The Movements: 1920s Bauhaus

Franziska Hintze examines the utopian German design born from the ashes of WWI

Tuesday 12 February 2013

Sometimes, as much as it may surprise, art doesn’t have solely deal with the high and mighty functions of the ‘soul’, or attempt to explore notions of ‘immediate experiencing’ or ‘historical dimension’. It is often forgotten that art can also have a much more functional side. A movement from the 1920s exemplifies this perfectly, subordinating design to functionality. The holistic approach of the Bauhaus Movement was to reintegrate art as functional design in all aspects of life.

Why this is an artistic approach in itself will become clear, if we look at the compelling story of struggle that this movement underwent. Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus School in the German town of Weimar in 1919. His concept was twofold. On the one hand he wanted to develop a fruitful system of education that formed versatile artists proficient in photography, painting, architecture and design. On the other, he aimed at a vague utopia: Reshaping human consciousness through art.

This intention seems to match that of the expressionists. However, one can perceive the emotional overkill stemming from expressionism, since Gropius was looking for a rational, not an ecstatic solution. He pursued the goal that every object of daily life should display harmony between function and design and made his students consider cutlery, furniture and architecture under new angles. Even already renowned artists like Klee and Kandinsky joined the school and began to consider the social connotation of art.

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Thanks to his “science” of design, Gropius blazed the trail for his successor, the new director of the Bauhaus that had in the meantime moved to Dessau. H.Mayer focused on design of furniture for industrial mass production.

Thanks to earnings from sales of innovative designs developed by students and professors, the school became self-sufficient for the first time and students began to sell their concepts: M.Breuer invented the Bauhaus style chair, the “Wassily Chair”, that soon went into production. The second and last move of the
school to Berlin under the 3rd director and well known architect Mies van der Rohe was accompanied by a shift to architecture and we can still contemplate the functional, clear features of the Weissenhof settlement in Stuttgart whose construction was lead-managed by Rohe.

The movement was shaped by quarrels among the art directors within the school, and by political opposition from the right. The cosmopolitan language of the clear geometric forms became its downfall. The movement had always been struggling with allegations of being left-wing and once Hitler had come to power, he considered the movement “degenerate” and “un-German”. The Bauhaus was closed in 1933 and most of the artists moved to the United States where they could thrive.

Considering all the opposition the Bauhaus encountered, it is remarkable that our notion of “modernity” is inevitably connected to the clear, rational forms in concrete and steel. The look of our cities and interior is unthinkable without the Bauhaus.

Mixing mass production with expressionist concepts is a bold project and most tensions within the school are due to this acrobatic pretension. In my eyes the Bauhaus reconceptualised art in two ways: firstly it raised functionality to a genuine purpose of art and secondly its way of struggle and eventual worldwide success is a piece of art itself. The next time you sit in a Wassily Chair, you will remember...
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