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Living Out the Bauhaus Movement

The History of Art Education

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It's 1920 and Josef Albers enrolls as a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar. Soon after being there, he becomes head of the class in the glass workshop. He's already had art training and been an elementary teacher in his hometown.

By the year 1923, Albers is teaching the "Vorkurs", the preliminary course at the Bauhaus, and only 2 years later, he's the first student to be named a Bauhaumeister. He also becomes the head of the woodworking department as well.

Meanwhile, Annelise Elsa Frieda Fleischmann was living an affluent life, where she was always interested in the visual arts world. She had taken painting and drawing classes in Berlin, and her parents expected her to continue to live out the same kind of domestic life as her mother had lived. She rebelled and went off to art school, Bauhaus. There she met Josef.

They married in Berlin in 1925. She became Anni Albers. He was 11 years her senior.

Josef was influential as a teacher, a painter, writer and color theorist. Anni was only allowed into the weaving department, but soon she embraced textiles and began to explore it in earnest and make it her own. She became known for her bold abstract designs.

But why the Bauhaus? What made this place so unique that it attracted these wonderful artists?

Walter Gropius was trained in architecture, had served in WWI and he viewed the war as a tragedy for the arts. He was part of the Work Council for the arts and other radical artists groups. Gropius was the director of Grand Ducal Saxonian school of arts and crafts, and he renamed it Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar. This was the start of the Bauhaus with his 4-page booklet manifesto. Bringing together this unique dualistic approach and idea, Gropius proposed

and created the school with workshops (taught by a master craftsman) and artist (a master of form) working together. The goal was to deepen your skills as an artist as well as a “maker”.

But the attraction of the Bauhaus didn't stop there. This was a school that combined living and working in an environment that was surrounded by a wealth of artistic and creative experiences. The craft-based method was the ideal for artistic design and material production, in Gropius' mind.

The curriculum was also unique. Per Gropius' design, all students began with the obligatory Preliminary Course, which was a half year long. Then the students moved onto workshops. Last, they went into building. The workshop phase lasted three years. The building phase lasted another two years.

Part of the Bauhaus philosophy harkened back to a medieval crafts guild, where there was a multidisciplinary sense of camaraderie and working together between the different artists and craftsman. Gropius believed in reforming the pedagogy regarding the study of architecture so that the gap would be bridged.

All of these theories and experiments weren't realized from the beginning, but they came to be as part of what Gropius called “fundamental research”. It was much like being part of a laboratory for the arts where, connections were made where they had not been made before, with disciplines that had never connected before, or in ways that had never been tried before.

These are the things that attract me and I'm sure were part of what attracted both Josef and Anni Albers. I would love to be a part of a place where art is center. Where creativity is freely flowing and new innovations are being made. At the Bauhaus, there was no difference between a tea infuser design and a building and a drawing. All these disciplines were just as important. There was no hierarchy.

Although the Bauhaus was started in Weimar, when it started to take more of a turn with a focus on industrial aspects and the way the creations were made, the school moved from its original city, to the more industrial city named Dessau. This happened in 1923 and was one of the turning points for the school and the movement. At this point, they lost their preliminary course director and Expressionist painter, Johannes Itten. Although it was a great loss, this proved to be a wonderful and productive move for both the Bauhaus and Walter Gropius. Most of his known works happened after this move.

The preliminary course which lasted between six months and a year was a basic training. Students learned about colors, shapes, materials, without a specific goal in mind. As they showed aptitude, or suitability toward something specific, the student would then enter the workshops. They would then be called apprentices. This would lead to an apprentice exam at a later given time.

This makes me think of the idea that process is more important than progress. I think about the notion of playing as its own goal for art. Unfortunately, as a teacher, I wasn't often given this opportunity with my middle school students. But the value of this is immeasurable.

When Gropius moved the Bauhaus School to Dessau, he not only designed the new building, but also was heavily involved in its building and progress. Bauhaus Dessau opened their doors in 1926. The new building included housing for the Masters and a large housing building for students as well as an Employment office.

Although architecture is one of the disciplines that has been heavily influenced by the Bauhaus movement, it wasn't until 1927 that there were architecture classes in the Bauhaus. Because of political pressure against the Bauhaus, Gropius stepped down as director of the Bauhaus in 1928. He handed the reigns over to Hannes Meyer, a Swiss architect who had already

been teaching the architecture classes. The full plans for architecture were never fully realized at the school due to its untimely closing, in 1933. Gropius had one of his most successful projects in building the Sommerfeld House in Berlin, which he designed together with Adolf Meyer. After being built, its furnishings were made by students of the Bauhaus

Meanwhile, Josef Albers went from apprentice to master by 1925. In some ways, his association with the Bauhaus is just as deep as Gropius, having spent almost the whole time the school was opened within its doors. Marrying a fellow student there. Gaining his own voice and Mastery while there.

Albers taught drawing and color theory. He was my biggest inspiration out of the Bauhaus. I am blown away by the depth and breadth of his expertise. He was a prolific artist but also went on to becoming a beloved professor both at the Bauhaus and at Black Mountain College, which also was very similar to the Bauhaus in its methodology.

Albers believed that students could teach teachers, and vice versa. They weren't stuck in one role forever. Perhaps he learned this because he had lived this.

The Bauhaus wasn't just about the visual arts. They would put on plays, they had musicians, they were known for having elaborate parties, which were planned months in advance, and they would make all decorations themselves.

Another amazing asset that brought the Bauhaus to gain even a bigger impact was the fact that they had professors like Vassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Both men were already successful and part of rebellious art groups, so joining the Bauhaus was a natural next step for them.

Josef and Anni Albers embodied the spirit of Bauhaus. Their artistic life didn't stop with the closing of the Bauhaus. Josef was asked to join an innovative art school in the United States

called, Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which had leaders that had connections to the Bauhaus. Although he didn't speak any English at the time, they hired him anyway. Her book "On Weaving" would come much later, in 1965. Josef's "Interaction of Color" was first published in 1963, but they were first published as writers when they were still at the Bauhaus.

Gropius, after leaving the Bauhaus, remained committed and involved in much of the school's activities, even recommending the future leaders. He devoted his time solely to architecture, and after a brief time in England, he went to the United States and taught at the Harvard University at their Graduate School of Design.

The Albers, after a solid time at the Black Mountain College, moved onto traveling to Mexico for large chunks of time. Albers is invited to speak at various places and exhibits his work at many galleries. Anni is commissioned for a large drapery by a former colleague.

Josef also gets a position teaching at Harvard, but soon ends up teaching at Yale.

Another school, the New Bauhaus is founded in Chicago, by László Moholy-Nagy, another master from the Bauhaus Dessau.

In this way, where perhaps the dispersing of the school became the world's way to experience the Bauhaus. Where the ending of an era became the way in which everyone can understand a bit more about what it means to have form follow function.

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