

## QUICK VIEW:

### Synopsis

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy is arguably one of the greatest influences on post-war art education in the United States. A modernist and a restless experimentalist from the outset, the Hungarian-born artist was shaped by **Dada**, **Suprematism**, **Constructivism**, and debates about photography. When **Walter Gropius** invited him to **Bauhaus**, in Dessau, he took over the school's crucial preliminary course, and gave it a more practical, experimental and technological bent. He later delved into various fields, from commercial design to theatre set design; he made films and worked as a magazine art director. But his greatest legacy was the version of Bauhaus teaching he brought to the United States, where he established the highly influential Institute of Design in Chicago.

### Key Ideas

- Moholy-Nagy believed that humanity could only defeat the fracturing experience of modernity - only feel whole again - if it harnessed the potential of new technologies. Artists should transform into designers, and through specialization and experiment find the means to answer humanity's needs.
- His interest in photography encouraged his belief that artists' understanding of vision had to specialize and modernize. Artists used to be dependant on the tools of perspective drawing, but with the advent of the camera they had to learn to see again. They had to renounce the classical training of previous centuries, which encouraged them to think about the history of art and to reproduce old formulas, and move on to experimenting with vision and thus stretching human capacity to make it adequate to new tasks.
- Moholy-Nagy's interest in qualities of space, time, and light endured throughout his career and transcended the very different media he employed. Whether he was painting, or creating "photograms" (photographs made without the use of a

camera or negative), or crafting sculptures made of transparent plexiglass, he was ultimately interested in studying how all these basic elements interact.

## DETAILED VIEW:

### Childhood

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was born in a small farming town in southern Hungary. His father abandoned the family when he was young, and his mother took Laszlo and his younger brother to live with their grandmother. "I lived my childhood years in a terrible great quietness," he later wrote. He left for Budapest in 1913 to study law, but his studies were interrupted when he was drafted into the Army as an artillery officer in 1916. He experienced the horror of war on the Russian and Italian fronts, which remained with him for the rest of his life. He drew daily during this time as a soldier, sketching field life, his fellow officers and the civilians he encountered. He discovered a passion for drawing, and though he finished his law degree after the war ended, he had already decided to become a painter.

### Early Years

Moholy-Nagy applied to the Hungarian Communist Party after the revolution of 1918-1919, but he was rejected due to his bourgeois background. He joined the group MA ("Today"), which believed in the revolutionary potential of art. His style ranged widely in this early period. He painted landscapes with abstract elements and used bright colors typical of Hungarian folk art to depict technological subjects in a **Cubist** style.

Late in 1919 he left for Vienna, a cosmopolitan city with an avant-garde art scene, but finding it too genteel he quickly moved on to Berlin, where his ideas began to crystallize. He painted completely abstract works influenced by **Dada**, **Suprematism** and **Russian Constructivism**. He used letters as compositional devices and created photomontages which resembled those of **Kurt Schwitters** - though his serious and passionate nature did not embrace the sarcasm of Dada. Moholy-Nagy was also intrigued by the paintings of **Kazimir Malevich**, although he did not accept the Russian's spirituality. **El Lissitzky** and the Constructivists were his primary influences at this time. He experimented with transparency in color as he overlapped geometric shapes, believing in the Constructivist affirmation of art as a powerful social force which could teach workers to live in harmony with new technology.

Although Moholy-Nagy considered himself primarily a painter throughout much of his career, he also produced a great deal of photography. His first wife, Lucia, whom he met in Berlin in 1920, was a talented photographer and went on to record the Bauhaus years with her camera. They experimented with "photograms" (cameraless photographs in which light-sensitive paper is exposed directly to light), which allowed Moholy-Nagy to explore light and shade, transparency and form. While Moholy-Nagy was not the first to create this type of photograph, he coined the name for the technique. In 1922, his success as a painter secured him a one-man show at Galerie der Sturm, the most popular gallery in Berlin. A year later he received an invitation to teach at the **Bauhaus** from **Walter Gropius**.

## Mature Period



From 1923 to 1928 Moholy-Nagy taught at the Bauhaus, an influential school of architecture and industrial design that provided students with a groundwork in all of the visual arts. His recruitment to the faculty marked a turning point in the school's direction since he was given control of the school's crucial preliminary course, or *Vorkurs*. Rather than endorsing the individualism of Expressionist painting, he introduced a new emphasis on the unity of art and technology. Moholy-Nagy's gregarious disposition made him a natural teacher. He taught the metal workshop, taking over from **Paul Klee**, which designed a line of lighting fixtures under his direction that are still in use today.

He also co-edited the periodical *Bauhaus* with Gropius, who became his new mentor and lifelong friend. They co-published the *Bauhausbucher*, the fourteen books that acted as the manifesto of the Bauhaus faculty. He designed the typography for the books as well as wrote two influential ones himself. *Painting, Photography, and Film* was published in 1924. The second book, and the fourteenth in the series, *From Material to Architecture*, was published in 1929 (this was translated as *The New Vision* in 1932), and offers a summary of Moholy-Nagy's *Vorkurs*.

Political pressure in the late 1920s prompted Moholy-Nagy to resign from the Bauhaus. Next, he explored a variety of creative fields to support his family, no longer identifying himself as a painter. Socialists and Nationalists alike attacked his controversial stage sets for the Krolloper, an experimental opera house in Berlin, for the overt use of machinery that dwarfed the human figure onstage.

Moholy-Nagy expressed himself more fully in the eleven films he made between 1926 and 1936. His first film, *Berlin Still-Life*, follows a documentary style he often employed. However, it was his famous *Light-Play, Black-White-Gray* of 1930 that was distinctly avant-garde. In 1932, he and Lucia separated, and he married his second wife, Sibyl, whom he had met at a film production studio. Their daughter Hattula was born in 1933.

Political tension and rise to power of the National Socialists in 1933 led Moholy-Nagy and his wife to emigrate. They moved temporarily to Holland in 1934, then to London in 1935. Moholy-Nagy discovered an international group of artists and intellectuals who had also fled there, finding many opportunities for industrial design. However, he was not satisfied with the situation in London as he truly sought an artist community and a chance

to re-create the Bauhaus. His second daughter, Claudia, was born amidst his busy work life and just before an opportunity to return to Berlin. He was asked to record the Olympic Games of 1936, but quit the assignment after two weeks, disgusted to find that his revolutionary friends had become Nazis. In 1937, a door opened for the artist when he was recommended by Gropius to direct a new art school in Chicago.

### Late Years and Death



From 1937 to 1947, Moholy-Nagy dedicated himself to teaching as much as to his own work. He negotiated a five-year contract as director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, but the school went bankrupt after its first year. While the faculty stood by him, Moholy-Nagy faced personal attacks by the Executive Committee, which instilled his distrust of industrialists. Against all odds, he re-opened the school in 1939 as the School of Design, and recruited a board of art supporters who agreed with his educational philosophy, including Gropius, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and philosopher John Dewey. Moholy-Nagy and the faculty supported themselves through other work and taught at the School out of devotion. The start of World War II presented new challenges as the draft depleted the school of both faculty and students. However, Moholy-Nagy's inventiveness kept the school alive, and he found ways for the school to contribute to the war effort through ideas for camouflage and other ventures.

Moholy-Nagy worked tirelessly at a multitude of projects, including teaching and administering the school, dictating a new book, *Vision in Motion*, and working in industrial design to support his family. In 1944, a board formed by industrialists friendly to the educational ideas of the school offering to support its administration and finances to the newly named Institute of Design.

Moholy-Nagy, however, became seriously ill and was diagnosed with leukemia in November 1945. After X-ray treatment, he returned to work as diligently as ever. In November 1946, he attended the Museum of Modern Art's *Conference on Industrial Design as a New Profession*. This conference was his last stand for his ideas of art education, especially the idea that art should guide industry rather than industrialists dictate design. He died soon after his return from Chicago from internal hemorrhaging.

### Legacy

Moholy-Nagy's influence on American art was felt broadly in several disciplines. Along with the other emigres from the Bauhaus, he succeeded in instilling a modern aesthetic into American design. His impact was felt most strongly by his students, but his use of modern materials and technology impressed other young designers, including Charles Eames, who visited the New Bauhaus while studying at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Moholy-Nagy's influence on photography is felt equally through his writings as through his photographs and photomontages. His first Bauhaus book established photography as a fine art equal to painting. His experiments in light and shadow reinforced photography's value as a subjective medium, and therefore an artistic medium, rather than simply a means to document reality.

Recent years have brought international attention to Moholy-Nagy's achievements. with several major museums organizing retrospectives, including Tate Modern, the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, and the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago celebrating the impact of his work on American art.

### ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's main influencers, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

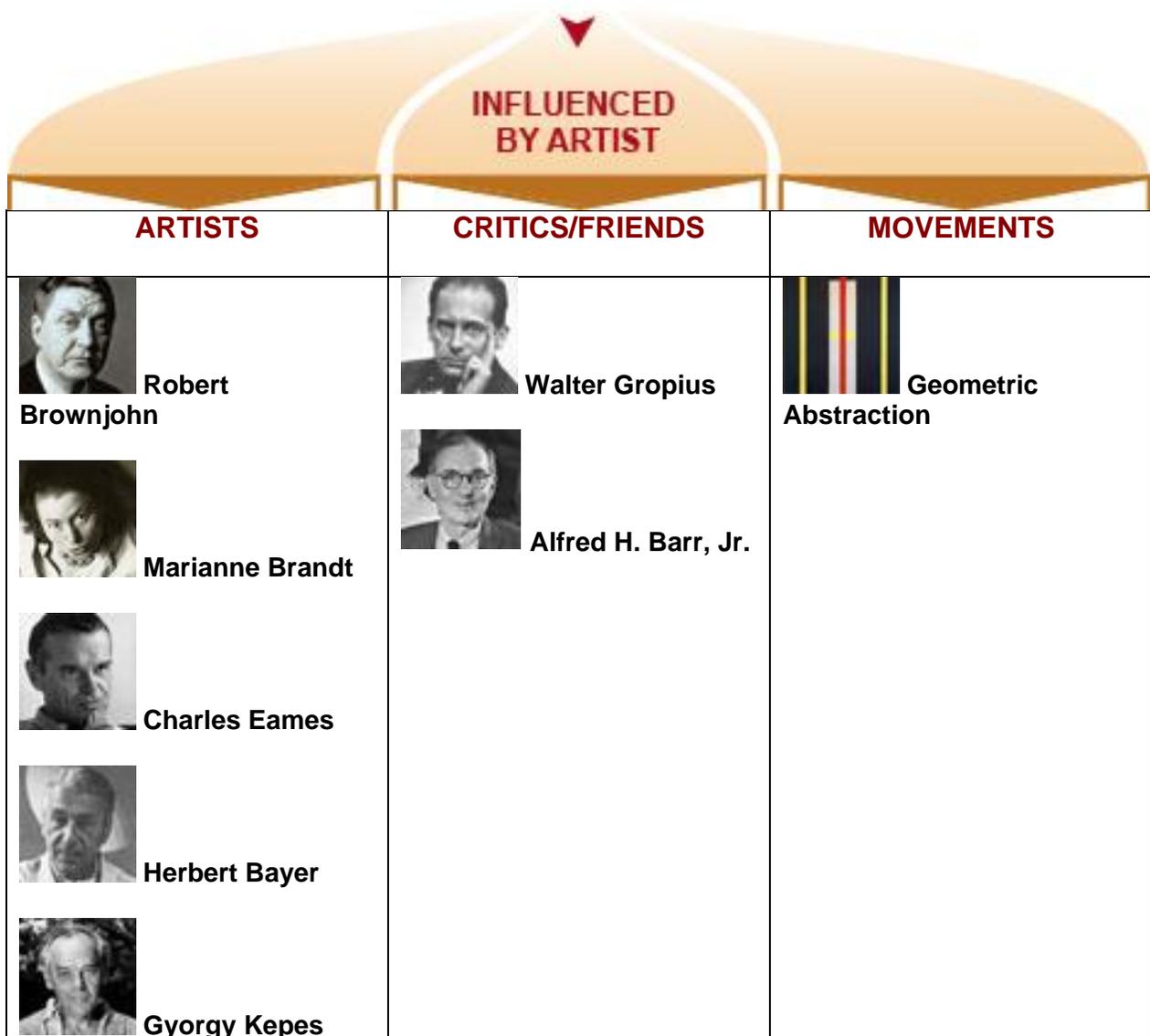
ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <b>Kurt Schwitters</b>	 <b>Lajos Kassak</b>	 <b>Cubism</b>
 <b>El Lissitzky</b>	 <b>Paul Scheerbart</b>	 <b>Constructivism</b>
 <b>Kazimir Malevich</b>	 <b>Walter Gropius</b>	 <b>Suprematism</b>
 <b>Piet Mondrian</b>	 <b>Herbert Read</b>	 <b>Dada</b>

INFLUENCES  
ON ARTIST





**Laszlo Moholy-Nagy**  
Years Worked: 1917 - 1946



**Quotes**

"The reality of our century is technology: the invention, construction and maintenance of machines. To be a user of machines is to be of the spirit of this century. Machines have

replaced the transcendental spiritualism of past eras."

"The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as the pen."

"Designing is not a profession but an attitude. Design has many connotations. It is the organization of materials and processes in the most productive way, in a harmonious balance of all elements necessary for a certain function. It is the integration of technological, social, and economical requirements, biological necessities, and the psychological effects of materials, shape, color, volume and space. Thinking in relationships."

"Everybody is talented."



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### **Major Works:**



**Title:** Photogram

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy was fascinated by light throughout his career, and photograms offered the opportunity to experiment with the subtlety of light and shade. To create the photogram, he laid everyday objects on light-sensitive paper before exposing them to light. The brightness of the object's silhouette depended on the exposure time - a longer exposure meant a brighter image. In this photogram a paintbrush overlays Moholy-Nagy's hands, perhaps slyly suggesting the photogram is a medium of art that rivals painting.

**Year:** 1926

**Materials:** Gelatin silver print

**Collection:** Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Title:** Composition A 19

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy's first abstract paintings featured opaque geometric shapes reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist paintings, yet *Composition A 19* shows him developing beyond that style into new interests in light and the transparency of forms. The cross motif that appeared in earlier paintings is here enlarged and doubled, the red and black crossbeams overlapping each other with varying levels of translucency.

**Year:** 1927

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Private Collection



**Title:** *Bauhausbucher 8, Malerei, Fotografie, Film*

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy was responsible for the typography and graphic design of all but three of the Bauhaus books. His primary concern for the design was the rational organization of space. He employed clean lines and typeface to achieve this effect. These designs were his first real exploration of graphic design, which he pursued further in posters and ads after he resigned from the Bauhaus.

**Year:** 1927

**Materials:** Letterpress printed book

**Collection:** Museum of Modern Art



**Title:** Lightplay Black-White-Gray, 1930

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy worked with engineer Istvan Sebok and technician Otto Ball

to realize his vision for *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, also known as the *Light Space Modulator*, the sculpture featured in this film. 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 as a free-standing, immobile sculpture, as a device in experimental theatre, and in this 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.

**Year:** 1930

**Materials:** 16 mm black and white film, silent

**Collection:** Hattula Moholy-Nagy



**Title:** Stage Set, Tales of Hoffmann

**Description:** Moholy-Nagy's first set design after leaving the Bauhaus was for the Krolloper's production of the *Tales of Hoffmann*. The opera is typically produced with lavish sets and costumes, but Moholy-Nagy's simple design defies expectations in its use of contemporary urban elements such as stainless steel cots and plain white walls. Moholy-Nagy stated in an interview, "Let us test the staying power of so-called great music by having fun with its trappings. If we insist on grand opera, let us see it as contemporaries."

**Year:** 1929

**Materials:** Silver gelatin print

**Collection:** George Eastman House



**Title:** Double Loop

**Description:** After exploring light through the media of painting, film and photography, Moholy-Nagy investigated its properties through transparent sculpture. He abandoned the geometric forms of his earlier work for biomorphic curves. Since his incisions in the plexiglass could not be corrected, his swooping lines were especially daring. Moholy-Nagy was seriously ill when he made Double Loop, but the freedom of the dynamic form betrays nothing of his doubt or fear of death.

**Year:** 1946

**Materials:** Plexiglass

**Collection:** Museum of Modern Art