



The Bauhaus Movement During Germany's Weimar Republic

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By (insert writer's name)



The Bauhaus, or literally the house for the building arts, is perhaps Germany's most important cultural contribution of the twentieth century, for the Bauhaus revolutionized the way that art and design were thought of and taught. Like an old classic chair which had declined into a state of disrepair, covered in layers of thick, peeling lacquer, and neglected for years, art for centuries had slowly become less and less relevant to most of the segments of society, merely serving as ornamentation or decoration and becoming accessible to fewer and fewer people. "The Bauhaus began with a utopian definition: 'The building of the future' was to combine all the arts in ideal unity."¹ **Note: this is cited because it is a direct quote** The Bauhaus was able to strip art of its typically superfluous characteristics, leaving an exposed and raw idea which could then be theoretically reshaped and redesigned without the usual conventions limiting the design, effectively rendering art once again functional. Rivaling the Bauhaus' innovating approach to artistic creation, is the fact that the school was founded and subsequently produced a surprising amount of brilliant work during one of Germany's most turbulent eras.

¹ Magdalena Droste, Peter Hahn, Karsten Hintz, Bärbel Mees, Klaus Weber, Christian Wolsdorff, and Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, The Bauhaus Archive / Museum of Design in Berlin (2000); available from <https://www.bauhaus.de/de/>, accessed March 5, 2001.



The entire duration of the existence of the Bauhaus in Germany is inextricably linked to that of the Weimar Republic. In a virtually mirrored relationship, the two undergo near coinciding periods. It can be said that the Republic underwent three separate and distinct eras during its short-lived existence. The first period of Weimar, from 1919 through 1923, is characterized by the inception of the Republic and its ensuing stormy first few years marked by turmoil and its attempts at establishment in the face of adversity. The next period of Weimar was its so called golden age, from 1924 to 1930, which saw the Republic gain its feet and experience a relative political and economic calm while inexplicably encountering a cultural boom. Weimar draws to a close in 1930 with the dissolution of its parliamentary democracy, and subsequent takeover by the Nazi party which marks the third and final period of the Republic.

Uncannily, the Bauhaus school experienced three periods which parallel that of its Republican counterpart. The initial period of the Bauhaus, known as the Weimar period, lasted from 1919 until 1925 and was equally as tumultuous as that of the Republic having to battle outside forces for the integrity of the school. The Dessau period of Bauhaus, from 1925 through 1928, is the second period for the school and exemplifies their most productive period. And the final period of the Bauhaus, is that of the Berlin Period which lasts but a short time before the schools' premature closing by the Nazis in 1933. Suffice it to say that the Bauhaus school was a microcosm for the Weimar Republic, being shaped by the same external forces, struggling with internal strife, was founded with the



same high handed ideals, lasting virtually the same period of time, and succumbing to the same end.

To understand the existence of the Weimar Republic, it is important to first touch upon the foundation and goals of the Republic which were set forth by the framers of the constitution of Germany after their defeat at the hands of the Allied forces in World War I. On January 19th, 1919 national elections for a National Assembly were held. The more liberal parties, those representing a desire for a shift away from the traditional German authoritarian monarchical system of government, received roughly 76% of the popular vote.² **Note: this information is cited because it contains specific data that is not common knowledge and particular to the cited author's research** It was these elected Assemblymen who effectively ratified the choice of a parliamentary-style government. This recently elected Assembly convened to write Germany's new constitution in the small Thuringian town of Weimar, giving the Republic its name.

Aside from the task of developing a new ruling method, the second most important task for the new government was to devise a plan for the economic recovery of Germany. A third goal of the new German government was establishing a new role in the international balance of power. As the Kaiser abdicated his throne, so too did his Imperialistic dreams, which had been imbedded in the German nationalistic landscape for decades, vanish. The new Germany would no longer have the option of constructing a visible empire on par with that of the global powers such as Great Britain.

² Arthur Rosenburg. A History of The German Republic (London: Methuen, 1936), 39.



Very much like the Weimar Republics' foundation, the Bauhaus school was established out of the ashes of World War I. During the last days of the war, a young architect by the name of Walter Gropius was appointed by the local government in the town of Weimar to take over the Weimar Art Academy as well as the Weimar Arts and Crafts School. This was a prestigious position in that Weimar had an equally prestigious artistic history. Gropius would only accept the position of head of the school if the National Art Directors agreed to allow the architect to make some fundamental changes in the schools' curriculum.³ **Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge** Gropius was of the school of thought, known as *Werkbund* in Germany, which held an, "ideal of a cultural integration of the great periods of the past wherein art, morality, politics and religion all formed one living whole."⁴ **Note: this is cited because it is a direct quote** It was this type of attitude which he believed was responsible for the recent phenomenon of hoarding of art by the bourgeoisie, effectively keeping it from the public where it can be enjoyed by all.

Gropius believed that the teaching methods associated with the modern art schools were not only doing society a great disservice, but the artist as well, by disassociating the artist from society and cultivating an artist's abilities in such a narrow definition of art that he completely forsook the handicrafts. Gropius therefore felt it

³ Hoffa Harlan, *Art Education*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan., 1961), 12-28.

⁴ Herbert Bayer, *Bauhaus 1919-1928* (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 12.



important that this trend be reversed and allow art to be democratized.⁵ Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge

It was his intention to transform the national art school in Germany into a design center whereby the various arts were brought together into a modern synthesis, whereby art could be and should be reconciled with an industrialized culture, for it was his belief that industrialization was not the enemy of early twentieth century society, but an unavoidable component which could be harnessed and married to artistry. A coinciding goal was to demonstrate to his students that they must face the facts of their future, a future involved primarily with industry and mass production rather than with individual craftsmanship. So in May of 1919, Gropius combined the two art schools in Weimar under one program and one name, the Bauhaus. The central theme of the new school was, "the forming of the entire human environment through architecture, industrial design, painting and sculpture"⁶ Note: this is cited because it is a direct quote

Gropius' ideas about the state of art in the twentieth century were not novel in the art world, Oskar Schlemmer, one of the artists recruited as a master teacher at the Bauhaus stated his convictions as follows,

"God has come to inhabit men - their religion, which is enlightenment and belief in themselves; and their dwellings which are their churches. Neither pictures of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Walter Haftmann, Alfred Hentzen, and William S.Lieberman, German Art of the 20th Century (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1957), 19.



legendary Greek gods and heroes, nor Adorations of the Magi, nor sunsets of Nice decorate the walls of my rooms, but my own intrinsic feelings of godliness, heroism, life, my worship of the mystical and unconscious, the sunrise and sunset of my soul - these are portrayals worthy of contemporary man...Our true subject now is to reveal the psychic aspect.”⁷ **Note: this is cited because it is a direct quote** In other words, to find man’s role in the universe. Aside from Schlemmer, many other prominent artists of the day, each with similar attitudes toward art came to join the faculty of the Bauhaus. Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Gerhard Marks, Lyonel Feininger, Johannes Itten, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy were all original master teachers.

The general unrest, disorder, lack of direction and uncertainty in Germany after World War I actually fostered the establishment of institutions that had new types of programs, such as the Bauhaus, and this is the crucible in which the Bauhaus was formed in Weimar in 1919. The Bauhaus met with opposition from the very beginning from the government and all sides of the populace due to an overwhelming ignorance and reactionary fear of the unfamiliar. The school experienced a constant hindrance to their work having to devote roughly 90% of their time and efforts to battling national and local hostilities, leaving only a paltry 10% for the actual creative work.⁸ **Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author’s research and is not common knowledge** A large segment of the German population was ever vigilant for any signs of

⁷Mathias Eberle, World War I and the Weimar Artists (New Haven, Connecticut : Yale University Press, 1985), 112.

⁸ Hans M.Wingler, The Bauhaus (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1962), 113.



Bolshevism, for they saw it as an insidious evil which left unchecked would permeate all segments of society. Their fear of Marxism, Communism, Collectivism, *et al* reached such a degree that they began to perceive it everywhere, even when it was nonexistent: in politics, in the trade unions, in the schools, and in their art. It was this mind set which immediately cast the shadow of Socialism/Communism upon the Bauhaus, for the school was founded during a Socialist regime in Thuringia. Gropius stressed to all the faculty, students and administrators to remain aloof of any political activity, but to no avail. For the Bolshevik-art tag remained with the school. It didn't help matters that the school commonly incorporated in their teaching, words like Bourgeoisie, Proletariat, communal setting, the collected work, etc., which were commonly viewed as Marxist catch phrases. The Bauhaus was no more a Communist organization than the Boy Scouts, but largely due to the stereotypical treatment that all modern art was being given at the time, that of a divisive and subversive activity, the Bauhaus was labeled by the Right as art-Bolshevism.⁹ **Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge**

There were attacks upon the school for other reasons from the conservative right as well. In a country where the end of the War spelled the end of their beloved monarchy, a new world order which put Germany further from the top than they felt was deserved, and the economy and politics were wrought with instability, they were not

⁹ Eckhart Nuemann, Bauhaus and Bauhaus People (New York, New York: Van Nordstrom Reinhold, 1993), 223.



about to tolerate a threat to another of their institutions. This was a war the reactionaries felt they could win. The overtly radical concept of the school alone was frightening and threatening to the conservatives' established views of academia and orthodoxy. And the art itself was blatantly confrontational and challenged the established art houses and conventions. A further threat came from the moderate left, from yet another naïve and ignorant group, the local craftsman organizations and trade unions. Their fears were founded upon, and unjustly so, that the school was another threatening factor which was likely to accelerate the decline of the crafts which they believed was resulting from the 20th century industrial movement. Of course if the unions had been less reactionary and would have bothered to examine the Bauhaus' principal statement, they would have seen that it was the schools' intention to link the trades with art, not destroy the trades.¹⁰ **Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge**

Perhaps the biggest obstacle in which the school had to stand against in the face of success was the government - the same government who had ratified the original Bauhaus project, the same government who was facing similar struggles for legitimacy and support of their own. The initial indifference, with which the local government had been treating the Bauhaus, soon changed to what could only be called open hostility. This animosity began gradually, with the already limited budgets for the funding of programs unexplainably being cut, until financial crisis were evident. In response to

¹⁰ Ibid. 224.



these financial straits, and acting in a fiscally responsible manner, the school endeavored to sell much of what the students and faculty produced to the public. However, the government once again stepped in and banned the practice. They stated that the entry of state funded institutions into the free market was unfair competition with private enterprise. Feeling completely menaced by an antagonistic government, who hamstrung them at every turn, the founders, masters, students and director all decided upon the dissolution of the Bauhaus in Weimar in order to pre-empt the inevitable attempt by the government to close the school. So during the holiday months of 1924/1925, the masters and students separately wrote letters to the government of Thuringia notifying them to the fact that upon completing their contractual agreements the school would close down. The Bauhaus school in Weimar closed its doors in the spring of 1925.¹¹ **Note: this information is cited because there are differing dates proposed by multiple authorities and this particular source has been accepted by the author as the most likely**

Despite all of these hurdles, the Weimar period as it is now known, was one of strong developmental groundwork. The artists began to build a base from which to erect their vision of a return to a functional art. For the students of the Bauhaus, their vision became, in effect, their attempt at coping with the disorientated post-war culture and the continuing dissemination of modern technology throughout society. They developed and implemented a program whereby the artist was taught by both a master artist and a craftsman so that the artist could return to a functioning member of society

¹¹ Bayer, Bauhaus, 218.



not merely a disconnected specialist.¹² Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge

The move of the Bauhaus in 1925, to the small mining town of Dessau was a fresh start, for the town welcomed the school with open arms. Also the small town atmosphere offered some advantages not found in Weimar. For instance, the mayor of Dessau, Dr. Fritz Hesse, was a farsighted person who wholeheartedly supported the principles of the Bauhaus and allowed it to develop undisturbed for a number of years. Also there was relatively simple administrative machinery which made contact with the local authorities much more conducive, not to mention the number of authorities was comparatively few which allowed for the Bauhaus a certain degree of freedom without the local government constantly interfering.

Upon re-opening, the faculty remained for the most part intact, however a number of former students, namely Herbert Bayer, who had completed their studies joined the staff as teachers. Unlike Weimar, where only the interiors contained the work of the Bauhaus students and faculty, the building of seven masters homes/studios and a new building to house the Bauhaus was soon approved, which Gropius designed. "The Bauhaus building at Dessau was architecturally the most important building of the decade."¹³ Note: this is cited because it is a direct quote The period in Dessau saw new

12 Abbott J. Cooper, and Ellen Miller, *ABC's of Bauhaus* (New York, New York: Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 1991), 99.

13 Bayer, 29.



ideas flowing forth and this period derives many familiar adjuncts of contemporary life: steel furniture, modern textiles, dishes, lamps, and modern typography.

With the Bauhaus firmly established, in Gropius' mind, he tendered his resignation as director in 1928, "...in order to exert my powers more freely in a sphere where they will not be cramped by official duties and considerations."¹⁴ Note: this information is cited because it is a direct quote The pressures of his position were limiting the time he had available to work on his designs.

The final phase of the Bauhaus coincides with the rise of Adolph Hitler who was able to wrangle an appointment as Reich Chancellor in 1933. Before anyone could realize what was happening, he used constitutional provisions to consolidate all high-level duties under his control and elevated himself to supreme dictator. The Republic was dead.

The Nazis infamous reign of terror not only included the persecution of the Jews and other peoples seen as inferior, but also included institutions, political parties and materials seen as counter to their goals; including any art which the Nazis found to be undesirable. Hitler himself felt so strongly about what he termed, "degenerative" art that he wrote a specific speech in which he derided art institutions as producers of communist propaganda. He in turn created an agency termed *Reichskenkstammer*, in which all artists were to be enrolled and whose approval had to be obtained for any art exhibition. To enforce these measures, the police suppressed any non-approved artist, and threatened

¹⁴ Ibid., 19.



them with jailing or the insane asylum.¹⁵ Note: this information is cited because it is particular to the source author's research and is not common knowledge

The final days of the Bauhaus, known as the so-called Berlin period, lasted only until April 1933. The school had moved to a provisional home in Berlin in 1932 due to conflicts with the Nazi regime which had taken-over the municipal government in Dessau. Berlin, with its tenuous political climate offered little in the way of artistic inspiration, quite opposite of the move from Weimar to Dessau. It was also this move to Berlin which cost the school much of its vaunted faculty, including Kandinsky, Breuer, Bayer, and Moholy-Nagy, all of whom went their separate ways.

From virtually the very minute the existing members of the school set foot in Berlin, the Bauhaus came under attack by the surging Nazi party who were determined to annihilate all of whom they deemed opponents to their ideal. And as with the Weimar Republic, the Bauhaus succumbed to the rising tide of Nazism. As soon as the Nazis had consolidated all governmental power under their control, they closed the Bauhaus as, "a hotbed of cultural Bolshevism."¹⁶ Note: this information is cited because it is a direct quote

Charles Dickens said in comparing London and Paris in the year 1775, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times". The same could be said of Germany during the years encompassing the Weimar Republic. These were years of phenomenal

¹⁵ Winger, *Bauhaus*, 301.

¹⁶ Werner Hofmann, *German Art of the Twentieth Century* (New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1957), 111.



foresight, witness the drafting of the Weimar Constitution; and they were times of extraordinary narrow-mindedness, lest we forget the acts of baseness, violence and social unrest. The Republic had fairly lofty goals, and in the final analysis it must be said, failed to reach them. Also out of the ruination of the First World War emerged the Bauhaus. Its founders also possessed a novel realization of art and its place within society. At every step these men met nothing but obstacles to realizing their vision. Each period of its history exemplified certain artistic successes and political failures. In its final analysis, it must be pointed out that the Bauhaus didn't fail during the Weimar Republic years, but the Weimar Republic failed the Bauhaus by forsaking the one segment of society who was actually attempting to improve the world around them in a positive manner. The Bauhaus was the Republic's best of times.



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