



Images Clockwise:
Photo of Walter Gropius, Bauhaus School,
Painting by Josef Albers, Chair by Mies Van der Rohe, and Poster from Bauhaus exhibition 1923.

The Bauhaus and American Art Education

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Abstract

The Bauhaus was a revolutionary art and design school that opened in the early twentieth century in Germany. Walter Gropius conceived the school with an idea based on a unity of all arts within the material world. He wanted to focus on a marriage between art and industry. Gropius acquired an influential group of instructors to help promote his ideas. After the start of WWII, artists and instructors of the Bauhaus fled to the United States and brought the Bauhaus ideas to the universities of America. The influences of the Bauhaus guided American Art Education for many years and in some respects still do. American art education has been steeped in the Bauhaus practices; educators today are re-evaluating these ideas to see if they are still valid as teaching methods in the twenty-first century.

The Bauhaus and American Art Education

The Bauhaus was a school of art and design, which opened in 1919 under the director Walter Gropius. The premise of the school was to forge unity between art and industry. Gropius also wanted the arts to work together, not in isolation, to create material objects that were functional and aesthetically pleasing so that all people could enjoy them. The instructors of the school were of the same mindset as Gropius and they developed a curriculum to achieve these goals. With the start of WWII, the Bauhaus in Germany closed and many of the instructors fled to the United States where they resumed their teaching at different universities. These teachers, many of them famous in their own right, influenced many artists at the time and greatly influenced the art education system of the United States. The Bauhaus philosophy of art education was the most prominent methodology of teaching in the US for many years. Many educators still follow the basic format of the Bauhaus program today. However, progressive art educators are questioning this methodology and its relevance today. The Bauhaus was innovative and influential during its time, but is the philosophy and practices still appropriate for teaching in today's culture?

The Bauhaus

Walter Gropius conceived the Bauhaus. As an already established architect, he was asked by the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar to take directorship of the two local art schools. Gropius agreed and founded the Das Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar (Hoffa, 1961). It was in the early planning stages of the school that Gropius began to formulate his philosophy of art education. Gropius was keenly aware of the gap between artists and industry and he wanted to bridge that with collaboration between the two. He was also conscious of the rebellious attitudes young artists

had against the traditional art academies. Gropius wanted to give students the opportunity to grow and develop ideas that would be part of a realistic world (Hoffa, 1961). The Bauhaus educational framework was structured in three tiers, the Preliminary course or *Vorlehre* lasted six months and consisted of elementary training in art (Raleigh, 1968). The second tier was titled Technical Instruction, which was similar to an apprenticeship and the third tier was called Structural Instruction. This last tier varied in scope due to the skills and talents of the individual artist (Hoffa, 1961). Each course had two instructors, a master artist for aesthetic problem solving and a master craftsman who was an expert with current industry tools and in their field. These instructors were called masters and the students were referred to as apprentices. The Bauhaus placed high value on craftsmanship (Lerner, 2005). The Bauhaus's fame in innovative education is owed mainly to the Preliminary Course.



Figure 1: The Bauhaus masters on the roof of the Bauhaus building in Dessau. From the left: Josef Albers, Hinnerk Scheper, Georg Muche, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer, Joost Schmidt, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, Vassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger, Gunta Stölzl and Oskar Schlemmer.

Vorlehre (Pre-Apprenticeship)

The first course students took at the Bauhaus was the *Vorlehre*. This course was designed to break down the conventional thoughts students had known prior to entering the Bauhaus

program as well as to have students re-learn and explore nature and materials in a new way.

Johannes Itten was the original designer and teacher of this course. Students were to study three main fundamentals: nature with attention to texture, plastic studies of composition in diverse materials and analysis of old masters. Itten wanted students to work directly with materials and learn to manipulate them. Itten's teachings were greatly influenced by Froebel and Pestalozzi. He was concerned that education "build the whole man as a creative being" (Raleigh, 1961, p. 286). Itten's theories vacillated between formal analysis and free expression. He often centered attention on contrast, such as dark-light or smooth-rough and color theory. This was the way in which he introduced design principles to his students. Itten's romantic views of art were in opposition to the prevailing art movements of the time, such as, de Stijl, Constructivism and Suprematism, which led Itten to leave the Bauhaus in 1923 because it was clear that the focus of education was on "function, analysis and economy" (Raleigh, 1961, p. 286).

Other instructors taught the preliminary course following Itten, each adding or changing the contents to follow their own philosophies. One of the successors to teaching the preliminary course was Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, his teaching and methodology was different than Itten, but as equally influential to the Bauhaus as a school. Moholy-Nagy took the position in 1923. He kept portions of Itten's teaching, such as exploring materials and problem solving; but he focused on the principles of design in a different way. He was interested in balance and space as opposed to contrast (Phelan, 1981). The idea of problem solving was of high interest to Moholy-Nagy, he believed that there could be many answers to an issue and that students were not wrong if they resolved the problem and could justify their approach. In this theory, the Bauhaus promoted the

process of art as opposed to the final product, which would become part of the foundation of the Bauhaus ideology (Phelan, 1981).

Precursor to the New Bauhaus in the USA

Prior to 1937, art education in the United States had seen many trends in its history. Past influential phases in art education included teaching students good taste through art and using art as a means to make the school environment more appealing to the learner, these ideas had merit but did not focus on art as a discipline in and of itself (Stankiewicz, 2001). Arthur Dow, an art educator at Pratt University, working in the early part of the twentieth century, started to promote learning basic principles of art, namely composition, but also line and color (Jaffe, 2005). Dow wrote a book titled *Compostion* in 1899, it was well received and re-published many times up through the 1940's. Dow was greatly influenced by Japanese wood block tradition and composition and his book reflected the thoughts of space within a composition (Berhens, 2004) Another art educator Denman Ross from Harvard also approached art with formal ideas. Ross applied scientific methods to art and design. He focused on balance, rhythm and harmony. He believed upper class people had good taste while the working class people had the skills to create things. One of his goals in art education was to bring good taste and technique together in order to make aesthetically pleasing objects (Stankiewicz, 2001). Both Dow and Ross had similar thoughts that would later be considered Bauhaus philosophy (Wygant, 1985).

The New Bauhaus and the Influence of Josef Albers in the USA

After several moves, the Bauhaus closed in Germany in 1933 due to a negative relationship with Nazi Germany. Many of the instructors and students moved from Europe to the United States. They brought with them their ideology and methodology. Many artists deemed famous

today came from the Bauhaus school. Three artists in particular whose impact and influence on American art education in the U.S. are Gropius, Moholy-Nagy and Albers. Gropius went to work as a professor of architecture at Harvard University. Moholy-Nagy opened a new art school in Chicago, called the New Bauhaus. Josef Albers became head of the art department at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. These men carried out the tradition of the preliminary course from the Bauhaus at the establishments where they worked. This set a trend in the United States that all universities they began to follow and ultimately their methods trickled down to K-12 schools (Raleigh, 1968).

Moholy-Nagy opened the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937. There he continued many teaching the Preliminary course, but with many changes in the theory behind it. Moholy-Nagy changed the name of the course to Foundations of art. The course became more scientific and analytic. This new course name has now been used throughout American art education since that time (Tavin, Kushins, Elniski, 2007). Moholy-Nagy hired Gyorgy Kepes who expanded the scientific approach to art making with the use of Gestalt psychology. Although many Bauhaus artists in Germany knew Gestalt psychology, at the New Bauhaus Kepes pushed it further in his teachings and writings (Berhens, 2004). Gestalt psychology was originally based upon visual perceptions and the way the brain organized them. Kepes was so greatly influenced by Gestalt psychology that he wrote a book, *Language of Vision*, which underwent over twelve printings by 1995 (Kim, 2006). He emphasized creation as “experiment” and “research” while expression became “optical communication” (Kim, 2006, p. 19) He used Gestalt principles to teach the design principles, unity, repetition, balance and rhythm. His teaching and his book were so

respected that many teachers and writers followed his cue in their own work (Kim, 2006). This greatly shaped the direction of American art education.

Josef Albers was also very significant in spreading the tenets of the Bauhaus philosophy in America. He immigrated to the US in 1933 immediately taking a position at the newly founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Although the school closed in 1957, it was regarded for its progressive educational views based in the ideals of John Dewey. Black Mountain was a liberal arts college, which boasted many influential artists as instructors. Albers continued the Bauhaus program at Black Mountain with the Preliminary course where students were taught formal arrangement, exploration of non-traditional materials and economy of labor and resources (Diaz, 2008). In 1950, Albers moved his teaching career to Yale University but continued his Preliminary course and his teaching philosophy. Albers believed that all individuals can create given the right instruction and tools; people are researchers and inventors. He believed that art curriculum was valid in its own right (Diaz, 2008). He focused his foundational classes on drawing, design and color. Students explored materials, methods and individual ideas in each of these classes. Gropius, on a visit to Albers at Black Mountain, commented “he gives them objective tools that enable them to dig into the very stuff of life” (Diaz, 2008, p. 262), this statement serves as the testament to Albers commitment to the Bauhaus philosophy and its becoming a staple in American art education.

Lasting Effects of the Bauhaus in American Art Education

It can be argued that Art education in the United States has not changed much since the introduction of the Bauhaus pedagogy. Many art teachers use the basic ideas from the preliminary or foundations course as a springboard for their curriculum. Although, there have

been calls for change over the years, teachers are resistant. Art educators have found comfort in teaching the design principles as laid out by the Bauhaus leaders. It is also known that teachers often teach how they were taught (Hobbs, 1993). However it appears as though the philosophy behind the Bauhaus teachings has been lost (Sheridan, 1990). Teachers focus on design principles and elements of art, but often do not allow students time to experiment with or explore the materials. Students are not given an “aesthetic problem” and challenged to find a solution (Tavin et al, 2007). However, there are some universities that are making changes to their foundations courses, such as Grand Valley State University in Michigan, they added a course to their foundations program title “Problem Solving”, in this class they focus on new media and big ideas (Tavin et al, 2007). At the University of Florida in Gainesville, the art and art history departments developed a program aptly titled Workshop for Art Research and Practice (WARP) in 1993. The course of study is based on contemporary art study with students being completely immersed in the program, which is nine credit hours. The one-semester course consists of three four-hour studio sessions and one two-hour lecture weekly. Speakers include people from other disciplines, such as physicists, psychologists, architects, lawyers and others who add to the diversity of the art curriculum. Students are encouraged to experiment and explore processes even at the cost of failure. During the course students have the opportunity to work with established artists and the community to broaden their experiences and knowledge so they can begin to develop their own personal style or voice (Catteral and Nugent, 1999). The School of Art Institute of Chicago, transformed their foundations course, newly called First Year Program (FYP) to “promote transdisciplinary thinking and production” as well as to help the artists develop their own voice artistically (Tavin et al, 2007, p. 15). The curriculum considers the

diversity of the students and their varied experiences in contemporary culture. The course titles are Research Studio I and II and Core Studio Practice, all of which are meant to have students experiment, solve and develop their art in the context of a contemporary art setting. As addressed throughout this paper, much of what happens in the universities tends to trickle down to the K-12 realm of art education. This is true again, as current theorists and writers call for changes in the current art curriculum. Olivia Gude discusses exactly this in her “Principles of Possibility” article of 2007. She challenges art teachers to do away with curriculum based on the principles of design and elements of art and asks teacher to try instead to focus on current issues, materials, problem solving and new media (Gude, 2007). Other authors recommend units based on problem solving, social issues, big ideas or key concepts all gleaned from visual culture (Tavin et al, 2007). A lot of these “new” ideas are actually Bauhaus pedagogy but they are refreshed and made current to our time.

Conclusion

As one reads this paper it is apparent that the Bauhaus has had a profound effect on art education in America. The early ideas of Gropius were embraced by many people, such as Moholy-Nagy and Albers, these men along with others brought the Bauhaus pedagogy to the United States where it has been imbedded in our art education ever since. Even with recent calls for change in art education, the underlying ideas of the Bauhaus are still evident. Today’s theorists want art to be taught in relation to today’s culture, they want students to problem solve, they want art to be available to all people not just the elite. These ideas are very rooted in the Bauhaus philosophy. These new courses with new names still endorse the methods that Itten, Moholy-Nagy and Albers taught, however they have been updated and revamped to apply to the

21st century. One must remember that the Bauhaus was current during it's own time and therefore our courses should change to reflect our time. As Albers said in an interview in 1941: Why do we still have the belief in academic standards while our living reveals variety, youth and freshness....? Why must exploration and inventiveness, two American virtues, too, play such a minor part in our schools? (Diaz, 2008, pp. 261-262) These words while very Bauhaus in concept still appear valid in today's vision for American art education.

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