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Art and Design in the Lab

By Marjorie Welish 12/02/09

Given that the Museum of Modern Art has undergone a makeover and become rather indistinguishable from an amusement park, it may come as a shock that the current exhibition devoted to the Bauhaus will have none of that. Not at all a spectacle, with little deluxe glamour evident in the art objects or their installation, and little emphasis on the high-octane stars that created some of them, “Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshop for Modernity” calls on us to engage with an entirely different sort of project. With unprecedented access to the three archives from Weimar, from Dessau and, finally, from Berlin—where the workshop in diaspora relocated before being forced to close by the Nazis—this joint effort represents a reanimation of its collective spirit on the 90th anniversary of the Bauhaus and its progressive vision for society.

Only a third of the 1,300 artifacts recently on view in Germany made the transatlantic crossing for this version of the show, organized by curators Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman; but the real object under scrutiny is the entirely absorbing contingent history of innovative experimentation occurring in a laboratory dedicated to design. The unruly history—not the svelte myth—of the Bauhaus is what we see as walk through this show.

World War I traumatized Europe and changed life forever, but in its aftermath, 90 years ago, no cooperative effort was more inspiring than the will to improve humankind’s relation to the world by rethinking the conditions under which art comes into being. Testing this was the Bauhaus, in theory and practice. At first, as directed by Walter Gropius (1919-28) yet with strong mentoring by Johannes Itten, it was thought that guild practice might resurrect artisanal handicraft to harmonize the individual and society. A striking product of this thinking is a sculpture carved by a former soldier in 1919 from what was once a propeller blade, remarkable in that it sublimates an instrument of war by opening the surface to curve upon curve in an aesthetic of strong dynamical form.

Itten, judged too mystical by his peers, left the Bauhaus the legacy of his celebrated fundamentals course in form that carries over to the subsequent phases (and in adapted form, to many art schools today). A general expressionism under Itten disappears, and the lexicon of essential constructivist elements comes to inform all design. But again, this phase is less scripted than we had come to believe. Along with trials in stained glass by Josef Albers are fine furnishings, from cabinets to weavings that bring traditional techniques in line with modern technologies. Of the many wonderful pieces here is the ensemble of objectified geometrical eloquence in a coffee and tea service designed by Marianne Brandt, a student of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, head of the metal workshop. Although Brandt had developed her design to be mass-produced, here on view is the deluxe version in silver, ebony and glass that she had made especially for a friend in 1924. Featured by the curators to make their point about the aesthetic emphasis of the Bauhaus program under Gropius, the service also directs our attention to the group collaborations required to pool artisanal expertise to produce any object. The collaborative nature of much-authorship marks Bauhaus design and distinguishes its specific nexus of form through function.

Meanwhile, and off to one side, the ludic principle that is hard-wired in the human species is represented by Paul Klee. Together with objects from the nursery, first-rate Klee paintings signal the respect with which the Bauhaus faculty treated imaginative play.

That, in the circumstances, painting represented only an avatar of design is obvious, from the way the technologies of industry find both functional and imaginative expression through photography, film and theater, under the influence of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, the conspicuous figure among the faculty who promoted the arts of light and motion as expressing the spirit of the modern age. Can you imagine that in this exhibition, Kandinsky makes only a cameo appearance!

The point in all this—a point extremely well finessed by the curators—is that design is a comprehensive term for the organizing forces informing art of all sorts. Nothing dramatizes this argument better than the conspicuous sight of furnishings now considered classic modernist and familiar to us through mass production. Marcel Breuer's 1927-1928 cantilevered club chair in chrome-plated tubular steel and canvas sits right by the display of vintage promotional literature for the chair manufactured by Standard Möbel, Breuer's own company. With profits going to his business and not to the Bauhaus, Breuer was effectively competing with Gropius and the institution, which included a conflict over intellectual property rights. The social forces configuring the Bauhaus' successes may be only an undercurrent in this exhibition, but they are there for all to read: The laboratory of design ideas intended to change the world was before long a threat.

From without, the school's innovative synthesis of art and technology drew fire from more and more hostilely conservative German governments. Readily affordable, well-designed furnishings from this period of the Bauhaus are on view to suggest that, had it been allowed to survive, this alembic for design might well have also demonstrated an ethics informed through social responsibility: All classes should be able to live in environments that work well and are beautiful because they are humanly fit for use.

A last attempt to sustain the Bauhaus occurred under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, from 1930 to 1933.

A final word apropos of post-pop museology: Although this show has just opened, the first edition of the exhibition catalog has already sold out, which proves that an historical show rich in cultural implication can draw people to its concerns. Indeed, the caliber of conversation overheard through eavesdropping on engaged visitors of all kinds has never been higher!

"Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity" is on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, from November 8, 2009, through January 25, 2010.

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