

The Haus always wins

From left: the Unesco-listed Bauhaus complex in Dessau, Germany; Nomos Glashütte's limited-edition Tangente 33 Yellow is one of a series celebrating the design school, which turns 100 in 2019

How one German school shaped a century of design

By Jonathan Bell



Below: the cover of one of the movement's many influential design books, 'The Stage at the Bauhaus' (1925)
 Right: the school's principles of clean-lined rationalism have informed many of the classic furniture designs of the past century



Contemporary design is awash with influences, as the visual swirl of digital culture provides a constant stream of inspiration from past and present. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the world of the wristwatch, where great names vie for prestige by drawing on many forms of visual language: historical, technical, futuristic and, of course, pared-back geometric modernism. One of the most artful names to drop is that of the Bauhaus, the influential German school. For decades, some of the finest watches ever made have quoted Bauhaus design – whether visually or literally – using the school as shorthand for a very particular approach.

As the 100th anniversary of its foundation approaches, it's worth exploring what 'Bauhaus influenced' actually means. The Bauhaus was in operation between 1919 and 1933, although some of its ideals and approaches were resurrected at the postwar Ulm School of Design, as well as other offshoots in the USA. Despite this modest historical footprint, the school's cultural legacy is huge, and its surviving complex in Dessau is now a Unesco-listed monument serving as an educational foundation.

The Bauhaus's first director was the

pioneering modern architect Walter Gropius. The movement was formed out of a specific set of cultural and social circumstances, at a time of economic deprivation and depleted national pride. Two existing German schools – the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts, and the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts – were to be resurrected following World War I, but Gropius successfully argued for their merger, with the new institution striving "to create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist". (The oft-quoted modernist maxim "form follows function", on the other hand, actually dates back to Chicago skyscraper pioneer Louis Sullivan at the end of the 19th century.)

From the outset, the Bauhaus, initially based in Weimar, incorporated both tradition and a challenge to the existing order. It was always self-consciously German, harking back to the country's tradition of craft guilds and apprenticeships, skills that had flowered briefly in Art Nouveau. Just six years after Henry Ford's moving assembly line in Michigan helped usher in the modern era, the Bauhaus opened with a remit to combine the worlds of art, craft and



Above: Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, circa 1915
 Right: Nomos Glashütte's limited-edition Tangente Red

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'For decades, some of the finest watches ever made have quoted Bauhaus as shorthand for a very particular approach'



industry. Gropius and his peers were in thrall to the potential of the machine age, the apparent purity of ornament-free design created with a single purpose. The Fagus Factory, which Gropius designed with Adolf Meyer and completed in stages from 1911, used glass and concrete to striking effect; this was architecture to serve the new form of industry for the masses.

Gropius believed his visual, technological and ideological purity could be brought to bear on art education, teaching students to reject the old orders of decoration and hierarchy and their association with a corrupt and decadent society. The early years of the Bauhaus were shaped by emerging factions and personality cults, as the nascent avant-garde found its way in the world. Students came from all disciplines, including painting, typography, sculpture and product design, as well as craft and architecture, while the impressive roster of tutors and lecturers included the Swiss painters Johannes Itten and Paul Klee, the celebrated abstract artists Wassily Kandinsky and Lyonel Feininger, architect Marcel Breuer and a host of multi-discipline artists and designers, including László Moholy-Nagy, Gerhard Marcks, Herbert Bayer, Anni and Josef Albers, and Marianne Brandt.

most keenly felt in architecture. Josef and Anni Albers went on to teach at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina, while Moholy-Nagy founded the New Bauhaus in Chicago in 1937, now the IIT Institute of Design. Former Bauhaus student Max Bill – known for his watch designs for Junghans – co-founded the Ulm School of Design in 1953; its close relationship with the likes of Braun's design director Dieter Rams furthered the Bauhaus ideals. Ultimately, certain forms of product design have come to define the Bauhaus legacy, with any form of geometric abstraction reflexively falling under a banner of Bauhaus style. "Bauhaus" became shorthand for an ideological purge of mass market design, with fussiness and chintz chucked out in favour of clean, rational modernist rigour.

Design that has a direct Bauhaus lineage is still highly prized – Rams' work for Braun, Anni Albers' fabrics or the furniture of Breuer and van der Rohe. In particular, Max Bill's watch designs, with their purity of form and craftsmanship, distilled the core elements of the school's philosophy into a single object. Yet there are many mass-produced objects that make only superficial reference to the school's functionalist tenets but still tout the name; everything from cars to kettles can be lumped under the Bauhaus-lite umbrella. The school's centenary celebrations will no doubt bring many more.

Some brands have drawn a more explicit parallel with the Bauhaus era. Nomos Glashütte's limited run of Tangente models takes inspiration from a specific facet of Bauhaus-era design – the bold primary colours deployed by the many abstract artists who taught and studied in the school. The Tangente is already something of a design classic, taking the Bauhaus-Bill-Rams approach to its case design with just a hint of inter-war decadence in the typography of the numbers. For the new edition, Nomos's primary source is the work of Paul Klee.

In 1925, the entire school moved to Dessau, taking up residence the following year in a building designed by Gropius himself. Gropius resigned in 1928 and his successor, Hannes Meyer, tried to take the school in a more commercial direction. Yet the seeds of dissent had been sown and the students were radicals in an increasingly partisan and dangerous society. The city of Dessau, which had funded the school, fired Meyer in 1930, replacing him with the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. His tenure was controversial, as the by-then Nazi-run city demanded the school be closed. Van der Rohe made compromises but in 1933 the inevitable happened and the Bauhaus was shut.

Gropius, van der Rohe and Breuer, among others, fled to the US, where their legacy was

The nine-piece collection comes in three sizes – 33mm, 35mm and 38mm – with accents of red, yellow and blue, each limited to 100 pieces. Klee's deceptively simple sketches explored the relationship of primary colours, from subtle modulations to bold juxtapositions. In the context of the rigorous industrial design of the watch, these splashes of colour enhance the palette of matt black and chrome. Nomos is acknowledging that the Bauhaus was filled with colour, innovation and eccentricity. Gropius's original belief in egalitarian design might have been buried by a century of consumption, but some principles seem to be everlasting. ©