



A better world From left: a woman at the Bauhaus wearing an Oskar Schlemmer mask and sitting in a Marcel Breuer chair; Schlemmer's "Bauhaus Stairway," painted in 1932, the year the Nazis closed the Bauhaus and its iconic building in Dessau, Germany; Marianne Brandt's iconic teapot.

Zealpolitik

An exhibition on the Bauhaus examines its high ideals and lasting impact. Shax Riegler reports.

Just what was the Bauhaus? The myths that have grown up around the short-lived but enormously influential German art and design school keep getting in the way of a clear answer. It has now come to signify so much more than its originators ever intended that fixing on a precise definition is at the heart of the Museum of Modern Art's comprehensive exhibition "Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity," which opens Nov. 8 and runs until Jan. 25, 2010.

Coming on the heels of a major Bauhaus exhibition that opened in Berlin earlier this year, MoMA's show — curated by Leah Dickerman, of the painting and sculpture department, and Barry Bergdoll, chief curator of architecture and design — commemorates the 90th anniversary of the school's founding and the 80th anniversary of MoMA. Alfred Barr Jr., the museum's first director, paid a visit to the school in 1928, and it was a formative influence on him.

In bringing together such familiar objects as Marcel Breuer's tubular steel furniture, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's photographs and a Marianne Brandt tea set with pieces harder to categorize, like Lothar Schreyer's 1920 design for a coffin and the 1921 African Chair by Breuer and Gunta Stölzl, and by showing masters' and students' works alongside one another, the exhibition demonstrates how lively a workshop-laboratory-school the Bauhaus was during its 14-year run.

At various points, the school employed or taught such seminal artists, designers and architects as Anni Albers, Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, Lyonel Feininger, Walter Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Lucia Moholy, Lilly Reich, Oskar Schlemmer and William Wagenfeld. Founded in Weimar, in the devastating aftermath of World War I, on the foundation of an earlier school, the Bauhaus at first had an uneasy relationship with the machine and mechanization. Inspired by the reverence for medieval handcraftsmanship that had been fetishized by the English Arts and Crafts movement, the school sought to train a new generation of artists in a new way.

During these early years, its teachers were an eccentric lot of artists drawn from Europe's avant-garde. The school's most famous pedagogical innovation — the first-year Vorkurs, or

foundation course — was developed to strip away students' preconceptions by allowing them to experiment with raw materials, unimpeded by any knowledge of historical styles or examples. Under the monkish, charismatic artist Johannes Itten, the course incorporated breathing and perception exercises aimed at unleashing the expressive nature of students and materials. After that year, students entered specialized workshops devoted to one medium.

Over time Gropius, the school's founding director, realized that manufacturing was the future, and in 1923 he adopted a new slogan, "Art and Technology: A New Unity," to reflect the school's desire to be a training ground for artists and designers in the machine age. Despite this pro-capitalist agenda, the Bauhaus and its kooky faculty, high-strung students and left-leaning politics eventually got on the nerves of the staid city fathers of Weimar, and the state cut financial support to the school. Luckily, it was invited to move to the industrial city of Dessau, where it took up residence in 1925.

Here, the school's emphasis on geometry, abstraction and standardization — all the better to produce designs that could easily be made by machine — was seen in everything from the iconic building itself (designed by Gropius) to theatrical productions. A photograph in the exhibition shows a woman, wearing a metallic theatrical mask designed by Schlemmer and

It takes thousands of knots to make a beautiful rug. And another one to make sure a child didn't weave it.



Some 250,000 South Asian children are forced to weave rugs destined for our homes. Look for the human knot on the GoodWeave label and you can help stop this practice.

Every GoodWeave certified rug is made on a loom that is independently monitored, ensuring that only adult artisans crafted it. Your GoodWeave purchase helps get kids off looms and into schools, where they belong.

You can find a beautiful GoodWeave certified rug from nearly 70 rug designers, including the following companies:



CariniLang

www.carinilang.com (646) 613-0497



Custom Cool

(516) 815-7532 www.customcool.net



Indi-B

www.indib.com (310) 598-1211



Kooches

(914) 937-9703 www.kooches.com



Liza Phillips Design

lizaphillipsdesign.com (845) 252-9955



Odegard

(800) 670-8836 www.odegardinc.com



Rosemary Hallgarten Inc.

(203) 259-1003 www.rosemaryhallgarten.com

GoodWeave, introduced this fall by the nonprofit RugMark, replaces the RugMark label.

Learn more at www.GoodWeave.org.

a dress made in the weaving workshop, sitting on one of Breuer's tubular steel chairs. As Dickerman points out in the exhibition catalog, this blank-faced human, so pared down that she transcends race, class and political borders, embodies the Bauhaus's ideal modern figure.

Turmoil was common at the Bauhaus, and in 1928 Gropius resigned under heavy criticism. He was succeeded for a couple of years by Hannes Meyer, an architect and a Marxist, who often lamented the bourgeois commodification of much of the school's output. "Bauhaus is fashion," he complained in a 1929 lecture. "All the ladies at the cocktail parties chatter about Bauhaus constructivism. Their calling cards are in lower-case letters." For its final three years, the school was run by Mies van der Rohe. Declaring it decadent, the Nazis shut down the school in 1932. Mies re-established it briefly in Berlin in 1933, but a few months later it was gone for good.

The Bauhaus group didn't stay down for long. In the 1930s many of the school's leaders immigrated to America and took up university jobs: Gropius to Harvard, Mies to what would become the Illinois Institute of Technology, Albers to Black Mountain College in North Carolina (and later to Yale) and Moholy-Nagy to the New Bauhaus in Chicago. From these posts they ensured the continuation of Bauhaus ideals well into the post-World War II era.

MoMA enlisted Gropius and Herbert Bayer to mount an exhibition on the Bauhaus in 1938. Gropius chose to ignore the last five years of the school's existence — the years after he left — but the exhibition still had a profound impact. A Dec. 4, 1938, headline in *The New York Times* announced, "Nazi-Banned Art Is Exhibited Here." Eventually, however, the Bauhaus's influence came to be seen as suffocating, if not downright sinister, by a later generation, most notably in Tom Wolfe's 1981 takedown of Modernism, "From Bauhaus to Our House," in which Gropius ("the Silver Prince") comes off as an evil mastermind plotting world domination through architecture. By the late 20th century, the word Bauhaus had become a vague term describing a superficial style that was both iconic and banal. (It was even the name of a seminal English goth band.) But MoMA's new exhibition seeks to restore the Bauhaus to its proper historical context.

"There was a tremendous and vital dialogue among artists working in different mediums about what it meant to be 'modern,'" Dickerman said. "As a kind of cultural think tank, the Bauhaus is still a relevant model for today." ■