Bauhaus Exhibition at the Fondazione Antonio Mazzotta

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Anni Albers, who was the last person alive to have taught at the Bauhaus, was besieged by requests to give the inside scoop on the innovative art school that effectively changed the look of the modern world. Until her death some three years ago, Mrs. Albers--her name choice; in perverse rebuttal to feminism, this former head of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop, married to the more famous Bauhaus Master Josef Albers, gave her profession on her passport as "housewife"--would regularly fend off reporters, makers of documentary films, and scholarly art historians. "It wasn't so ideal," she would declare in her deliberate Berlin cadences and clear soft voice like Elizabeth Bergner's. "As with all institutions, it had its nasty politics and in-fighting. And we wanted to do our own work, not always be part of the greater whole. Now Klee and Kandinsky and Schlemmer seem like

celebrities; then they were just artists trying to concentrate."

But ordinary, everyday life in both the Weimar and Dessau incarnations of the Bauhaus does indeed now seem extraordinary. Every six months or so, Paul Klee would tack up his latest watercolors on the walls of the corridor near his studio. For Klee's fiftieth birthday party, some of his acolytes decided he was too spiritual to receive his presents on the usual earthly plain and so arranged at the nearby Junkers plant for an open cockpit aircraft from which they let drop an angel stuffed with prints and metalwork and other objects they made especially for the occasion. When the newly-wed Alberses invited Mies van der Rohe and his mistress Lily Reich for dinner one night in their streamlined house designed by Walter Gropius, and Anni used the butter curler that was one of the few souvenirs of her fancy Berlin childhood, Reich sniped, "Butter balls! Here at the Bauhaus? At the Bauhaus you should have a good solid <u>block</u> of butter!" And then there were the dances where the Bauhaus band played, the costume parties where everyone dressed in metal or

black and white. Camaraderie often overshadowed the differences among these pioneers of visual reform who lived and worked together day and night.

This is the spirit that came through in the exhibition Bauhaus at the Mazzotta Foundation in Milan early this year. The range of objects assembled for this large and diverse show made clear that the Bauhaus was not in search of the pristine white perfection and sterility with which it has retrospectively become associated. The school, rather, was devoted to experimentation, imagination, and sheer fun.

Under the direction of the publisher Gabriele Mazzotta, curators Marco De Michelis and Agnes Kohlmeyer assembled some surprising gems by virtually unknown artists alongside equally revelatory rarities by the big names. Most of the work pulses with the spirit of experimentation that infused these pilgrims of modernism. The foray into new forms applied to tea cups as well as painting, to door locks as well as theatre costumes.

The Milan exhibition began with documents concerning the

creation of the school, and with art produced there in 1919, the year the Bauhaus opened. It moved to a meticulous reconstruction of the vitrines used in Weimar in 1923 to show the latest Bauhaus craft. These crisply interlocking cubes presented the original objects in such a way that the beakers and bowls seemed to have just been made.

Walking along, following the course of the Bauhaus up to its tragic demise under pressure from the Nazis in 1933, one consistently felt that most of the paintings, textiles, photographs, and pieces of furniture were fresh from the workshops. And while the lack of ornament and honesty about materials was constant, the quality level, understandably, was not. The Mazzotta presentation provided an opportunity to consider who at the Bauhaus was truly in the upper echelon artistically. To this viewer's eye, Johannes Itten was and is vastly overrated; the Milan show further proved the point that his art is preachy and hard to read. But others, like Peter Keier--hardly a household name--emerged as deserving of further

study for his bold and colorful graphics that anticipated Ellsworth Kelly's work by half a century.

Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, whose work invariably suffers in reproduction, came off as one of the freshest and most imaginative people in the history of the school, his theatre work the height of frippery. Benita Otte-Koch's textiles and course work, besides appearing to be the starting point for Marimeko, were revealed as an exquisite blend of strong and quiet. And Kurt Schmidt's marionettes suggested the spirit of playfulness that one forgets was so important at the school.

Not surprisingly, the Mazzotta Foundation gave much space to the Italian Bauhausler Alfredo Bortoluzzi. His fresh, experimental studies from Josef Albers's, Schlemmer's, and Kandinsky's courses and his portrait of Klee with a Klee-like background were delightful. Bortoluzzi, one learned, ended up teaching dance in Paris with Serge Lifar. This glimpse of his work and life made one want to see and know more.

That was also the effect of Lucia Moholy-Nagy's photographs.

Her image of Walter Gropius is one of the most gripping portraits of the century for its crisply black and white evocation of this creator of straight lines and sharp edges. Gropius cups his head in his hands; the rippling furrows of his brow and the arrangement of his fingers take on the patterns of his architecture. Lucia is one of those artists capable of making her subject's character truly come alive; Georg Muche, one of the Bauhaus form masters, looks fantastically decadent, with an other-worldly glint in his eyes. And the photographer's double portrait of Wassily and Nina Kandinsky at home in Dessau depicts the ferocity and dedication of the arch priest of abstraction with his more frivolous wife at his side.

The reconstruction in Milan of the setting for that photo, the Kandinskys' austere dining room, was meticulous. The actual painting that hung there, now owned by the Centre Pompidou, was in its proper position on the black wall behind Marcel Breuer's immaculate and rhythmic circular-topped table. It was splendid to see this material in the context of a place where people lived

and breathed their vision twenty-four hours of the day.

That Breuer had one of the most fecund minds at the Bauhaus became apparent in the Mazzotta exhibition. We would be thrilled, and not entirely surprised, to find the "mechanical person" he designed in 1923 on sale at Hamley's, complete with batteries. What a gadget it would be--like an animated, anthropomorphic composition by Rietveld.

The Bauhaus has been given a fair shake here in the center of this city of fashion and trends. It is cause for celebration. What was, about seventy-five years ago, the latest and freshest in design, was shown to have a depth and resonance, as well as a wit, lacking in most of the current minimalism and designer boutique chic. It's no surprise that over 50,000 visitors flocked in, the only shame being that they had to be subjected to the distraction of informational videos when the show would have best been seen in silence. But fortunately the Mazzotta exhibition has been preserved in a comprehensive catalogue--although this is less fortunate if one does not read Italian.[1]

1. Bauhaus, 1919-1933, da Klee a Kandinsky da Gropius a Mies van der Rohe, a cura di Marco De Michelis e Agnes Kohlmeyer, Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, Furo Bunoaparte 52, 20121 Milano, 1996. (424 pages, copiously illustrated.)