

Looking Forward— And Back

Weimar as the 1999 European Capital of Culture


BY ANDREA
SCHULTE-PEEVERS

PHOTOS BY
DAVID PEEVERS

On the threshold of the millennium, Weimar has been designated the 1999 European Capital of Culture. For the first time since the concept originated in 1985, the cultural ministers of the European Union have bestowed the honor on a German city. Its official purpose: "to establish a lively dialogue between the cultures of Europe and to learn about each country's cultural achievements."

Weimar is poised to meet this lofty goal with events ranging from new productions of Goethe's *Faust I* and *Faust II* to a rock opera called *The Ninth of November*; from performances by international dance and theater troupes to a marathon 250-hour reading from Goethe's works. Elegant galas and high-brow symposia to street fairs and artist workshops—Weimar in 1999 will seek to create a fertile symbiosis between artists, scientists, politicians, social observers, and Everyman. The city hopes to become a breeding ground for ideas that will resonate far into the next millennium.

"The emphasis is clearly on exchange and cooperation between nations, artistic genres, generations, and religions," says Bernd Kauffmann, director of Kulturstadt



Besides marking the anniversary of Goethe's birth, 1999 is also the 240th birthday of Friedrich Schiller. Shown here is the entrance to his house.



Newly restored bay windows in the downtown area show Weimar's transition to modern times.

GmbH, the umbrella organization that's been working for half a decade to coordinate this year-long celebration. "Our goal is to make Weimar once again a focus of European cultural interests," he adds.

The selection of Weimar is especially appropriate in 1999 because of this year's many special anniversaries associated with the town. Foremost among them is the 250th birthday of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on August 28 (See feature, pp. 32-37). It's also been 240 years since his friend and fellow literary giant, Friedrich Schiller, was born. Other events to be commemorated are the 80th anniversaries of the Weimar Republic and the Bauhaus movement. And let's not forget the 50 years since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany and the first decade of reunification of the two German states.

But just as importantly, it's Weimar's unique position in German—and indeed, European—history that accounts for its being picked as Cultural Capital. Though predecessors—including Stockholm (1998) and Lisbon (1994)—are much larger cities, it was in diminutive Weimar that artistic and cultural movements of global impact were fomented. Between the 18th and early 20th centuries, an intangible magnetism—often described as *genius huius loci* (the spirit of the place)—pulled a pantheon of artists to the Ilm River. They all contributed to making Weimar a nexus of both the Enlightenment and the artistic avant-garde. It was only in this century that the National Socialists saw to it that the town wasn't allowed to bask in its humanistic glow forever by tainting its legacy with the concentration camp Buchenwald.

All elements of Weimar's heritage are embraced throughout the 1999 celebra-



Top: Because of Duke Carl August's young age (statue shown here), the principality of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, was headed by his mother, Anna Amalia. It was she who created the free-spirited intellectual and artistic climate. Bottom: Many artists were drawn to the Ilm River, also known as 'Goethe Park.'

tions which seek to create a thematic and artistic throughline between past and present.

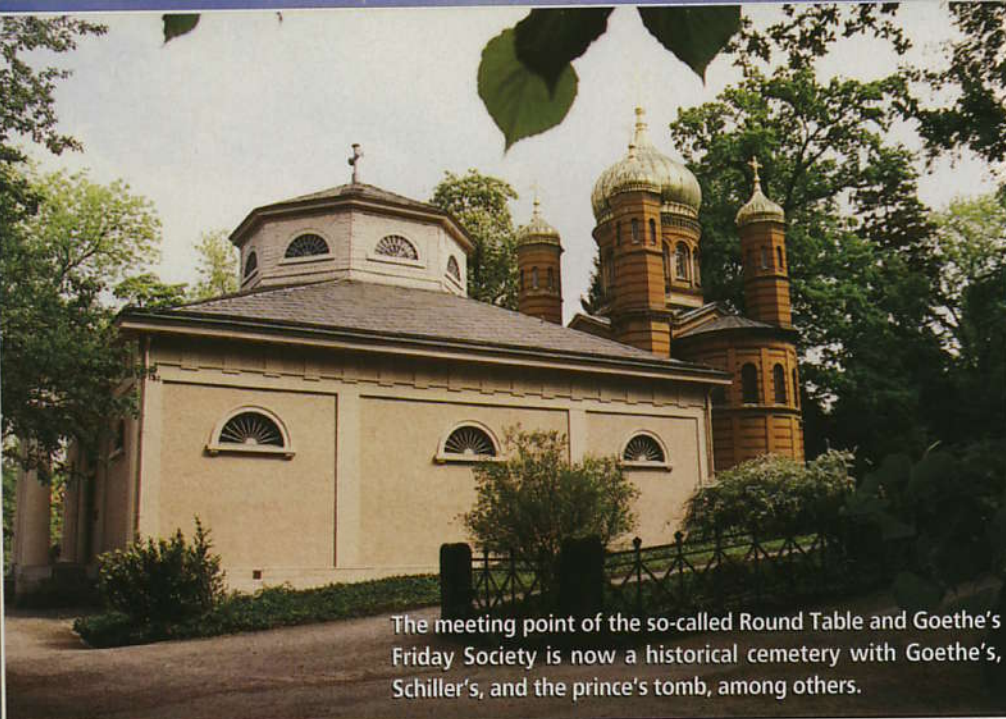
LITERATURE

Although Goethe is most commonly considered the catalyst for Weimar's emergence as a literary and artistic center, Anna Amalia—head of the duchy of Saxe-Weimar created the free-spirited intellectual and artistic climate that exerted its pull on many of the day's foremost thinkers. First to arrive was Christoph Martin Wieland whose list of achievements included a translation of the works of Shakespeare. Hired in 1772 as the educator of Anna Amalia's son Carl August, it was Wieland who urged his teenage charge to invite the 26-year-old Goethe to Weimar. In 1775 Goethe came for a visit; he stayed for 60 years. Much of this time he spent as minister in the duke's service, supervising such varied offices as road construction, mining, and waterways. While directing the court theater and the institute of arts and sci-



ence, he also penned such legendary works as *Iphigenia: A Tragedy*, *Torquato Tasso*, and, of course, *Faust I and II*.

A monumental figure in his lifetime, Goethe's presence lured a slew of other luminaries to Weimar. Most prominent among them were the author and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, a former fellow law-student of Goethe's in Strassbourg who became court preacher; and Friedrich Schiller who wrote his most famous dramas, *Wallenstein* and *William Tell*, in Weimar.



The meeting point of the so-called Round Table and Goethe's Friday Society is now a historical cemetery with Goethe's, Schiller's, and the prince's tomb, among others.

A Sampling of Literature Events:

- International Essay Contest—Topic: Freeing the future of the past? Or Freeing the past of the future?
- Goethe's Impact in the 20th Century—Focus of debate at annual summit of German Goethe Society
- Goethe's 250th Birthday Party—Weimar's entire downtown will be a street party with performers from around the world

THEATER

The theater had been a popular form of entertainment in Weimar since the first stage was built at court in 1696. The town got its first resident troupe in 1771, thanks to the vision and determination of Anna Amalia. She even managed to engage the actor Conrad Ekhof, a seminal figure in the German theater. But only three years later a blaze consumed the theater along with the rest of the palace. The thespian spirit, though, survived on the small stages of pleasure palaces and even in improvised ones in the countryside where low-brow farces and comedies entertained the courtiers and upper classes.

Goethe saw to it that this light-weight popular fare was gradually replaced by more edifying material, including, naturally, his own works. As director of the *Hoftheater* (court theater), which he founded in 1791 and ran for a quarter of a century, he also pushed for overall professionalism. With famous actors like Corona Schroeter as part of the ensemble, the theater's repertory ran the

gamut from crowd-pleasing plays by Kotzebue and operas by Mozart to demanding Schiller dramas, most of which had their premiere under Goethe.

Updated versions of classical fare have always been the staple of the Weimar stage, called the *Deutsches Nationaltheater* (German National Theater) since 1919. Under restoration since 1996, it reopened this February with new productions of *Faust I* and *Faust II*. Lean times and slashed cultural budgets, however, are forcing the state-subsidized stage to merge with the theater in Erfurt, some 18 miles west of Weimar, a move that's been the source of controversy and consternation.

A Sampling of Theater-Related Events:

- The Ninth of November—Musical comedy about this poignant date, the fall of the Berlin Wall
- Dead Poets' Societies—Examining the Goethe Cult in the context of the historical epochs since Goethe's death in 1832
- Death, Destruction, and Detroit III—Through visuals, sound, and text, this production explores the process of destruction and reconstruction in the course of history

ARTS, CRAFTS, AND ARCHITECTURE

The spirit of Weimar has always drawn the artistic avant-garde but, ironically, it was never allowed to flourish here. This is especially true of art and architecture, which had their Weimar heyday in the early years of this century only to finally

succumb to a reactionary and conservative mindset in the 1920s. This era began promisingly enough in 1903 when Harry Graf Kessler was appointed director of the Museum of Art and History by Grand Duke Wilhelm Ernst. Unfortunately, Kessler's support of modern artists clashed with the traditional tastes of his employer, ending in his dismissal. But before his demise Kessler brought to Weimar the Belgian avant-garde architect Henry van de Velde who, in 1906, founded the School of Applied Arts. In 1919 Van de Velde hired Walter Gropius as director of the school's new architecture department, which the latter baptized "Bauhaus." The roster of eminent Expressionist artists who came to teach here included Kandinsky, Feininger, Klee, Itten, Marcks, and Schlemmer. The Bauhaus, of course, went on to break new ground in the evolution of Modernist art and architecture. Its understated, simplistic, and functional forms continue to be major influences in design and the arts to this day.

For the encrusted Weimar establishment, however, the Bauhaus innovations were too challenging. Conservative politicians, victorious in the 1924 elections, followed through on their promise to curb the group's influence by cutting its budget in half, thus forcing its move to Dessau in 1925.

These days, the re-founded Bauhaus University occupies the restored Henry van de Velde art nouveau structure that once housed his School of Applied Arts. A new lease on life has also been given to the Haus am Horn, the only house of an extensive planned Weimar Bauhaus colony ever built, which is now a museum.

A Sampling of Weimar 1999 Exhibits:

- Rise and Fall of Modernism—Exhibit examines the dichotomy between the pull Weimar exerted on the avant-garde and the town's innate conservatism
- Feininger in Weimar—Show of works—sketches to oils—of the Weimar countryside by the American artist Lyonel Feininger
- The Monument—Interactive exhibit on the famous Goethe-Schiller sculpture, a symbol of Weimar that's been exported throughout the world (copies in San Francisco, Cleveland, Milwaukee)

MUSIC

The compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach rang through Weimar during the master's tenure here between 1708 and 1717. Brought to Weimar as court organist at age 23, Bach burst into his prime in the Ilm town where he composed a string of 17 serenely beautiful cantatas. In 1714 Bach was promoted to court music director but finally left the town in disgrace—after serving a four-week jail term! His crime? He had broken his contract by accepting another position elsewhere.

It wasn't until the arrival of Franz Liszt in 1842 that Weimar embarked on its next musical heyday. As court orchestra director, Liszt succeeded in making Weimar a European center of music. A supporter of avant-garde composers like Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner, Liszt earned both kudos and criticism for his 1850 premiere of the latter's *Lohengrin*, in part because Wagner was wanted by the police. When Liszt left in 1861, a succession of famous musicians—including Richard Strauss—picked up his baton. The Weimar Music Academy, founded in 1872 and named after Liszt in 1956, keeps the city's musical tradition vibrantly alive.

A Sampling of Music Events & Happenings:

- Songs of Goethe: Hip hop to jazz—contemporary musicians compose, record, and perform new music inspired by the famous poet and his works
- Concert in honor of Franz Liszt with the Berlin Philharmonics directed by Daniel Barenboim
- Concert of Bach's Christmas Oratorium and Cantatas

POLITICAL LEGACIES

In the history books Weimar is synonymous with Germany's first democracy as well as with the horrors of the Buchenwald concentration camp. Despite its name, the Weimar Republic was never actually governed from Weimar. It was merely the place where, in 1919, the National Assembly passed the country's first Constitution. The town was selected because the delegates felt that explosive political climate-rocking Berlin might threaten the process were it to take place there. Centrally located and equipped with a suitable venue (the National

Theater), Weimar also proved a popular choice because its humanist tradition was so antithetical to the militaristic "spirit of Potsdam" of the previous government, from which the new leaders sought to distance themselves. Just a week after passing the Constitution on July 31, the new government returned to Berlin.

Unfortunately, the roots of democracy proved shallow in Weimar. In 1924, the social-democratic state government was replaced by reactionary forces. Just two years later, the NSDAP—then just a small and obscure party—held its first convention here. In 1930, Thuringia was the first German state to elect a Nazi party member, Wilhelm Frick, into government. In the 1932 election, the Nazis won almost 50 percent of the vote in Weimar.

Fervent support by the local people was one of the reasons Nazi leaders chose to locate one of their earliest concentration camps near the town. Built in 1937/38, Buchenwald spelled torture and death; more than 65,000 perished before American troops liberated the camp on April 11, 1945. Many thousands more died after the war when Buchenwald became an internment camp under the Soviets until 1950. Even Weimar's humanist spirit, ultimately, had proved incapable of staving off such unimaginable forms of barbarism.

A Sampling of Political Events:


- The Road to Weimar—Exhibit explores why Weimar was chosen as birthplace of Germany's First Republic: the "spirit of Weimar" vs. the "spirit of Potsdam"
- Weimar Speeches—Scientists and publicists debate questions of our time on the eve of the new millennium



More than 65,000 died gruesome deaths at the Buchenwald concentration camp just outside of Weimar. Many thousands more died after the war when it became an internment camp under the Soviets until 1950. The site is now a memorial.

- Planet Buchenwald—Project in which people from the nations victimized at Buchenwald live at the camp memorial for nine months, serving as "space scouts" to young international visitors

It's a kaleidoscopic schedule of events that Kauffmann and his team have assembled for Weimar 1999. Incorporating both traditional and cutting-edge art forms, it makes room for new interpretations of classics and often infuses serious subjects with a dose of humor. It's a program intended to probe past legacies, examine their relevance to the present, and provide new impulses for the future.

For more information and updates, check the Website: www.weimar1999.de 

Contributing editor Andrea Schulte-Peevers writes from Los Angeles.