European Parliament

The Bauhaus movement: Where are the women?

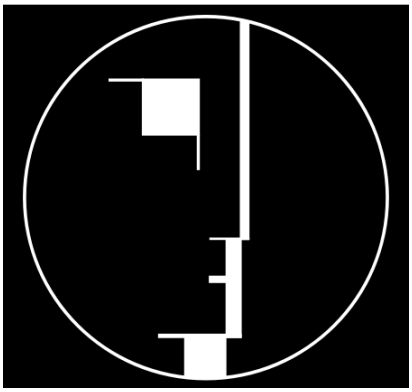
SUMMARY

Bauhaus, arguably the most influential art and design movement in history, celebrated its centenary in 2019. While many of the avant-garde genres that helped shape modern art focused on painting, the Bauhaus movement encompassed a wide array of media, materials, and disciplines, ranging from the fine arts to architecture and design. Bauhaus is renowned for its smart use of resources, simplicity, effectiveness and polished, smooth lines. Its principles still influence the design of contemporary architecture and everyday objects, embodied in the belief that 'Less is more'.

In an era when women had no access to public education in many fields, Bauhaus director Walter Gropius proclaimed that the institution would be open to 'any person of good repute, regardless of age or sex'. However, although the movement was largely populated by women, the names recorded in history are mainly those of men, while female Bauhaus creators are mostly remembered as their wives or assistants. Indeed, these pioneering creators were tolerated, rather than welcomed.

By many accounts, the early years of the Bauhaus restricted women to areas deemed proper for their gender, such as textiles and weaving, while discouraging them from indulging in architecture, sculpture or painting. Similarly, no matter how talented, women had very little opportunity to teach at the school and did not receive apprenticeship certificates, which prevented them from acquiring master's diplomas and ultimately placed limits on their careers.

In spite of these difficulties, women *Bauhauslers* arguably turned such constraints into an advantage. Under the direction of Gunta Stölzl, the Bauhaus weaving department became one of the school's most successful fields, with fabrics from the weaving workshop being very successful commercially. Architect Lilly Reich, metal designer Marianne Brandt, wood sculptor Alma Siedhoff-Buscher and photographer Lucia Moholy are just some of those iconic Bauhaus figures. In recent years, an increasing number of museums pays tribute to their pioneering work and legacy.



In this Briefing

- How it all started
- Bauhaus: A comprehensive artwork
- The 'forgotten' women of the Bauhaus

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PE 689.355 – March 2021

How it all started

Figure 1 – Swinging, 1925

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The *Staatliches Bauhaus* – commonly known as the Bauhaus, literally meaning 'house construction' – originated as a German school of the arts in the early 20th century. Founded by Walter Gropius in 1919, the school became famous for its approach to design, which attempted to unify the principles of mass production with individual artistic vision and strove to combine aesthetics with everyday function.

Bauhaus was grounded in the idea of creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a comprehensive artwork – in which all the arts would eventually come together. Gropius expanded on this vision in the 1919 Bauhaus Proclamation, describing a craft guild uniting architecture, sculpture, and painting into a single creative expression. Bauhaus training was centred on a craft-based curriculum, instilled jointly by an artist and a master craftsman, to help develop each student's creative 'ambidexterity', consisting of sensitivity to art and manual skills.

Illustrating the school's international background, prominent figures within the movement included Swiss painter Paul Klee, Hungarian designer László Moholy-Nagy, Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Dutch painter Theo van Doesburg and Hungarian-born architect and furniture designer Marcel Breuer.

Three German cities – Weimar (1919-1925), Dessau (1925-1932) and Berlin (1932-1933) were home to the school, under three different architect-directors: Walter Gropius (1919-1928), Hannes Meyer (1928-1930) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1930-1933). The institution was finally closed under pressure from the Nazi regime, as its social progressiveness and internationalism were equated with Bolshevism and its new aesthetic was perceived as degenerate. Gropius and other prominent members emigrated to the United States of America in the 1930s, and later influenced the development of modernism in the 1950s and 1960s.

Bauhaus: A comprehensive artwork

Bauhaus architecture: Simplicity in multiplicity

In 1925, Gropius designed an emblematic building to house the Bauhaus school, which relocated from Weimar to Dessau (see Figure 2). The building exhibited many features that later became hallmarks of modernist architecture. Composed of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines and planes, the building's pin-wheel plan, breaks free of ornamentation to focus on simple, rational and functional design, thus transcending traditional symmetry and embodying one of Bauhaus' main principles – 'Form follows function'.

Figure 2 – The Bauhaus school in Dessau

Photo credit: © Pecold / Adobe Stock

Another core tenet of Bauhaus, 'Truth to materials', celebrates modern materials – steel, glass and concrete – in their most natural form, allowing them to be seen, rather than covered up.

The largest concentration of Bauhaus-style buildings in the world can be found in Israel. Listed as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage, Tel Aviv's 'White City' has over 4 000 Bauhaus buildings, many of which designed by architects of Jewish descent who fled the Nazis in the 1930s.

Bauhaus design and typography: Less is more

Bauhaus design is renowned for its smart use of resources, simplicity, effectiveness and polished, smooth lines (see Figure 4 below). Its principles still influence the shape and look of contemporary objects.

For example, Steve Jobs publicly discussed his embrace of the Bauhaus simplicity and its impact on Apple products' aesthetic. Sir Terence Conran, founder of Habitat, was also inspired by Bauhaus' 'bold and open' approach. Similarly, fitted kitchens, or the concept of the well-known and popular IKEA modular furniture, was influenced by the classic creations of Bauhaus designers.

In addition, the Bauhaus modernist posters featuring simplified geometric sans-serif typography and blocks of colour are credited for the development of modern day graphic design (see Figure 3). One of the most notable example of the genre is Barack Obama's presidential campaign poster.

Figure 3 – Joost Schmidt, Bauhaus exhibition 1923

Photo credit © Public domain, Wikimedia Commons

Bauhaus art: Proficiency in their craft is essential to every artist

Fine art became a major offering at the school in 1927, with free painting classes taught by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. Instruction focused less on function (like so many Bauhaus offerings) and more on abstraction. Inspired by architecture, the carefully balanced compositions by Wassily Kandinsky (see Figure 1) and Paul Klee would typically exhibit flat planes and overlapping shapes to amplify the sense of scale and proportion. In addition to paintings, Bauhaus artists often produced abstract sculptures and avant-garde collages.

The 'forgotten' women of the Bauhaus

What went wrong

In an era when women could not receive a public education in many fields, Gropius proclaimed that the Bauhaus would be open to 'any person of good repute, regardless of age or sex'. Gropius' idea was so well-received that in the first year, more women applied than men, causing concern that a too high proportion of female students would reduce the new school's credibility.

Indeed, these pioneering creators were tolerated rather than welcomed. By many accounts, the early years of the Bauhaus confined women to certain areas deemed proper for their gender. Gropius allegedly believed that men's and women's brains functioned differently: men had the capacity to think in three dimensions while women did not. Young women could thus develop their creativity in weaving, but were discouraged from indulging in architecture, sculpture or painting.

Figure 4 – Lilly Reich and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Weissenhof chair, re-edition

Photo credits © Christian Drescher, Wikimedia Commons, Public domain

Another source of criticism surrounds the belief that Gropius's proclamation of gender equality remained very much theoretical and outside the teaching field. Indeed, this is clearly reflected by the gender ratio in the institution, in which only 6 out of 45 faculty members were female at the Weimer location, and this figure improved little over time.

Similarly, due to the initially high influx of female students, Gropius modified the enrollment policy to accept 'only women of extraordinary talents', which ultimately led to a decrease in female students.

Regrettably, the school did not offer apprenticeship certificates in weaving, thus making it impossible for women to register with the Chamber of Trade, which prevented them from acquiring master's diplomas and ultimately placed limits on their careers.

It comes then as no surprise that although the Bauhaus movement was largely populated by women, the names recorded in history are those of men, while female Bauhaus creators are often remembered as their wives or assistants. However, although determined by their gender, Bauhaus women arguably turned this constraint into an advantage.

Iconic female Bauhaus figures

The remarkable group of women weavers – including Gunta Stölzl, Anni Albers, Otti Berger and others – formed a critical mass in the school, developing a sophisticated modern teaching of weaving that both extended the remit of the Bauhaus and also importantly represented an alternative trajectory.

Weaver **Gunta Stölzl** became known for her intricate, colourful designs (see Figure 5). Piloting the move from individual pictorial weaving to modern industrial designs, while also implementing the study of mathematics, she encouraged experimentation with unorthodox materials such as cellophane, fiberglass, and metal. Stölzl was the only woman master teacher and under her direction (1926-1931), the Bauhaus weaving department became one of the school's most sought-after. Fabrics from the weaving workshop became commercially successful, providing the school with vital and much needed funds.

Figure 5 – Gunta Stölzl, Slit Tapestry Red-Green, 1927-1928

Photo credit © Jennifer Mei, Wikimedia commons, Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0)

After Stölzl left the school in 1931, another pioneering textile artist, **Anni Albers**, stepped in to head the workshop. Weaving offered Albers a way to bridge the divide between art and design. Her early tapestries had a considerable impact on the development of geometric abstraction in the visual arts (see Figure 6). Juxtaposing innovative materials such as cellophane, horsehair, cotton and jute, Albers developed prototypes for adaptable partitions in response to developments in modernist architecture, such as open-plan spaces and large glass windows.

Figure 6 – Anni Albers, Design for a Jacquard Weaving, 1926

Photo credit © Tulip Hysteria, Public domain, Wikimedia commons

In 1949, Anni Albers was the first woman textile artist to hold a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), and in 1965 she published her renowned book 'On Weaving', which would later become a landmark text in the world of weaving.

This masculinisation of the Bauhaus school accentuated in the early 1930s during Mies van der Rohe's period as a director. His teachings were oriented mainly towards architecture and metalwork, two fields from which women had been long discouraged. However, one student, **Lilly Reich**, managed to make inroads into this 'men only club', on the strength of her talent and without ever studying architecture.

Mies van der Rohe's collaborator and partner for over 12 years, she took part in various projects, including an apartment building for the *Deutscher Werkbund* exhibition, the 'Velvet and Silk Cafe' exhibition in Berlin, and the German pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition.

In 1928, she was appointed 'artistic director' of the German section of the Barcelona Exhibition, sharing the position with Mies van der Rohe. Reich also contributed to two paramount works of Bauhaus architecture: the Tugendhat villa and the Lange house. Mies Van der Rohe appointed Reich to the post of director of the Bauhaus interior and fabric design workshop, a position she held simultaneously at both the Bauhaus in Dessau, and in Berlin. Reich thus became one of the few educators to teach at both schools.

Marianne Brandt broke the glass ceiling in another discipline reserved for men – metal. Brandt had many talents, as a painter, a sculptor, an industrial designer, and at the end of her life, a photographer. Importantly, she was the first woman to attend the metalworking studio and replaced László Moholy-Nagy as a studio director in 1928.

Many of her designs became iconic expressions of the Bauhaus aesthetic. Brandt developed one of the most commercially successful objects to come out of the school – the best-selling Kandem bedside table lamp. Her sculptural and geometric silver teapots (see Figure 7) while never mass-produced, reflect the Bauhaus emphasis on industrial forms, paying careful attention to functionality and ease of use, from the non-drip spout to the heat-resistant ebony handle.

Figure 7 – Teapots by Marianne Brandt, 1924

Photo credit: © Sailko, Wikimedia Commons, Attribution Share Alike 3.0 Unported

Alma Siedhoff-Buscher was one of the Bauhaus' few women to switch from the weaving workshop to the male-dominated wood sculpture department. There, she created a number of successful toy and furniture designs, including her 'Little ship-building game,' which remains in production today (see Figure 8). The game manifests Bauhaus' central tenets – its 22 blocks, forged in primary colours, can be used to construct the shape of a boat, or rearranged to allow for creative experimentation.

However, Siedhoff-Buscher's most ground-breaking work proved to be the interior she designed for a children's room at 'Haus am Horn'. Indeed, she created each piece to 'grow' with the child – a puppet theatre could thus be transformed into bookshelves, a changing table into a desk.

Figure 8 – Ship-building game by Alma Siedhoff-Buscher, 1923

Photo credit: © Axel Hindemith Wikimedia Commons, Attribution CC BY-SA 3.0

Gertrud Arndt's aspired to become an architect, but it was only after arriving at the Bauhaus in 1923, that she realised architecture classes were not yet available to women. She took up weaving instead and excelled at the task. Her iconic rug, produced for Walter Gropius' office is still in production today.

Despite Arndt's success at the loom, she is mainly known for her innovative photography technique. As a self-taught photographer, Arndt assisted her husband's architectural practice by photographing their construction sites and buildings. However, it was Arndt's series of self-portraits, 'Mask Portraits', that ultimately shaped her legacy and are now seen as an important forerunner of feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman.

Renewed attention to female Bauhaus figures

The Bauhaus movement celebrated its centenary in 2019. This was an opportunity for the bias towards the school's male students to be rectified. Weavers, industrial designers, photographers, and architects, the Bauhaus women not only advanced the school's historic marriage of art and function, but were also instrumental in laying the groundwork for centuries of art and design innovation to come.

The majority of these female creators had to flee Germany following the rise of Nazism and subsequently found it harder than their male counterparts to gain employment. Their works, usually executed in more transitory materials – less valued and more prone to wear and tear – were often left behind, unprotected. Even when their creations had been sheltered, they were sometimes misattributed, as in the case of Lucia Moholy. Wife of painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, she gave free photography classes and took emblematic pictures of the Bauhaus and its community. When Moholy fled Germany, she left 560 glass plates behind – which she later described as her 'only tangible asset' – in the care of Gropius, who went on to use 49 uncredited prints in a 1938 Bauhaus exhibition at the MoMA. Moholy's works therefore promoted the Bauhaus aesthetic for years without attribution. Ultimately, Moholy won a legal battle for recognition in 1957, which led to the return of 230 negatives. However, the artist's own husband also refused to credit her for many of their collaborations, including the celebrated 1925 book 'Painting, Photography, Film'.

In recent years, a growing number of museums have made amends to the 'forgotten' women of the Bauhaus, by shining a light on their pioneering work and impressive, but often unknown, legacy. 'Bauhaus women' (2019) hosted by the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, the latest to date, focused on some 60 Bauhaus artists.

Importantly, the architecture and design departments of most European universities today have more female students than male. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for women to establish themselves upon completing their studies and to gain recognition in these professional fields. Similarly, men still predominate in professorships in architecture and design faculties. While much has changed for the better with regard to women's rights, compared to the situation at the Bauhaus in the last century, a breakthrough for women artists is still awaited.

FURTHER READING

Bauhaus online archive, 2021.

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