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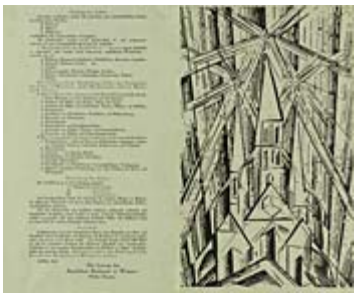


Lyonel Feininger, cover illustration, and Walter Gropius, text
Programm des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar (Program of the state Bauhaus in Weimar; also known as the Bauhaus Manifesto)
April 1919
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Katya Kallsen

Walter Gropius

THE BAUHAUS IN HISTORY
by Ben Davis

What does the Bauhaus mean to us, today?

This, more than anything else, is the question provoked by the recent "Bauhaus" show at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as the various other exhibitions and symposia that marked the 90th anniversary of the legendary art school last year. In *Artforum*, K. Michael Hays answered the question by saying that the Bauhaus represented a belief in the unifying power of geometry, something we no longer can share. In the January *Art in America*, Joan Ockman replies that the school may indeed still be relevant -- but only the Expressionist early period, so different than what we normally associate with the term "Bauhaus."

The Bauhaus was more than just an idea, of course, it was an actual institution. That institution's historical background figures in each of these accounts -- to a point. In general, however, what strikes me is how bloodless most descriptions of the Bauhaus are. History appears more or less the way it did at the MoMA show, as a timeline outside the galleries; that is, as ornament, not as integral to understanding the meaning of the artwork. To truly recover the spark of relevance of Bauhaus practice, you need to thoroughly dig into what happened in Germany in the years 1919-1933 -- to put the history back into art history, so to speak.

Four giant facts that loomed over the founding of the Bauhaus in 1919:

* World War I, 1914-1918. The War killed some two million Germans, and left Germany's economy -- then the world's second largest -- in shambles. The conflict had begun in 1914 with substantial working-class support, on all sides. It ended with German soldiers in revolt against their officers, and a deep hatred of the leaders who had initiated the hostilities. Many Bauhaus students were veterans of the war. Walter Gropius, its first director, served on the Western Front, was wounded, and won two Iron Crosses.

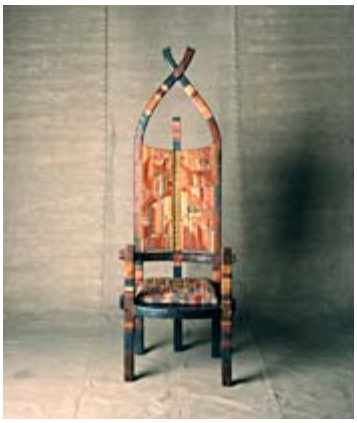
* The Russian Revolution of 1917. Growing out of war fatigue, a successful Marxist-led revolution on Germany's doorstep overthrew a much-loathed Czar and replaced him, for heroic moments, with history's most far-ranging experiment in worker-run government (soon to be strangled by civil war and reaction). The Russian example ignited a wide-spread enthusiasm for social experiment and revolutionary politics, in Germany and elsewhere.

* The German Revolution of 1918. In November, the discredited German Kaiser fled the country; the German Empire became the German Republic. Inspired by the October Revolution, the next months saw power pass over into a woolly collection of grassroots workers and soldiers councils across the country. Authority was soon consolidated, however, in a National Assembly dominated by the disastrously centrist German Social Democratic Party (SPD), socialist in name, but in practice bent on placating a still-monarchist right-wing. The workers council movement, however, persisted -- and was

Johannes Itten

The Bauhaus band

Walter Gropius' *Monument to the March Dead*



Marcel Breuer with textile by Gunta Stölzl
"African" or "Romantic" chair
1921

wildly influential with artists; Gropius became head of the architect-led Working Council on the Arts in February 1919, which issued an "Appeal to the Artists of All Countries."

* Months of civil war between a still-monarchist right and a socialist-inspired left in 1918-1919. The police and army were so penetrated by radical agitation that the SPD government fell back on the "Freikorps," irregulars formed from the rump of the German officer corps, to maintain order. In January 1919, a rebellion in Berlin, the "Spartacus Uprising," ended with the murder of the left's most popular speaker, Karl Liebknecht, and its most capable thinker, Rosa Luxemburg. In February, Freikorps troops used artillery and mass arrests to crush the workers movement in Bremen, on the northwest coast, and the Ruhr, in the west, then went into central Germany to liquidate various organs of popular power. In March, there was another upheaval in Berlin. In April, Bavaria declared itself an independent "Soviet Republic" under workers rule, and was violently put down (becoming subsequently the cradle of Nazism).

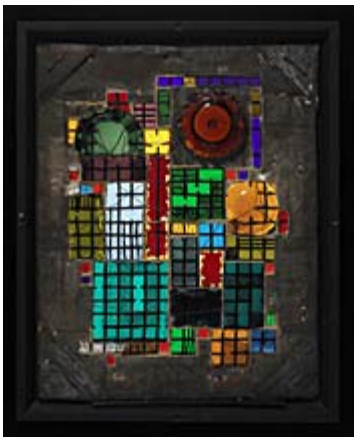
These were the cheerful headlines that formed the backdrop for the birth of the Bauhaus. Imagine: Walter Gropius issued the Bauhaus Manifesto in *April 1919,* when the hope in the new ultra-democratic structures was still running hot, when the post-war economic chaos was acute, when class war was an inescapable fact -- Weimar, where the Bauhaus was to have its home, had recently been sealed off for a radius of 10 kilometers by the government, to secure it against the left!

Gropius' call to students is not an explicitly political document, but read in context it echoes with the utopian hopes of the era. The Bauhaus' founding appeal is not the clarion call to industrial design that one might expect, given the school's legacy -- just the opposite, in fact: It denounces "designers and decorators," and declares "Art is not a profession." The manifesto got its topical relevance by decrying the "isolation" of the contemporary artist. "The complete building is the final aim of the visual arts," the opening lines trumpet. "Their noblest function was once the decoration of buildings. Today they exist in isolation, from which they can be rescued only through the conscious, cooperative effort of all craftsmen." The intense interest generated by such a holistic art program only makes sense when understood against a background of social disintegration; the fact that the manifesto took a stand against "salon art" and for "cooperative" practice meant it harmonized with the contemporary revolutionary rhetoric. In later days, Bauhaus recruits would universally remember the woodcut that illustrated the manifesto -- a shining, Expressionistic church by Lyonel Feininger -- as the "cathedral of socialism."

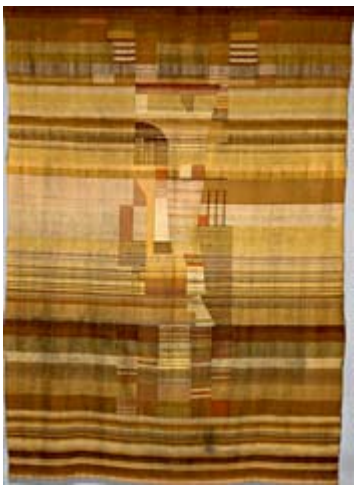
In his most explicit nod to Marxist language, Gropius declares, "Let us create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist." The irreconcilable struggle between capital and labor, right and left, was thus displaced onto an opposition between fine art and handicraft, substantially easier to resolve. This doctrine found practical outlet in the cooperative teaching of the early Bauhaus, with each workshop co-taught by a "technical master," who taught practical skills, and a "form master," i.e. an artist.

The Bauhaus was always an elite phenomenon -- at its height, it drew about 200 students a term. But with its promise of a mission for the arts that responded to the hardships of the day, Gropius attracted some of the brightest minds, as both students and staff: Josef Albers, Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, Marianne Brandt, Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, Lothar Schreyer, Gunta Stolzl. In a country that traditionally revered academic credentials, only Itten had any prior teaching experience

Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin
Photo by Hartwig Klappert



Josef Albers
Scherbe ins Gitterbild (Glass fragments in grid picture)
ca. 1921
Albers Foundation/Art Resource
Photo by Tim Nighswander



Gunta Stölzl
Tapestry
1922-23
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Michael A. Nedzweski

Josef Hartwig
Chess set (model I)
1922
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Imaging Department

among the first instructors. In scholarly accounts, it is customary to dwell on the naiveté of early Bauhaus pedagogy, such as Kandinsky's classes where students were tasked with uncovering supposedly natural harmonies between shapes and colors. These are often framed as part of the "original sin" of modernism, with its supposedly foolhardy hunger for universals (this is the tack the Hal Foster takes in the MoMA catalogue). But such were the times; as in all politically turbulent periods -- think of the '60s -- people turned to all kinds of strange spiritual solutions to the problems around them.

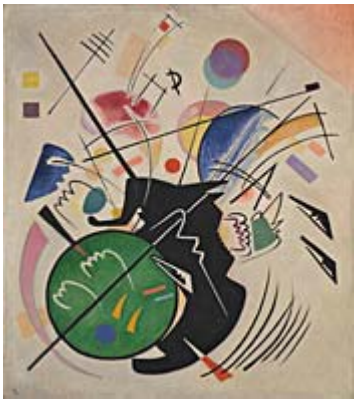
Thus, the free-thinking Bauhaus proved a natural point of attraction for members of the "Wandervogel" back-to-nature movement; Alfred Arndt recalls tramping into Weimar in 1921, running into a one-time fellow traveler ensconced at the Bauhaus and falling under the school's spell. The most pronounced spiritual ideology, however, flourished around Itten, the priestly artist whom Gropius recruited to teach the school's famous *Vorkurs* foundation course. In his class, students learned to get in touch with their creative selves, mediating on the "inner forms" of Old Master paintings, and making junk constructions intended to put them in tune with the logic of materials. Itten was a disciple of the mystical doctrine known as "Mazdaznan," involving complete purging of the self of all negative thoughts. A large circle of students was indoctrinated in these new-agey practices, with Itten leading them in group breathing exercises, fasts, and even the use of a "needle machine" that punctured the skin to release impurities. The early Bauhaus kitchen prepared food according to Mazdaznan doctrines (when there was food at all; students often went to bed hungry).

So it was that the preppy, functionalist Gropius found himself presiding over a sort of hippy-dippy esthetic commune, awash in exotic and esoteric ideologies. "Boys had long hair, girls short skirts," remembers Tut Schlemmer. "No collars or stockings were worn, which was shocking and extravagant then." The students played in clamorous, experimental bands. They created lantern festivals and parades for which they crafted exquisitely impractical art kites. In general, they scandalized the population of provincial Weimar.

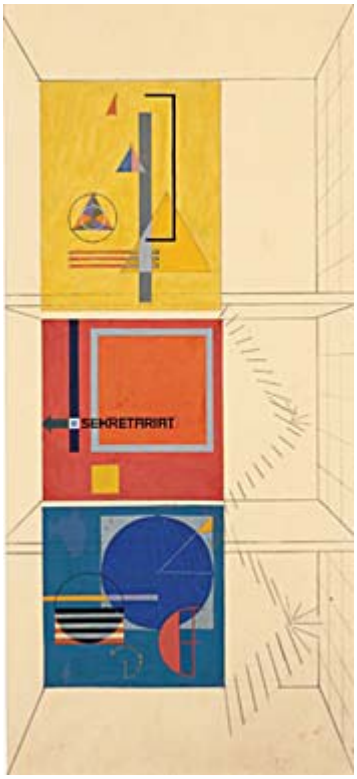
The state of Thuringia, where Weimar was situated, was not even fully formed until 1920; it was wracked by political confrontations between left and right. Fractious politics meant that Gropius' experiment had to constantly justify itself before town leaders, while at the same time facing the unstinting, militant hostility of the era's own version of the tea-party movement. In 1919, locals had already branded the Bauhaus as "Spartacist-Jewish." In early 1920, a newspaper announcement trumpeted the following: "Men and women of Weimar! Our old and famous Art School is in danger!" A "public demonstration" against the Bauhaus was called for January 22, 1920.

In March 1920, an attempt at a Freikorps-led coup in Berlin -- the so-called "Kapp Putsch" -- galvanized the German left. A nationwide general strike shut down the country, thwarting the coup leaders. In Weimar, nine workers lost their lives defending the Republic. Bauhaus students attended their burial in force with colorfully painted signs and leftist slogans, much to the dismay of Gropius, who was anxious to maintain a neutral profile. And yet, later that year, Gropius himself contributed the winning design for a tribute to the slain workers, *Monument to the March Dead*, an abstract concrete lightning bolt -- a landmark of Expressionist architecture that may well itself have finalized the idea of avant-garde-as-Bolshevik in the minds of Weimar's fuming burghers.

The Bauhaus Idea always represented a compromise between conflicting tendencies; a fanciful, utopian spirit was balanced against a more practical-minded, forward-looking character. Gropius owed his position as director to the fact that his persona seemed naturally



Vasily Kandinsky
Schwarze Form (Black form)
1923
Private collection
Courtesy Neue Galerie New York
Photo by Jeffrey Sturges



Herbert Bayer
Wall-painting design for the stairwell of the Weimar Bauhaus building on the occasion of the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition
1923
Collection Merrill C. Berman
Photo by Jim Frank

to mediate these conflicting tendencies -- the previous director of the Arts and Crafts School, the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde, selected Gropius as replacement because he was a proponent of modern industrial architecture, but also opposed the more extreme ideology that completely subordinated art to design. However, as his school's situation became more embattled, the tensions between these two poles sharpened. In 1922, as condition of renewed funding of the Bauhaus, the Weimar government insisted that the school produce a show to "give account of" its accomplishments.

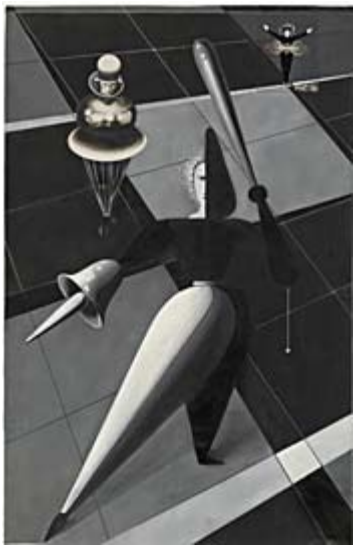
It was under these pressures that the Bauhaus began to make its turn towards industrial design and mass production in earnest, away from the pageantry of Expressionism and Arts and Crafts. It was the extreme situation that resulted in the sharpness of the detour, which was really a repudiation of the entire spirit of the early Bauhaus: The post-war crisis was deepening; 1923 would be remembered as the "Year of Hunger." The post-war inflation, which had been bad enough, became hyper-inflation -- money ceased to have any meaning from day to day; by the end of the year, the government was issuing two-trillion-mark notes. The all-important Bauhaus showcase of 1923 would coincide with the apogee of this crisis.

"Art and Technology -- A New Unity" was the new slogan that Gropius hit upon to win over the town; "Exactly what we didn't want," Feininger told Gerhard Marcks upon seeing the slogan plastered in the Weimar train station for the Bauhaus exhibition. Yet Feininger understood the pragmatic logic of the shift: "One thing is sure -- unless we can produce 'results' to show the outside world and win over the 'industrialists', the future of the Bauhaus looks very bleak indeed," he wrote to his wife Julia. "We now have to aim at earnings -- at sales and mass production! But that's anathema to all of us and a serious obstacle to the development process." Itten, with his spiritualist outlook, was replaced by the Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a leftist himself of a Constructivist bent who had fled Hungary after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, that country's own short-lived experiment in workers' government, in 1919.

Walter Gropius' 1923 essay, "The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus," offers a window into his thinking at this juncture. It is a transitional document, representing the architect's attempt to reconcile the original rhetoric of the school with a new program that might appeal to backers. It maintains a vaguely left-ish rhetoric, proclaiming that as long as the "machine-economy. . . remains an end in itself rather than a means of freeing the intellect from the burden of mechanical labor, the individual will remain enslaved and society will remain disordered." But this is immediately followed by a statement -- incredible given the economic circumstances -- that "[t]he solution depends on a change in the individual's attitude toward his work, not on the betterment of his outward circumstances, and the acceptance of this principal is of decisive importance for new creative work." As one perceptive critic stated at the time, "A blunter rejection of Marxism and kindred Utopias is inconceivable."

It was too late, however, to save the Bauhaus at Weimar. Economic hardship, combined with a French occupation of the Ruhr over German non-payment of reparations, was ideal for the growth of cultural reaction. The Nazis had their first big electoral success in Thuringia; the SPD government that the Bauhaus relied on for support was deposed. The school's plight became something of a cause célèbre, with luminaries like Peter Behrens, Albert Einstein, Mies van der Rohe, Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schonberg signing a letter decrying the assault on the school. But by the end of 1924, the writing was on the wall.

And yet, by the time it had to pack up shop, the German currency's value had been stabilized by massive American loans (the "Dawes



Oskar Schlemmer
Study for "The Triadic Ballet (Das Triadische Ballett)"
ca. 1924
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Marianne Brandt
Coffee and tea set
1924
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin
Photo by Fred Kraus

Paul Klee
Maibild (May picture)
1925
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Plan"), economic activity began slowly to perk up in Germany, and the publicity of the forced closing had proved salutary. Different localities bid against one another to host a relocated Bauhaus. Dessau, an industrial village that was home to the Junkers aircraft manufacturing plant, won out. It was in Dessau, under slightly improved economic circumstances, that Gropius was to build his famous Bauhaus building, and the classic ideology of the school was crystallized under Maholy-Nagy's spell. The co-teaching scheme was dropped. A Bauhaus Corporation was founded to market products, with wallpaper eventually being its most successful money-earner. The wood, stained glass, bookbinding and pottery workshops all passed into history. The first actual architectural workshop was eventually established. The communal fraternization between students and teachers of the early Bauhaus was replaced with glorified "work study," with pupils serving as cheap labor to help with product lines.

Still, there is a simultaneously idealistic and pragmatic tone to Bauhaus design ideology that is the result of a nexus of factors very specific to the mid-'20s Germany. The tremendously influential Russian avant-garde had left the indelible impression that left-wing art meant orienting on the factory; industrial design could thus serve as channel for the optimism of hopeful Bauhaus youth (in point of fact, market relations had already been restored in Russia under the New Economic Policy, and the USSR was beginning its long, tragic slide towards bureaucracy and terror). On the other hand, Germany had been saved by American capital, and "Americanism" -- thrift, efficiency, business -- became fashionable. Herbert Bayer's plans for fantastical urban pop-up architecture, clearly inspired by Soviet propaganda kiosks, but intended to feature advertising for various consumer products, stand as a symbol of this odd conjuncture, when the quintessential capitalist use of art -- product and graphic design -- could be considered radically socialist.

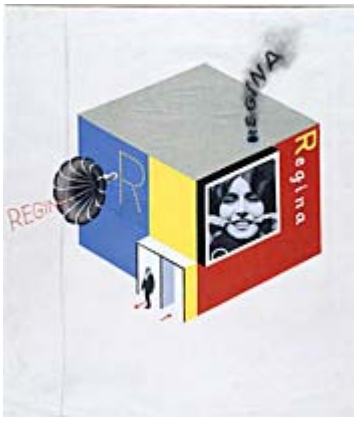
The Bauhaus was founded with a utopian program for architecture in a wrecked country where little actual building was being done. With the stabilization, the demand for professional labor picked up considerably. In 1928, Gropius decided to leave the school he had founded to continue his career as an architect, putting in his place Hannes Meyer, a Swiss veteran of the communal architecture movement, who would carry forward the torch of progressive design -- though somewhat less diplomatically than Gropius (Maholy-Nagy couldn't stand him, and resigned).

And yet, for both the Bauhaus and for German society in general, the contradictions of the immediate post-war era had not been resolved, but only covered over with a big pile of money from the United States. In 1929, the U.S.'s own economic contradictions erupted into the open, as the orgy of speculation of the '20s came undone in the Great Crash. The U.S. needed its loans back. Crisis returned in Germany with a vengeance. Unemployment skyrocketed. A thoroughly embittered and disoriented German electorate turned towards Hitler's National Socialists.

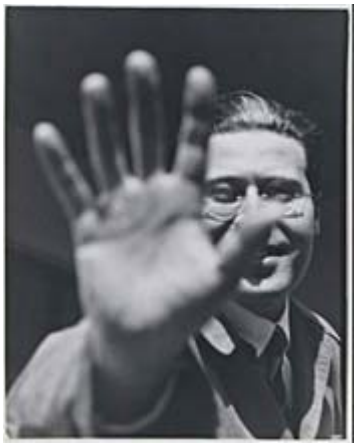
The rest is well known. As John Willett says, with the rise of the Nazis, "the entire modern movement in Germany was not merely doomed but damned." The compromise between free-thinking avant-garde ideology and big industry on which the Dessau Bauhaus was based fell apart. Hannes Meyer's socialist sympathies caused him to be forced out as director of the Bauhaus, to be replaced by the relatively apolitical Mies van der Rohe. Mies would try to hold the famous institution together as it was hounded out of Dessau in 1932 by the Nazis, reviving it in makeshift quarters in Berlin, before it was finally closed as Hitler came to power in 1933. But it mattered little, by this point, how the Bauhaus positioned itself: To the Nazis, says Willett, "any form of association with the SPD or the November

Walter Gropius' Bauhaus Building, Dessau

Walter Gropius
Bauhaus Master Houses, Dessau. Isometric site plan
1925-26
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Imaging Department



Herbert Bayer
Design for a multimedia building
1924
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Imaging Department



Lucia Moholy
László Moholy-Nagy
1925-26
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Copy photograph © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Revolution was 'Marxist,' just as any innovatory ideas in the arts fell under the heading of Art- or Cultural-'Bolshevism.'"

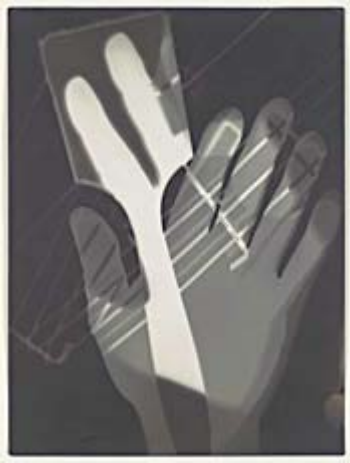
* * *

That is the story of the Bauhaus. What, at last, is the interest in returning to this history today? The Bauhaus was formed in the shadow of a potential Marxist revolution; its founding statement offered the school as solution to many of the same problems that also led to the popularity of revolutionary ideology -- the chaos left in the wake of an imperialist war, social disintegration, human alienation. Instead of political revolution, however, the original Bauhaus adherents looked to the Arts and Crafts tradition, itself inspired by the older utopian socialism of people like Owen and Fourier, who believed that they could dream up elegantly designed communal schemes, islands of unalienated labor in a capitalist world.

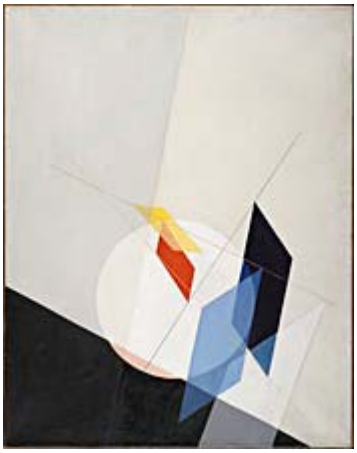
In fact, utopian thinking was one of the three great traditions of European thought that Marx had sought to synthesize (the other two being German idealism and English political economy). Such schemes were a genuine inspiration, but if you read the *Communist Manifesto*, you find "utopian socialism" critiqued. For these reformers, Marx and Engels write, "Historical action is to yield to their personal inventive action; historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones; and the gradual, spontaneous class organization of the proletariat to an organization of society especially contrived by these inventors." Closer to hand in the Germany of 1919, the martyred Rosa Luxemburg had developed similar objections in her pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*, with respect to the vogue for worker's co-operative organizations in Germany: The great flaw of communal schemes was that they tried to find a way around the reality of class struggle; without confronting the actual divisions of society, inevitably, utopian schemes either remain dilettantish and marginal, or they adapt themselves to the needs of the wealthy, or they are crushed.

In essence, the history of the Bauhaus is the history of an institution passing inexorably through these three stages. It always remained something of a progressive phenomenon, in spirit; there is a pivot point that allowed the school to swing round from the early mystical attachment to cooperative living to Maholy-Nagy's ringing assertion that "Constructivism is the socialism of vision." But what these different propositions have in common, despite opposed esthetics, is that they offer artistic solutions to political dilemmas, conceiving social problems as problems of bad esthetics. They themselves could not, therefore, put into place the conditions that might realize their promises: *of course* the extravagant, impractical community experiments of the early "Expressionist" Bauhaus were doomed; *of course* the ideas of the later, design-oriented Bauhaus were fated to become a tool for big business, sucking them of all their soul. Without profound political change, there was no other path open. Looking back mournfully, much later, Gropius acknowledged that his project was always hobbled by its historical circumstances: "about ninety percent of the unprecedented efforts made by all participants in this undertaking went into countering national and local hostility, and only ten percent remained for actual creative work."

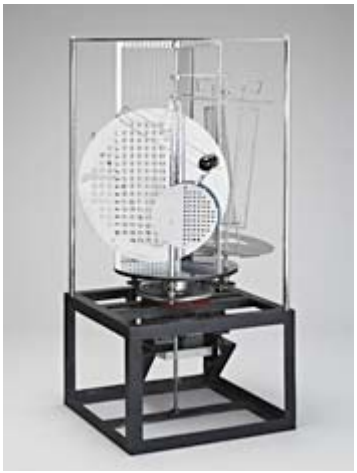
To recover the spark of relevance of the Bauhaus today, you have to rediscover the tension that underlay it. Against those who dismiss the Bauhaus, you must recognize that it was not just a school dedicated to creating attractive objects; its production is shot through with the luminosity of political passion. But against those who idealize avant-garde utopias, it is also important to see that this was *displaced* energy, responding to the right questions but unable to provide the answers to them on its own. In this sense, the ultimate lesson of the Bauhaus for today is that art cannot afford to turn away from history.



László Moholy-Nagy
Untitled
1926
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Copy photograph © The Metropolitan Museum of Art



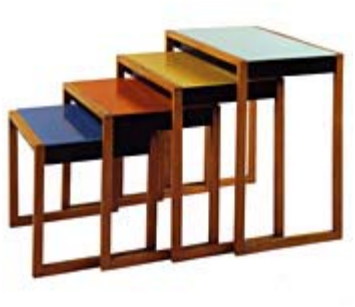
László Moholy-Nagy
A 18
1927
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum
Photo by Katya Kallsen



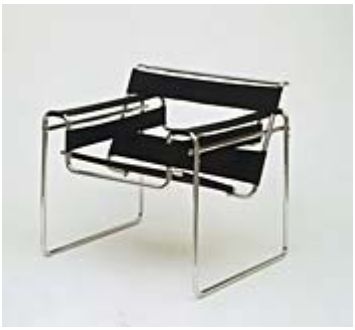
László Moholy-Nagy
Lichtrequisit einer Elektrischen Bühne
(Light prop for an electric stage)
1930
Harvard Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com

Museum
Photo by Junius Beebe

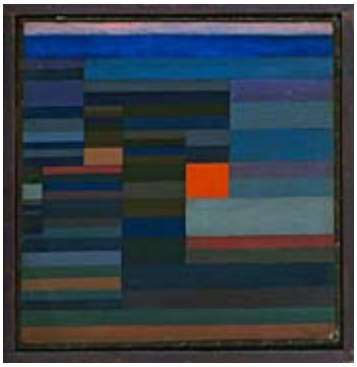


Josef Albers
Set of stacking tables
ca. 1927
Albers Foundation/Art Resource
Photo by Tim Nighswander



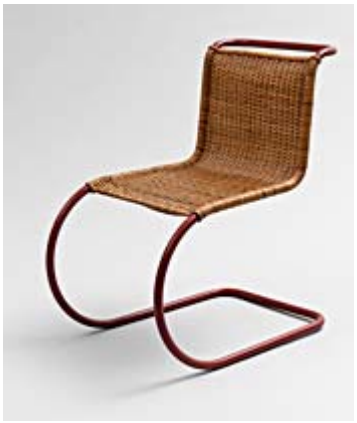
Marcel Breuer
Wassily Chair
1927-28
Museum of Modern Art

Josef Albers
Paul Klee, Dessau
1929
Museum of Modern Art

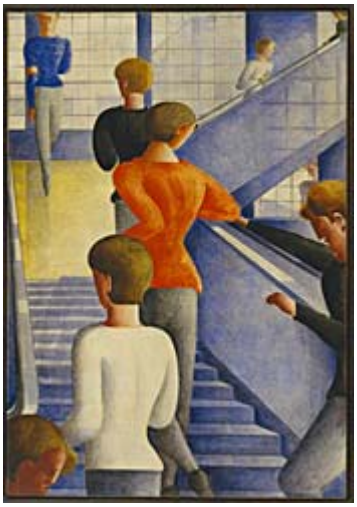


Paul Klee
Fire in the Evening
1929
Museum of Modern Art

Paul Klee
Landschafts-Wagen Nr. 14 (Landscape wagon no. 14)
1930
Harvard Art Museum
Photo by Katya Kallsen



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with Lilly Reich
Side chair (MR 10)
ca. 1931
Manufactured by Bamberg Metallwerkstätten, Berlin, Neukölln
Courtesy Neue Galerie
Photo by John Wronn
Museum of Modern Art



Oskar Schlemmer
Bauhaus Stairway
1932
Museum of Modern Art