

## ☞ INTRODUCTION

### THE POLITICS OF DESIGN REFORM IN THE GERMAN *KAISERREICH* ☞

#### THE BAUHAUS AND WILHELMINE-ERA ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE

Progressive architectural currents in Weimar Germany could never have resembled those of the Wilhelmine era, any more than the Weimar Republic (1919–33) could have resembled the Wilhelmine Empire (1871–1918). The Weimar Republic, which emerged from the ashes of a shattering military defeat, existed in stark contrast to the Prusso-German *Kaiserreich*, which rose following a string of intoxicating military victories that galvanized Germans to accept forced unification at the hands of Prussia. Yet if the “great divide” of World War I separated the *Kaiserreich* from Weimar Germany, there were nonetheless important attributes of Wilhelmine politics, culture, and society that survived the war to shape the conditions of Weimar Germany, often in unexpected ways.

Walter Gropius’s Bauhaus is a classic example of an institution that, in 1919, grew out of the post-war era’s unique circumstances while remaining heir to important pre-war innovations in German art, architecture, and the applied arts. Twentieth-century Germany’s best-known educational institution for the applied arts, fine arts, and architecture, the Bauhaus continues to be celebrated, reexamined, and criticized by a seemingly uninterrupted flow of literature about the school, its founding director, and an all-star faculty comprised of such luminaries as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Johannes Itten, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Lyonel Feininger, and many others.<sup>1</sup>

The Thuringian state initially founded the “State Bauhaus in Weimar” (*Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar*) in 1919 for the purpose of reviving the crafts.<sup>2</sup> As the thirty-five-year-old Walter Gropius wrote when he sought budget approval from Thuringian state authorities in 1919, the Bauhaus would promote



1. Henry van de Velde, renovation of Grand Ducal School of Fine Arts, Weimar, 1904 and 1911 general view (altered) (Courtesy of the Fiske Kimball Fine Arts Library Image Collection, University of Virginia)

“a proliferation of the crafts and industry in the state of Weimar as a result of the re-molding of the schools in accordance with a craft-oriented, practical approach.”<sup>3</sup> An ambitious school director whom the Belgian artist Henry van de Velde had recommended as his successor, Gropius successfully combined the Weimar Academy of Art and what remained of van de Velde’s Weimar School of Applied Arts into a single institution (Figs. 1–3). The school quickly broadened its mission to promote a radical fusion of the fine arts, the decorative arts, architecture, and industrial design. The Bauhaus’s innovative introductory course, developed initially by Johannes Itten, together with the school’s production of numerous formally innovative industrial prototypes, seemed to leave many aspects of Wilhelmine applied-arts teaching and practice far behind.

From its beginning in 1919, the school met with considerable resistance from nationalist forces who saw the Bauhaus as a menace to traditional German culture. Constantly embattled, underfunded, and forced to leave the cities of Weimar, Dessau, and later Berlin, the school functioned as a kind of crucible for Germany’s avant-garde. The Bauhaus drew strength from its affiliations and affinities to such peer European movements as Russian Constructivism, Dada, Surrealism, and the Dutch De Stijl movement – precisely the influences that conservative nationalists, and later Hitler’s National Socialists, saw as such a threat to native

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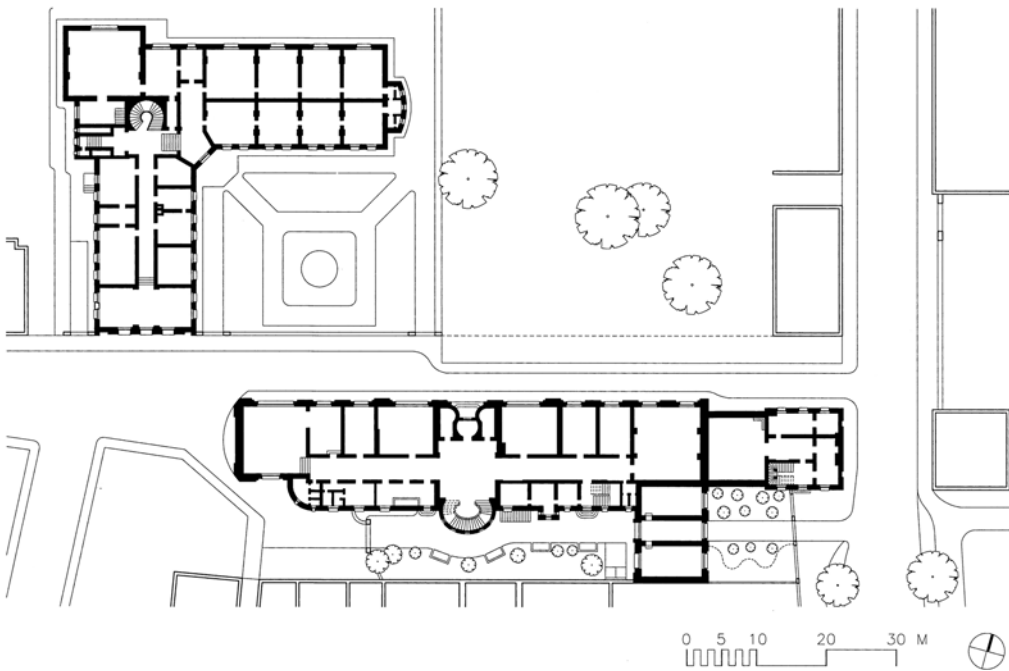
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2. Henry van de Velde, Grand Ducal School of Applied Arts, Weimar, general view (altered)  
(*Kunstgewerbeblatt* 22, N.F., 1911)



3. Site plan and building plans of Grand Ducal Schools of Fine and Applied Arts, Weimar, 1911  
(Drawing by Joe Corridore after L. Walter)

German traditions. Aided in part by exhibitions and publicity received after the emigration of Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Josef Albers, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to the United States, the Bauhaus's reputation achieved mythical status, towering over all other modern German schools of design. The dizzying number of historical reinterpretations of the Bauhaus that have accumulated since its dissolution in 1933 have, in fact, functioned as a veritable index of Western cultural trends and preoccupations ever since.<sup>4</sup>

The continuing popular and scholarly success of the Bauhaus "industry" has also done much to shape the historiography of German architecture and design prior to the First World War. The Bauhaus's dramatic historical trajectory alone was enough to confer an aura of uniqueness to the school that Gropius's tireless efforts at promotion helped reinforce.<sup>5</sup> This apparent uniqueness, however, belies important pre-war precedents that were of a foundational nature for the evolution of twentieth-century German architecture and design. For although the Bauhaus arose under the drastically altered conditions of the Weimar Republic, it was merely the best-known example among countless private and state applied-arts institutions that, for the past several decades, had been coming to grips with a powerful upsurge in German industrialization, rapid commercial development, and the growth of a sophisticated capitalist consumer culture. As much as the Bauhaus and its first director did to publicize fresh approaches to the applied arts and, later, architectural education, the school was advancing a spirit of innovation and experimentation pioneered by many Wilhelmine schools.

The southwest German kingdom of Württemberg, for example, erected a studio art building in Stuttgart in 1907 in order to attract leading artists to the state who would simultaneously teach in the Stuttgart School of Applied Arts (Fig. 4). The architect Bernhard Pankok, director of the local applied-arts school, designed a concrete and glass building as remarkable for its time as the series of changes made by the state of Württemberg to reorganize and strengthen the relationships between architecture, the applied and fine arts, and light manufacturing industries.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere, and as early as 1902, fresh approaches to the fine and applied arts could be seen at the Debschitz school in Munich, the Royal School of Art and Applied Arts in Breslau (under the architect Hans Poelzig), the Royal School of Applied Arts in Berlin (under the artist Bruno Paul), the Dusseldorf School of Applied Arts (under the artist and architect Peter Behrens), and many other schools. Not only did these schools pioneer new levels of experimental collaboration between artists, architects, and craftsmen, but they instituted one of the educational features that would become a cornerstone of Bauhaus pedagogy: the instructional workshop (Figs. 5 and 6). Originally inspired by British Arts and Crafts practitioners' principled, "hands-on" return to design training based on the practical mastery of materials and constructional principles, the instructional

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4. Bernhard Pankok, atelier building for the Württemberg Association for the Friends of Art, Stuttgart, 1907, view of north side (*Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* 20, 1907) (destroyed in World War II)

workshop lay at the heart of Germany's early-twentieth-century Applied Arts movement, or *Kunstgewerbebewegung*. Like the Bauhaus later on, this movement regarded architecture and the applied arts as inseparable.<sup>7</sup>

Instructional workshop-based applied-arts training reached particular heights during the Wilhelmine era at Hans Poelzig's Royal School of Art and Applied Arts in Breslau beginning in 1903. As the Bauhaus would do sixteen years later, Poelzig's school modified the fine-arts curriculum of an art academy and fused it with the instructional workshop program of an applied-arts school. Moreover, Poelzig's faculty taught a synthesis of the fine and applied arts in workshops geared explicitly toward architectural production (Fig. 7; see also Figs. 42–43 in Chapter 3). Indeed, Poelzig's emphasis on individual creativity and unification of the arts under the banner of architecture prompted the German architectural historian Hartmut Frank to characterize the pre-war Breslau academy as a "Bauhaus before the Bauhaus."<sup>8</sup>

Changes to the crafts in Second Empire Germany were of foundational importance to the subsequent evolution of architecture and the design fields in twentieth-century Germany. Similar to Britain, where early industrialization spurred an Arts and Crafts movement several decades earlier than Germany, the crafts' importance rested on a twin base. First, the crafts still represented a livelihood for millions.<sup>9</sup> Though threatened by rising mass production and

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5. Crefeld School of Crafts and Applied Arts, instructional workshop for lithography and print-making, 1910 (*Grundsätze der Handwerker- und Kunstgewerbeschule Crefeld*, Crefeld, 1911)



6. Crefeld School of Crafts and Applied Arts, instructional workshop for decorative painting, 1910 (*Grundsätze der Handwerker- und Kunstgewerbeschule Crefeld*, Crefeld, 1911)

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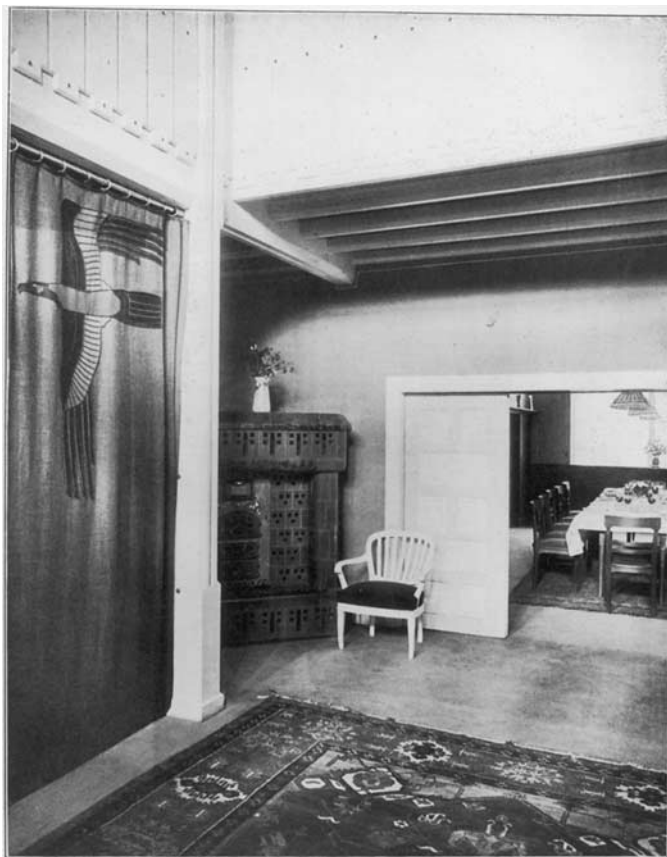
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7. Hans Poelzig with students and faculty of the Royal Art and Applied Arts School in Breslau, model home for the Breslau Applied Arts Exhibition of 1904, view of hall and dining room (Karl Masner, *Das Einfamilienhaus des Kunstgewerbevereins*, Berlin, 1905)

industrial concentration, this branch of the economy still saw the production of a huge variety of wares by individual artisans skilled in metalwork, cabinetry and furniture-making, bookbinding and leatherworking, ceramics, and other “practical” or “applied” arts (Fig. 8).<sup>10</sup> Second, the crafts represented an avenue for artistic expression and potential cultural reform – particularly among that class of highly trained artists, architects, and craftsmen who saw in the arts, crafts, and industry new ways of coming to grips with the social transformations and unsettling effects of industrial production. During the 1890s, when reform-minded applied artists began designing furnishings, room interiors, and eventually entire buildings in the form of fully integrated, harmonious “total works of art” (a *Gesamtkunstwerk*), architecture began to regain its reputation as what the nineteenth-century art critic John Ruskin had referred to as “the Mother of all the Arts.” This provided many Wilhelmine architects and artists with another reason to regard crafts reform and architectural reform as virtually inseparable.

## 8 Before the Bauhaus

**THE ART EDUCATION MOVEMENT, THE WERKBUND, AND WILHELMINE GERMAN REGIONALISM**

All of Germany's important pre-war developments in the applied arts, in turn, evolved out of a particular matrix of Wilhelmine historical conditions – circumstances that enabled twentieth-century artists, architects, and applied artists to take on new roles in modern German society in the first place. On one hand, Wilhelmine imperial and state institutions pursued expansive commercial, industrial, and export policies consonant with larger German ambitions to compete with the world's leading imperial and economic powers on an equal footing. On the other hand, and riding a wave of economic expansion that began in the mid-1890s, artists, architects, and applied artists identified emerging areas of industrial growth, commercial expansion, and private consumption as legitimate domains of cultural production. In a development symbolic of the Wilhelmine era's remarkable economic growth and attendant opportunities for cultural experimentation, many of the most celebrated architects active in Germany between the late 1890s and 1918 – Peter Behrens, Richard Riemerschmid, Bruno Paul, August Endell, and the Belgian Henry van de Velde among them – were professional painters who gravitated to the applied arts and architecture without ever having received even one semester of formal architectural education.

Among educated, artistically inclined turn-of-the-century Germans, the Wilhelmine artist, broadly conceived, would “spiritualize,” “harmonize,” and otherwise help overcome the adverse effects of industrialization, urbanization, and mass production through constant but varying invocations of German *Kultur*.<sup>11</sup> The Deutscher Werkbund, the design association dedicated since its creation in 1907 to harmonizing German culture and spiritualizing German work, became the epicenter of artists' efforts to recast German products, and indeed all manifestations of German growth, as symbols of a renewed twentieth-century German culture. Whether in factory architecture, domestic appliances and furnishings, luxury ocean liners and naval officers' quarters, or commercial advertising, Werkbund artists strove to become the lead organizers of a “tasteful,” accomplished, and economically competitive German output. The architect Fritz Schumacher stated the Werkbund's ambitions clearly in his keynote address at the organization's founding meeting in Munich in 1907: “It is high time that Germany learned to comprehend the artist no longer as someone who pursues his dilettantish interests (*Liebbaberei*) more or less harmlessly, but as someone in whom there resides one of the most powerful forces for the ennoblement of German production. And through the ennoblement of this production, [the artist] ennoble the whole inner life of the nation, which in turn will enable this nation to be victorious in the competition of the peoples.”<sup>12</sup>

Earlier developments in Wilhelmine artistic attitudes underpinned this ambitious mobilization of artists for the improvement of German production. Among the most important of these was the wide-ranging, diffuse, but powerful



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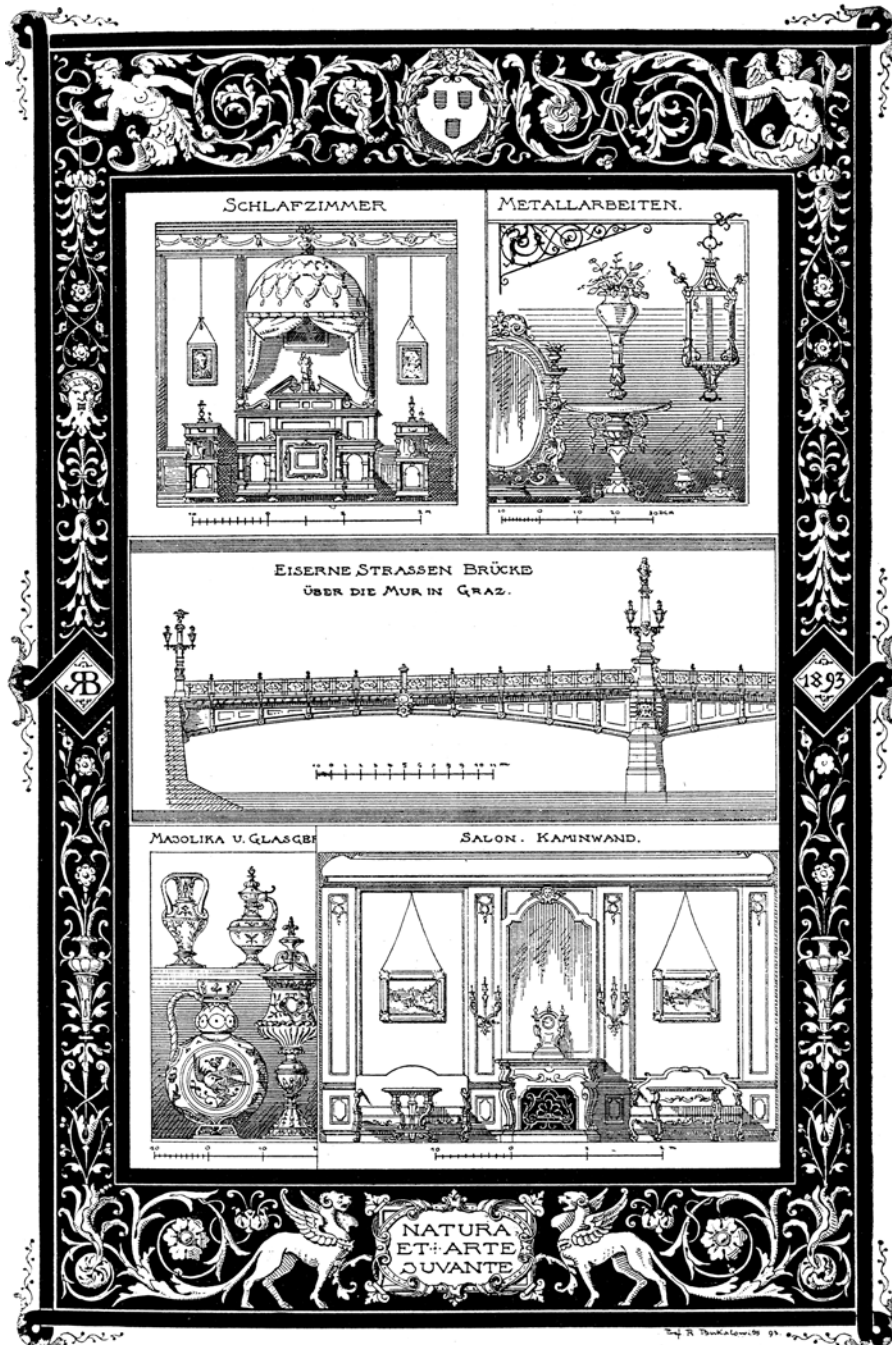
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8. Rudolf Bakalowits, catalog entry in *German Applied-Arts Draftsmen*, 1893 (*Deutsche Kunstgewerbe-Zeichner: Ein Adressbuch Deutscher Künstler die sich mit Entwerfen kunstgewerblicher Gegenstände befassen*, Leipzig, 1893)

10      **Before the Bauhaus**

Movement for Artistic Education (*Kunsterziehungsbewegung*), propagated during the 1890s by such cultural critics as Julius Langbehn, Ferdinand Avenarius, and Alfred Lichtwark. Each in their own way, these writers sought to influence German attitudes toward mass production, the proliferation of consumer goods, and home furnishings and decoration. Adherents of the Art Education movement located the source for united Germany's cultural redemption in the arts, which were seen as an antidote to a nineteenth century dominated by the development of science, instrumental reason, industrialization, and commercialization.<sup>13</sup>

Accomplished journalists and celebrated art critics such as Ferdinand Avenarius, Julius Meier-Graefe, and Alexander Koch led the movement in their respective journals *Kunstwart*, *Dekorative Kunst*, and *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*. Joined by Alfred Lichtwark, director of the Hamburg Museum of Art; Ludwig Pallat, an educational reformer in the Prussian Ministry of Culture; Peter Jessen of the Arts and Crafts Museum in Berlin; the Prussian architect and civil servant Hermann Muthesius; the Saxon artist and architect Paul Schultze-Naumburg; and the wealthy art patron and reformer Karl Ernst Osthaus, the various members of the Art Education movement embarked on an aggressive campaign to educate public taste in the fine arts and applied arts. By the early 1900s, the movement grew well beyond the readership of the new artistic journals to include museums such as the Museum of Art in Hamburg, the Folkwang Museum operated by Osthaus in Hagen, and various local schools of applied arts.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly successful authors such as Konrad Lange and Julius Langbehn adapted the theme of artistic education in programs to renew German culture and reground German "character" amid the widespread upheavals of German industrial expansion.<sup>15</sup> Langbehn exemplified the Art Education movement's sinister side: his immensely popular *Rembrandt as Educator* (*Rembrandt als Erzieher*) of 1890 sparked a reemergence of Volkish ideology in which adherents identified with their "Germanness" through an array of irrationalist notions. Among these were a belief in the importance of German blood, German soil, and racial purity as sources of national identity, which combined with antirationalism, antiurbanism, and an emphasis on aesthetic politics (*Kunstpolitik*) as an agent for the restoration of a collective, mystical German soul.<sup>16</sup> If Langbehn's calls for German racial purification and leadership by an "invisible emperor" foreshadowed the darkest mutations of Nazism's technologized Volkish thought in the second quarter of the twentieth century, then the nature-loving turn-of-the-century "Wandering Bird Group" (*Wandervogelgruppe*), along with the original, utopian incarnation of the German Garden City Society, represented a more hopeful, positive, opposite Volkish extreme.<sup>17</sup>

A similar diversity characterized Wilhelmine Germany's cultural and political geography. The Swiss architect Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (known as "Le Corbusier" after 1920), an avid student of Germany's applied-arts movement before the First World War, noted aptly in 1912 that the Wilhelmine Empire could