

From Immaterial to Material: Some Reflections on the Art Historical Genealogy of the Bauhaus Design Icons

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A model, an experiment, a myth, a legend, a school, a movement, a failure, an idea, the epitome of modernism – the Bauhaus has been given a plethora of characterisations and still, even a hundred years after being founded, it has not lost its quasi-mysterious aura.¹ From an art historian's point of view, it has become a phenomenon not only because of its actual historical development and impact during its fourteen years of operation, between 1919 and 1933, but because of its afterlife. The subsequent reception of the Bauhaus amounts to its own history as

Bauhaus-images continue to serve as projection surfaces for various perspectives on art and design depending on the zeitgeist.

After the Bauhaus was pressured to close its doors by the Nazis in 1933, the ideas, design principles and approaches that had been developed throughout its fourteen years did not vanish. On the contrary, the Bauhaus students, professors and masters carried their own personal Bauhaus with them, most of them after emigrating from Germany. Several attempts were made to found a new Bauhaus or at least a second kind of Bauhaus.² Each made reference to the original school but related to different aspects, emphasizing different focuses; each had their own idea of what the Bauhaus originally was or should have been, implementing the different political and socio-cultural conditions they found in their specific times and places. The Bauhaus ideas, although carried into the world

by original Bauhaus students and teachers, started to develop a life of their own through the further expansion of design and architecture after World War II.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Bauhaus was consequently built up as the epitome and original source of modernist design in art historical reception.³ This reception was based on documenting the development of the historical school on the one hand, but on the other, it was also an attempt to legitimise modern art movements, especially design in general, by constructing a legendary historiography not only for the historical Bauhaus but all the other schools, movements and design ideas that had sought inspiration in the original school. From a contemporary point of view, the Bauhaus has therefore become a role model and figurehead for practicality, functionality, rationality and modern serial fabrication because, although they



were not necessarily essential for the historical Bauhaus, these aspects have become essential for design development since.

The important role the Bauhaus has gained throughout the 20th century and its meaning as a projection surface for everything “modern”, minimalistic or functional in design has led to a lot of misunderstandings regarding the historical school. On the one hand, the general achievements of the Bauhaus have been overvalued, implying everything modern was first done at the Bauhaus, which led to immoderate adoration of the school and an almost cultish following. On the other hand, various countermovements have tried to push the Bauhaus off its pedestal by proving a general failure of its original goals. Besides the early political criticism coming from conservative and far-right perspectives⁴, the historical Bauhaus also had to face harsh critique coming from artistic and intellectual contemporaries such as Bertolt Brecht⁵ and Theo van Doesburg who heavily influenced the direction of the school⁶. After World War II, critical theory⁷ and post-war modernity⁸ (“*Nachkriegsmoderne*”) traditionalized critique towards Bauhaus in the cultural and intellectual milieu and, since then, each gen-

eration begets their own arguments as to why the Bauhaus should not be seen as the epitome of modernism but rather, its failure.

A major critique of the historical school from its inception until today refers to Bauhaus production itself, questioning whether or not the objects designed there fulfil the ideology of merging art and industry in a functional and rational way. Since the 2000’s the Walter Gropius era in particular has been under suspicion of having gained its fame through marketing and propaganda by Gropius himself whilst manufacturing luxury products for the wealthy few. As such, this object-based critique mainly focuses on the material aspects of the Bauhaus designs while blending out those immaterial implications that cannot be retrieved in terms of form or material only.

In this paper I attempt to trace how the material production of functional, rational and minimalistic objects within the Bauhaus was not the main goal of Walter Gropius’ concept for his school. In my perspective the Bauhaus during the Gropius era was mainly driven by immaterial ideas, pedagogical concepts and philosophical conceptions on how to work in the machine age by combining art and technology. Many of these immaterial

aspects can also be found in Bauhaus precursors and document a certain *Kunstwollen* of the time, driven by German Neo-Romanticism and Idealism.

A material based Bauhaus critique which excludes the immaterial aspects deriving from Gropius’ idealism can best be displayed in a case study of one of the most prominent Bauhaus designs.

Marianne Brandt’s Tea Infuser: Iconic Design or Stumbling Block?

Marianne Brandt’s tea infuser Model *MT 49/ME 8* (Fig. 1), an early work designed in 1924 in the metal workshop of the Weimar Bauhaus, is one of the most famous Bauhaus objects. With the design based on geometrical forms, the circle and the sphere, the little X-shaped foot of the tea infuser can either be perceived as a combination of triangles or square segments. The formal reduction, the apparent omission of ornament and concentration on geometry, assumes the external appearance of a product manufactured by a machine, although it was never industrially produced. Only eight exemplars were fabricated during the Bauhaus era, seven of them were handcrafted in exquisite materials that





Figure 1. Marianne Brandt, tea infuser Model MT 49, 1924. Photo: Lucia Moholy. Copyright VG Bildkunst Bonn. Bauhaus Archiv - Museum für Gestaltung Berlin.

range from tumbac to brass to bronze as well as silver and ebony.⁹

The tea infuser is not only one of the most prominent Bauhaus designs ever made, it is also the centrepiece of Robin Schuldenfrei's critique on the Walter Gropius -Bauhaus.¹⁰ For Schuldenfrei, the use of not only traditional but also expensive and exclusive materials like silver – often associated with the bourgeoisie – in combination with the “old fashioned” way of handcrafting an original single piece contradicts with the oft-cited motto “Art and Technology – a new Unity” proclaimed by Gropius in 1923. For that reason, the tea infuser proves “[t]he failure of Gropius's Bauhaus to merge art and technology – to move from the production of individual, luxury objects to mass reproduction”¹¹.

Her argumentation thereby takes famous Bauhaus catchwords, “Sachlichkeit, functionality, hygiene and the use of modern material and construction methods” as starting points of the overall Bauhaus design goals.¹² By not following modern serial fabrication during the expansion of the Bauhaus design, *Sachlichkeit*, rationality, and functionality only seem to be formal aspects at first sight. A deeper look reveals the true colours of the object as



one which merely pretends to be produced industrially but is actually a traditional luxury product for upper-class homes. The detailed price list assembled by Schuldenfrei¹³ of Bauhaus products from 1923 and 1928 – the Gropius era – proves this is the case. Most of the products were handcrafted with prices far too high for working-class members, such as the tea infuser.¹⁴ The iconization of the tea infuser as well as its criticism focus on the object's material implications: the rational form, functionality and modern fabrication. Within Schuldenfrei's approach, the tea infuser therefore becomes an "object [...] of discourse, the material evidence of a series of debates on handcraftsmanship, machine production, and taste"¹⁵. But what if the object was not just material evidence, but rather a material manifestation of the immaterial goals Gropius had in mind?

Bauhaus Education and Work: Teaching the Unteachable

Schuldenfrei's premise is based on Gropius's 1923 proclamation "Art and Technology – a new Unity". For her, this new theme appears to express the goal of turning Bauhaus into a production site for mass production, quot-

ing Hannes Meyer's famous dictum "people's needs instead of luxury needs" with the comment: "[B]ut would he have been moved to make such a declaration if Gropius had successfully carried out his stated aims?"¹⁶. Following Schuldenfrei's argumentation, achieving the goal of merging art and technology is measured in the amount of designs that would go into industrial production and that could afterwards be purchased for affordable prices – a somewhat materialistic approach to the subject. Without a doubt, the 1923 statement was meant to herald the start of a new Bauhaus chapter, or in Gropius' words from 1922:

*In its present form, the Bauhaus stands or falls with the recognition of the necessity to accept commissions. I would consider it a mistake if the Bauhaus were not to face the realities of the world and were to look upon itself as an isolated institution.*¹⁷

Still, this development was rather connected to the previous Bauhaus chapter than to an overall turn into a production site. Without the historical development that both the Bauhaus and Gropius's mindset underwent from 1919 to 1923, the turning point of "Art und Technology – a new Unity" can only be insufficiently understood.

As the statutes clearly show, the Bauhaus founded by Gropius in 1919 was meant to be a school. The scope was consequently "to educate artistically gifted men and women to become creatively designing craftsmen, sculptors, painters or architects. Thorough training of all students in the crafts provides the unifying foundation."¹⁸ The idea of unification can already be found in this earlier document and is part of Gropius's Bauhaus from the founding of the school until his departure. It derives from German 19th century idealism that combined the idea of the total work of art with the cult of the artistic genius. For Gropius, true art was always the work of a genius and therefore something that could not be taught: "The origin of art transcends all methods; in itself it cannot be taught, but the crafts certainly can be."¹⁹ The scope of educating artistically gifted students to become creative designers obviously included training in traditional crafts,²⁰ but Gropius's attempt to teach the unteachable, i.e., artistic creativity, went further than that: "We are not in a position to awaken creative powers and to develop the innermost thoughts and feelings of young people through educational means. This can only be done through what



we call personality.”²¹ To develop personality, Gropius promoted a joyful community for the students, providing food, housing and social interactions in post-war Weimar.²² Moreover, he attempted to manifest the development of personality within the educational concept. The so-called “Vorkurs,” the preliminary course invented by Johannes Itten in 1919,²³ was meant to encourage experimentation and reflection on the properties of materials as well as thinking creatively and practically ‘outside the box’. His conceptual idea of confronting students with their personal perception and an awareness for individual approaches “can be best summarized in a pair of opposites: ‘intuition and method’, or subjective experience and objective recognition’.”²⁴ Itten shared the idea of universality with Gropius, although his background was much more spiritual as he was a disciple of the Mazdaznan²⁵. He taught under the motto “Play becomes party – party becomes work – work becomes play”²⁶ as well as implementing meditation and breathing exercises into his courses to promote subjective, internal experience. Itten’s lessons, therefore, were often challenging for the students, as Oskar Schlemmer described:

Itten gives ‘Analysis’ in Weimar. Shows pictures which students then have to draw in terms of one or another essential – usually movement, line, curve. He then illustrates these in the example of a Gothic figure. Next, he shows the weeping Mary Magdalene from the Grünewald Altar. The students attempt to extract some basic element from the very complicated composition. Itten looks at their efforts and explodes: If any of them had any artistic sensitivity at all, then when faced by such a powerful depiction of weeping, the weeping of the whole world, rather than trying to draw it they would simply sit down and burst into tears themselves. Then walks out slamming the door behind him.²⁷

In this sense, Itten was not interested in commercial art. For him, the centre of production was the internal, subjective and spiritual development of ideas. This led to a confrontation with Gropius in 1922:

Recently, Master Itten demanded from us a decision either to produce individual pieces of work in complete contrast to the economically oriented outside world or to seek contact with industry. [...] Let me at once clarify this: I seek unity in the fusion, not the separation of these ways of life.²⁸

“Unity in fusion” is also what Gropius sought with his motto “Art and Technology – a new Unity”, which must be regarded in close connection with the dispute with Itten. After the first years in Weimar – that had been dominated by the post-war lack of materials and tools, and the preference for crafting, artistic

experiments, philosophical discourses on art and spirituality – Gropius wanted to move towards a production that would spread the Bauhaus goals and ideas to a wider audience. By contrast, Schuldenfrei identifies:

[...] the Bauhaus’s difficult position of trying to be modern while existing within the context of Kunstgewerbe, the applied arts, with the skilled training in the traditional crafts that it required. The workshops continued to occupy an unclear position between their role as producers of the unique art object and as designers of prototypes for mass reproduction.²⁹

Yet it was precisely this unclear position that Gropius sought. The workshops were not meant to be based on *either* traditional crafting skills *or* industrial design – for Gropius they were meant to be both, with all the contradictions and ambiguities implied.

How to Design: Some Notions on the Creative Idea and Functionality

The finished piece of work was not the final goal in Gropius’s perspective, but a manifestation of the fusion between artistic creativity and production skills based on handcraft and psychology, i.e. artistic training. In this sense personal experience and development were also part of the productive process, especially in relation to the development of innovative



design solutions. A well-known but insistent example clearly illustrates the correlation between the material product and the immaterial process of creating the design. Marcel Breuer's famous tubular steel furniture *Club Chair B3* (Fig. 2) became the most prominent showpiece of Bauhaus design³⁰ that later went into serial production, although not as a Bauhaus product, but one independently marketed by Breuer.³¹

Analysing the form, construction and historical references of the chair, all the catchwords of "Bauhaus-Style" can, in fact, be retrieved: modern, industrial materials and fabrication, minimalism, rational design, clear shapes focused on functionality, light and practicality. In the case of the Gropius-Bauhaus, another layer must be revealed: the process by which Marcel Breuer came to develop the design of such "modern" furniture. An anecdote reveals the origin of the idea for the design: Breuer's newly purchased Adler bicycle inspired him to use steel tube, a rather new and until then exclusively industrial material, for the interior of private homes.³² Apparently this is a good example of what Gropius meant by saying that artistic personality should fuse with professional skills:



Figure 2. Marcel Breuer, tubular steel furniture Club Chair B3, 1925. Bauhaus Archiv - Museum für Gestaltung Berlin.



Even outside of the Bauhaus workshop, in his free time, Breuer's perception of the world surrounding him was focused on creative solutions as well as the properties of materials.

The *Club Chair B3* was developed in 1925 while the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau. While the Dessau period (1925–1932) seems to embody the heyday of the rational and the functional in Bauhaus, it was neither the first chapter in its history nor in Marcel Breuer's oeuvre. An earlier piece of Breuer from 1921 illustrates previous stages of the institution's history and his personal development as a student. The so-called African Chair³³, one of Breuer's first collaborations with Gunta Stölzl in Weimar, resembles an indigenous tribal throne and was a unicum that could hardly be described as rational or even practical but was rather a creative and expressive way of approaching the subject "chair" from a non-academic tradition. It was not considered that a piece like this would be brought to serial production. The idea and execution were experimental with Gunta Stölzl weaving the fabric directly onto the wooden structure of the completely handcrafted chair. In this sense, the Bauhaus

product implies the process of developing a creative and original idea as well as materially executing the piece. In Gropius words: "The work is not an end in itself; [the philosophical conception] gives it direction and cohesion."³⁴

From a contemporary perspective, functional design is meant to completely fulfil its function without any distracting details or disruptive elements that restrict practical use of the object. In this sense, Breuer's *Club Chair B3* is a perfectly functional design, especially at a time when furnitures were mostly heavy and difficult to move. But having the immaterial implications of personal development and philosophical concept in mind, even the most famous Bauhaus slogan attains distinction: Although functionality has become of vital significance for modern design, especially in relation to the popular image of the Bauhaus that exists today, the philosophical concepts behind the design were of even more import to Gropius. As I will now go on to discuss, this is an idea vividly expressed in Gropius' own architecture of the famous Bauhaus school building in Dessau.

While the Bauhaus in Weimar had its residency in a building by Henry van de Velde,

the move to Dessau was advantageous in that a new building could be created from scratch, one that would be Bauhaus to the core (Fig. 3). Designed by Gropius in 1925, it soon became the most prominent reference for Bauhaus itself and a symbol or trademark for the ideas of the school.

The most prominent part, the workshop block with its great curtain wall glass façade and the glass corner, has become an icon of modernity in architectural history. The intended function, however, was not just practicality. With the building's huge glass façade, it was almost impossible to heat the workshops in winter while one can imagine they must have been incredibly hot in summer. The function of this workshop building was in fact to formally represent a new modernity, aesthetically reacting to the innovations that the Machine Age had brought – an immaterial function that can also be witnessed in the detail of the auditorium.

The auditorium in Dessau (Fig. 4) was planned to be used as multifunctional room connecting the workshop building with the canteen and the dorms. It was a place for gatherings of all kinds including theatre plays, lectures and readings and could be extended





Figure 3. Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Building Dessau, 1925-1926, entrance and workshops. Bauhaus Archiv - Museum für Gestaltung Berlin.

to almost double its size by opening into the canteen. It was also one of the areas that was most accessible to the public. Although most Dessau residents did not attend the readings and theatre plays which were considered too wild and radical, Gropius also had the idea to show movies in the auditorium to bring more people into his building. Therefore, the auditorium attempted to express as much modernity as possible with radically minimalistic lights, a precursor of the fluorescent tube; ceiling paint enriched with tiny metal particles to reach a shiny, almost glittery surface for the lamps; doors inspired by Japanese bridal cabinets designed by Gropius himself; and seating design by Marcel Breuer, a special foldable version of his steel tube furniture with a modern canvas covering. A further detail of the interior expresses Gropius's notion of functionality: the radiators are displayed like sculptures mounted at eye level. For the heating itself, this was utterly unfunctional because the heat rose to warm the ceiling rather than the seating area. The function here was to display the clean shape of this technological innovation rather than the practicality of the design. Through their clean industrial shape the radiators symbol-



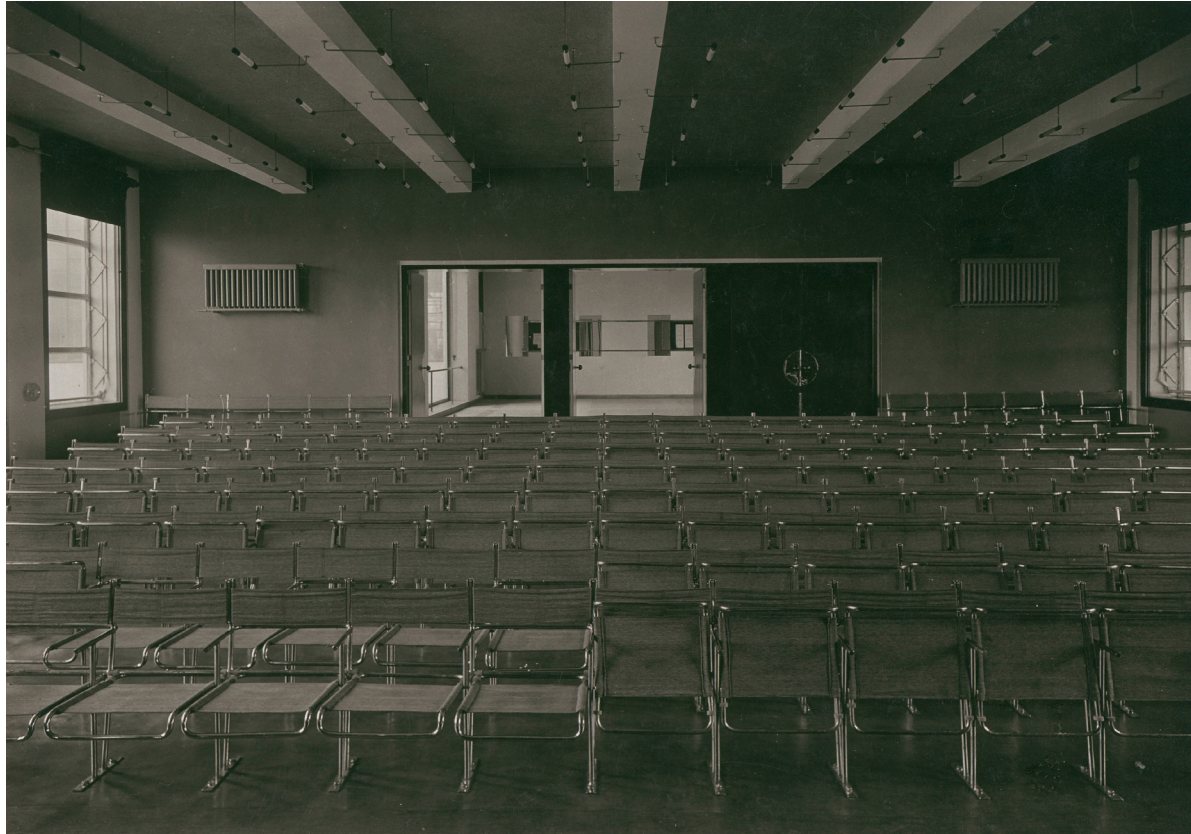


Figure 4. Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Building Dessau, 1925-1926, auditory. Photo: Erich Consemüller. Copyright Stephan Consemüller. Bauhaus Archiv - Museum für Gestaltung Berlin.

ize a vision of a new and modern life with all the comfort and convenience technical inventions could offer.³⁵ Hence, they become a manifestation of a philosophy that embraces technical innovations and proclaims an optimistic zeitgeist and attitude towards the machine. The radiators thus illustrate how philosophy has the potential to enrich the object with immaterial values.

Zeitgeist and “Wesensforschung“

Schuldenfrei remarks on what was happening in Bauhaus design between 1923 and 1928: “Bauhaus objects employed a stripped-down vocabulary of forms while reducing applied ornament.”³⁶ While this is certainly not the case with all the Bauhaus objects of the Weimar era which were often one-off expressionist solutions like the aforementioned African Chair,³⁷ it appears to be true when it comes to the tea infuser. No applied ornament obscures the sharp silhouette of the pure geometrical forms. Yet considering this design as a simple formal reduction, or some kind of omission of distractive parts, is not wholly in line with Gropius’s design principles. Within Gropius’s conception, a design like this was much more about find-



ing the essential substance, the true nature of the object, and expressing this essence through a characteristic form. Form is the keyword here, although not in a *formalistic* but intensely *idealistic* sense. Even before the Bauhaus was founded, a particular strain of German zeitgeist driven by romanticism, the notion of total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) and Nietzsche's ideas on art as a kind of substitute religion, exalted form as a manifestation of greater ideas or ideologies.

As I have drawn out in my dissertation on the German Werkbund, there was already a tendency towards form as an ultimate expression of immaterial values before World War I.³⁸ The Werkbund, an association of artists, industrial entrepreneurs and craftsmen, was founded in 1907 with the goal of "the ennoblement of [...] work in synergy of art and industry"³⁹. This association nurtured a vivid discourse on the character and effectuality of art within the Industrial Revolution in its first years after its foundation 1907, debating relevant topics such as machine work, company organization and social questions including various assessments of industrial entrepreneurs and artists. Yet quite soon, collaborations between artists and industrial-

ists were riddled with misunderstandings as well as struggles for the status quo. A paradigm shift occurred in 1910/1911 with the Werkbund changing its main goal to "*Durchgeistigung*", an artistic spiritualization and intellectualization of the Werkbund discourse that excluded the material aspects of industrial production and the voice of the entrepreneurs. Within this paradigm shift, the artistic form was explicitly valued higher than material production because it was seen as a manifestation of the artistic genius. In this sense, form became an abstract vessel, a carrier of ideas, that was meant to influence society in a deeply meaningful way by cultivating the individual mind.⁴⁰ This mindset is exemplified to the extreme in a furniture exhibition from 1910/11 which showed machine produced furniture with a minimalistic formal vocabulary designed for the working class. The vision of this design was to find a genuine formal expression for working-class culture to prevent the proletariat from rebelling against their oppressors or voting for the social democrats.⁴¹

Although this kind of idealism seems crude and naive from today's perspective, the members of the Werkbund strongly believed

that the mere reception of a spiritualized and intellectualized ("*durchgeistigt*") form would make a decisive difference.

Walter Gropius entered the Werkbund at the end of 1910, just as the association was undergoing its shift towards "*Durchgeistigung*". He was not only building up his career as an architect at the time but his entire mindset and the world of ideas that would later evolve to form the Bauhaus. Although Gropius was heavily influenced by Werkbund ideas and contributed strongly to "*Durchgeistigung*"⁴², the interrelation between Gropius and the Werkbund has been underrated in research literature so far. When in 1922⁴³ Gropius emphasized how philosophical concepts give design work direction and cohesion, this kind of pre-war idealism was revitalised. As such, form was related not only to formalist design, but to a manifestation of higher immaterial values, ones capable of altering culture and society. In the case of the Dessau building, the philosophical concepts giving "direction and cohesion" were the attempt to express a new zeitgeist, a new lifestyle of the Machine Age driven by innovation, flexibility and pace. In the case of Marianne Brandt's tea infuser, the design



philosophy is strongly connected to Gropius's vision of "*Wesensforschung*".

According to Gropius, every object had its own nature and specific character (*Wesen*) that had to be investigated (*Forschung*) before a design could be created. This investigation of the object's nature was dependent on "the laws of mechanics, statics, optics, acoustics" and, especially, proportion, which was, in his perspective, "a matter of the intellectual/spiritual world (*geistige Welt*)".⁴⁴ "*Geist*" (spirit/mind), a recurring keyword in Gropius's texts,⁴⁵ implies the immaterial artistic genius that lies behind creation as well as the individual personality. "*Wesensforschung*" therefore unifies materiality and immateriality, just as the Bauhaus education tried to unify training in craft skills within the workshops and the development of personality in artistic classes such as the preliminary course. If "*Wesensforschung*" was followed consequently, the nature of the object could be revealed clearly as a design "*Typus*" – a prototype with a form so essential and typical for the object's nature that it could be reproduced endlessly without losing its inner core, its "*Wesen*", while simultaneously carrying influential ideas on how to creatively express

the Machine Age and its new lifestyle in the realm of household items.

Summarizing all these aspects, Marianne Brandt's tea infuser is a perfect manifestation of what Gropius considered the fusion of immaterial *and* material aspects central to his idea of the Bauhaus. For the same reason, Brandt handcrafted her tea infuser, since manipulating the material with her own hands was part of "*Wesensforschung*". On the one side, the handcrafting process was a pragmatic part of developing professional skills within the metal workshop, whilst on the other, it was the simplest and most effective way of investigating the nature of the object and the materials at hand.

The form itself is faithful to the nature of the object; to "tea infuser" as well as to personal experience. It's essential character is to contain tea extract, thereby becoming a vessel for an essential substance and as such bearing symbolic meaning within Bauhaus idealism.⁴⁶ To choose a round-shaped form for a vessel (an object meant to hold liquid) is typical. On the other hand, the Russian tea ceremony – where the infuser originally comes from – was part of the everyday Bauhaus routine, since Wassily Kandinsky

had introduced it to the school, a specific Bauhaus practice.⁴⁷ Yet Brandt's personal experience reveals an even more specific and particular background. Looking back, she remarks on being a woman in the metal workshop:

At first, I was not accepted with pleasure – there was no place for a woman in a metal workshop, they felt. They admitted this to me later on and meanwhile expressed their displeasure by giving me all sorts of dull, dreary work. How many little hemispheres did I most patiently hammer out of brittle new silver, thinking this was the way it had to be and all beginnings are hard. Later things settled down, and we got along well together.⁴⁸

To still choose a (hemi)sphere as the basic form for her tea infuser after this experience at the metal workshop and with her own work says a lot about Brandt's personality. The fact that the chosen materials were, amongst others, silver and ebony, can equally be interpreted to that effect. The choice of material derives from an idea that was also born before World War I – the idea of handcrafted work having a greater value than machine work because it was considered more human, more skilful, experienced and time-consuming, including personal patience, effort and hardship.⁴⁹ The machine, on the other hand, although capable of effort-



less, steady and precise non-stop operation, could never replicate the value of individual effort. The personal effort and hardship of the human condition were supposed to be honoured through expensive materials to express greater value.⁵⁰ Because Brandt handcrafted the piece, her personal work in this matter justified the use of a valuable material like silver – in opposition to machine-made objects like the steel tube furniture.

Thus we see how all these immaterial aspects – their idea of the zeitgeist, training in crafting skills, “*Wesensforschung*”, the process of fabricating and Brandt’s individual and very personal experiences – are unified in the form, production and material of the tea infuser.

Conclusion: From Immaterial to Material

More than 20 years after closing the Bauhaus, Gropius himself pointed out how the goals of his era were widely misunderstood, especially regarding purely rational interpretations of functional design. In the speech he held within the opening ceremony for a new building of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (Ulm Design School) in 1955, he

emphasised “the importance of the magical over the logical”, further explaining:

The hypertrophy of the sciences has suppressed the Magical within our lives, the poet and the prophet have been treated as orphans of the overly practical objective human being due to the unprecedented triumph of the logical sciences.⁵¹

Even almost 30 years after the founding of the Bauhaus, Gropius’s 19th century mindset – an artistic idealism nourished by ideas of artistic genius and the total work of art – was still a fundamental part of his perspective on what the school he had founded: it was meant to be what might be best described as a “radical utopian community”⁵². Well aware of the Bauhaus image built up after World War II he tried to make clear:

Nevertheless, a fallacious portrait of the pioneers of modern architecture has been projected that exposed them as fanatic proponents of rigid mechanical principles, glorifying the machine and having become cold towards deeper human values in service of ‘*Neue Sachlichkeit*’ (New Objectivity). [...] Functionalism to us was not synonymous to an efficient approach only; it also involved psychological issues.

A combination of today’s rational and materialistic perspective on design with some art historians desire to define art history as rational science based on material evidence

only serve to dilute the underpinnings of Gropius’s Bauhaus. Psychological issues, the development of a creative personality directly following the trauma of World War I and the attempt to nourish “*Geist*” und “*Wesensforschung*” through artistic creativity on the one side and handcraft on the other, can neither be understood through an exclusively material approach nor by mottos such as functionalism and rationalism that developed in meaning years and even decades afterwards.

The development of the historiography of modernism with the Bauhaus being perceived as the primordial mother of “*Sachlichkeit*”, functionalism, practicality, etc. was bound to generate a countermovement to accompany this genealogy. The history of the Bauhaus leaves space for criticism through attempts to get closer to the historical reality of the famous school in Germany. There is no doubt that the Bauhaus did not invent everything “modern”, it was a school that tried to provide a field for experimentation. Due to this, any considerations of the Bauhaus that exclude immaterial aspects – work and design processes, the psychological model of creation within, philosoph-



ical concepts, personal development and zeitgeist behind Bauhaus creation – remain insufficient. While Gropius and his contemporaries were well aware of the immaterial as being fundamental to artistic production (“*Durchgeistigung*”), art historical reception partly turned these immaterial aspects into material criteria of perception. The tea infuser by Marianne Brandt deserves the label “Bauhaus in a nutshell”⁵³, simply because of the very specific immaterial aspects and narration within its formal physical appearance.

As such, art history’s challenge is to reconstruct the immaterial values that are implied within the material object and to tackle ‘bygone’ ideals even if they seem crude, illogical and conflicting to our mindset today. To differentiate, and therefore come closer to historical phenomena in all their complexity and ambiguity, art historians might well wander away from the path of material examination and instead welcome that which is partly ungraspable: the immaterial.

Endnotes

1 With a variety of events, discourses, exhibitions, and publications the Bauhaus centennial in 2019 has proven that there is no distinct or consistent Bauhaus image in today’s reception.

2 The most prominent ones being the New Bauhaus Chicago, founded by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in 1937, the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, founded in 1933, and later on, Josef and Anni Albers’s sphere of activity, and the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (Ulm School of Design), founded by Max Bill in 1953.

3 The first profound monography on the Bauhaus that is still relevant today is Hans Maria Wingler’s publication from 1968, often referred to as the “Bauhaus Bible” and first published in English in 1969 (Wingler, *The Bauhaus*).

4 See Emil Herfurth’s pamphlet against the Bauhaus “Weimar and the Staatliche Bauhaus”, February 1920, printed in Hans Maria Wingler, *The Bauhaus. Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press 1978), 37f. See also Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919–1933* (Köln: Benedikt Taschen 1998), 48–50.

5 Bertolt Brecht, “Nordseekrabben oder die moderne Bauhaus-Wohnung“, printed in *Geschichten und Gespräche*, ed. Gerhard Seidel (Berlin: Eulenspiegel 1987), 31–44.

6 Droste, *Bauhaus*, 54–58.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug“, in Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Berlin: Fischer 2008), 43–130.

8 Rudolf Schwarz’s article „Bilde Künstler, rede nicht!“ (“Create, artist, don’t talk“) in 1953 initialized the so-called “Bauhaus-debate”, see *Die Bauhaus-Debatte 1953. Dokumente einer verdrängten Kontroverse*, ed. Ulrich Conrads. Peter Neitzke (Wiesbaden: Vieweg 1994).

9 One of them, now to be found at the Neue Galerie in New York, was created on a spinning lathe, a first attempt of industrial fabrication. For a full list of the eight exemplars see Annemarie Jaeggi, “Unity in diversity”, in *original Bauhaus*, ed. Nina Wiedemeyer (Munich, London, New York: Prestel 2019), 36–37.

10 Robin Schuldenfrei, „The Irreproducibility of the Bauhaus Object“, in *Bauhaus Construct. Fashioning Identity, Discourse and Modernism*, ed. Jeffrey Saletnik, Robin Schuldenfrei (London, New York: Routledge 2009).

11 Ibid., 38.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 43.

14 Her argumentation does not only exemplify Marianne Brandt’s tea infuser, but several other design examples from the metal workshop, as well as Josef Hartwig’s chess set designed in 1924, another famous Bauhaus icon.

15 Schuldenfrei, “Irreproducibility“, 38.

16 Ibid., 37.

17 Walter Gropius, “The Necessity of Commissioned Work for the Bauhaus“, Notes, dated December 9, 1921, printed in Wingler *Bauhaus*, 51.

18 § 1 of the teaching regulations set in the statutes of the Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar in 1921. See Wingler *Bauhaus*, 44.

19 Gropius “Commissioned Work“, 51. Gropius’s belief in the artistic genius can already be proven in his early articles and speeches like “Monumental Art and Industrial buildings” from 1911 (Walter Gropius: “Monumentale Kunst und Industriebau“, printed in *Walter Gropius: Band 3: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Harmut Probst, Christian Schädlich (Berlin: Ernst & Sohn 1987), 28-51) as well as in the correspondence with Alma Mahler, starting in 1910.

20 The famous pedagogical concept of combining art lessons with crafting at the workshops derives from this idea.

21 Gropius “Commissioned Work“, 51.



22 For further remarks on how Gropius provided food, housing and personal company see Ute Ackermann, *Das Bauhaus isst* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann publishing 2008), 8–29. A very picturesque story tells about the students in Weimar wandering through Ilm park, the old park where Goethe once had his garden house, carrying self-made artistic lanterns, discussing philosophy and arts while surrounded by fireflies. Felix Klee, „Meine Erinnerungen an das Bauhaus Weimar“, printed in Droste and Friedewald, *Unser Bauhaus*, 170.

23 At that time Itten was already experienced in art education and had led a private art seminar in Vienna. When he came to Weimar, several of his Viennese students followed him.

24 Droste, *Bauhaus*, 25.

25 Founded by Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nish at the end of the 19th century Mazdaznan is a religion or religious cult that derives from Zoroastrianism and focuses on the idea of the universal spirit in mind and body. Mazdaznan principles like the vegetarian diet, breathing exercises and meditation were part of Itten's everyday spiritual practice at the Bauhaus. See Paul Citroen, „Mazdaznan am Bauhaus“, printed in Droste and Friedewald, *Unser Bauhaus*, 64-70 for a quite vivid description of Mazdaznan rituals and their meaning for daily life at the early Bauhaus.

26 Droste, *Bauhaus*, 37.

27 Oskar Schlemmer, Letter to Otto Meyer-Amden of 16.5.1921, quoted in Droste, *Bauhaus*, 29. Similar experiences of braking mental boundaries are delivered from Paul Klee's classes: *“The absoluteness [...] to which Klee opened our eyes had initial effect of overwhelming and inhibiting us. Thus, suddenly transported into a world of perception for which we were not yet mentally equipped, we naturally felt shaky, or as if in a trance.”* Marianne Ahlfeld Heymann, „Erinnerungen an Paul Klee“, in *Und trotzdem überlebt* (Konstanz: Hartung Gorre 1994), 78, English translation: Elizabeth Otto, „Bauhaus Spectacles, Bauhaus Specters“, [https://](https://www.academia.edu/34882840/Bauhaus_Spectacles_Bauhaus_Specters)

www.academia.edu/34882840/Bauhaus_Spectacles_Bauhaus_Specters, 57

28 Walter Gropius, „The Viability of the Bauhaus Idea“, Notes, dated February 3, 1922, printed in Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, 51.

29 Schuldenfrei, „The Irreproducibility“, 50.

30 Breuer's design was also a fundamental part of the interior of Gropius's master house in Dessau. Ise Gropius demonstrated the lightness and mobility of the tubular steel chair in the documentary film „New Living“ („Neues Wohnen“) from the series *How Can We Live Healthily and Economically*, directed by Richard Paulick for Humboldt-Film GmbH Berlin, 1926.

31 Although Breuer's design went into serial production and therefore seems to exemplify the Bauhaus goals of mass production according to Schuldenfrei's point of view, she does not include it in her argumentation.

32 Christopher Wilk, *Marcel Breuer, furniture and interiors* (New York: MoMA catalogue 1981), 188. Besides, Elizabeth Otto has pointed out a correlation between Breuer's chair designs and spiritual aspects like spirit photography, see Otto, „Bauhaus Spectacles“, 46–48.

33 Although this chair became famous as „African Chair“, the name occurred later after World War II and was originally identified in as „romantic leanchair“ („Romantischer Lehnstuhl“).

34 Gropius, „Commissioned Work“, 51.

35 Walter Gropius, „Die neue Baugesinnung“, printed in: Probst and Schädlich, *Walter Gropius Schriften*, 93.

36 Schuldenfrei, „The Irreproducibility“, 41.

37 Another quite vivid example is a door knob designed by Naum Slutzky in 1921 that shows such a destructed, edged metal solution, Oskar Schlemmer joked about it, you could never use it without getting bloody fingers. Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933* (Köln: Taschen Bibliotheca Universalis 2019), 170.

38 Adriana Kapsreiter, *Kunst und Industrie – Veredelung der Arbeit und moderne Fabriken im Diskurs des Deutschen Werkbundes 1907 bis 1914*, (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann 2021).

39 Werkbund Statutes, §2. *Satzung vorgelegt von dem geschäftsführenden Ausschuss für die erste Jahresversammlung des Deutschen Werkbundes zu München am 11. und 12. Juli 1908*, ed. Deutscher Werkbund (Werkbund Archive Berlin)

40 Gropius explicitly repeated this idea in a speech in 1955: Walter Gropius, „Dynamische Tradition in der Architektur“, printed in Probst and Schädlich, *Walter Gropius Schriften*, 179.

41 Theodor Heuss, „Der Hausrat des Proletariats“, *Die Hilfe, Wochenschrift für Politik, Literatur und Kunst*, (1911), 318–319 or Robert Breuer, „Prinzip der Wirklichkeit“, in *Fachblatt für Holzarbeiter, Illustrierte Monatshefte für die fachtechnische und kunstgewerbliche Fortbildung* (1911), 125–127.

42 Among Gropius's achievements for the paradigm shift are his speech of 1911 (Gropius, „Monumentale Kunst“) followed by an exhibition of modern industrial architecture in the same year and several articles in the Werkbund-Jahrbücher in 1912 and 1914.

43 See note 24.

44 Gropius, „Baugesinnung“, 95.

45 „Geist“ or „geistig“ can be found more than once in every text by Gropius quoted in this article.

46 Originally the tea infuser was placed on top of the samovar containing the tea extract that can be diluted with hot water from the samovar.

47 Jaeggi, „Unity“, 38.

48 Marianne Brandt, „Letter to the younger generation“, in *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People*, ed. Eckhard Neumann (New York et al.: Van Nostrand Reinhold 1970), 98.

49 This is one of the results of my dissertation concerning the first Werkbund years 1907 and 1908, when the Werkbund intensely discussed material



aspects of production like the modes of work, the differences between individual and machine work and the expression of the value of work.

50 Kapsreiter, "Kunst & Industrie", 63–72.

51 Gropius, "Dynamische Tradition", 179.

Translated by the author of this article. German original: "*Bedeutung des Magischen gegenüber dem Logischen*": „Die Hypertrophie der Wissenschaften hat ja das Magische in unserem Leben verdrängt, der Poet und der Prophet wurden zu Stiefkindern des überpraktischen Zweckmenschen infolge des beispiellosen Siegeszuges der logischen Wissenschaften.“

52 Otto, "Bauhaus Spectacles", 45.

53 Former Bauhaus curator Klaus Weber in a statement to *The International Herald Tribune*, quoted in Elizabeth Otto, "Marianne Brandt's Experimental Landscapes in Painting and Photography during the National Socialist Period", *History of Photography* 37, no. 2 (May 2013), 167–181.

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