

Photography at the Bauhaus – experiment and pedagogical discipline

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Abstract: *Bauhaus represented an innovative convergence between different artistic disciplines, emphasizing the integration of art and design into the emerging industrial context. This artistic synthesis had a profound impact on the way photography was perceived and used, transforming it from a simple documentation tool into a medium of creative expression that influenced various fields, including architecture, graphic design, and the visual arts. Under this structure, Bauhaus students and teachers explored not only the technical aspects of photography, but also its didactic function, thus promoting an interdisciplinary approach that combined theory and practice. Photography became a means by which abstract concepts were translated into concrete images, facilitating the effective communication of the innovative ideas that characterized the Bauhaus movement. Thus, with the help of photographic tools, a dynamic interaction between aesthetics and functionality was achieved.*

Keywords: *Bauhaus; Photography; study of photography; Neues Sehen; Walter Peterhans; László Moholy-Nagy; Lucia Moholy;*

Introduction

In the fires of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, a tumultuous era from a social, political and cultural point of view, the Bauhaus movement represented an innovative response to the social and cultural challenges of the time, sharing progressive visions of artistic education. By promoting a unity between applied and fine arts, the Bauhaus redefined the link between aesthetics and functionality, having a significant impact on various disciplines, including photography².

Among the fundamental principles of the school, there is the experimentation and integration of various artistic environments, which has led to a unique interdisciplinary approach. Thus, it is stated that „the Bauhaus movement achieved a revolution in art education, promoting the unity between art and functionality and challenging traditional distinctions between applied arts and fine arts”³. This vision had lasting effects, influencing not only the design, but also the way photography was perceived and used in the contemporary artistic context.

The Bauhaus functioned between 1919 and 1933, in three stages: Weimar, Dessau and Berlin, under the leadership of Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The school's program aimed to unite the arts with craft and technology, and the direction towards industrialization and functional design created the framework in which photography became a practical and theoretical tool for designing a new modern vision.

Photography at the Bauhaus was not initially a formal part of the curriculum, yet it became one of the school's most influential and enduring contributions to modernism. From the school's

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² Walter Gropius Herbert Bayer, Ise Gropius, and Herbert Bayer. 1976. *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, Museum of Modern Art. p.156.

³ Z. Zhang. 2024, October. „The Evolution of Photography in Graphic Design”. *Des. Insights*, vol. 1, no. 7, pp. 15–20, doi: 10.70088/dwpv9y91.

founding in 1919 in Weimar to its closure in Berlin in 1933, photography transitioned from a support service for documenting and publicity into a theorized design discipline. This article endeavours to explore the dual nature of Bauhaus photography: its role in documenting the school's revolutionary designs and its status as a site of radical experimental innovation. The trajectory of the medium at the school reflects broader shifts in 20th-century art, moving from the expressive and documentary to the experimental and, finally, to the sober objectivity of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

1. The role of Photography at the Bauhaus

Photography played an essential role in defining the image and the visual discourse of the Bauhaus, becoming not only a means of documentation, but also a laboratory for aesthetic experimentation. Through new techniques, unconventional compositions, and a theoretical attitude that legitimized photography as an autonomous medium, Bauhaus-related practitioners made a decisive contribution to what was called the „Neues Sehen“⁴ or New Vision, influencing modern photography and visual communication in the twentieth century.

Neues Sehen promoted ideas such as - unexpected angles (up/down), tight framing and abstract details, play of light and shadow, photograms and photomontage, as well as the integration of photography with typography and graphic design. The goal was to transform the "camera" into a second eye, capable of revealing structures and rhythms of the modern world inaccessible to the ordinary eye. This approach was theoretically and practically supported by Bauhaus paintings and international exhibitions such as Film und Foto (1929), which consolidated New Vision as a major direction between the two wars.⁵

The between war period was marked by a series of radical transformations in the artistic and cultural sphere in Germany, and the Bauhaus school played a central role in this metamorphosis. With an interdisciplinary approach that integrated visual arts, architecture, and design, the Bauhaus rethought not only artistic techniques, but also everyday objects, aiming at functionalism and utilitarianism.

Through an innovative synthesis between art and practical utility, the Bauhaus reconfigured the perception of photography, transforming it into a relevant tool for art education and modern design. Within this school, photography has overcome traditional limitations, being used not only for documentation, but also as a way of experimenting with forms and spaces, thus practicing an interaction between subject and observer. This interdisciplinary approach has generated a new form of visual communication, in which photography has become an integral part of the creative process. Photography became an essential language at the Bauhaus, combining art with practicality and opening up new horizons of visual communication. Photography became an essential language at the Bauhaus, combining art with practicality and opening new horizons of visual communication.

Analysing the contributions of this art form, it can be seen how the Bauhaus profoundly influenced not only aesthetics but also artistic pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of sensory experience in contemporary design, as evidenced in recent research on ecological perception and psychogeography.

In the early years of the Bauhaus, photography functioned primarily as a documentary and promotional tool. Its main purpose was to record the school's buildings, workshop products, and

⁴ The Neues Sehen, also known as New Vision or Neue Optik, was a movement, not specifically restricted to photography, which was developed in the 1920s. The movement was directly related to the principles of the Bauhaus.

⁵ *New Vision Photography* - The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved May 20th, 2026, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-new-vision-of-photography>.

daily life to provide material for publications and exhibitions. During this period, the school lacked a dedicated photography department, and the medium was used pragmatically to build the institution's public image.

The most significant figure in this early documentary phase was Lucia Moholy⁶. Although she was not a student or a formal faculty member, her work as a photographer was central to the construction of the Bauhaus legacy⁷. Moholy produced a vast archive of negatives documenting the school's architecture in Dessau, as well as products from the various workshops. Her photographs were characterized by a clear, precise style that emphasized the functional and formal qualities of the objects and buildings she captured.

Within the innovative approaches promoted by the Bauhaus, photography has been integrated not only as an artistic tool, but also as a fundamental element in the pedagogical development of students. This institution emphasized the intersection of art and technology, placing particular emphasis on photography's ability to reflect both social realities and abstract concepts, facilitating active learning.

At the Bauhaus, art education and the didactic approach were integrated into an interdisciplinary model that profoundly influenced the development of photography as a form of artistic expression. This institution aimed to unite art, craft and technology, thus promoting a holistic vision of art education that reflected the economic and social realities of the time.

Thus, students were encouraged to experiment with various mediums, and photography became an essential tool in exploring new visual concepts. The didactic role of photography at the Bauhaus was essential not only for the formation of technical skills, but also for the development of critical thinking in relation to contemporary art and design. However, it is important to note that this approach was not limited to technique; It also included an exploration of the cultural context and influences from various artistic fields. For example, the evolution of photography in graphic design is linked to the revolutionary ideas promoted by the Bauhaus, which emphasized the synthesis between art and functionality, contributing to a deeper understanding of visual communication.⁸⁹

1.2. The role of Photography at the Bauhaus, Walter Peterhans and the Photography Department

The Bauhaus, founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius, is renowned for its revolutionary approach to art, design, and education. Among its many innovations was the formal integration of photography into its curriculum, a development closely associated with Walter Peterhans. Its curriculum evolved through several phases under different directors—Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe—each contributing to its unique blend of artistic experimentation and practical training. While early Bauhaus years focused on crafts like weaving and metalwork, photography gained prominence later as both a medium of artistic expression and a tool for documentation. Photography at the Bauhaus initially reflected the experimental spirit of figures like László Moholy-Nagy, who pioneered photograms and photomontage techniques¹⁰.

⁶ Lucia Moholy (born Schulz; 1894 — 1989) was a photographer and publications editor. Her photos documented the architecture and products of the Bauhaus and introduced their ideas to a post-World War II audience.

⁷ Robin Schuldenfrei, "Images in Exile: Lucia Moholy's Bauhaus Negatives and the Construction of the Bauhaus Legacy". *History of Photography*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 182–203, 2013. DOI: 10.1080/03087298.2013.769773

⁸ Zhaorui Zhang. 2024, October. „The Evolution of Photography in Graphic Design”. *Des. Insights*, vol. 1, no. 7, pp. 15–20, doi: 10.70088/dwpv9y91.

⁹ Oleksandr Zeleniuk. 2023. "The Influence of Bauhaus Aesthetics and Ideology on the Formation of Contemporary Artistic and Design Culture". *Pomiędzy Polonistyczno-Ukrainoznawcze Studia Naukowe* 8(1):63-69. DOI:10.15804/PPUSI.2023

¹⁰ Walter Gropius Herbert Bayer, Ise Gropius, and Herbert Bayer. 1976. *Bauhaus 1919-1928*. Museum of Modern Art. p. 156.

However, it was with the appointment of Walter Peterhans in 1929 that photography became an independent workshop within the school.¹¹ Peterhans's arrival marked a shift toward a more systematic and theoretical approach to photographic education. „Photography was originally conceived as a subsection of the advertising workshop, since photographs were now becoming automatic components of every advertisement. But since photography teacher Walter Peterhans was uninterested in supplying *tools* for the typographic department, no cooperation between him and Joost Schmidt took place. Peterhans concentrated above all on teaching his students the principles of taking technically perfect photographs”¹².

Walter Peterhans brought a rigorous intellectual framework to photography at the Bauhaus. His teaching emphasized „Seherschulung” (visual training), aiming to cultivate students' perceptual acuity and aesthetic judgment. The curriculum under Peterhans was designed not merely to teach technical skills but to foster an understanding of proportion, form, light, texture, and compositional qualities essential for both artistic creation and design practice.¹³ „While Moholy-Nagy's interpretation of photography fascinated countless artists and scientists and inspired many amateurs, Peterhans's photography has only recently attracted response. The majority of his photographs are still lifes in the tradition of trompe-l'oeil painting”¹⁴.

Peterhans's pedagogy prioritized observation over imitation. Students were encouraged to analyze objects meticulously before photographing them, often producing technically precise still lifes that revealed underlying structures and relationships¹⁵. This method aligned with broader Bauhaus principles that sought to bridge art and science through disciplined experimentation.

„A distorted self-portrait, or a shot that exploits the angles of the Dessau building. The photography with which the Bauhaus is most closely associated is the experimental *Neues Sehen* of photography. But when it finally became part of the Bauhaus syllabus, the master, Walter Peterhans, taught and practiced exactly the opposite of this: offering precisely arranged still-lifes that celebrated technical mastery”¹⁶.

Walter Peterhans played a pivotal role in establishing photography as an academic discipline at the Bauhaus. His commitment to visual training shaped generations of artists and designers by emphasizing observation, analysis, and aesthetic judgment. The legacy of his pedagogy endures not only through his students but also through ongoing curricular innovations inspired by his approach.

Walter Peterhans' teaching techniques have profoundly influenced contemporary art and photography education, being recognized for promoting a critical understanding of the image and its role in society. The impact of these techniques can be seen in the way students are taught to explore their creativity through photography, addressing complex themes and experimenting with different styles, but also in their ability to convey emotions and visual stories. Photography, as an expressive tool, has become an essential medium of artistic communication.

¹¹ Charitonidou, Marianna. 2019. „Bauhäusler in Chicago: László Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe and the 'Re-invention' of Teaching Models”. *Initiations: Practices of Teaching 1st Year Design in Architecture*, pp. 310–322.

¹² Magdalena Droste. 2022. *Bauhaus, bauhaus-archiv Berlin*. Berlin: Museum für Gestaltung, p. 478.

¹³ „*Bauhaus Photography*”. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

¹⁴ Charitonidou, Marianna, *op. cit.*, p. 480.

¹⁵ Walter Gropius Herbert Bayer, Ise Gropius, and Herbert Bayer. 1976. *Bauhaus 1919-1928*, Museum of Modern Art. p. 156.

¹⁶ Frances Ambler. 2018. *The Story of the Bauhaus*. London: Octopus Publishing Ltd London, p. 147.

2. Artists and Pedagogues that taught photography at Bauhaus

2.1 Lucia Moholy Nagy

As previously noted, Lucia Moholy's photography was indispensable for documenting the school's architectural and product output. This relationship was symbiotic; the clean lines and functional forms of Bauhaus architecture were perfectly suited to the precise, objective style of her photography. „Lucia's publishing knowledge made the Bauhaus books happen. Not only did her images illustrate their pages, but she also helped to shape their texts”.¹⁷ This documentary practice extended to the products of the metal workshop, where photographs captured the reflective surfaces and geometric simplicity of modern design.

Lucia Moholy documented the architecture, workshops and life at the Bauhaus through eloquent photographs fig.1, which built the public image of the school. Many of the iconic images of the Dessau building and workshop activities belong to her, although her recognition has long been diminished by disputes over the rights of negatives and erroneous attributions. Her work illustrates both the „Neues Sehen” and the experimental nature of the era.



Fig.1. *Bauhaus Interior*, Lucia Moholy Nagy, accessed may 22nd 2026 from:
<https://www.documentjournal.com/2019/11/lucia-moholy-the-photographer-who-immortalized-the-bauhaus-finally-gets-her-due/>

¹⁷ Frances Ambler. 2018. *The Story of the Bauhaus*. London: Octopus Publishing Ltd, p. 87.

2.2 László Moholy-Nagy

László Moholy-Nagy¹⁸ was one of the most influential theorists and practitioners of New Vision; he promoted the photogram, the experiment with surfaces, and the combination of photography with film and design. His pedagogical vision encouraged technological exploration and industrial aesthetics¹⁹.

The inclusion of photography into the Bauhaus curriculum was strongly influenced by the figure of László Moholy-Nagy, who proposed a revolutionary vision of photographic practice, stating that photography should not reproduce the existing world, but create new visual realities (Fih.2) through his innovative technique, László Moholy-Nagy revolutionized photographic practice, promoting the idea that photography should not reproduce the existing world, but to create new visual realities through his innovative technique. „The photographer is a manipulator of light; photography is manipulation of light. If in photography the main point was not the changing play of light, until now hardly graspable by other means, but simply the question of the projection of objects in their formal appearance, we should then have to regard as good every flat, poorly lit and gray picture in which one could still recognize an object. However, nobody who has any understanding of photography would take such a view today.”²⁰ Thus, photography became an experimental medium, capable of reflecting and influencing contemporary cultural developments. These artistic practices were often linked to avant-garde movements, integrating concepts such as functionalism and visual communication, which were essential in the development of modern art. The analysis of this context has been extensively discussed in the specialized articles, which emphasize the impact of the Bauhaus on contemporary design and its relevance in artistic culture.



Fig.2. László Moholy-Nagy, *Portrait Lucia Moholy*, no date. Retrieved may 22nd 2026, from <http://flieschool.com/photographer/l%C3%A1szl%C3%B3-moholy-nagy>

¹⁸ László Moholy-Nagy (born László Weisz; 1895 –1946) painter and photographer as well as a professor at the Bauhaus school. He was highly influenced by constructivism and a strong advocate of the integration of technology and industry into the arts.

¹⁹ *Bauhaus and Photography. Neues Sehen in Contemporary Art*. Retrieved May 20th, 2026, from <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/bauhaus-and-photography/>

²⁰ *Bauhaus Photography*. 1986. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 1986, p. 126.

„Photography when used as a **representational art** is not a mere copy of nature. This is proved by the rarity of the “good” photograph. Only now and then does one find really “good” photographs among the millions which appear in illustrated papers and books. What is remarkable in this end at the same time serves as a proof is that (after a fairly long visual culture) we always infallibly and with sure instinct discover the “good” photos, quite apart from the novelty or unfamiliarity of the thematic content”²¹ - László Moholy-Nagy.

2.3 Erich Consemüller

Erich Consemüller²² was an iconic figure in German photography, making a significant impact on the Bauhaus movement through his innovative and critical approaches to the image. His works not only captured reality, but also challenged visual perception, playing an essential role in transposing the Bauhaus philosophy, which combined art with functional design.

Erich Consemüller's photographic style is distinguished by an innovative approach that transcends the simple documentation of reality, while exploring the complexity of visual perception. His works highlight a synthesis between technique and artistic vision, reflecting a deep understanding of the photographic subject fig.3. Consemüller often uses ingenious compositions to capture not only the image, but also the emotion and atmosphere of the context in which it is placed.

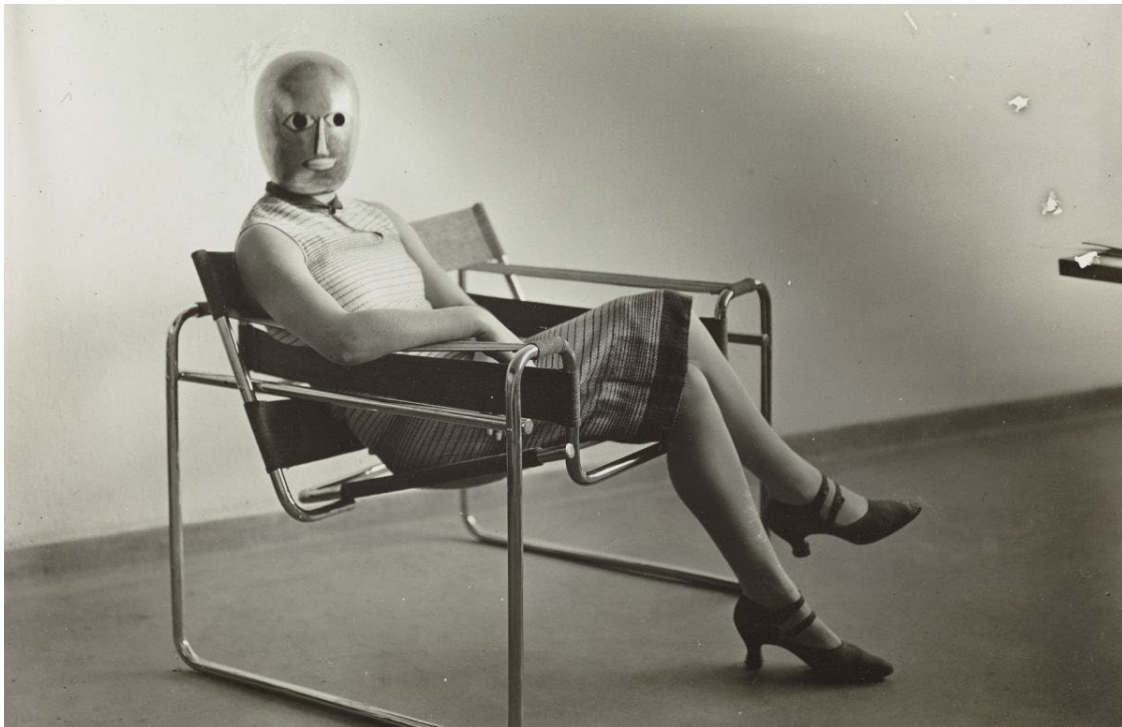


Fig.3. Lis Beyer in a Wassili chair by Erich Consemüller wearing a theatre mask by Bauhaus teacher Oscar Schlemmer. Retrieved may 21st 2026 from: <https://flashbak.com/photographs-of-bauhaus-in-the-1920s-426159/>

²¹ „Painting, Photography and Film”. 1969. Translation of *Malerei, Fotografie und Film* which originally appeared as Volume 8 in the Bauhausbücher series in 1925. Lund Humphries, p. 33.

²² Erich Consemüller (1902–1957) was a German photographer and architect who studied and taught at Bauhaus art school. He worked alongside the photographer Lucia Moholy documenting life at the Bauhaus.

Reflecting on Erich Consemüller's contribution to Bauhaus visual documentation, it is essential to recognize the profound impact of photography as a tool for artistic understanding and representation. Consemüller used photography not only to capture the aesthetic elements of the Bauhaus movement, but also to promote innovative ideas about design and functionality. As part of a larger visual landscape, his photography blends science and art, providing a clear perspective on how these disciplines interact.

3. Conclusions

Within the innovative approaches promoted by the Bauhaus, photography has been integrated not only as an artistic tool, but also as a fundamental element in the pedagogical development of students. This institution emphasized the intersection of art and technology, placing particular emphasis on photography's ability to reflect both social realities and abstract concepts, facilitating active learning.

Photography has been perceived as an essential tool for exploring and integrating various artistic disciplines, such as architecture, painting, and design. This synergy promoted an interdisciplinary approach that enriched both the creative process and artistic education. For example, by experimenting with perspectives and compositions, photographers were able to influence the way architects and designers viewed spaces and objects, creating coherent and innovative visual communication.

Photography at the Bauhaus was a dynamic and evolving field that mirrored the school's broader commitment to modernism and experimentation. From the early documentary work of Lucia Moholy to the radical innovations of László Moholy-Nagy and the technical precision of Walter Peterhans, the medium served as both a record of the school's output and a site for redefining human perception. By integrating photography with architecture, typography, and industrial design, the Bauhaus created a holistic visual culture that remains foundational to modern graphic design and visual communication. The transition from the „New Vision” to „New Objectivity” reflects the ongoing tension between experimental art and functional design, a dialogue that continues to inform the practice of photography today.

The concepts promoted by the Bauhaus profoundly shaped not only visual aesthetics, but also the didactic approach to art and photography, influencing students and subsequent generations of artists. This school encouraged an integration between the different artistic disciplines, stimulating an interprofessional exploration that allowed young creators to develop innovative visions.

At a time when teaching methodologies and photography-focused workshops were constantly evolving, the Bauhaus proved to be a true pioneer in integrating these teaching techniques. His interdisciplinary approach not only encouraged artistic experimentation but also emphasized the importance of the cultural context in which photography was used.

Photography at the Bauhaus was not just a documentation tool, but a means of aesthetic and theoretical innovation. Through *New Vision*, through the works and teaching of figures such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Lucia Moholy and Walter Peterhans, photography became a constitutive part of the modernist project: a tool to see, communicate and produce forms appropriate to a changing industrial world. The reception and re-evaluation of individual contributions continue to offer new insights into how the photographic image shaped the visual memory of the twentieth century.

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