

**WEIMAR GERMANY
(1918-1933): WALTER
GROPIUS: THE
BAUHAUS AND
INTERNATIONALISM**



WEIMAR GERMANY (1918-1933): WALTER GROPIUS: THE BAUHAUS AND INTERNATIONALISM

Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Walter Gropius's ideas behind internationalism, how the Bauhaus School in its different forms tried to promote itself as a vanguard institution dedicated to modernist ideas, and finally why the school collapsed in an era of volkish hyper-nationalism that sought to define for the world what it meant to be "German."

Subjects

European History, World History, Art, Art History, Architecture

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Bauhaus Museum, Berlin
- New National gallery, Berlin
- Bauhaus Buildings, Dessau

Essential Questions

- Who was Walter Gropius?
- What was the Bauhaus? Was it simply a building or an entire movement?
- Why did the Bauhaus have to move to different locations around Germany? Why was it finally closed by the Nazis in 1933?
- How was the Bauhaus and its international movement a radical new approach to art and architecture?
- Why was Gropius and his Bauhaus considered so radical and dangerous?
- What is the legacy of the Bauhaus today?

Academic Summary

Our guiding principle was that design is neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilized society.

Walter Gropius

One of the outstanding achievements of the new constructional technique has been the abolition of the separating function of the wall. Instead of making the walls the element of support, as in a brick-built house, our new space-saving construction transfers the whole load of the structure to a steel or concrete framework. Thus the role of the walls becomes restricted to that of mere screens stretched between the upright columns of this framework to keep out rain, cold, and noise. ...Systematic technical improvement in steel and concrete, and nicer and nicer calculation of their tensile and compressive strength, are steadily reducing the area occupied by supporting members. This, in turn, naturally leads to a progressively bolder (i.e. wider) opening up of the wall surfaces, which allows rooms to be much better lit. It is, therefore, only logical that the old type of window—a hole that had to be hollowed out of the full thickness of a supporting wall—should be giving place more and more to the continuous horizontal casement, subdivided by thin steel mullions, characteristic of the New Architecture.

And as a direct result of the growing preponderance of voids over solids, glass is assuming an ever greater structural importance....In the same way the flat roof is superseding the old penthouse roof with its tiled or slated gables. For its advantages are obvious: (1) light normally shaped top-floor rooms instead of poky attics, darkened by dormers and sloping ceilings, with their almost unutilizable corners; (2) the avoidance of timber rafters, so often the cause of fires; (3) the possibility of turning the top of the house to practical account as a sun loggia, open-air gymnasium, or children's playground; (4) simpler structural provision for subsequent additions, whether as extra stories or new wings; (5) elimination of unnecessary surfaces presented to the action of wind and weather, and therefore less need for repairs; (6) suppression of hanging gutters, external rain-pipes, etc., that often erode rapidly. With the development of air transport the architect will have to pay as much attention to the bird's-eye perspective of his houses as to their elevations. The utilization of flat roofs as 'grounds' offers us a means of re-acclimatizing nature amidst the stony deserts of our great towns...Seen from the skies, the leafy house-tops of the cities of the future will look like endless chains of hanging gardens."

From Walter Gropius: The New Architecture and the Bauhaus, Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1965

In the early morning hours of 11 April 1933, in a small quiet section of Berlin, Germany, about a hundred Gestapo black-shirts surrounded an old brick building, once a telephone manufacturing center, but since converted to an educational institution. Eventually, their young leader began to ask for papers and identification. Teachers and

students alike were questioned one by one as to their political and cultural affiliations. In a time of hardship, anxiety and suspicion, few of the school's neighbors in the community took time to notice the commotion. After a few hours of inquisition, the guards placed a lock and chain on the door to the building, closing the school forever. The students and instructors milled around, hoping to forestall events over which they had little to no control, but to no avail. In the early days of the Third Reich, only those connected to the central inner circle of power had that kind of influence. Coming less than three months after Adolph Hitler and the National Socialists rose to power, the scene had been repeated in different forms throughout the Reich, and would continue to do so for years to come.

Unknown to many onlookers on that gray April day, this particular search and seizure wasn't just the closing of a school. It also signaled the end of an era, not just for the teachers and students of this particular institution, but for a cultural vanguard as well. The school was called the Bauhaus. Staffed by many of the leading artists and architects in Germany at the time, the Bauhaus spearheaded the drive towards modernity in Europe during the Interwar period. More than a just building, the Bauhaus itself had come to symbolize internationalism, futurism and socialist thought in a time of chaos. While Interwar Germany slid deeper and deeper into political and ethical turmoil as the 1920s rolled on, the ideas and philosophies coming out of the Bauhaus desperately tried to stand as a cultural beacon of light, one that unfortunately in the end was snuffed out by a regime dedicated to ultra-nationalistic "volkish" art and architecture.

Walter Gropius had founded the Bauhaus in 1919 with the idea of combining theoretical fine art study with the practical applications of architecture. In doing so, Gropius hoped to achieve the marriage of an art study center where masters would teach students with a practical application center where those techniques could then be put to use in making furniture and designing buildings. The notion for such a union seems to make perfect sense today, and many colleges and universities around the world have since adopted the Bauhaus model, but Gropius and his philosophies were considered revolutionary by many at the time.

In the beginning, the Weimar government had funded and supported the original Bauhaus with public funds. After generations of autocracy and militarism, many intellectual Germans during the Interwar period hoped to convince the world that they had something to contribute besides death, war and destruction. To many artists in Europe looking towards the future with guarded hope and optimism after the horrors of war earlier in the decade, the opening of Gropius' school offered the chance to embrace a new cultural revolution, one for which artists, thinkers and intellectuals had been clamoring for many years.

Students in the years since the Second World War have looked back at the art produced at the Bauhaus and many fail to see how it could have been that revolutionary. Gropius himself had left Germany for America before the war, but the classic lines and clean forms of Gropius's pupils became the standard and example for the architecture of the 1950s. During the Interwar years, however, most Europeans wanted little to do with clean lines. Such art and architecture was labeled socialist and internationalist, and as such seemed to be linked to Stalinist Russia. After all, if one

looked at a building designed by someone at the Bauhaus, how could one tell that building was in Germany? Although the urban landscape of Europe today is littered with so-called "cookie cutter" buildings, such was not always the case. In an age when people of different nations strove to show how they were different, any attempt to deviate from the cultural norm was probably bound to fail. Such was the case with the Bauhaus.

Philosophically, many students and artists at the Bauhaus had long harbored leftist tendencies (as is the case of many college students today), and the first communist cell was organized at the school in 1927. Most students at the institution played little to no part in politics, but the appearance of a radical left-wing organization surely left a bad taste in many German mouths. When an economic crisis hit the country in the 1920s, and Germany began to fracture into two major divisions, many at the Bauhaus began to call for revolution along the lines of Stalinist Russia. By 1930, a majority of the students enrolled in Dessau supported the KPD, Germany's communist party, and the school had an active cell of radicals and revolutionaries. What many students failed to realize, however, was that while they were shifting to the left, Germans as a whole were shifting to the right. For a publicly funded institution, even one subsidized by local funds, this position proved untenable.

When the Nazis gained control of Dessau after the election of October 1931, the handwriting was on the wall. The Nazis moved against the school at the Dessau city council meeting of 21 January 1932, when they called for the school to be closed 01 April and for funds earmarked for the Bauhaus to be shifted to relief for the unemployed. They also called for the school building itself to be demolished. The proposals were narrowly defeated in the January city council meeting, but by August the Nazis were successful in carrying them to victory. In October 1932, the school relocated to Berlin, but even that wasn't enough. Nazi leaders in the capital wouldn't let it reorganize, even under a different mission statement. There was simply too much socialist baggage and too many ties to leftist organizations.

A couple of months after the Bauhaus opened for a new semester in Berlin, supposedly under the watchful eye of National Socialist leaders, a group of Gestapo soldiers surrounded the building and closed the school. No longer would the Bauhaus and Gropius's internationalism propose itself a vehicle for Germany's spiritual and cultural transformation. A new master had since assumed that role, and under his leadership, anything "non-German" would be stricken from the Reich in an attempt to purify the fatherland in blood and iron.

Students and historians since the end of the Second World War have grappled with Gropius's ideas and standards. Historians often disagree as to the extent of the Bauhaus's contribution to German society. These analyses miss the point. The Bauhaus was a symbol, probably before its time, for a world not yet ready for peace. Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain Walter Gropius's ideas behind internationalism, how the Bauhaus School in its different forms tried to promote itself as a vanguard institution dedicated to modernist ideas, and finally why the school collapsed in an era of volkish hyper-nationalism that sought to define for the world what it meant to be "German."

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain Walter Gropius's ideas of internationalism and modernism in art and architecture and how those ideas manifested themselves in the Bauhaus Movement
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the Bauhaus School under Gropius and other artists sought to promote itself as a vanguard institution dedicated to modernist ideas.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why German society turned on the internationalist movement, leading to the closing of the Bauhaus School in 1933.
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the legacy of the Bauhaus movement, not only for the post-war period, but also for art and architecture in the 21st century.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Is art a reflection of the society from whence it comes, or can art be a movement for change in society? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Gropius and the Bauhaus. (20 min)
- Video – Gropius and the Dessau Bauhaus (30 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus, taking notes as appropriate. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/ photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: How did Walter Gropius's Bauhaus School in its different forms try to promote itself as a vanguard institution dedicated to modernist ideas, and why did the school collapse in an era of volkish hyper-nationalism that sought to define for the world what it meant to be "German"? (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail Walter Gropius's ideas behind internationalism, how the Bauhaus School in its different forms tried to promote itself as a vanguard institution dedicated to modernist ideas, and finally why the school collapsed in an era of volkish hyper-nationalism that sought to define for the world what it meant to be "German".

Extension

On tour: Bauhaus buildings in Dessau, Germany

While on tour, students can visit the Bauhaus buildings in Dessau (about 1 ½ hours each from Berlin or Leipzig – it's about ½ way in-between the two cities). In Dessau, students can see for themselves many buildings designed by Gropius and his students between 1925 and 1932 (when the school was open in Dessau). The Bauhaus buildings are now together designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Site. Gropius, considered the father of the “international style” and the “modern movement” that revolutionized artistic and architectural thinking around the globe in the 1920s. Considered too far-left and linked to the internationalist rhetoric coming out of Stalinist Russia, the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis in 1933 and the buildings were repurposed for other uses during their rule. The city took heavy damage during the war (as did almost every town in Germany), and the Bauhaus school buildings were no exceptions. After the town became an industrial center in East Germany in 1945, reconstruction was sporadic at best over the subsequent four decades. Since reunification in 1990 however, reconstruction has been undertaken at a more rapid pace, especially in the Bauhaus sites. The main building of the Bauhaus College is now a museum dedicated to Gropius, his life and his ideas. It's even possible to stay at the “Studio Building” in one of Bauhaus studios (rebuilt, of course) – be advised – Bauhaus students had communal showers and since the building is a historical site, there is no accessibility for wheelchairs.

Pre/post tour: Gropius House in Lincoln, Massachusetts

Students fortunate enough to live close to Boston are encouraged to visit the “Gropius House” on Baker Bridge Road in Lincoln, MA (a Boston suburb) where they can see for themselves the home Gropius lived in from 1938 to 1969. Gropius designed and built the house when he came to Boston to teach at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. The home is perhaps the classic example of Bauhaus philosophy, utilitarian and yet built paying homage to classic New England architectural traditions. Today, the home is a National Historic Landmark and is owned by a private organization (Historic New England), but family possessions are still found in the home, including many examples of Bauhaus style furniture and artwork. There is an admissions fee, but the visit is well worth it and therefore highly recommended for students, teachers and anyone else interested in Gropius and the Bauhaus movement.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.thelearninglab.nl/resources/Bauhaus-manifesto.pdf
Walter Gropius, “Bauhaus manifesto and Program, 1919” – primary source document
- www.bauhaus-dessau.de/english/home.html
Bauhaus Dessau (website) – official website for the Bauhaus Museum in Dessau, Germany. Outstanding photographs and articles on Gropius, modernism, and the Bauhaus movement – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- www.walter-gropius.com/
Walter Gropius (website)
- www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/gropius.html
Walter Gropius (website) – from Professor Jeffery Howe, Fine Arts Department at Boston University
- www.germanheritage.com/biographies/atol/gropius.html
Walter Gropius (website) – from the German – American Homeport Association
- wwwFOUNDATIONSakc.com/people/legends/walter-gropius
Walter Gropius (website)
- whc.unesco.org/en/list/729
Bauhaus and its Sites in Weimar and Dessau (website) – from UNESCO
- www.historicnewengland.org/historic-properties/homes/Gropius%20House
Gropius House (website) – in Lincoln, MA – website for the home Gropius owned from 1938-1969
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- www.slideshare.net/Jclancy35/bauhaus-5742188
Bauhaus (PowerPoint) – from Joe Clancy of Taproot Design (UK)
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYrqrqB0B8I
Bauhaus: A History and its Legacy (video) – 10-minute video from Brian Douglas Hayes at the Art Institutes International Minnesota. Gives a good overview of Gropius and his movement.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=_szmgy_YrN8
Architecture Collection – Episode 01: Gropius – The Dessau (video). Outstanding 27 minute video. Does a great job of explaining both the modernist movement and the personification of that movement in the Bauhaus School in Dessau – highly recommended for students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Gropius
Walter Gropius – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bauhaus
Bauhaus – Wikipedia article
- en.wikiarquitectura.com/index.php/Bauhaus_building_in_Dessau
Bauhaus building in Dessau – Wikiarquitectura article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_style_\(architecture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_style_(architecture))
International Style (architecture) – Wikipedia article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/germany/country_profile
On the Road: Germany (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/interwar-europe-lost-generation-hemingway-sun-also-rises
Interwar Europe – Hemingway: Sun Also Rises
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/interwar-europe-remarque-all-quiet
Interwar Europe (1919-1939) – Remarque: All Quiet on the Western Front
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/weimar-gropius-bauhaus-and-internationalism
Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus: International Art and Architecture in the Weimar Republic
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/switzerland/interwar-europe-dadaism
Interwar Europe (1919-1939) – Dadaism: Rejecting Modernity's Chaos

Key Terms

- Bauhaus
- Gropius
- Internationalism
- Modernism
- Socialism

