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100 Years of Bauhaus

BY NINA SIEGAL | MARCH 27, 2019



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The Bauhauschapel (T. Lux Feininger: clarinet, Waldemar Alder: Trumpet, Ernst Egeler: Drums, Clemens Röseler: Trombone, Friedhelm Strenger: Piano), Dessau 1930. Exhibition: 2019 Triennale der Moderne - Weimar, Dessau, Berlin (January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019).
(Image Courtesy: Photo: Unknown/ © Bauhaus-Archive Berlin)

Bauhaus was a school, but it was much more than a school. It was a locus of experimentation, for art and architecture, lighting, stage design, typography, performance, dance and furniture design — but more than that, it was where the teaching of art itself was revolutionized.

“Art and the people must form an entity,” a flyer for the Bauhaus boldly declared. “Art shall no longer be a luxury of the few but should be enjoyed and experienced by the broad masses.”

The first iteration of the school, Staatliches Bauhaus, opened 100 years ago this year, in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, during the period of the Weimar Republic. It lasted just 14 years, in three locations, and became the ultimate expression of inter-war values — an effort to expunge the violent history of the First World War — and an expression of freedom in Europe that existed only until the Nazis came to power.

Even when the school finally closed in 1933, Bauhaus did not end — it simply moved and morphed and influenced almost everything that we think of today as Modernist culture.

“Bauhaus was a school but also a concept or idea, and it was a place where you could go where there was no difference between art forms,” said Tanja Pirsig-Marshall, a curator at the Westphalian State Museum of Art and Cultural History in Munster, Germany. “Artists were able to experiment with materials and techniques; they used the stage as a kind of showcase to develop their ideas. It was also because of the teaching method and the character of the school and the ideas that developed that made the Bauhaus quite important.”

There was a before and after Bauhaus, the precursor and the successors, and this year, to mark the 100th anniversary of its founding, museums across Germany and the globe are celebrating the centenary with a wide range of exhibitions that explore both, known as Bauhaus 100.

Before the Bauhaus, there was the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts in Weimar, which was founded in 1908 as the first “citadel of modernism” by the Belgian designer Henry van de Velde. Later, the school changed hands from van de Velde to the architect [Walter Gropius](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/76068-walter-gropius), who rechristened it as Bauhaus.

The exhibition “Van de Velde, Nietzsche and Modernism around 1900,” at Neues Museum Weimar explores van de Velde’s ideas, how they related to artistic and ideological principles set out by the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, with about 500 objects, including about 100 paintings and sculptures.

“Gropius was a new generation,” said the exhibition’s curator Sabine Walter in a telephone interview. “In 1919, Gropius really wanted to make a break and start from the very new.”

The list of teachers who helped form the Bauhaus’ ideologies included [Paul Klee](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/5262-paul-klee), [Josef Albers](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/3218-josef-albers), [Wassily Kandinsky](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/wassily-kandinsky-3484) and [Lyonel Feininger](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/60430-lyonel-feininger). The textile artist Gunta Stolz taught students such as [Anni Albers](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/anni-albers-757923), who later also taught there. [Oskar Schlemmer](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/oskar-schlemmer-163974), a sculptor, painter and choreographer, was hired as “master of form” at the Bauhaus theatre workshop. He became not only an influential stage designer but also a key Bauhaus figure, as explored in the exhibition “[Oskar Schlemmer](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/oskar-schlemmer-163974) – The Bauhaus and the Path to Modernity,” at the Herzogliches Museum Gotha in Germany from April 28 to July 28.

“Schlemmer’s role at the Bauhaus is often described as an intermediary between the different positions and currents, political, esoteric and rational thoughts,” the show’s curator, Timo Trumper, said by email.

The Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, where it later came under the leadership of the Swiss architect [Hannes Meyer](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/hannes-meyer-202893) and ultimately the German architect [Ludwig Mies van der Rohe](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/ludwig-mies-van-der-rohe-1675850).

A new Bauhaus Museum Dessau will open on September 8, as part of this year’s centenary celebration. In 1932, it moved to Berlin, its final location, where it stayed for less than a year. The Nazis raided the school in 1933, surrounding with Gestapo agents and searching for evidence of a Jewish communist conspiracy. Although van der Rohe tried to stay and fight for the institution, ultimately, it was forced to close under pressure from the Nazi party.

The Bauhaus became a diaspora. Some Bauhauselers, as they called themselves, stayed in Europe. About 30 students and teachers from the school immigrated to the Netherlands, for example, where they established Bauhaus-inspired institutions such as the Nieuwe Kunstschool (the New Art School), as explored in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum exhibition, “Bauhaus: Pioneers of a New World,” until May 26.

[Josef Albers](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/3218-josef-albers) was invited to teach at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1933, and he and his wife, [Anni Albers](#) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/anni-albers-757923), both ended up teaching there for many years, teaching visual perception, as Albers famously put it, “To open eyes.”

They were followed to Black Mountain by the Swiss theater artist Alexander “Xanti” Schawinsky, Schlemmer’s acolyte and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy who moved to America and established Chicago’s New Bauhaus – Institute of Design.

In the United States, the Bauhaus artists developed relationships with, and influenced the work of key modernist artists such as the composer [John Cage](/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/john-cage-33049) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/john-cage-33049), the choreographer [Merce Cunningham](/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/223113-merce-cunningham) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/223113-merce-cunningham), the artist [Robert Rauschenberg](/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/robert-rauschenberg-37) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/robert-rauschenberg-37) and the photographer [Barbara Morgan](/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/barbara-morgan-4228) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/barbara-morgan-4228), who specialized in images of modern dancers. The Westphalian State Museum of Art and Cultural History in Munster, Germany, explores the legacy of the artists who went to the United States in the years after the Bauhaus closed and who had an immediate impact on the American art world in its exhibition “Bauhaus and America: Experiments in Light and Motion,” which runs through March 10.

With 47 artists represented by about 150 artworks on show across six rooms, the show is focused on the visual, performing and applied arts, with a special emphasis on innovations in stage lighting and design. Among the highlights of the exhibition is something called the licht-raummodulator, created by Moholy-Nagy, a metal, wood and glass contraption with a motor inside, which projects light.

The show also includes works by American artists such as Bruce Naumann and [Robert Rauschenberg](/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/robert-rauschenberg-37) (/web/20190330143124/https://www.blouinartinfo.com/artists/robert-rauschenberg-37), who were influenced by Bauhaus ideas and aesthetics. In 1938, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened “Bauhaus: 1919–1928,” an expansive survey dedicated to the German school of art and design with nearly 700 examples of the school’s output.

“The Bauhaus movement was really popular in America in part because the MoMA exhibition received a lot of attention — some people even called it the first blockbuster exhibition,” said Pirsig-Marshall. “The fact that these artists also got quite important jobs at important art institutions, or helped create new institutions in the United States, shows that it was considered a kind of new way of life.”

Today, the MoMA website states that the Bauhaus school “had served as a model for the Museum’s multi-departmental structure, and inspired its multidisciplinary presentation of photography, architecture, painting, graphic design and theater.”

Gropius eventually moved to Massachusetts and became a longtime professor at Harvard, where a core group of Bauhausers convened. Today, Harvard owns one of the largest collections of works relating to the Bauhaus, calling it “the 20th century’s most influential school of art and design.” Until July 28, the Special Exhibitions Gallery at the Harvard Art Museums will present “The Bauhaus and Harvard,” with 200 works, including textiles, paintings, photographs, furniture, and archival materials.

As the exhibition curator, Laura Muir said in an interview with Harvard’s Index magazine, “Even 100 years later, the Bauhaus seems very forwardthinking and pioneering — a lot of artists and designers are still drawing inspiration from that.”

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