

# How Nordic Designers Reacted to Bauhaus? “Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus”

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**Exhibition review: “Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus”. Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 24 October 2019 – 1 March 2020.**

The centennial of the original Bauhaus in 2019 generated a plethora of different exhibitions, shows, displays and seminars throughout Europe, particularly in Berlin. When our good selves visited the city in December 2019 there was still a major Bauhaus exhibition ongoing in the Berlinische Galerie as well as some smaller displays around the city. An interesting exception – from the Finnish perspective – to the usual display of Bauhaus “classics” was offered by the Bröhan-Museum with their exhibition *Nordic Design. The Response to the*

*Bauhaus* [*Nordic Design. Die Antwort aufs Bauhaus*].

The Bröhan-Museum specialises in art nouveau, art deco and functionalism. It was originally founded in 1973 by Karl H. Bröhan (1921–2000), a passionate, self-taught collector and connoisseur of art nouveau, art deco, and Berlin Secession. Bröhan donated his notable collection to the city of Berlin in 1981, and in 1983 the museum moved to its current location in the former barracks building belonging to the Charlottenburg Palace complex. Since 1994 the Bröhan-Museum has been one of the 17 organisations under the auspices of the Berlin State Museums [Staatliche Museen zu Berlin].

The Bauhaus as a theme fits perfectly with the profile and scope of the Bröhan-Museum. It is thus no surprise that *Nordic Design* was already the second exhibition on that theme in the museum in 2019. The year began

with *From Arts and Crafts to the Bauhaus*, which concentrated on the evolution of the Bauhaus. The second exhibition focused on the post-Bauhaus era in the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark) and the reaction that the Bauhaus and German modernism caused in the new design that emerged in these countries from the late 1920s and early 1930s onwards. Both exhibitions were curated by the current director of the museum, Dr. Tobias Hoffmann, the first in collaboration with Dr. Anna Grosskopf. For a Nordic visitor, the focus on the Nordic response to the Bauhaus felt inspiring, not only because it is part of our design history but also because the topic itself is still fresh and open to new research and interpretations.

The main premise behind the exhibition was that Nordic modernism – as opposed to German modernism – did not first and



foremost aim at being avant-garde. That is to say, the main advocates of modernism in the Nordic countries from the mid-1920s onwards were certainly aware of the Bauhaus (and the development of modernism in Germany in general) but adopted their own independent approach to modern design. Instead of aiming to invent avant-garde forms *per se*, the aim of their work was to create custom-made and practical solutions to the problems at hand. Moreover, as the exhibition's introductory text stated, modern design in the North merged with various national characteristics of the respective countries, becoming a constant component in defining their identities.

For visitors like us who have a keen interest in the development and the evolution of Nordic modernism the starting premise of the exhibition was thus quite promising.

The exhibition started with a room dedicated to Finland, comprised mostly of Aino and Alvar Aalto's designs for the Paimio Sanatorium (completed in 1933). Thereafter, each country had its own separate section consisting of respective design classics. The displays were typical and of high quality: each object was well lit and could be viewed from

an appropriate distance. Pieces of furniture sitting neatly on podiums and light fixtures hanging from the ceiling were accompanied by a few well-selected images on the walls depicting iconic sites such as Arne Jacobsen's SAS Hotel in Copenhagen (opened in 1960).

The basic layout of the first part of the exhibition was thus quite traditional and neutral to the extent that it even risked becoming a bit dull. One of course understands the curatorial decisions because the exhibition was designed primarily for a German audience – not for a Nordic visitor who is used to living amidst and even using similar objects every day. Nevertheless, one can't help but wonder if many similar exhibits haven't already been showcased in similar exhibitions several times over the years in Germany. Therefore, a bit more of an out-of-the-box approach would not have gone amiss.

In this respect, the latter part almost felt like a different exhibition altogether. The exhibition design was more inventive and versatile, and the selection of objects more diverse. The approach moved away from national design classics and instead concentrated on the issues of "childhood", "demo-

cratic design" and "hygge". Chronologically the focus of the latter part was on the post-war years up until the 1980s. The displays were playful and imaginative, and the themes were addressed through such Nordic design phenomena as Lego and IKEA. Endearing photographs of children and children's design, together with well-chosen posters, established a happy and optimistic background to the exhibits.

The iconic names or objects were not, however, forgotten; particularly delightful was one of the final displays showing Eero Aarnio's (born 1932) chairs *Ball* (1963), *Pastil* (1967) and *Pony* (1972) together with Verner Panton's (1926–1998) lamps *Type G* (1969), *SP3* (1970) and the *Sitting Wheel* chair (1973) accompanied by images of Panton's fantastic interior designs. In contrast to the preceding exhibition rooms, the walls of the final section were painted black, which gave it a more intense and atmospheric feeling. Even the more traditional displays in the final section, such as Marimekko and Björn Weckström's jewellery designs, gained from this more atmospheric approach.

The second part of the exhibition clearly made up for what was lacking in the first





Figure 1. From the exhibition “Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus”, Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 24 October 2019 – 1 March 2020. Photo: Joonas Rantasalo.

part: there were interesting comparisons, juxtapositions even, and dialogues between the icons of Nordic design. This type of approach indeed made a more profound point, and one that we would have liked to see throughout the whole exhibition. The founding fathers of Nordic modernism, such as Aalto, Sven Markelius, Gunnar Asplund, and Paul Henningsen, were in constant dialogue and even co-operation with each other (it is a well-known fact, for example, that it was Markelius who proposed Aalto as a member of CIAM before the Frankfurt congress in 1929).

From the Nordic point of view, this actual interaction between Nordic designers seemed to have been neglected and thus deserving of criticism. The interaction between the key players and the cross-pollination of ideas, not only in terms of design and architecture but also in terms of the role of the designer in building a better society, was crucial in the development of the Nordic societies.

It was therefore a pity that even in the second part of the exhibition the central themes of these societies, namely the welfare state and (social) democracy, received at most only a cursory treatment – partly because of





Figure 2. From the exhibition "Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus", Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 24 October 2019 - 1 March 2020. Photo: Joonas Rantasalo.



Figure 3. From the exhibition "Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus", Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 24 October 2019 - 1 March 2020. Photo: Joonas Rantasalo.



the short texts on display. In the exhibition book, Dr. Grosskopf's article on democratic everyday design delightfully improves on this in a scholarly manner. However, the other articles in the book, even though expanding on their subjects, are not really able to exceed national boundaries or cover societal themes. Particularly from a Finnish point of view, one also wonders why Artek, originally the epitome of innovative and democratic design, was not even mentioned in the exhibition texts.

For a Nordic visitor, *Nordic Design. The Response to the Bauhaus* proved to be a thought-provoking and promising opening to an interesting topic. Hopefully, the exhibition (and the book) inspires further research. It is evident that there is much more to this topic than one exhibition is able to grasp.

Exhibition book: Tobias Hoffmann, ed., *Nordic Design. Die Antwort aufs Bauhaus – Nordic Design. The Response to the Bauhaus* (Berlin: Bröhan-Museum / Stuttgart: arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2019).



Figure 4. From the exhibition “Nordic Design: The Response to the Bauhaus”, Bröhan-Museum, Berlin, 24 October 2019 - 1 March 2020. Photo: Joonas Rantasalo.

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