

LESSON THREE: Ideal Living



IMAGE ELEVEN: Vasily Kandinsky. French, born Russia. 1866–1944. *Orange*. 1923. Lithograph, composition: 16 x 15 1/8" (40.6 x 38.3 cm); sheet: 19 x 17 1/8" (48.2 x 44.3 cm). Publisher and printer: Staatliches Bauhaus, Weimar. Edition: 50. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase 1949. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE TWELVE: Marcel Breuer. American, born Hungary. 1902–1981. Attributed to Standard Möbel, Germany. Wassily Chair. 1927–28. Chrome-plated tubular steel and canvas, 28 1/4 x 30 3/4 x 28" (71.8 x 78.1 x 71.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Herbert Bayer

INTRODUCTION

This lesson examines two artists, Vasily Kandinsky and Marcel Breuer, who were friends and faculty members of the international school and collaborative project known as the **Bauhaus**. The Bauhaus was established in the city of Weimar in 1919 on the following principles, outlined by its founder Walter Gropius, a German architect:

Architects, painters, sculptors, we must all return to crafts! [...]

Let us therefore create *a new guild of craftsmen* without the class-distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us desire, conceive, and create the new building of the future together. It will combine architecture, sculpture, and painting *in a single form*, and will one day rise towards the heavens from the hands of a million workers as the crystalline symbol of a new and coming faith.¹¹

True to his word, Gropius created a school of workshops based on the model of the Bauhütten, homes built for stonemasons during the High Middle Ages. Central to the Bauhaus mission were artists' workshops, where students gained practical and hands-on skills in art, craft, and architectural and industrial design. The workshops produced prototypes for mass production, ranging from furniture to buildings. Founded during the bleak economy of post-World-War-I Germany, the Bauhaus represented the hope for a better Germany and a better world.

11. Walter Gropius, "Manifesto," (1919). The Bauhaus Archive / Museum of Design <http://www.bauhaus.de/english/bauhaus1919/manifest1919.htm>

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to the principles of the Bauhaus.
- Students will consider the elements of chair design.
- Students will be introduced to the printmaking technique of **lithography**.
- Students will consider how technological progress affects art and design.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to name the parts of a chair (head, back, seat, arms, legs, feet). Ask why they think chairs share the same names as parts of the body. Have them think about the different types of chairs they use in their daily life (at school, at home, in restaurants, et cetera). How does the design of these chairs reflect their purpose? Based on the students' own experience or observation, how might someone's favorite chair reflect his or her personality?
- Ask your students to imagine how a print is made. Where do we find prints? Are there examples of prints in the classroom (such as in textbooks and on posters, hats, and t-shirts)?
- Web quest: Ask your students to explore MoMA's "What Is a Print?" Web site ([moma.org:http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2001/whatisaprint/flash.html](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2001/whatisaprint/flash.html)). Ask them to report back on the different types of prints they learned about from this online activity.
- Debate: In 1936, the German philosopher and writer Walter Benjamin published a famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Benjamin, like other thinkers of the time, was interested in exploring the profound impact modern mechanical reproduction (such as industrial design, photography, and film) had on the value and definition of art. Divide your students into two groups, "A" and "B." Group A should defend the idea that mechanically reproduced objects are art. Group B should take the opposite position, denying that mechanically reproduced forms can be considered art. Both teams should come up with a name for their "movement," and should cite evidence to support their arguments.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Begin by looking at *Orange* (Image Eleven).

- Ask your students to name the shapes that Kandinsky used in this work.
- Ask your students to identify how many layers of shapes and colors are in the print. What might these layers reveal about the process?
- Ask your students to consider the composition of the print. How different would it look if Kandinsky had omitted the black checkerboard pattern in the upper left-hand corner? What if the large orange shape had not been included? Ask your students to imagine the print without the narrow triangle stretching diagonally from the lower left-hand corner to the upper right-hand one. How would this change the composition?

Kandinsky played a ubiquitous and colorful part in the story of modern art. Founder of the Blaue Reiter (Blue rider) group, Kandinsky shared his Russian compatriots' excitement and hope of the post-1917 October Revolution years, and returned home after an eighteen-year sojourn in Germany. He remained at the Bauhaus until Nazis closed the school, in 1933. *Orange* reflects both the artist's interest in abstract forms and color and the Bauhaus predilection for geometry. This change in the artist's work reflects both the Bauhaus aesthetic and the simplified geometric forms and graphic design generated by **Suprematism** and **Constructivism**, the leading Russian movements of the day.

The printmaking workshop at the Bauhaus embodied the school's ideals of collaboration and production. The workshop published master portfolios, developed iconic Bauhaus typography and poster design, and was actively used by the students. Kandinsky's *Orange* is included in one of the first Master Portfolios published by the Bauhaus. Like many modern artists, Kandinsky was partial to lithography because it was easy to manipulate and could produce large, colorful, uniform editions. Such print qualities were especially useful for organized groups like the Bauhaus, who publicized their artistic cause through printed magazines, pamphlets, and posters. (For more on Kandinsky, please refer to Lesson Three in the *Modern Art and Ideas 2: 1893–1913* educators guide.)

- **Ask your students to look at Breuer's Wassily Chair (Image Twelve). What do they notice about the chair's shape and lines? How would they describe the chair's overall form?**
- **Ask your students to try to identify the materials the artist used. How do they think the chair was made? Why do they think the artist made the design choices that he did?**
- **Ask your students what they think it might be like to sit in this chair. What parts of the chair would come into contact with the sitter's body?**
- **In-class writing exercise: Ask your students to imagine who might sit in this chair. Ask them to take a few minutes to write a monologue from the point of view of the sitter.**

The Hungarian-born architect and designer Breuer arrived at the Bauhaus in 1920. Drawn to the school's reputation for innovation, Breuer had abandoned his fine arts studies in Vienna and sold all of his belongings to finance his trip to Weimar. Although he would later become an internationally acclaimed architect, Breuer was initially apprenticed to the Bauhaus carpentry workshop. It was during this time that he began experimenting with furniture design.

As the legend goes, Breuer's flash of inspiration for the Wassily Chair occurred while he was riding his bicycle. He suddenly realized that the lightweight tubular steel of the bicycle's handlebars could be used in furniture construction. This revolutionary idea had an enormous impact on design, and within a year after the first Wassily prototype, many modern designers were using tubular steel. Breuer's experimentation with industrially produced materials also coincided with a shift in the Bauhaus away from handcrafted products and toward fulfilling the new motto coined by Gropius: "art and technology—a new unity." Breuer named the chair after his Bauhaus friend and mentor Kandinsky, who had immediately recognized the intelligence of the chair's design.

- Ask your students to compare Kandinsky's print and Breuer's chair. What shapes and lines do the two designs have in common? What differences do your students notice? How are both items forms of mechanical reproduction?
- Ask your students to reflect on the differences between working alone or in a group. What might be some of the advantages of the kind of collaborative creativity fostered by the Bauhaus?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design a Chair

Direct your students to develop a prototype for a chair. Ask them to consider how the design and materials of the chair might reflect the world today. Encourage them to be as creative as Breuer in thinking about how a material used for a different purpose could also be used in designing a chair.

Ask your students to sketch their chair (using line drawing and/or collage elements) and to write an explanatory paragraph of their design intentions.

2. An Invention of Accident

Lithography was invented accidentally by the Bavarian actor and playwright Alois Senefelder (1771–1834). Ask your students to investigate how and when Senefelder stumbled upon his discovery. Ask your students to research and write about another accidental invention (in any discipline).

3. The Beauty of the Bicycle

Few people realize that the bicycle is a relatively recent invention. Direct your students to investigate the origins of the bicycle and to research other artists who have been inspired by the bicycle (such as Henri Lartigue and Marcel Duchamp) on The Museum of Modern Art's Web site: www.moma.org.

4. The Weimar Republic

The "Weimar Republic" (as it is now referred to) was a brief but promising moment in Germany's history between the two world wars, named after the city of Weimar. Working in groups, have your students research different periods of the Weimar Republic, including the Republic's rise and its early years (1918–23); Stresemann's Golden Era (1923–29); and the rise of Hitler and subsequent fall of the Republic (1930–33).