in the bauhaus kitchen

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When picturing the white surfaces and functional forms inside the Bauhaus, most people do not imagine the pervasive smell of garlic. But from 1919 to 1922, it was everywhere among the large group of students and faculty in Weimar: sweating out of their pores, on their clothes, in the air. Alma Mahler, wife of the school's founding director Walter Gropius, found it intolerable. When Anni Albers's uncles came from Berlin, they laughed about it. And it became a serious matter in school politics.

A faction of the students and faculty led by Johannes Itten adhered to the Mazdaznan doctrine – a way of life in accord with the teaching of Zoroaster, a Persian prophet born in 628 B.C., who viewed the universe as a cosmic struggle between *aša* (truth) and *druj* (lie). The goal of life was to sustain *aša* through good thoughts, words and proscribed activities. The adherents of Mazdaism at the Bauhaus not only followed their many rules rigorously, but condemned the violation of these rules by others. One of their requirements was vegetarianism.

Initially, Gropius extolled the health benefits of the regime. At this time, it was only his wife who recoiled from the redolent odour of garlic, cabbage, sprouts and other vegetables. Mahler, who had a sensitive gallbladder, refused to try 'the obligatory diet of uncooked mush smothered in garlic' for fear of a bilious attack,[1] and she was fond of pointing out to people that Itten himself often suffered from such attacks.

Many other people at the school objected to the rigorous rules of behaviour, which they felt encouraged a false sense of virtue. Paul Klee was troubled by Itten's role of holy figure, as leader of the Mazdaist sect. Klee was particularly critical of the sect's divisiveness, and the spell it cast over the entire school; Mazdaist rules, mainly those concerning food and diet, split the student body and faculty into two groups. In the spring and summer, the devotees of Zoroaster underwent major fasts that began with the taking of a powerful laxative. They would subsequently fast for as long as three weeks, consuming nothing but hot fruit juice. During these periods, they would repair to an orchard that the sect owned on a hill on the outskirts of Weimar, and there they would sing piously and tend the land surrounding their raspberry bushes and fruit trees. They also took ritual baths, piping hot, in the public bathhouse in Weimar and then rubbed themselves with ashes or charcoal. Their objective was to purify their outsides just as they had purified their insides through the fasting and laxatives. They even used a needle machine to puncture their skins before having their bodies rubbed with the same oil they had taken as a laxative. This was said to draw the impurities (what we would call 'toxins' today) out of the blood, causing the pinpoints in the skin to turn into pustules, which would be bandaged. The believers then exercised strenuously to induce a heavy sweat so that the ulcerations would heal, a process that often caused them to itch horribly for months.

In 1922, Itten managed to persuade the Bauhaus kitchen to follow Mazdaist rules for a while. He pushed to have all Bauhaus students adhere to the sect's practices, but Gropius opposed him. Everyone at the Bauhaus had to take a side, and Gropius finally prevailed, with the Council of Masters taking action so that Itten was required to confine himself mainly to teaching; he subsequently left the school. For the majority of Bauhauslers, the idea that a specific set of dos and don'ts, in the kitchen as in one's personal habits, could confer spiritual goodness was unacceptable. Food, like everything else, was considered an area of life that should be governed by principles of freedom, intelligence and a certain lightness of attitude that acknowledged the importance of pleasure. Food and the kitchen, furthermore, were central points of interest at the school, both because of their significance in and of themselves, and as a metaphor. Cooking was seen as similar to painting – the taking of raw ingredients and the application of correct technique, achieved through well-designed tools, to achieve palatable results.

Josef Albers, for example, the first student to become a master, said of his artistic method:

'I paint the way I spread butter on pumpernickel.' From there he would go on to extol the merits of good coarse dark German bread, contrasting its nutritional character and interesting texture to the empty airiness of white bread, which he likened to paper tissues. Food was like everything one designed: it should have character and enhance everyday existence. Later in life, Albers would call the selection of colours in his *Homages to the Square* 'recipes'. The idea went back to his Bauhaus years, where the notion of a meticulous formula or system behind creation, of planning and pre-meditation and the organisation of the elements, was seen as fundamental to making art and objects or taking buildings from the planning stage to the end result. The intention was to be deliberate and straightforward, to follow an organised approach, and to retain a lightness of touch and lack of self-importance about what one did.

Directness and candor were key on a purely visual level as well. Marcel Breuer designed impeccable kitchens, with the appearance of every appliance and cupboard honestly proclaiming what it was. In the metal workshop, tea glasses and other serving implements and utensils were streamlined. Clean aesthetics and functionalism were prized in every detail: modern materials like stainless steel and linoleum were celebrated. And while in most homes outside of the Bauhaus, living rooms were decorated with flowered wallpaper, damask curtains and chintz upholstery fabrics, at the Bauhaus the taste for smooth unadorned surfaces and forms that honoured purpose prevailed throughout the house.

The one faculty member who really knew how to cook was Klee, who was obsessed with the details of what he ate. When he was a teenager, the easiest way to get on with his cranky father was by drinking beer with him; Klee particularly prized 'wheat beer, which tastes utterly delicious, with a piece of lemon swimming in it'.[2] At such moments, one can feel Klee responding to the difference between wheat and hops, his seeing the yellow lemon as the essence of sunshine, his appreciating the sharpness of the citrus taste against the softness of the beer, his taking in the movement of the lemon. It matters that it was 'swimming' and not merely 'floating', that it was in motion rather than static. Food has much in common with painting: its need for contrasts, balances and counterbalances, the simple pleasures it presents.

Whenever Klee was apart from his wife Lily Stumpf, whom he married in 1906, he would write to tell her exactly what type of ham, for example, someone had served at lunch, delighting in such specifics when recounting a meeting with a friend as: 'good coffee. The skin on the milk was, thank God, so tough it stuck to the pot. But there were also macaroons – extra for me.'[3] Lily was a professional pianist; Klee a first-class violinist. As musicians, they knew the importance of nuance and measure, the way in which everything counts, and Klee treated the details of the kitchen as equally important. Like Albers, he was not interested in fancy food, but in the stuff of everyday life. He made a drawing for Lily of something he called 'caviar bread', which was so good that it had inspired him to take a holiday in a village near Bern because it was served at every meal in the modest pension there; he gave the bread its name not because it was topped with sturgeon eggs, but because, in its graininess, the humble bread had the quality of the greatest luxury.

Klee's taste in food was as eclectic as the subject matter of his painting, and he approached it with the same lust. Each detail has its own individual force, and a resplendent vitality, while at the same time existing in a rich relationship with all the other details. During World War I, when food was the essence of survival, he savoured 'a bowl of sauerkraut with blood sausage – the best dinner, very appreciated' and 'a lovely dinner consisting of tea, liverwurst, herring, chocolate, bread, apple-cake, apples, no hunger'.[4] This embrace of life, the longing for truthfulness over pretension, the whole-hearted zeal with which he experienced the everyday, was part of the spirit that he would bring to the Bauhaus a few years later, and that would be so essential to the school.

Near his air-force base in Cologne, early in December 1916, Klee 'had the good luck to find a little pub where I got veal ragout with potatoes, and bread with a thick layer of liverwurst on top. I was starving like a wolf.'[5] The more the experience of food satisfied his animal instincts, the better. His preferred dishes and ingredients were at times like the beasts and other images in his art: suckling pig, roast mutton, on numerous occasions a horrible-sounding 'sour liver', which he describes as 'very good, and useful on a winter night',[6] as well as cabbage, beets, lots of bread, and the inevitable potatoes, in various forms.

Early in 1917, Klee started putting his cooking ideas into letters to Lily. His approach had the creative flair that would infuse his teaching at the Bauhaus, and called for the understanding of materials and processes, and the willingness to be adventurous and take risks, which was seminal to the school's philosophy. Klee advised his wife on how to make what sounds like a coarse hash out of leftover roast meat and *steinpilzen* (porcini mushrooms): 'Cut some fat into small pieces when raw and put them through the sausage machine. Add some onions and potatoes. Fry on low heat, and use any other leftover in the sausage maker. Put the bones into the soup.'[7] As in Klee's art, it was essential

to use everything and waste nothing, and to assemble a range of small parts authoritatively to make something whole and cohesive.

And the right food could have a direct impact on what he painted after eating it. Shortly after the armistice, when the making of art was easier than it had been for the previous four years, 'ein schön gebratenes Gockelchen' (a beautifully roasted chicken) that someone had sent to his house 'made for a nice, inspiring meal and provided me with the energy for a very colourful watercolour'.[8]

Klee first visited the Bauhaus in the autumn of 1920, the year after the school had opened in Weimar. By then, he was a well-respected painter, and Gropius was eager to have him come and teach at the new institution. Promised good studio space and a decent salary, Klee joined the faculty in Weimar in January of 1921. Once he was at the new school, he became increasingly preoccupied with what he ate. He wrote to his wife that the solution to living alone, before she and their young son Felix arrived in Weimar, was each day to make himself boiled eggs and eat them with poppyseed bread, ham and tea, and in the period before inflation became too rampant, to dine in a restaurant every evening. That strategy gave him the maximum time and energy to paint.

Then Felix arrived without Lily, and Klee employed a maid to help out. He adored her potato pancakes and instructed her on the best way to fry chops and exactly how to use a pullet to make soup. Especially when he invited Oskar Schlemmer for lunch, he wanted everything to be as good as possible, given that the ingredients could not be expensive.

Klee wrote to Lily that he needed the right foods to keep his moods in balance. He informed her that he was often famished, and that it was a struggle to keep his energy and spirits up. On one occasion, when he had been eating mainly wilted winter cabbage, he told her that at least there was enough leftover schnitzel to allow him to paint with force. He liked to throw together ingredients and cook them intuitively, making concoctions that had the right effect on him. He was proud of having prepared a true *sugo* – an Italian sauce based on tomatoes and ground meat – which was perfect with spaghetti. He prepared chicken in a heavy pot with onions and apples, and gave the canned peas that accompanied them some extra oomph by adding a homemade sauce composed essentially of butter and flour. The repasts were frugal and depended on the inventive recycling of ingredients: what had been the basis of a soup the previous evening was warmed up at lunchtime the following day, and then served cold at supper.

Above all, as in his art, Klee was obsessed with innards. He made risotto with a steamed calf's heart – drinking a glass of cooking wine as he stirred – and was pleased with tart kidneys and rice 'which behaved extremely well in a piquant wine sauce'. That description of their 'behaviour' was very much in keeping with his artistic approach, where inanimate objects were accorded personal traits. The leftover sauce from those well-behaved kidneys served Klee the next day in a minestrone with cabbage and onions. He delighted in reconstituting the same ingredients, in the way he reconfigured staircases and other recurring elements in his art. When he cooked offal, he responded with his painter's eye. Not only did the forms of hearts, kidneys, livers and lungs figure in his art, but he emulated the functions of these organs – the flow of blood and the intake of oxygen – in the processes he adopted on paper and canvas.

The most remarkable of Klee's culinary inventions was lung ragout, which he first made for a midday meal on a wintery Tuesday in January. Here he was more specific than usual about the timing, if as imprecise as always about the measurements:

> Tuesday ... a ragout of lungs spiced with blond spices. Recipe – start at ½ past 11 – boil a little water with some salt, add the whole lungs, 12 o'clock remove the lungs and slice finely on a board, 5 past 12 return the lungs to the pot. Ingredients added immediately: a chopped onion, some garlic, a strip of lemon peel, some horseradish, two carrots, butter and pepper. Ingredients at ¼ to 1: Flour dissolved in cold water, some vinegar, a lot of chopped parsley, a little nutmeg. Serve at 1 o'clock.[9]

Highly unusual, structured but playful, the two essentials of Klee's life – food and art – were of a piece, and it was important not to rule anything out as unacceptable.

When Gropius was designing the masters' houses in Dessau, Lily Klee asked for a stove fuelled by coal. Even though her husband was the principal cook, it was up to the mistress of the household to make the demand, and she knew that Klee liked to cook his stews and soups over coal. Tut Schlemmer, however, specified a gas stove. Georg Muche's wife, the Norwegian painter Erika Brandt, insisted on a new electric model. Nina Kandinsky, ever nostalgic for her native Russia, wanted only a *Kamin* – a wood-burning stove made of heavily ornamented black iron, which looked more suitable for a cosy dacha than a contemporary kitchen. For themselves, Ise and Walter Gropius opted for a streamlined stove in keeping with what was being made at the Bauhaus workshops.

The goal of the Bauhaus, of course, was to improve the experience of being human through

the design of everything in one's surroundings. Each object one touches, the clothing one wears, the buildings one enters, and, above all, the vision and enchantment of great art, alter our existence, sometimes subtly, at other moments indelibly. The intelligence, grace, and artistry of design in one's kitchen, the cooking implements, the serving objects: all could invite feelings of balance and grace, of nourishment to the soul, a sense of harmony and psychological well-being in every aspect of daily existence. On the other hand, if executed carelessly, with impracticality or what might be seen as moral corruption, a sense of imbalance and discomfort would result. Since a well-nourished person who had enjoyed his or her last meal was likely to achieve better art and design, the Mazdaznan adherents stuck to their vegetable juices and garlic, while Klee continued to eat innards. The choice was personal, but the objective was the same in both cases: to improve human life. To that end, the Bauhaus saw the acts of making, eating, and serving food not just as essential, but as sacred.

1 Alma Mahler Werfel, *And the Bridge is Love*, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, New York, 1958, p.143.
2 Paul Klee, *Briefean die Familie*, vol.2, 1907–40, trans. Oliver Pretzel, Dumont, Cologne, 1979, p.813, May 9, 1916.
3 Ibid., p.768, July 20, 1911.
4 Ibid., p.831, November 9, 1916.
5 Ibid., p.838, December 2, 1916.
6 Ibid., p.839, December 5, 1916.
7 Ibid., p.861, April 1, 1917.
8 Ibid., p. 935, August 29, 1918.
9 Ibid., p.1259, January 9, 1935.

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Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky at their masters' house, Dessau, c.1926
Centre Pompidou - MnamCci - Bibliothèque Kandinsky
Photographer unknown

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Attributed to Irene or Herbert Bayer
View of the canteen terrace, Bauhaus Dessau, c.1927 (printed later)
Gelatin silver print
25.3 × 20.4 cm
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin

164
Georg Muche
Still-life, 1923
Colour lithograph on vellum
33.6 × 23.2 cm
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin