



Search  (Economist.com)

Welcome  
My account [Manage my newsletters](#)  
Log out

**Get 4 FREE trial issues >>**  
[Subscribe](#) [Student offers](#)

[Site feedback](#)

- Home
- This week's print edition
- Daily news analysis
- Opinion
  - All opinion
  - Leaders
  - Letters to the Editor
  - Blogs
  - Columns
  - KAL's cartoons
  - Correspondent's diary
  - Economist debates
- World politics
  - All world politics
  - Politics this week
  - United States
  - The Americas
  - Asia
  - Middle East and Africa
  - Europe
  - Britain
- Special reports
- Business and finance
  - All business and finance
  - Business this week
  - Economics focus
  - Management
  - Economics A-Z
- Business education
  - All business education
  - Which MBA?
- Markets and data
  - All markets and data
  - Daily chart
  - Weekly indicators
  - World markets
  - Currencies
  - Rankings
  - Big Mac index
- Science and technology
  - All science and technology
  - Technology Quarterly
  - Technology Monitor
- Books and arts**
  - All books and arts**
  - Style guide
- People
  - People
  - Obituaries
- Diversions
- Audio and video
  - Audio and video library
  - Audio edition
- The World In
  - The World in 2010
  - The World in 2009
  - The World in 2008
  - The World in 2007
  - The World in 2006
  - The World in 2005
  - The World in 2004
- Research tools
  - All research tools
  - Articles by subject

**Books & Arts**

**Bauhaus**  
**The coast of Utopia**

Nov 12th 2009 | NEW YORK  
 From *The Economist* print edition

**Germany's idealistic designers have much to teach the modern world**



**The mighty Mies**

ART movements that are launched with manifestos often seem both brazen and naive. "Let us collectively desire, conceive and create the new building of the future," wrote Walter Gropius in his Bauhaus call to arms in 1919. Heralding a new school of art, architecture and design in Weimar, Germany, he declared that this new building "will one day rise towards heaven as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith".

Inaugurated in the wake of the first world war, the Bauhaus school spent 14 years grappling with what it meant to live in an age of machines, mass consumption and post-war dread. Gropius, the school's founding director from 1919 to 1927, wanted a new educational model, even a new understanding of art. Instead of the traditional art academy, where students imitated historical paintings and recreated tired archetypes of beauty,

he conceived of a place where painters, sculptors, architects and designers worked together in experimental laboratories. His aim was to revive the lost tradition of *Handwerk*, or manual craft, and end what he regarded as the "arrogant class division between artisans and artists".

It has been 90 years since the first students enrolled in the school, which had two other directors—Hannes Meyer from 1927 to 1930 and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe from 1930 until 1933, when the Nazis shut it down. The school's legacy can still be felt in the world of design and architecture, in part because many of the Bauhaus students and teachers went on to become successful émigrés. Gropius went to Harvard, van der Rohe to the Illinois Institute of Technology. And there was also Josef Albers, Marcel Breuer, Vasily Kandinsky and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Yet whereas Bauhaus has become synonymous with a certain modern style—streamlined, geometric, abstract, minimalist—this does not tell the whole story. The school's real contribution was far more varied.

The first Bauhaus show at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) since 1938 includes 450 works drawn from private collections, the three Bauhaus institutes—the Bauhaus Archive Berlin, the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau and the Klassik Stiftung Weimar—and MoMA's own collection. Arranged both chronologically and thematically, it has

- [Comment \(1\)](#)
- [Recommend \(39\)](#)
- [E-mail](#)
- [Share](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Reprints & permissions](#)

**Related Items**

- Country briefing**  
Germany
- More articles about...**  
The arts
- Websites**  
"Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity" is on at MoMA.

Advertisement

**The Economist**  
Now available  
in audio

**Entire edition,  
read word for word**

**Free for subscribers  
or US\$8.00**

[Download now](#)



- Articles by subject
- Economics A-Z
- Special reports
- Style guide

- Country briefings
- All country briefings
- China
- India
- Brazil
- United States
- Russia

- My account home
- Newsletters and alerts
- Manage my newsletters
- Manage my e-mail alerts
- Manage my RSS feeds
- Manage special-offer alerts
- More »

- Print subscriptions
- Subscribe to *The Economist*
- Renew my subscription
- Change my print subscription delivery, billing or e-mail address
- Pay my bill
- Activate premium online access
- Report a missing copy
- Suspend my subscription
- More »

- Digital subscriptions
- Subscribe to Economist.com
- Manage my subscription
- Mobile edition
- Audio edition
- Download screensaver
- More »

- Classifieds and jobs
- The Economist Group
- About the Economist Group
- Economist Intelligence Unit
- Economist Conferences
- Intelligent Life
- CFO
- Roll Call
- European Voice
- EuroFinance
- Reprints and permissions

- EIU online store**
- Economist shop**

Advertisement

gathered together a rich array of drawings, paintings, models, photographs, tapestries, furniture, sculptures and objects created within the school by both teachers and students.

The usual items associated with Bauhaus are here, including Marcel Breuer's elegant club chairs (designed so that the tubing for 50 chairs could be packed into a single box), Gropius's sleek plans for housing estates and Herbert Bayer's severe graphic designs. But there are quite a few surprises. Visitors entering the show are greeted with an arresting coffin design by Lothar Schreyer, painted with a brightly coloured and boldly geometric woman. Paul Klee's eerie hand puppets come a few rooms later, amid designs for tapestries and glasswork. Bauhaus "is so much more than tubular steel chairs," explains Leah Dickerman, who curated the show with Barry Bergdoll at the museum. The school has long been seen as a symbol of Germany's road not taken. This show strips away the mythology and looks at the art.

Despite the changes that took place under each director, there is a strong shared sensibility among the works. At a time when abstraction was still new, Bauhaus artists worked towards a universal visual language, one that was based on geometry and devoid of narrative. The school taught that art was a product less of inspiration than of research. This rational pursuit of common forms was a political response to the war (despite Gropius's insistence that Bauhaus was apolitical). The school idealised an aesthetic that existed beyond geographical boundaries or national symbols—such as Herbert Bayer's designs for a sans serif "universal lettering" and Josef Hartwig's demilitarised, geometric chess pieces. As with most art movements that begin with manifestos, the Bauhaus school had a Utopian element. It is a shame such things have come to seem so anachronistic.

"Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity" is at the Museum of Modern Art in New York until January 25th

[Back to top ^^](#)

### Readers' comments

Readers have commented on this article (the window for new comments is now closed).

[View all comments \(1\)](#)

Advertisement