The Bauhaus Art School: History And Impact On Modern Design

The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 in Weimar by architect Walter Gropius with the idea of creating a “total work of art” in which all of the arts, including architecture, were brought together in unity. Upon the creation of his school, Gropius wrote the Bauhaus Manifesto, a guide which proclaimed that “the ultimate aim of all creative activity is the building” and called for interdisciplinary collaborations between artists and craftsmen; which would aim towards a more responsible and aware society, characterised through its inexpensive housing, functional and affordable wares and through putting art and design into the public sphere.

Pupils enrolled at the school were known as ‘apprentices’ and studied a course known as the ‘Vorkurs’ where they practiced exercises in colour, texture, form, light and line. Apprentices were taught the principle that “form follows function”, as well as the importance of the unity of creative design and material production. Upon completion of the Vorkurs, students would select one practice to specialise in and attend workshops which provided hands-on training in that practice. Workshops were taught by two tutors; a master of craft, who would oversee technical skills and a master of form, a well-known practicing artist - rather than a trained academic - who would be responsible for aesthetics. Masters of forms included painters Johannes Ittens, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee and so for many apprentices, the promise of being taught by such prestigious artists will undoubtedly have been among the reasons for their enrolment.

In the Manifesto, Gropius (1919) had claimed that “any person without regard to age or sex may be welcomed” and the same year that it was written saw more female than male applicants to the school, (Buller, 2010) however upon arrival many female apprentices were simply told there were no course spaces available for their chosen practice, and they were instead dispatched to either bookbinding, pottery or weaving. The pottery workshop, however, shut women out and by 1922, the bookbinding workshop was closed entirely; this meant that for the majority of female apprentices, weaving was their only choice, which contrasted hugely against their male peers who were not limited within their selections and were instead, encouraged to study courses such as architecture, metal work or furniture.

During the first two years before the workshops were fully established, no definitive gender was assigned to them, and a male student, Max Peiffer-Watenphul, participated in weaving activities (Smith, 2014), however by 1921 a workshop comprised wholly of women weavers had been founded.

Gunta Stölzl enrolled at the Bauhaus in 1919 and during this early period, she travelled to Krefeld to study dyeing techniques and advanced fibre technology; which she later brought back with her to the Bauhaus. In 1922, Stölzl became the first female master of craft in the school’s history, working tirelessly to improve the weaving workshop curriculum (“The Threads of Weavers’ Lives”, 2013) and later in 1927, became the workshop’s Head.

As a consequence of Stölzl’s desire to create a separate space for the women entering the school, paired with encouragement from Gropius - who sought to segregate the female population from the male and therefore the more “masculine” workshops - the women’s

weaving workshop, and the idea of what was and was not so-called women's work was established (Smith, 2014).

Unsurprisingly due to Gropius' clear contempt for weaving, a large number of the male academics at the Bauhaus echoed his disdain; with master of form Oskar Schlemmer stating that "where there is wool, there is a woman who weaves, if only to pass the time," (Smith, 2014). By expressing this sexist opinion, Schlemmer is dismissing weaving and saying that it holds no intellectual dimension and requires little skill or mental concentration.

Similarly, Georg Muche, who became master of form for the weaving workshop in 1921, made every attempt to disassociate himself from the weaver's work and swore never to "weave a single thread, tie a single knot or make a single textile design." Muche believed the process of handling thread to be inherently feminine and therefore a threat to both his masculinity and his status at the school (Smith, 2014). As well as the materials and processes of weaving holding a feminised status at the Bauhaus, they were also considered subordinate to more fundamental practices of form and colour theory such as architecture or painting, which is what Schlemmer and Muche practiced.

Gertrud Arndt was an apprentice who enrolled into the school in 1923 with a scholarship and was intent on studying architecture, however when she arrived she was refused entry to the architecture workshop and dispatched to weaving. During her time at the Bauhaus, Arndt experimented with photography, as well as the loom, and eventually abandoned weaving in 1927 after the completion of her course. Arndt went on to become a successful photographer and forged links with the school in the early 1930's when her husband - who she had met whilst studying there - accepted a teaching post at the school (Buller, 2010).

Similarly, apprentice Anni Albers had enrolled into the school with the desire to study glasswork and had been refused and forced to settle for weaving, which she had once described as the least objectionable alternative (Harris, 1994). Albers soon became a pioneer in weaving and was notable for her experiments in texture; in 1931 when Gunta Stölzl left the school, Albers became the new Head of the Weaving Workshop (Smith, 2014). As well as directing the workshop, Albers wrote extensively and gave much consideration to the status of weaving as an art form, commenting that "when the work is made with threads, it is considered a craft, when it is on paper, it is considered art" (Smith, 2014).

As a consequence of World War I, Germany experienced an economic crisis from 1919-1923 and it was during this time that apprentice Benite Otte enrolled at the school. She too, was dispatched to the weaving workshop but Otte - along with a number of other weavers - made the decision to give up some of their classes to spend time growing vegetables and preparing food for their peers and teachers (Buller, 2010). This was a gendered sacrifice, and whilst their master Oskar Schlemmer praised the group of weavers greatly for this, they received no remittance.

Another one of the problems the female apprentices faced is that they were almost always overshadowed by men; even the most successful female Bauhaus artists (such as Albers and Stölzl) featured less prominently in history than their male counterparts (Rawsthorn, 2013). Furthermore, female apprentices would have had to juggle domestic responsibilities with their education and practices, all whilst being overshadowed by their husbands who would have worked in similar fields.

In 1923, Hungarian painter Laszlo Moholy-Nagy joined the teaching staff at the Bauhaus; upon his arrival he took over the Vorkurs from Johannes Itten and the metal workshop from Paul Klee (“Chronology”, 2012). This was perhaps a turning point for women at the school as before this point, they had been refused entry completely to the metal workshop - as the work would have been considered too strenuous and manual for women to perform - however now the Head of the Metal Workshop, Moholy-Nagy encouraged women to pursue the practice. One such woman was Marianne Brandt, who went onto become one of Germany’s forefront designers (Rawsthorn, 2013).

In 1925 the Bauhaus was facing increasing political pressure from the local community and government; the school was thought to be too left-wing and promiscuous in its ideals (Ray, 2001) but nevertheless, a company to sell items that had been designed and produced at the school, Bauhaus Ltd. was set up. Under Stölzl’s leadership, the business thrived and generated much-needed income for the school, however Weimar Chamber of Trade did not give apprenticeship certificates for weaving, which meant that the weavers could not register for journeyman or master’s diplomas which therefore hindered them from earning money from their practice once they had completed their course at the school (Rawsthorn, 2013).

In the same year, the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau and three years later in 1928, Gropius resigned as director to return to practice privately as an architect in Berlin and Hannes Meyers became the new director.

Under Meyers in 1930, a contract with the German textile firm Polytextil was created and yielded lucrative licensing fees for Bauhaus designs which the apprentices were able to set themselves; meaning that the students were given the opportunity to be involved in every stage of the textile production from creation to finance. Commissions flowed in from textile manufacturers and finally the work of the Weaving Workshop was considered on an equal footing to that of the other workshops that designed and produced elegant, practical household accessories and furniture (Rubin, 2009).

In 1930 Hannes Meyer left his position as director and Ludwig Mies van Der Rohe took over and then in 1932, due to further political turbulence, the Bauhaus was forced to move to Berlin. The Nazis had become the biggest party in Dessau in the recent elections at the time and due to the school’s left-wing image and Jewish student and staff community, it was particularly at risk. The Nazis had were determined to crack down on what they saw as foreign influences and repeatedly denounced the Bauhaus for its “degenerate art”.

When the Bauhaus opened in Weimar, just six out of the forty-five faculty members were female, contrasted with the six out of the thirty-five female faculty members at the school in Dessau, or the one out of the thirteen female faculty members at the school in Berlin (Buller, 2010). Whilst this shows that the equality in gender in teaching staff improved over the years, it also shows a decline in numbers of faculty members, which parallels with a decline in numbers of enrolment (Buller, 2010).

Eventually a year later in 1933, facing tremendous pressure the Berlin Bauhaus was forced to shut, but whilst the school closed, its teachings did not disappear.

The priority for Bauhaus artists was to leave Germany, as being former students meant that they were suspected of being Communists and therefore, treated with contempt. For artists

such as Anni Albers and Gunta Stölzl this threat was worse, as not only were they former students and faculty members, Albers was Jewish and Stölzl had married a Palestinian Jew which meant that they were doubly compromised. Albers and her husband emigrated to the United States where she found a teaching position at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (Harris, 1994) whilst Stölzl lost her German Citizenship and was forced to move to Switzerland.

Some artists did not leave Europe during World War II and suffered; both professionally, in terms of their art work and the fact that it left them isolated from Gropius's circle - Gropius and other prominent Bauhaus artists who had fled to the United States for refuge are the ones that have since dominated historic accounts of the Bauhaus - and in the sense that it left them to deal with the brutal consequences of the continent's mid-twentieth century politics (Rawsthorn, 2013).

In conclusion, the Bauhaus was a hugely innovative institute and its teachings and legacy is still relevant today within modern-day art schools; our current-day curriculum is owed to the Vorkurs, and artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. As problematic as he sometimes was, Walter Gropius somewhat opened the doors for females to attend and succeed in artistic academic environments, and this was echoed by his contemporaries; however whilst they meant well, their sexism and pride often prevented the men from delivering the forward-thinking innovation it promised. The Bauhaus had progressive aspirations but the men in charge represented the prevailing societal attitudes at the time (Ince, 2013 cited by Smith, 2013).