

100 years since the founding of the Bauhaus

Including an interview with Bauhaus student Wilf Franks

By Barbara Slaughter and Stefan Steinberg
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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Bauhaus movement in Germany, which played a key role in the development of progressive art and culture in the twentieth century. The anniversary is being celebrated by the publication of new books reviewing the Bauhaus and a number of exhibitions and events taking place in Berlin, Dessau and beyond.

In order to familiarise our readers with the significance of the Bauhaus we are reposting an interview with British artist Wilf Franks (1908–2003), which first appeared on the WSWS in 1999. Franks was a pupil at this influential school of art and design between 1929 and 1931.

He was trained by Reinhold Weidensee in the Bauhaus carpentry workshop in Dessau, Germany, and knew Walter Gropius, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, among others prominent artistic figures.

Wilf was forced to quit Germany in 1931 after the Nazis gained control of the Dessau city council in that year and undertook to close down Bauhaus school.

On returning to Britain, Franks worked at a training school for young men in a mining area in northeast England, passing on some of the skills he had learnt in Germany. It was during this time that he met the distinguished composer Michael Tippett (1905–1998), who became his close friend and collaborator.

Later, Franks joined the Margaret Barr Company as a dancer. Barr had trained with Martha Graham and was one of the innovators of modern dance in Britain. After the Second World War, he worked at the Ford factory in Dagenham for 10 years as part of the design team. He later turned to teaching, and joined the staff at Leeds Polytechnic as a lecturer in design. Franks remained a supporter of Trotskyism and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) until his death.

The *Staatliches Bauhaus* [literally, State School of Construction] in Weimar, in the central German state of Thuringia, was founded in April 1919 by Walter Gropius (1883–1969), its first director. This was a time of political crisis and turmoil, nowhere more so than in Germany. In the midst of the carnage of the First World War, the Russian Revolution of October 1917 raised the banner of international solidarity and socialism, in opposition to the rampant nationalism of the belligerent imperialist powers.

The seizure of power by the workers' and soldiers' Soviets in Russia, under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, inspired the German revolutionaries in the *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus League), led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, to emulate them. The country was in uproar. Thousands of workers and intellectuals, repulsed by the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) abandonment of socialist internationalism and descent into patriotism, flocked to the banner of the Spartacists.

On November 9, 1918, two days before the armistice was declared, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated. Liebknecht called for a socialist republic based on workers and soldiers councils. The SPD, which in 1914 had voted the Kaiser war credits and supported the imperialist war, came

forward to strangle Germany's "November Revolution." With SPD support, the workers uprising was suppressed, and in January 1919 Luxemburg and Liebknecht were murdered, along with hundreds of members of the newly established Communist Party.

Prior to these tumultuous events, a number of artists had been seeking to develop their own creative language: *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) movement of Kandinsky, Klee, Franz Marc and August Macke in Germany; the fauvists [*fauves*—wild beasts in French, so named by a hostile critic] such as Georges Braque and Henri Matisse in France; the Dutch de Stijl movement that included Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg.

During the First World War and in its aftermath, some artistic tendencies took on more overtly political colouring. The Dada movement, originating in Switzerland in 1916, represented a rebellious and nihilistic rejection of the cultural and social status quo. Its practitioners included the Frenchman Marcel Duchamp, the American Man Ray, and the Germans George Grosz and Max Ernst.

The October 1917 Revolution in Russia, together with the Bolshevik government's policy of encouraging the widest artistic and intellectual freedom and experimentation, had an inspirational effect on the artistic world. The work of Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and many others had an impact far beyond the borders of the USSR.

The Bauhaus emerged in this cultural, political and social ferment. As a young man Walter Gropius was influenced by the work of John Ruskin and William Morris. Before the First World War, he trained as an architect and worked in the office of Peter Behrens, with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, who later became known as Le Corbusier.

Like thousands of others, Gropius was radicalised by his experiences during the war. He became chairman of a left-wing association of architects, artists and intellectuals—the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers Council for Art), which had sought to extend the November 1918 revolution into the area of art. Gropius believed in the need for a new society. He aimed to overcome the separation between the arts and crafts and to create a total environment fit for human beings to live.

The Manifesto of the Bauhaus, written by Gropius in April 1919, was illustrated with a woodcut by expressionist painter Lyonel Feininger, Gropius's first appointment to the Bauhaus. *Cathedral* (or "cathedral of the future," as Gropius called it elsewhere) shows a rocket-like building rising boldly towards the sky; atop its three spires are five-pointed stars radiating beams of light. Feininger, who had also supported the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, did not choose the image for any religious symbolism.

As a "cathedral of socialism," the illustration represents the aims of the Bauhaus to unify architecture with art and design in the service of social man. "The ultimate aim of all creative activity is the building," wrote Gropius in the opening lines of the Bauhaus manifesto. "The decoration of buildings was once the noblest function of the fine arts, and the fine

arts were indispensable to great architecture. Today they exist in complacent isolation, and can only be rescued from it by the conscious cooperation and collaboration of all craftsmen. Architects, painters and sculptors must once again come to know and comprehend the composite character of the building both as an entity and in terms of its various parts. Then their work will be filled with that true architectonic spirit which, as 'salon art,' it has lost."

The Bauhaus attracted many leading artists of the period, including Kandinsky, Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, Moholy-Nagy and others. They taught alongside craftsmen in the fields of stone, wood, metal, clay, glass, colour (paint) and textiles, whose expertise enabled the students to master the materials and tools of each medium (*Werklehre*). Each area also had a tutor who addressed the problems of form (*Formlehre*), encouraging the students' abilities to observe, represent and compose.

In February 1924, the Social Democrats lost control of the Thuringian state parliament to the right-wing German nationalists, who had from the start been overtly hostile to the Bauhaus for its supposed "Bolshevism." In September, the Ministry of Education cut the school's funding in half and placed the staff on six-month contracts. For Gropius, who had already been looking for alternative sources of funding, this proved to be the last straw. Together with the Council of Masters, he announced the closure of the Bauhaus from the end of March 1925. The SPD, who had governed Dessau—the capital of the Free State of Anhalt from 1918 to 1945—for years, offered to establish the Bauhaus in that city. Gropius and his staff moved there in 1926.

The tragic betrayal of the German working class by its political leaders opened the road for the Nazis to come to power. The Communist Party, now under the direct influence of Stalin, and the Social Democrats refused to organise a united front to stop Hitler's Brownshirts. By September 1932, the Nazis had won a majority in Dessau, and cut off all financial support to the Bauhaus. The school was forced to move to Berlin, where it survived without any public funding for a brief time. On April 11, 1933, the Berlin police, acting on the orders of the new Nazi government, finally closed it. The Nazi's "degenerate art" exhibition in 1937 featured works by several former Bauhaus teachers.

The Nazis failed in their efforts to completely obliterate the Bauhaus. Its forced closure and the subsequent emigration of many of its former staff and students ensured that it would become famous and influential throughout the world, especially in the United States, where a Bauhaus school was established in Chicago in 1937. The Bauhaus had a lasting impact on art education and in architecture. But cut adrift from the socialist ideals that had inspired the movement and thrust into a completely different cultural environment, many of those who worked there went on to produce relatively expressionless and dehumanised buildings.

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The following interview with Wilf Franks was carried out by the veteran British Trotskyist Barbara Slaughter in 1999. She visited him at his home in North Yorkshire, where he told her about his experiences at the Bauhaus.

Barbara Slaughter: What were your first impressions of the Bauhaus?

Wilf Franks: I was nearly 22 when I went to the Bauhaus in Dessau. It was in 1929. I was born in January 1908. In the beginning, I didn't know what the Bauhaus was; I thought it was just a school for architects. When I arrived, I was impressed by the building. I was tremendously moved by it; it was something I didn't expect and I couldn't possibly have imagined.

I arrived after dark and there was this beautiful glass-fronted building, all lit up, with people walking about inside. If you can imagine, a 50-foot-high area of glass with the lights shining through and the steel girders of the construction four feet back from the glass. You can't believe what an experience that was. You would have been as

dumb-struck as I was if you had seen it. I had come into a strange country and had endured a horrible stinking train journey, with people talking in a language I didn't understand, and suddenly I had arrived at this wonderful place and wondered, "Where have I come to?"

The students all gathered round me. I was the first Englishman. They were tremendously pleased about this, because they felt it meant they were getting international recognition—that the school was becoming known to the world.

I was taken inside and given a meal. Then I was taken into a big hall where they were showing pictures of things they had done. They showed some drawings and suddenly there was a drawing of me. They had only met me 20 minutes before, out in the courtyard in the dark, and here were pictures of the Englishman who had just arrived.

The students showed me all round the building, the theatre, the workshops and the students' living quarters. At the Bauhaus the workshops were identified with specific materials—wood, stone, metal, clay, and so on. Students were encouraged to discover all the possible ways of using the different materials, by considering, by thinking, by feeling their way into them, to see what qualities they have and if they can be enhanced and used for the betterment of life.

BS: What did you study at the Bauhaus?

WF: Every workshop had a Master of Form, or design teacher, and a Workshop Master, or technical teacher. I was put into a workshop with a man named Reinhold Weidensee, who was a very good craft teacher and I had to learn to make furniture. Gropius had been the Master of Form in the same workshop, but he had left some months before, so he was just a name to me at first.

One day, Weidensee told me that I was going to make a bed for the Hygiene Ausstellung (Hygienic Exhibition) in Dresden. He said, "The Bauhaus has made a hygienic house and you are going to make a hygienic bed."

He gave me some long planks to plane up and we put them in the press and pressed hard beech wood veneer on the surface of each plank and on the edges. They were smoothed up and painted. Then they were rubbed down with wet and dry sandpaper and painted again and rubbed down. This happened three or four times and afterwards they were shining like glass. They were a lovely green colour.

People came in and looked at the work. Some of them were younger than I was, and some much older. They made all kinds of suggestions about how the work could be made more interesting or more practical, maybe by altering it here or there. I listened and learnt from them. And now I don't know who designed that bed. It was attributed to me, because I did the handiwork, but I don't know who designed it, because so many people came in on it. I remember the ideas that I had, and how Weidensee had corrected me. Everyone at the Bauhaus helped one another. We learnt from each other. The students had as much to do with the teaching process as the masters did.

At the end of the day's work, we would put all the tools carefully away in the cupboards and then oil the benches, leaving them perfectly clean for the next day. Often I would find next morning that the bench had been oiled again by somebody else. It took me a while to realise what was happening. When we left, other students came from where they had been working on jobs and did their Bauhaus work at night-time. I realised that the school was much wider, more organised and totally different from the impression I had got when I first arrived there.

BS: How did socialist ideas influence the work of the Bauhaus?

WF: Weidensee was a lovely person, very genuine and quiet. He was the person who actually told me, "You will have to become a communist, if you want to make the most of our teaching, because it's all based on that. The world revolution has begun in Russia."

He didn't know what Moholy-Nagy[1] knew, who was a Hungarian and had been through the Hungarian Revolution. He told me at the beginning,

“The counterrevolution has already happened. Stalin is the arch-enemy.” This is how I began at the Bauhaus with Moholy-Nagy.

Moholy-Nagy explained that the new society began under Lenin and Trotsky. This is what the Bauhaus believed. This is what all the students believed. They all told me about what happened earlier—the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the German Revolutions of 1918–19 and 1923. They talked about it constantly and they said it would happen again.

They all knew that Marx and Engels proposed a revolutionary change, which Lenin and Trotsky had put into practice, which Moholy-Nagy taught me about. But it’s all gone now. Stalin bugged it all up. That’s not the word he used, but he gave that importance to it.

The other students were Marxists. I remember three students coming to me and giving me a copy of the Communist Manifesto. It was printed in English and they had sent to England for it, which must have cost them a lot of money. They put it on the bench where I was working and said, “Read that, Wilf, and then you’ll know what we are all about.”

They were internationalists and they wanted to be international. They wanted English and American people there as well as Germans, French and Dutch. They were influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. I heard them talking about dialectical materialism. I discussed it with them. The students used to talk to me during the day, at dinnertime and in the pubs and always they were on about the revolution that had failed and the revolution that was coming soon that was going to win.

They were learning to create—for working people, for everybody. They were thinking about creating a new world out of their craftsmanship and their good work. This is a totally different attitude from any other art school that I know of, because it was not an art school—it was the Bauhaus. It was there to create the architecture for the new socialist world that had begun in Russia and that would be international, because it had to be international, and it was international. That’s why I was there. They wanted me there and I know this happened to others.

I remember going to Edinburgh University and talking about the Bauhaus. People stood up, older people than myself and young students, and actually said that I was lying—that it was all an idea in my mind. They were absolutely convinced that the Bauhaus was non-political, purely artistic—pure artists coming together and creating, and why couldn’t we do the same? I said, “Because you don’t have the same motive. You are not working from the same part of you.” But they would not accept it.

BS: What do you recall of Walter Gropius?

WF: What we were learning at the Bauhaus was that the time will come when things change, when we will have to make everything by machinery by standardisation—but make it beautiful, like the Englishman, William Morris. Gropius said that everything must be made by hand, but with standardisation and mass production in mind, so that everybody can have beautiful things.

Gropius allowed the politics to go on. The first time I met him at his house he said to me, “You’re Wilf from England. I’ve heard all about you. You’re doing very well.” I told him, “I don’t feel I am doing very well. I am a fish out of water. I know nothing about Marxism, nothing about politics and nothing about architecture.” He said, “You don’t have to know anything about architecture or politics. All you have to do is to join in everything the students do.... We, the older generation, can’t do it, but you will create the architecture of the new world, that represents the people of today.”

He said, “You will do what people did in earlier days—the Gothic arch, Gothic cathedrals and churches were the direct expression of the people of those days.” I remember him putting his hands like this and saying, “You will do for the people of today what the people of those days did through Gothic architecture. You will make all the things that they want in your way, which we do not yet know.” He must have had some conception of a new form of society.

Then he told me to go into the next room and listen to the discussion, try

and understand what they were talking about and join in if I could. So I went in there and listened to a quite elderly man speaking in German, talking about Karl Marx’s philosophy of dialectical materialism. And of course I didn’t understand very much at the time, but I asked the other students and learnt a lot more later on.

BS: What do you recall of the artists you met at the Bauhaus?

WF: The artists were teachers of design and they did it by teaching their own “thing.” Paul Klee had classes continually in which the students worked as he worked.

Klee was a musician. I didn’t know this until one day I heard him playing the piano, and then I knew, because it was so marvellous. I asked the other students and they told me he was doing a concert in the town a few days later. I went to hear him and he was fantastic, playing his own works and the “old masters.”

After that, when I saw him paint, I realised that his art works were musical works, done in a special medium. I realised his drawing came from his movement and his musicality. Mine came from my visual experience. I’m a very tactile person. My tactile sensibility is most important and visual is second. My aural awareness is weakest. When you witnessed his playing, it was like looking at his drawings. I admit it’s a bit of a “Wilfness” to say that he was trying to paint from his aural sensibility, but I think it’s true.

I saw Klee painting; his students took me along to watch him. He played with objects near at hand and used them. He could pick up something like a matchbox and make it into the shape of a human face or paint with the edge of a ruler. He could pick anything up and use it. He was very big in his movements. He would dip a brush in paint and roll it across the page. It was a big movement. It came from his essential personality—an aural, musical personality.

There has never been a person who worked like he did. He was first and foremost a musician and painting was a second string to his music. In an extraordinary way he tried to do in paint what he did in music. He played both piano and violin and composed as well. I think he was a great musician, but he’s not known for that now.

We had to learn drawing at the Bauhaus because we had to draw our designs. Life drawing is very important. The most important subject for a human being to draw is another human being—the human body is the most subtle, the most marvellous construction.

We used to have weekly life drawing classes. I had done a lot of drawing over the years and the students asked me about it. I tried to explain how, when I am drawing a limb, say a wrist, I feel my own wrist at the same time. It’s as if my wrist becomes conscious. I was trying to tell them what happened and I was making statements I could hardly explain myself.

I remember Paul Klee standing near and listening. I talked to him afterwards and he was very interested. I said that drawing was a very physical thing. I draw from my own body. When I see a leg, I feel the shape of my own leg. It’s got something to do with the brain. It’s not a conscious thought, but the brain affects the body. My leg is as human as the leg I draw. I am trying to capture the “legginess” of the leg. You have to make sure you look carefully at the model and notice the differences from yourself, otherwise you finish up with a self-portrait every time.

I went to an exhibition at Jena with some other students, who thought that Klee was the greatest of the greatest. The exhibition was mainly of the work of his students. In the café afterwards I told them that only one or two of them had “worked” and the rest were rubbish. They asked me to go back in with them and show them which ones I meant. Then they said, “Strangely enough you’ve picked out all the master’s work.”

Kandinsky[2] was a painter at the Bauhaus. I was not in his class, but would have been if I had stayed a year longer. I often saw him in Dessau. He had a house there. I asked him questions, which were prompted by Moholy-Nagy, but he was very cagey and wouldn’t answer. I remember

him saying, “You make it very dangerous for people when you ask such questions.” He had lived in the Soviet Union and knew from personal experience what Stalinism was. He was telling me that the Stalinists could even kill him there in Germany if they thought he was an enemy. He repeated, “You don’t know how much danger you are putting people into when you ask such questions.” I couldn’t understand him then, but now it is quite obvious what he meant.

BS: How did the rise of fascism affect the Bauhaus?

WF: Paul Schultze-Naumburg was the architect that they sent into the school to re-establish pure German art instead of the “cosmopolitan rubbish” we were doing. He described Bauhaus furniture as Kisten, or boxes. He wanted to teach us how to carve Bacchuses on chair backs and that sort of thing, what we would call super-Victorian stuff.

I only saw him once. I was posing for a sculptor who was making a three-quarter-size statue and somebody came along and said, “Schultze-Naumburg is in the office and he wants to see the Englishman.” So I put on a pair of shorts and ran across the road and up the stairs into his office. There I saw these two Nazis in their uniforms and this fellow sitting at the desk. It’s the first time I had witnessed a scene like that. I’ve seen it in films and plays since.

He addressed me and said that they were very partial to English *Kultur*. I replied that I didn’t know there was any specifically English *Kultur*. So he said, “Oh well, we recognise your country as a country of great culture and we are sacking all the foreigners. But if you remain in the town you will eventually be reinstated.” So that’s when I left.

Two days later the students told me that there was to be a gathering in the square. They had put up a big platform with banners and everything. They said the fascists were coming, and we must be there to hear what they said and to see what they did.

I could see that they were all pale-faced and frightened, including people I thought were strong. And I got this fear from them. I had no real idea what Hitler was. I’d seen these two Brownshirts, but that was all.

The square was full and the police came on horseback and drove us back into the side streets, leaving one main street open. We waited for about a quarter of an hour, but it seemed much longer after the business with the police, who were very clumsy and crude. Then we heard the sounds of a brass band in the distance and it came nearer and nearer. Very soon the brown shirts came into the square, which we had filled a short time before. It was packed full of these brown shirts and the police. This was the first time I had seen them.

Then the speaker came out on the platform. He was the leader of the fascists in the state of Thuringia. I couldn’t follow anything he said, but I could see that the people I was with were deeply hurt and frightened by what they heard. When we got back they told me, “On Monday we are going to have a *Spiegelfest* (festival of mirrors).”

Monday arrived and I got up early, at about seven o’clock, and went into the workshop. All the walls of the workshop were draped with mirrors—big mirrors, little mirrors. There were beer barrels on legs and the drink was free. These people that I had been with, were all “practical idealists,” which means they were fighting for an ideal which could actually be achieved. I knew them as such, and here they were making love in public, and drinking and going to sleep against the wall, they were so drunk. And this went on the whole day long. This was the end of the Bauhaus.

I knew they were throwing in the towel. I actually saw them doing it. Everything is finished; all our ideals have come to nothing; Hitler’s here, the Brownshirts are here, was what they were saying. It was intended to be a kind of Bacchanalian feast, and it was that. And to such a degree that I couldn’t equate it with what they were, and had been, and all that they had taught me to be. It was all being thrown away.

Before I left Germany I bought a book on art published by the fascists. It was like a pornographic magazine and was supposed to show how

degenerate the Bauhaus was. On one page there was a Bauhaus drawing and opposite they printed a fascist drawing, with Nazi flags and all that. It was part of their self-advertisement and was supposed to show how superior their art was to that of the Bauhaus. When you saw their stupid, insipid drawings next to ours, it worked completely the opposite way.

BS: What is your opinion of art today?

WF: Creativity is our deepest instinct and it is what we must do. We want to create together—we don’t want to create on our own. We want to create together. And this is what the man and woman of the future will be doing. They will be seeking out people with whom they can work and together create. It takes at least two minds, not one mind. My imagination is only half of it. It leaves out the best part and allows in the worst part—the self-preservation that is the human instinct for defence against volcanoes and earthquakes.

In bourgeois society the more absurd, the more objectionable, the more questionable, the more puzzling, the more insipid and slight your work can be, the greater art it is because the more is charged for it, because the man who pays won’t know what he is paying for. So you can put a line of bricks in the Tate Gallery and every night when the gallery closes, you can walk back and change the position of the bricks. Everybody will go and look at them for a second time and say how wonderful they are.

When you are learning a craft you have to learn to use two hands on a chisel, you have to learn technique. Today, art students go through art school and they learn the technique of making nothing in particular.

That is not to say that I think that nobody produces art of any value today. But I do think that many people produce art that is of very minor importance to life, which is not what it should mean. It should mean something to life, to our life, to social life or collective life. And if it doesn’t mean something to that, then it’s trivial, it’s immediate and it won’t matter. It’s something that you shouldn’t be worrying about.

Human emotion is tied to our love of one another and our desire to aid and work with one another. This is the basis of the reality of both art and science. They are not two opposites. Art is expressed in our relationships with one another, or it stays inside and becomes trivial, nothing. There is no such thing as a work of art “for myself.” My work of art must be a major part of my relationship with some other people, if not all other people.

The truth that we are trying to express is that we are the human animal species. This is what we are. And the deepest instinct we have is to be human, to be related with other people and work with other people to enhance our collective lot. That is where Marxism and Bolshevism and Trotskyism all spring from.

Notes:

1. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). A Hungarian and a constructivist—a follower of Vladimir Tatlin. In 1919 he supported the Hungarian Soviet of Bela Kun and in January 1921 he arrived in Berlin. The following year he participated in the Dada and Constructivist Conference held in Weimar. He taught the preliminary course at the Bauhaus from 1925 to 1928. After he left he maintained a strong relationship with the students. In 1935 he left Germany, and in 1937 was appointed head of the new Bauhaus school in Chicago.

2. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944). Born in Russia. He studied art in Munich, returning to Russia in 1914. After the Russian Revolution, he became head of the Museum of Modern Art in 1919 and founded the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences in 1921. He knew Walter Gropius before the First World War and was inspired by his Bauhaus Manifesto when writing the programme for the Moscow Institute of Art and Culture in 1920. He left Russia in 1922 and became Master of Form in the mural and painting workshop at the Bauhaus. He remained at the school until it was closed by the Nazis in 1933, when he left Germany for France.

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