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Modern Museum Illustrates the Bauhaus Idea



The Bauhaus Building, Dessau, Germany:

WALTER GROPIUS, Architect.

It Now Sports a Nice Steep "Nuremberg" Roof

A LIVING IDEA, born in Germany during the despairing post-war years, banished as "bolshhevistic and degenerate" by the National Socialists and now a refugee in America, along with those who conceived it, is enshrined in the current exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, on view through January. The show is entitled, "Bauhaus, 1919-1928."

Strictly, the Bauhaus (Ger: *to build house*) was an art center established 1919 in Weimar, Germany, by Walter Gropius, a modern German architect who is now chairman of the department of architecture at Harvard University. Gropius merged the old art academy at Weimar with a school of arts and crafts (similar to an American "vocational" school) and established the "State Bauhaus" which flourished there until 1925. Local hostility forced him then to move to Dessau where he continued as director until 1928. The school lasted five years longer and was closed in 1933 by the Nazis.

The Bauhaus idea is a concept, as old as ancient Egypt, that artist and craftsmen are one, that any division between the two is false and "arrogant;" that only through the conscious co-operative effort of all craftsmen can a really great work of art result. It aimed to bring a fundamental unity to modern life, and its ultimate, distant goal was "the collective building" which (like the Temple of Karnak, the Parthenon, and Chartres) would be the work of many craftsmen—painters, plumbers, carpenters, architects, sculptors, designers, etc.—all working harmoniously with the materials and tools at hand.

The Bauhaus program, based upon this goal, proceeded to teach students manual dexterity in all the crafts, to investigate the laws of the physical world, to plumb the spiritual world, and to master the machine. Out of the Bauhaus came the first experiments in tubular furniture, in modern typography, in modern lighting, and many significant developments in architecture, photography, abstract art, textile and other crafts. The Bauhaus sought to combine art with industry and mass production.

The exhibition at the Modern Museum attempts to demonstrate the program and its

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operation at the old Bauhaus. Its importance to America lies in the widespread transplantation of the Bauhaus idea to this country. Most of the former masters of the Bauhaus are now here: Gropius and Marcel Breuer are at Harvard, Moholy-Nagy at Chicago (former director of the erstwhile "New Bauhaus"), Feininger and Alexander Schawinsky are in New York, Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, North Carolina.

Hundreds of items are in the show: paintings, photographs, sculptures, textiles, constructions, plans, books, lighting fixtures, glass ware, metal wares, furniture, advertisements, pottery, music, theatre designs, and other objects which add up to a bewildering demonstration of how "the artist can be trained to take his place in this machine age."

"The gifted student," said Gropius, "must regain a feeling for the interwoven strands of practical and formal work."

With this end in mind, the student was first made "gifted," that is, equipped with a familiarity of tools and materials and machines in the various crafts, then encouraged to strike out hewing his own path through the jungle of 20th century life to common clearing ground of a new design for living, where his fellows, striking out on other paths, would meet with him.

Probably the nearest approach to the Bauhaus' goal was the building which its founder, Gropius, designed for the new Dessau location in 1925. This structure, termed by Alfred Barr, Jr., as "the most important architectural work of the '20's," was built as a 20th century counterpart to monastic architecture.

The design of the building and the design of its equipment (by Bauhaus masters and students) revolves around the fundamental philosophy pursued at the school. "Simplicity in multiplicity" is sought in the design of the building, its chairs, filing cabinets, its dining room dishes, every convention and tradition in "Art" is forgotten for the sake of a better and newer synthesis. But it was too much for the National Socialists. After the school was closed the present regime ordered a pitched "Nuremberg" roof to be added.

In its heyday, the Bauhaus was hardly known in America but after a few years writes Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in the catalogue "The world began to accept the Bauhaus In America Bauhaus lighting fixtures and tubular chairs were imported or the designs pirated. American Bauhaus students began to return; and they were followed, after the revolution of 1933, by Bauhaus and ex-Bauhaus masters who suffered from the new government's illusion that modern furniture, flat-roofed architecture and abstract painting were degenerate or bolshevistic. In this way, with the help of the fatherland, Bauhaus designs, Bauhaus men, Bauhaus ideas, which taken

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together, form one of the chief cultural contributions of modern Germany, have been spread throughout the world."

Strangely, and yet in perfect accord with Gropius' founding principle, the Bauhaus alone of all "art movements" of the 20th century, did not develop a style. There is no such thing as *Bauhausism*. There is only that Bauhaus idea: that the individual's own free experience is a collective heritage.



First Tubular Steel Chair: DESIGNED BY MARCEL BREUER AT THE BAUHAUS