and analyzed as separate components. That analysis would yield understanding about the character and effects of these components, and that understanding would result in better design. In 1999, Howard Singerman wrote: "Over and over again in the teaching of art at the Bauhaus and in its teaching in America, the re-creation of design as vision is represented by the field or, more familiarly, by the picture plane as the gridded, ordered, law-bound rectangle with which, and on which, art fundamentals begin. The rectangle marks the teaching of modernism as the visual arts, displacing and containing the human figure that stood at the center of the academic fine arts."