

bauhaus beginnings

Almost mythic in status, the Bauhaus is seen as one of the most influential schools of art and design of the twentieth century. Established in 1919, the Bauhaus sought to erode distinctions among crafts, the fine arts, and architecture through a program of study centered on practical experience and diverse theories. Until the school's forced closure by the Nazi regime in 1933, students and masters worked with a variety of traditional and experimental media and continually reconceived the role of art and design in contemporary society. Despite its relatively brief, itinerant existence, the Bauhaus occupies an outsize position in the cultural imaginary.

Marking the one hundredth anniversary of the school's opening, *Bauhaus Beginnings* reexamines the founding principles of this landmark institution. The exhibition considers the school's early dedication to spiritual expression and its development of a curriculum based on elements deemed fundamental to all forms of artistic practice.

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Founding the Bauhaus

The Bauhaus officially opened in Weimar, Germany, on April 1, 1919. Director Walter Gropius's manifesto announced a bold vision for the newly reformed, state-sponsored school of art and design. In a text laden with spiritual and romantic imagery, Gropius outlined a model of education that bridged the fine and applied arts. He hoped that various forms of artistic practice—especially painting, sculpture, architecture, and design—could produce socially and spiritually gratifying collective works.

Lyonel Feininger illustrated Gropius's future-oriented vision somewhat counterintuitively through a woodcut depicting a Gothic cathedral with flying buttresses, pointed arches, and rays of light emanating from its steeples. A preindustrial building form, the cathedral represented the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), in which designers, artists, and artisans collaborated in service of a single spiritual goal. The internationally circulated manifesto idealized the medieval past as a model for the transformation of modern arts education, attracting students from as far away as Japan to the school.

German Expressionism and the Bauhaus

Influenced by industrial architecture and standardization, Walter Gropius had by the mid-1910s developed a reputation as a leading modernist architect committed to rationalism, an ethic that considered architecture to be an objective science. The unprecedented atrocities of mechanized warfare experienced in World War I, however, motivated the architect—and many others of his generation—to rethink these commitments. Gropius rejected the burgeoning “machine aesthetic” and, by 1919, had become increasingly focused on the architectural possibilities of expressionism, a movement that foregrounded the subjective, emotional, and spiritual aspects of design.

Gropius’s earliest hires at the Bauhaus included prominent international figures associated with expressionism and spirituality. Lyonel Feininger, Gertrud Grunow, Johannes Itten, and Gerhard Marcks were among the first faculty members. In the following years, Gropius recruited other leading artists associated with influential groups such as Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) in Munich and Der Sturm (The Storm) in Berlin, including Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Lothar Schreyer. It was Gropius’s conviction that a revolutionary form of spiritual expression should not be constrained to the domain of fine art; through the Bauhaus curriculum, he sought to imbue objects of everyday life with an artistic spirit.

Spirituality at the Bauhaus

Swiss painter Johannes Itten was an unconventional teacher and a man of unusual beliefs. A mystic and disciple of Mazdaznan—a neo-Zoroastrian religion that became popular in Central Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century—Itten shaved his head and wore a long robe he had designed for himself. The magnetism of his personality and pedagogy persuaded a number of his students to follow a program of physical and mental exercises as well as vegetarian diets and purification by fasting. Itten infused the study of art fundamentals with a strong sense of spiritualism.

Vassily Kandinsky, who joined the Bauhaus in the summer of 1922, was committed to transcendentalist theories espoused by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner and proponents of the anthroposophist movement. Through nonfigurative compositions, Kandinsky attempted to formulate objective laws for the expression of subjective experiences, and he saw the school as a vehicle for the development of the spiritually gratifying total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*).

Other belief systems permeated the Bauhaus. Adolf Meyer, Gropius's architectural partner, was a theosophist, and several students were followers of arcane doctrines. Although not always immediately apparent, the commitment to spiritualism among Bauhaus masters and students suffused the school's mission.

Bauhaus Woodcuts

Woodcuts occupied a central role at the early Bauhaus. As a centuries-old printing technique, the woodcut came to be associated with the Romanticism and expressionism that coursed through the Bauhaus in its beginning phase. The German expressionists—committed to the subjective, emotional, and spiritual facets of design—revived and celebrated this preindustrial form of art.

The first publication issued by the Bauhaus print workshop was Lyonel Feininger's portfolio *Zwölf Holzschnitte* (Twelve woodcuts) in 1921. The stark black-and-white prints reimagine urban scenes and naval seascapes in jagged forms that were highly characteristic of the woodcut as a medium. Gerhard Marcks, who, like Feininger, was among the first to be hired at the Bauhaus in 1919, published a series titled *Das Wielandslied der älteren Edda* (The Wieland song of the elder Edda) a few years later. Illustrating the Germanic myth of a legendary master blacksmith, the prints are an allegorical reflection on a Romantic, preindustrial past. Expressionism and spirituality, associated with the woodcut, were highly influential among students and visible in works such as the student journal *Der Austausch* (The exchange).

The Sommerfeld House

In early 1920, an opportunity to realize “the building of the future” —an ideal set forth in the Bauhaus manifesto—presented itself. Adolf Sommerfeld, a lumber mill owner, building contractor, and real estate developer specializing in timber structures, commissioned Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer to design a residence in Berlin. Gropius aimed to bring the Bauhaus workshops together in the creation of the house, which took inspiration from a rustic log cabin. He felt that wood gave architecture a spiritual quality, arguing that “wood is the building material of the present” precisely because it “is the original building material of men.” Despite the primitive association, timber was employed innovatively in Sommerfeld’s patented construction system, which layered thermal insulation materials between factory-cut, interlocking lumber.

Students designed key elements of the interior, including a stained-glass window above the staircase, carved wood ornaments, a large curtain, a set of wooden tables and chairs, light fixtures, radiator covers, rugs, and wall hangings. With the exception of the ceramics workshop, all were involved in the design and realization of the Sommerfeld House, which represented an actualization of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*).

Form and Color; or, The Fundamentals

The Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus introduced all first-year students to what were considered the fundamental principles of color, form, and material. Through lectures, demonstrations, and exercises, they were to develop familiarity with the “basic elements” of art and design, including points, lines, and planes; triangles, squares, and circles; and the primary colors. Teachers aimed to promote a shared foundation of aesthetic knowledge among the student body through these investigations.

The Bauhaus masters—each armed with his or her particular theories and interests—spearheaded the first-year studies. Johannes Itten initiated the Preliminary Course in the fall of 1920; László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers took over beginning in 1923. Albers led it alone after 1928. These courses were supplemented by specialized theoretical seminars taught by key Bauhaus faculty, including Gertrud Grunow, Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, and Joost Schmidt. The masters agreed that a firm grounding in the principles of form and color was crucial to the development of a new generation of artists. These fundamentals remained at the core of Bauhaus education until the closure of the school in 1933.

Color Systems

Color theory remained a central focus at the Bauhaus throughout the school's fourteen-year existence. Committed to developing a systematic understanding of color, instructors and students produced countless color wheels, triangles, grids, and spheres. The resulting schemes were used to explore key concepts, such as the relationships between primary and secondary colors; the nature of affinities and contrasts; the effects of saturation; and the gradients of tints, tones, and shades. Despite fundamental differences of opinion—Josef Albers, for example, believed that color was absolutely relative, while Vassily Kandinsky argued colors connoted specific spiritual and emotional meanings—Bauhaus masters agreed that the study of the general principles of color would be applicable to every artistic and design medium.

Theories of color drew upon a long history of spiritual, psychological, physical, metaphysical, physiological, and chemical investigations pioneered by artists, scientists, and writers, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ewald Hering, Adolf Hölzel, Wilhelm Ostwald, and Philipp Otto Runge.

Interaction of Color

In the Preliminary Course, students tested interactions among two, three, or four colors. To encourage students to think of color as a phenomenon independent of form, Johannes Itten devised a system of colored cutouts that could be placed side by side or on top of one another. His students placed these amid other media to explore the spatial effects and the changes to hue, value, or intensity brought about by arranging and combining colors. Vassily Kandinsky similarly championed the use of cutouts, having students position colored rectangles, squares, and circles in various configurations. Exercises often involved arraying these elements on a grid or within a square, constraining formal possibilities. Paul Klee developed a series of related exercises in watercolor. Fields of color, restricted to geometries such as circles and triangles, could intersect and overlap to test relativity and transparency. These studies allowed students to explore polarities such as light versus dark, warm versus cold, active versus passive, and receding versus advancing.

Form Studies

Masters at the Bauhaus argued that each primary shape—the square, the circle, and the triangle—possessed a unique character. Students in the Preliminary Course discovered these principles through exercises that challenged them to understand the distinct internal dynamics of each form. Subdividing squares, for example, led them to consider how the placement of elements within a composition and the choice of colors might create tensions, rhythms, contrasts, and proportional relationships. Other exercises challenged students to think about the visual impact of two-dimensional shapes through linear analyses highlighting aspects of movement within the forms.

These iterative exercises encouraged students to consider how subtle variations might affect compositions. Masters hoped to hone visual acuity and ability to think through form. Johannes Itten argued that, within any given geometry, there might be an “infinite number of possibilities.”

Spiral Studies

Spiral exercises in the Preliminary Course offered students a useful format for testing proportional relationships. Students drew lines moving outward from a central point and inscribed forms such as circles, squares, and triangles within them. As lines moved farther out from the center, forms became incrementally larger yet maintained identical geometric ratios. Bauhaus masters argued that such analyses would allow students to better understand proportion and the mathematical relationships among forms.

Not all spiral studies, however, originated from a center point; some began with lines on the outer periphery that moved inward. As an exercise in directional movement, the spiral was also a matter of perspective. Paul Klee characterized this in existential terms: “The direction determines either a gradual liberation from the center through freer motions, or an increasing dependence on an eventually destructive center. This is the question of life and death.”

Figure Drawings

After Oskar Schlemmer arrived at the Bauhaus, the first class he led was a figure drawing course. Through drawing sessions with nude models, he encouraged students to consider the body's underlying dynamic structure and to capture the abstraction of its movements. Exercises in figure drawing pressed students to reduce the natural forms of the body to geometric shapes in accordance with standard measurements and proportions. Schlemmer also sought to impart an understanding of the human figure conceived in three-dimensional space. Many of these ambitions fell within a long tradition of representing the body, including attempts outlined in Vitruvius's first-century BCE treatise *De architectura* (On architecture), Leonardo da Vinci's late fifteenth-century annotated drawings, and Albrecht Dürer's book *Underweysung der Messung* (Instruction in measurement) from 1525.

Schlemmer synthesized many of these ideas in his course *Der Mensch* (The human being). Because students were encouraged to capture the essential features of the body—from its joints and movements to its muscular structure and skeleton—natural sciences were an important component of his curriculum. Attention was given to physiology, and, more problematically, to the pseudoscience of phrenology and the comparison of skulls.

Analytical Drawings

Vassily Kandinsky championed the development of analytical drawing. He asked his students to construct still-life arrangements with objects found around the school, such as stools, lamps, curtains, boxes, and bicycles. Students sketched these scenes in pencil and ink and then traced over them in different colors to reveal visual axes, linear tensions, and other structural relationships among the objects. In the final step—“simplification”—students reduced concrete arrangements to single expressive lines that revealed the most important relationships within the composition. Later studies involved tracing paper overlays placed directly atop the sketches. The exercises allowed students to observe the interaction of points, lines, and planes underlying everyday objects. Rather than simply training artists to faithfully copy, Kandinsky insisted that the study of nature could reveal the forces of abstraction. He likewise argued that these exercises represented a necessary, intermediary step toward the production of any artwork. After studying elements such as colors and forms in isolation, the analytical drawing exercises tested their interrelation, which would serve as the basis for composition.

Material Studies

Students were expected to develop familiarity with a wide variety of materials—including wood, glass, fiber, paper, and metal—priming them for entry into specialized workshops.

Both Johannes Itten and Josef Albers contributed to the development of material studies in the Preliminary Course. Each considered the learning process to be experiential and tactile, foregrounding the sensorial comprehension of textures and contrasts. Influenced by pioneering nineteenth-century educator Friedrich Fröbel’s ideas about learning through play, Itten asked students to develop collages and assemblages from found materials. Sticks, wire, fabric, paper, and glass were arranged together to engage the sense of touch, the feeling of texture, and the perception of essence. Albers, by comparison, insisted that students work in harmony with the essential character of a single material; studies in his course explored the structural and conceptual limits of materials.

Light Plays

Building upon theories explored in the Preliminary Course, sculptors Kurt Schwerdtfeger (a student) and Josef Hartwig (a master) premiered an experimental stage production in Vassily Kandinsky's apartment in June 1922. In this live performance titled *Reflecting Color-Light Plays*, Schwerdtfeger and Hartwig projected colored lights through cut-cardboard stencils to cast luminous moving patterns on a transparent scrim.

The following year, student Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack began to separately develop a series of works he referred to as "Color-light plays." Like many early Bauhaus students, Hirschfeld-Mack arrived with previous training in the fine arts. He enrolled at the school late in 1919 after studying color theory with prominent painters Adolf Hölzel and Ida Kerkovius, who had previously mentored Johannes Itten and Oskar Schlemmer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart. Following Schwerdtfeger and Hartwig's explorations, Hirschfeld-Mack set primary shapes in motion using a projection apparatus in which mechanically operated colored lights were deployed in gradations from dark to light. Intended to foster powerful physical and psychological effects, Hirschfeld-Mack's multimedia performances were accompanied by music he had composed himself.

Print Portfolios

Lyonel Feininger led the printmaking workshop at the Bauhaus, which produced series of portfolios for public sale. Two portfolios in the planned five-part series *Neue Europaeische Graphik* (New European graphics) highlighted the work of Bauhaus masters: the first, in 1921, features fourteen prints by Feininger, Paul Klee, Gerhard Marcks, and Oskar Schlemmer, among others; the second, coinciding with the first Bauhaus exhibition in 1923, comprises eight prints, including one by Vassily Kandinsky and one by László Moholy-Nagy. Two other portfolios in the series feature works by German artists outside of the Bauhaus; a fifth, dedicated to French artists, was never released.

The prints were intended not only to provide practical experience to students but also to disseminate the Bauhaus's artistic philosophies to a wider audience and to generate a sizable income for the school. However, they never sold well, and due to the financial situation at the Bauhaus, exacerbated by hyperinflation in Germany, the workshop became defunct. After the school left Weimar in 1925, the printmaking workshop was closed.

The Exhibition of 1923

Pressured by mounting concerns from the regional government and the citizens of Weimar about political activity at the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius and the faculty resolved to hold the institution's first public exhibition in 1923 to showcase the productivity, versatility, and nonpartisan nature of the school to a wider audience.

The exhibition, held from August 15 to September 30, included a variety of events across several venues. A concentrated week of programming called Bauhaus Week saw the premiere of music and dance performances, film screenings, parties, and other events. Gropius's inaugural lecture, "Art and Technology—A New Unity," announced a new direction for the Bauhaus: from that moment on, the school would embrace machine production and an industrial aesthetic.

Architecture played a key role in displaying this new ambition. On the occasion of the exhibition, the director's office was rearranged and opened to the public. It featured furniture designed by Gropius and other elements by Bauhaus students, including a wall-color scheme by artist and architect Peter Keler, a wall hanging by artist Else Mögelin, and a rug by artist Gertrud Arndt. Press records report that approximately fifteen thousand visitors traveled to Weimar to visit the show, many from abroad. To accommodate the international audience, English and Russian translations of the exhibition catalog were planned.

Economic and Political Pressures

From the outset, the Bauhaus faced acute political and economic pressures. Manufacturers and craftspeople in Weimar criticized the state-funded institution, arguing that the products it produced created unfair competition in the marketplace. Conservative politicians meanwhile accused the school of promoting Communist ideologies and frequently threatened to pull its funding.

In order to shore up moral and economic support, the school established the Kreis der Freunde des Bauhauses (Circle of Friends of the Bauhaus) on October 20, 1924. To join the circle, members paid a fee of twenty marks per year, or a onetime amount of at least one hundred marks. The appeal is signed by the trustees of the board, including luminaries such as painter Marc Chagall, physicist Albert Einstein, and composer Arnold Schönberg, among others. The text emphasizes the international successes and spiritual achievements of the school, and it promises donors his or her choice of a print by a Bauhaus master.

As part of this effort, members of the Bauhaus also compiled testimonies of public support for the institution and sent them to the regional government. In more than thirty letters, endorsers of the school protest against its intended dissolution, asserting that the demise of the Bauhaus would represent an “irreplaceable loss for German art and economic life.”

Weaving

Although women were admitted to the Bauhaus in relatively large numbers—in its first year, about half the enrolled students were women—they did not share equal status with their male peers. The majority of women students were pressured to study weaving, rather than other disciplines such as metal-working or architecture, despite their objections.

In the aftermath of World War I, materials and funds for the school's workshops were scarce, and the weavers used original looms from the School of Applied Arts to produce one-off objects such as stuffed animals and dolls. Early Bauhaus master Helene Börner instructed weaving students to draw upon foundational theories of color and form developed in the Preliminary Course to produce innovative designs.

When former student Gunta Stölzl became director of the weaving workshop in 1926, she argued that “a woven piece is always a serviceable object,” pushing production away from the loom and toward industrial modes. Bauhaus textiles were manufactured in bulk and sold widely, rendering them one of the most successful and broadly disseminated Bauhaus products.

Haus Am Horn and the New Architecture

The competition for the design of an experimental house—the Haus Am Horn—represented a unique opportunity to highlight new directions in architecture at the Bauhaus. Turning away from expressionism, which had characterized the architectural work of the early Bauhaus, masters and students submitted entries based on rationalist and functionalist ideas. Georg Muche, then director of the weaving workshop, won the competition with a proposal for a modest, utilitarian house that was intended to be industrially pre-fabricated. Untrained as an architect, Muche relied on Walter Gropius's partner Adolf Meyer for technical supervision of the project.

Realized later that year in collaboration with Bauhaus students and masters, Muche's design for Haus Am Horn centered on a living space lit by a band of clerestory windows and topped with a flat roof. The central living space was surrounded by interlocking rooms, eliminating the need for hallways. The stark modernity of the ensemble was enlivened by furniture and other design elements produced by students and masters in the workshops.

The Haus Am Horn exemplified the search for a dialogue between craft production and industrial reproducibility. As a result of the project, Weimar in this period became a site of architectural pilgrimage, marking the success of the initiative.

The Stage

In the spirit of the total work of art, the stage at the Bauhaus became a key site for collaboration among designers and artists, requiring the careful orchestration of sound, words, movement, costumes, and sets. Theater pieces by students and masters enacted theories developed in the Preliminary Course and bore the marks of many workshops.

Led in its early years by Lothar Schreyer, the theater workshop explored spiritual, mystical, and religious concerns through the development of expressionistic and symbolic forms. Schreyer's commitment to morbid and often ethno-nationalistic themes rendered him a controversial figure in his two-year tenure at the school, and he adopted increasingly abhorrent political views after his departure.

Oskar Schlemmer took over as head of the workshop in 1923. Although he continued to pursue metaphysical questions, he focused increasingly on abstraction, mechanization, and mathematics. For Schlemmer, the human body was the building block of the theater. The body could be dramatically transformed by costumes, resulting in abstract and idealized forms.

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