

# The Changing Ideals of ‘Individual Creativity & Traits in Bauhaus’ Preliminary Course: Tracing the History of ‘Vorkurs’

## Bauhaus'un Tasarıma Giriş Dersinde Değişen 'Bireysel Yaratıcılık ve Becerilere' Dair İdealler: 'Vorkurs' Tarihinin İzini Sürmek

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### ABSTRACT

The Bauhaus school, founded in the early 20th century by Walter Gropius, became a leading institution for art, design, and architectural education. Gropius' vision emphasized abolishing the distinctions between different branches of art & design, and between artists & craftsmen. This holistic approach was encapsulated also in the school's curriculum, which sought to integrate arts, crafts, and industry. Central to Bauhaus education was the Preliminary Course (Vorkurs), which was compulsory for all students regardless of their discipline. This course laid the foundation for further education and was known for its inclusivity and the influence of several unconventional and innovative masters, including Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy, and Josef Albers. Each of these instructors brought distinct teaching methods and philosophies, contributing to the dynamic and evolving nature of the course. Vorkurs underwent significant changes throughout Bauhaus's 14-year history, reflecting the varying pedagogical approaches of its masters and the political and social changes of the era. As a result, the course cannot be seen as a static entity but rather as a series of diverse and sometimes inconsistent pedagogical experiments. This article examines the transformations and inconsistencies of Vorkurs by comparing the approaches of Itten, Moholy-Nagy, and Albers. It argues that the course should not be understood as a single, cohesive course but rather as a reflection of the diverse and evolving educational philosophies of its instructors. By focusing on these differences, the article aims to discuss the changing definitions and ideals of individual creativity and traits, which still are major topics of discussion within contemporary design education.

**Keywords:** Bauhaus, Vorkurs, Design Education, Individual Creativity, Design Traits.

### ÖZ

Walter Gropius tarafından 20.yy'ın başlarında kurulan Bauhaus okulu, sanat, tasarım ve mimarlık eğitiminde öncü bir kurumdur. Gropius'un vizyonu, sanat ve tasarımın farklı dalları ile sanatçılar ve zanaatkarlar arasındaki ayrımları ortadan kaldırmayı amaçlamaktaydı. Bu bütüncül yaklaşım, sanatlar, zanaatlar ve endüstriyi entegre etmeyi amaçlayan okulun müfredatında da somutlaşmıştı. Bauhaus eğitiminin merkezinde, disiplinden bağımsız olarak tüm öğrenciler için zorunlu olan Tasarıma Hazırlık (Vorkurs) yer almaktaydı. Bauhaus'daki eğitimin temelini oluşturan bu ders, kapsayıcılığı ve barındırdığı pek çok alışılmadık ve yenilikçi eğitim yaklaşımları sayesinde tanınıyordu. Bauhaus tarihinde öğretmenlerin her birinin, dersin dinamik doğasına katkıda bulunduğu ve geliştirdikleri farklı öğretim yöntemleri ve felsefeleri ile zengin bir ortamın kurulmasına katkı sağladıkları bir gerçektir. Vorkurs, tarihi boyunca önemli kırılmalar yaşamış ve bu, öğretmenlerinin değişen pedagojik yaklaşımlarını ve dönemin politik ve sosyal değişimlerini yansıtmıştır. Buradan hareketle, bu ders tekil bir yaklaşımın ürünü olarak değil, çeşitli ve bazen tutarsız pedagojik deneyler serisi olarak tartışılması gereken bir olgudur. Makale, Itten, Moholy-Nagy ve Albers'in yaklaşımlarını karşılaştırarak Vorkurs'un geçirdiği dönüşümleri ve kendi içindeki tutarsızlıklarını inceleme altına almayı hedeflerken, Vorkurs'u tutarlı bir tanım üzerinden incelemenin imkansızlığını vurgular. Tasarıma hazırlık dersi olarak gelişen dersin, sabit bir tutarlılığın aksine öğretmenlerinin çeşitli ve gelişen eğitim felsefelerinin bir yansıması olarak sürekli değişen yapısı üzerinden değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini savunur. Bu farklılıklara odaklanarak, bireysel yaratıcılık ve tasarım becerilerinin değişen tanımlarını ve ideallerini tartışmayı amaçlar; ki bu, çağdaş tasarım eğitimi için de hala önemli tartışma konularından biridir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bauhaus, Vorkurs, Tasarım Eğitimi, Yaratıcılık, Tasarım Becerileri.

## Introduction

One reason for this can be argued as the impact of the highly effective auras of each master on the course and the way of teaching, as well as the political turmoil between the two world wars. Consequently, the article will try to argue that all discussions subjecting the *Vorkurs* / Preliminary Course cannot be achieved from a single standing point but rather should be discussed regarding its multiplicity and within its inconsistencies. So, it is difficult to present the course as an outcome of a single approach to design as it can only be discussed within the framework of various masters' own internal dynamics as reflected on their periods. Therefore, the article will argue the impossibility of referring to the *Vorkurs* as a single entity in order to re-problematize and open up this relationship for further discussion. By focusing more on the differences rather than similarities between the different periods of the *Vorkurs* applied at Bauhaus, the paper will attempt to understand the various phases of this course during the history of Bauhaus and the factors influencing the course's structure. Parallel to the above-mentioned discussion, it will further elaborate on the ever-changing and transforming character of the phenomenon of 'individual creativity', and 'design traits', both of which always were fundamental subjects in the pedagogical approach of the school, in the light of very different ideals and approaches of different masters. Re-evaluating Bauhaus school, beyond the assumption that it represents a holistic or single pedagogy, that is not entirely realistic, can offer the possibilities for producing a new discourse based on its diversities and new perspectives of how personal creativity can be discussed within design education today.

## Material and Methods

There are many academic studies and research on Bauhaus education, therefore this article will try to avoid repeating the well-known discussions about the pedagogical approach of the school, but rather will try to discuss the position of the 'Preliminary Course' (*Vorkurs*) within the Bauhaus education and the transformations, inconsistencies that can be observed within the history of the school. For this purpose, in this study, the changes in the pedagogical approaches of Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers, who left their mark on the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* course, will be examined in the light of the changes in the era and geography of the school. In this aim, the discussion will try to introduce a comparative reading to the work produced under the studio of each master, while providing a literature review on each master's individual publications that include both their pedagogical insights as well as the visual outcomes from their courses. The evaluation of all the material from the studio productions of the masters' within the scope of this article is, of course, beyond the scope of the article. However, the materials and visuals selected for the discussion aim to initiate a ground for comparative readings. For this reason, the visuals in this article, selected for each master's studio, have been chosen with the aim of making a distinct contribution to the discussion of individual creativity and how this notion was adopted by each master differently.

While this discussion methodology aims to bring up a topic that has not been discussed much before, it also aims to reveal the differentiation of individual creativity and design skills, which are important components of design education both in Bauhaus and even today, in the light of different pedagogical approaches.

## Foundation of *Vorkurs* within the Bauhaus

Looking at the history of the Bauhaus school, it should be noted that not only the *Vorkurs* but also the school's general pedagogical history has gone through different periods, mostly influenced by the changes in its directors and location. Founded in Weimar in 1919, the first and the longest director of the school was Walter Gropius, till 1928. The school moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1925, where it stayed for 8 years in the building, which is mostly associated with the name of the school and institution. Gropius resigned from directing the school three years after it has moved to Dessau, in 1928. Hannes Meyer was the director of the school in between the years 1928-1930. And finally, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe has directed the school till its closure by Nazis in 1933 (URL 1) (Figure 1). Just before its closure the school moved again to Berlin in 1932, where it remained open hardly for a year. Although it is difficult to argue that both changes in the directors and locations of the school have a direct impact on the changing nature of the *Vorkurs*, it can be argued that the masters who run the course inevitably affected by the relations with the directors as well as the political turmoil of the country.

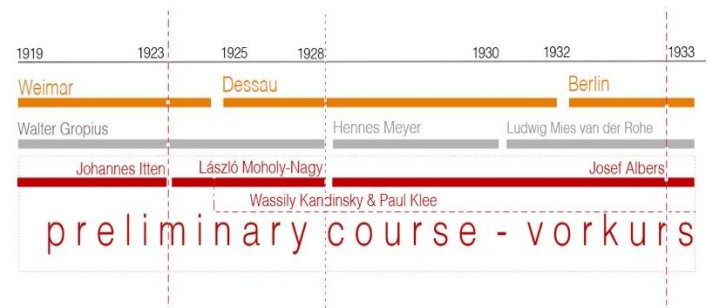


Figure 1. The diagram showing the history of Bauhaus in relation to the changing masters of *Vorkurs* (produced by the author)

The changes in the pedagogical priorities of the *Vorkurs*, on the other hand, can be analyzed parallel to the changes in the masters who run the course. *Vorkurs*, can be summarized in reference to various literature as a course where experimental educational methods are applied, and students explore different material usages and design principles (Whitford, 1984; Forgács, 2017; Naylor, 1985; Droste, 2006; Dearstyne, 1986). Even though all the masters have great influence on the nature of the course, it is well-known that the initial foundation of the course coinciding with the establishment of Bauhaus was laid by the Swedish painter Johannes Itten in 1919, and the content of the course was shaped around Itten's pedagogical ideals during his four-year leadership (Aközer, 2019). Less known is that the course emerged more as a solution to a fundamental problem related to student admissions to the school rather than educational content. In essence, it was developed as a method to accept students from diverse educational backgrounds into Bauhaus without limiting the diversity of student profiles. Itten, in his book where he explains the reason and content of *Vorkurs*, emphasizes that the course was designed as a tool to facilitate the acceptance of students with different characters and educational histories into Bauhaus. (Itten, 1963, p.7) Thus, even an interest in art could be considered a sufficient criterion for applying to Bauhaus, without the need for a special talent or educational background. Therefore, *Vorkurs* can be regarded as a fundamental gateway for students aged between 16 and 40, possessing diverse talents and skills, to converge at Bauhaus (Forgács, 2017, p.74).

To interpret the evolution of the *Vorkurs*' content and principles solely as the outcome of the various instructors' differing approaches would be an oversimplification as discussed

previously. During its 14 years of existence, the school was at the epicenter of severe political conflicts, enduring one of the most tumultuous periods in German history. Consequently, the school's institutional structure also underwent inevitable and numerous changes. Operating in three different cities—Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin—the school's initial address in Weimar was established as a continuation of the Grand-Ducal Saxon School of Fine Arts, known as the State Bauhaus, a state art academy. Upon its relocation to Dessau, it started to adopt the identity of a modern design school serving the industry, and in its final years in Berlin, it functioned as a private educational institution. (URL-1) This journey resulted in significant shifts in the school's institutional structure, leading to a departure from continuity in its educational framework towards differentiation and change. For instance, immediately after moving to Dessau in 1926, the school transitioned from a school to a university status, adopting the new name Hochschule für Gestaltung (School of Design) (Forgács, 2017, p.176). The transformations Bauhaus underwent throughout its existence endowed the school with a unique diversity, enabling the assembly of students and faculty with different backgrounds to accommodate various course structures. It can be argued that the change of address, beyond the change of the school's location, also brought about some ruptures in the school's perspective on art and design education. In the light of this change, it is a fact that *Vorkurs'* Weimar period was more under the influence of Itten, the Dessau period was more under the influence of Moholy-Nagy, and the last periods of Dessau and the Berlin period were marked by Joseph Albers.

The changes in the school's academic structure and the diversity of its student body were perhaps crucial in distinguishing Bauhaus from other institutions of its time. Embracing this argument, Bauhaus's international stature from its inception, attributable to its student and faculty body hailing from approximately 29 different countries, contributed to the educational diversity at the school.<sup>1</sup> It can be argued that the absence of distinct professional or disciplinary categorizations and hierarchies paralleled with these institutional changes facilitated a more comprehensive perspective on design, allowing for a more holistic development of design and production practices.<sup>2</sup> Because even from the very earlier years, Bauhaus's curriculum was founded not on disciplinary separations but on distinctions based on materials and application areas like wood, textile, metal, and glass.

The lack of disciplinary division allowed for the convergence under Bauhaus's umbrella of faculty specialized in different fields and backgrounds. While this diversity facilitated an environment of freedom, it also exposed the school to the friction and clash of ideologies among its faculty members. As Éva Forgács notes, "At Bauhaus, there was hardly anything that wasn't ready for conflict.

The school was a veritable pyramid filled with conflicting views, potential disagreements, and irreconcilable differences"<sup>3</sup> (Forgács, 2017, p.14, 24). The pedagogical differences among the faculty, alongside the impacts of environmental and political turmoil led to changes in the school's structure, are discernible through the *Vorkurs'* evolving content and production, which can even be distinctly categorized into different periods.

### The Rise of Individual Creativity in *Vorkurs* under the Influence of Itten

*Vorkurs* was anticipated to serve as an introduction to the essentials of color, form, and material, foundational to all visual expression, and simultaneously act as a bridge erasing the divide between craft and fine arts education as discussed before. This course was mandatory for all students coming from various disciplines from the winter of 1920 until the last years of the school before its final closure in 1933. Only after the assignment of Mies van der Rohe, as the director of the school, the course changed from being mandatory to a normal introductory course (Droste, 2006). This period of mandatory inclusion, spanning from 1921 to 1930, played a crucial role in establishing the course as one of the most prominent and distinct pedagogical approaches of the school (Dickerman, 2009). Interestingly, even though *Vorkurs* is present in the educational diagram, it actually is not mentioned in the initial educational manifesto written by Gropius in 1919, which defines Bauhaus's teaching ethos. However, it will later on be added to the extended version of the document dating 1923 that defines the theory and the organization of the Bauhaus education more in detail (Gropius, et al., 1938). Yet, the course became essential to achieving what Gropius most valued: transforming the entire school into a working studio where the workshops served the educational mission. Not only Forgács but also various other authors draw attention to how Itten, who was responsible for the *Vorkurs* curriculum in its early years, leveraged this course to significantly extend his influence across the school.<sup>4</sup> (Banham, 1960; Cross, 1983; Forgács, 2017). Initially, the lack of a dedicated workshop for this course was a point of contention for Itten, which was later resolved by integrating certain workshops' operation and management under his guidance (Itten, 1963, p.7-8).

With the implementation of this approach in the early 1920s, Bauhaus workshops, which until then had not been monopolized by any single form master, adopted a dual structure of workshop and master, leading to divisions Gropius had not intended (Forgács, 2017). This division was rooted in the presence of two masters responsible for each workshop: the *Handwerkmeister*, or 'Crafts Master,' skilled in craftsmanship, material use, and production techniques, and the *Formmeister*, or 'Form Master,'

<sup>1</sup> Tanyeli points out that this aspect starkly contrasts with the setup in Turkish universities, where the hierarchies and divisions not prevalent in the profession itself become conspicuously manifest within the academic environment, further segregating different disciplines. This situation essentially results in the abstraction of design-based educational institutions from production & craft processes, that inherently require the collaborative efforts of various disciplines (Tanyeli, URL-7).

<sup>2</sup> Art schools established with state support at the beginning of the 20th century were not very common. Apart from the Bauhaus established with this status, there was also a school called *Vkhutemas*, that is, Higher Art and Technical Studios, which was founded in 1920 in Moscow and was formed by the merger of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov School of Applied Arts and supported by Lenin. Although there are many similarities in the founding purpose and ideals of both schools, their institutional structures differ to great extent. While the Bauhaus reached college status in 1928, *Vkhutemas* continued its life as an institute, taking the

name *Vkhutein*. Both schools ended due to similar political pressures. "Institutionalizing the Avant-Garde: *Vkhutemas* 1920-1930", (URL-3).

<sup>3</sup> Forgács explains the factors that determine the fate of Bauhaus; She categorizes it as external/historical factors and internal/human, subjective factors and roles, and mentions that it is difficult to distinguish these two from each other and the fatal blow that will end the dream of a technological culture comes from both sides in the history of the institution (Forgács, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Gropius envisioned a very different academic structure for the Bauhaus than the university structure we understand today. Instead of constructing the structure of the Bauhaus based on the distinction between students and teachers, he saw the entire school as a community consisting of masters, journeymen and apprentices. Although Bauhaus has gone through many institutional transformations and is an educational institution with different statuses, it can easily be said that it has preserved this structure until the end. For example, it can be thought that Gropius rejected the title of professor given to him for this reason (Forgács, 2017).

who facilitated creative ideation. Such a segregation between the artist and craftsman in the workshop setup starkly contradicted Gropius's holistic ideals for design education. For Gropius, the essence of Bauhaus education was to eliminate this distinction, fostering a profile proficient in both areas. He firmly believed that the curriculum, particularly the foundational *Vorkurs* and workshops led by Itten, should not prioritize the fostering of students' imaginative capabilities over their practical skills, as this was counterproductive to Bauhaus's ideology. Gropius envisioned a school that catered not to personal egos and philosophies but to the community and industry, aiming to train designers, who could serve societal needs (Lerner, 2005).

The school was fundamentally about merging technical and artistic knowledge to highlight the new craftsman, rather than the artist's individuality, positioning designers to better integrate with society and cater to its diverse needs. In essence, Gropius argued against the notion of the artist as a solitary creative figure, detached from societal engagement, advocating instead for a designer committed to addressing communal demands (Gropius, 1926, reprint Gropius, et al., 1938).

The distinction between art and craft was not a novel concept but rather an extension of an educational system that had been in place since the mid-19th century.<sup>5</sup> Within this context, Gropius's vision offered a more progressive perspective for Bauhaus. However, Gropius found little support among educators who shared his vision. Even long-standing Bauhaus instructors like Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, who favoured the importance of individual talent, traits and creativity above other issues, upheld the belief that the designer's artistic aspect should predominate (Kandinsky, 1947). Itten, particularly during his period overseeing the *Vorkurs*, significantly disrupted the balance between the preparatory course and workshops, promoting a pedagogical framework that diverged quite radically from Gropius's blueprint for Bauhaus. Itten's educational philosophy was deeply invested in exploring the student's inner world, steering the *Vorkurs* towards a focus on personal creative expression over the object-oriented industrial production that Gropius envisaged. This shift towards personal expressiveness under Itten's influence, compounded by his distinct beliefs, eventually led to conflicts with Gropius, culminating in Itten's departure from the school quite early, in 1923.

In summary, Itten's leadership of the *Vorkurs* between 1919 and 1923 was marked by these ideological clashes, shaping the course into a battleground for differing visions about how design education should be. This analysis of the *Vorkurs*, across various periods within this article, aims to highlight the course's changing emphasis on the creative individual, which became to the fore especially in the structure that Itten tried to construct in Bauhaus but didn't remain the same all along the course of the Bauhaus history. For Itten, *Vorkurs* was a place for breaking conventional thought patterns to foster free thought (Aközer, 2009) (Figure 2).

Most of the work produced in Itten's *Vorkurs* stemmed from this individual liberation, and consequently consisted of

experimental and unconventional working methods. As seen in figure 2, rhythmic writing or expressions of motion were some of the most favored techniques introduced by Itten for form finding. A quest for diverse personal expressions were always given emphasis in the introduction of most of the work (Itten, 1963). Of course, in all studies focusing on this subject, Itten's personality and beliefs, described as eccentric by some, have also come to the fore, and for this reason, it has been claimed by some that Itten's education style has a religious character in some respect (Whitford, 1984). These views are not unfounded, it can even be read from Itten's photographs that he is a staunch supporter of 'Mazdaism' and that by associating the requirements of this belief with *Vorkurs*, he takes a different attitude from other masters throughout the school, almost taking on the air of a messiah. Whitford describes Itten as both "an educator with extraordinary brilliance and intelligence" and "a surprising combination of saint and charlatan" probably precisely because of these characteristics.<sup>6</sup> (Whitford, 1984, p. 51). Yet notably Itten was the only Bauhaus master with formal pedagogical training, adding an ironic twist to his legacy within the school's history.



Figure 2. Rhythm and expression exercises from Itten's studio, Weimar, 1920

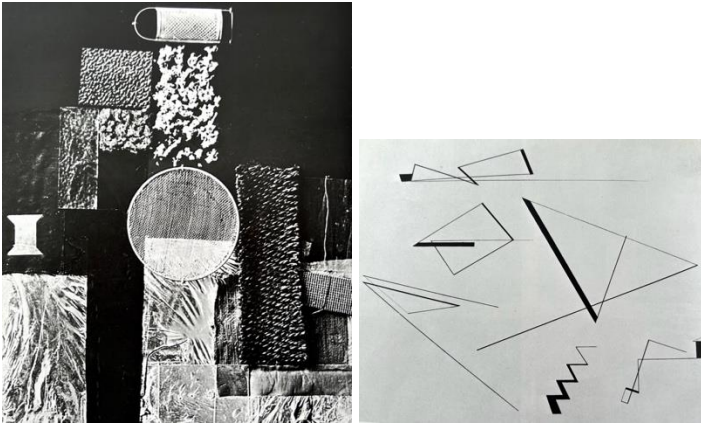
Apart from the general approach for individual expressions as a ground for Itten's *Vorkurs*, the structure of the course was outlined in his book *Design and Form, The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, as consisting of three main objectives. The primary goal was, obviously, to liberate the students' creative and artistic capabilities by loosening entrenched conventions and patterns. The second goal aimed at identifying the materials students were most attuned to, thereby facilitating their selection of the most suitable workshops for their further education and career choices. The third goal was to provide an education on the fundamental laws of crafts and the basic principles of design (Itten, 1963). According to Itten, it was only after the achievement of the first goal—freeing the imagination and creative skills—that more technical and practical information could be imparted to the students. Therefore, *Vorkurs* was largely built on the education of emotions, feelings, and perceptions, conceptualized by Itten through the theory of contrasts (Dickerman, 2009). The entire spectrum of art, encompassing color, texture, material, and rhythm, could be interpreted through a series of contrasts such as light/dark or soft/hard. By comparing these polar opposites to create different effects and understanding their impact across

<sup>5</sup> The founding ideas of the Bauhaus were actually nourished by the Arts & Crafts Movement of the pre-World War I period in Germany and many other European countries. The concept of Gesamtkunstwerk (holistic work), which emphasizes the unity of education given in the fields of art, craft and aesthetics, was based on the integration of production in all areas of life, especially by the *Deutscher Werkbund* in Germany, by combining art and craft training.

<sup>6</sup> Whitford underlines that many different beliefs were adopted among Bauhaus teachers at that time and that Itten was not alone in this sense. Rykwert repeats a similar analogy while emphasizing that Bauhaus has an irrational,

strong dark side. The Mazdaian belief adopted by Itten is based on the belief that what is interpreted as reality is nothing more than a curtain that blocks a higher and more authentic existence. To sensitize the mind and body to the true truth, Mazdaian recommended a rigorous vegetarian diet and regular practice of fasting, and a series of physical and mental exercises to purify the body (Whitford, 1984, pp.s.53-5). Aközer also underlines how Joseph Rykwert states Bauhaus as having an 'irrational, powerful, dark' face to be considered. In his narrative, Itten was declared as the darkest figure in the 'Dark Side of the Bauhaus' (Aközer, 2019).

various materials, textures, forms, colors, and rhythms, the essence of the *Vorkurs* production from 1919 to 1923 was established (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Exercises based on discovering the potentials of contrasts, formal contrasts of line and triangle, material contrasts effects, Weimar, 1920.

In Itten's course, these studies were always related to the education of the students, that is, the subject. "Students had to approach opposites in three different ways: experiencing them emotionally, objectifying them intellectually, and bringing them to life synthetically." (Itten, 1963, p.12). A significant part of the *Vorkurs* consisted of exercises that allowed students to explore the effects of these contrasts using a limited number of basic shapes (circle, square, triangle), aiming to develop a visual language that could form the basis of art practices. This language was more concerned with the perceptual qualities of the abstract compositions rather than their formal characteristics, thus prioritizing the effects of the created form on subjective perceptions over its objective features. Itten frequently emphasized this point, clarifying in his book that these exercises were not mere formalistic style exercises but were meant to convey how, for example, the formal characteristic of a square—the repetition of four right angles—could create a sense of dynamic tension in the individual experience of it (Itten, 1963, p.62).

This view was not exclusive to Itten but was also supported by other instructors in the early days of Bauhaus, such as Kandinsky. Kandinsky's foundational work on form-color relationships, assigning characteristic colors (red, yellow, blue) to basic shapes (square, triangle, circle), reflected a similar approach to personal/ individual perception analysis.<sup>7</sup> The endeavor to erase prejudices related to design and art and to establish a timeless new perception system, or the foundational pedagogical approach of forgetting everything to cleanse perception as advocated by Itten, could be seen as a reactive stance against the political climate of the time. The post-World War I drive to recapture innocence, a return to childhood, and the effort to reset the environment and frame of perception to a *tabula rasa* state were responses to the traumatic and destructive effects of the world's first major war. Concepts of abstractness and timelessness were phenomena that permeated cultural and artistic productions of the era, not limited to Itten's perspective on design. However, the focus on purified individual perception and creation during the *Vorkurs* initial years distinctly exemplifies Itten's unique approach to design education. In Itten's *Vorkurs*, the education

was focused on the artist's inner training, therefore all evaluations, discussions dwelled around the education of the subject rather than the final outcome, or the object produced. In accordance, the personal creativity was defined as inner potentials of the self in the production of art and design work and the pedagogical aim was to develop these traits for revealing the inner creativity.

Despite playing a significant role in the establishment and development of the *Vorkurs* within Bauhaus's pedagogical framework, Itten soon found himself at odds with Gropius, leading to his departure from Bauhaus. And the roots of this disagreement lied how Itten forced bringing individual creativity and perception to the fore and thus highlighting the notion of individuality above all else in design education. Yet for Gropius individuality and individual creativity was against the nature of an artist who stays away from social needs of the society and industry. (Gropius, et al., 1938) Therefore, the approach on individuality that Gropius attaches importance to in design production was very different from Itten's in this sense. Following the departure of Itten, the question of who would succeed Itten became pivotal, and initially, Gropius hesitated to entrust the *Vorkurs* solely to László Moholy-Nagy (Whitford, 1984). After Itten's departure, Josef Albers was brought in to assist Moholy-Nagy, till eventually taking over the course entirely in 1928. Under the administration of Albers, the course was split, with Albers teaching the first half of the year and Moholy-Nagy the second (Droste, 2006). Although the course was shared between the two instructors, the period between 1923-28 is generally regarded as dominated by Moholy-Nagy, and the time from 1928 until the closure of Bauhaus in 1933 as marked by Albers' influence.

### The Nourishment of Rationalism with Moholy-Nagy

Moholy-Nagy's *Vorkurs* differed fundamentally from Itten's by adopting a more rational and direct approach to material use and application techniques in general. His educational approach prioritized tactile perception, the properties of materials, compositional balance, three-dimensional volumes, scale, proportion, and the qualities of light in addition to the discovery of technological novelties in the design education. In his book *Von Material zu Architektur*, published in 1928 and translated into English as *The New Vision* in 1946, Moholy-Nagy elaborated on these topics extensively. According to Reyner Banham, this book is one of the most important published works of Bauhaus. (Lerner, 2005, p. 215; Banham, 1960) In the introduction to the book, Moholy-Nagy clearly states that his stance towards art and education is very different from Itten's individualism. "Yet for the majority of people this truth is obscured by the tendency to see art as something unique and purely individual. In fact, we observe art because of its fundamental and common roots that permeate life." (Moholy-Nagy, 1947). Although Moholy-Nagy used Itten's methods in his research on material examination, he brought a different and new view to *Vorkurs*. As Forgács also states, "While Itten directs students to combine various textures and make free-form compositions in order to develop emotion and perception, Moholy-Nagy pushes students to arrange different materials within a precise system." (Forgács, 2017, p.127).

Moholy-Nagy's approach to education, differed from Itten, was based on the assumption that every student was talented individually. Consequently, Moholy-Nagy aimed to develop the sensory and perceptual values of each student during the

<sup>7</sup> This generalization was based on a survey Kandinsky conducted at the Bauhaus Weimar. The majority of the respondents were expected to obtain

these results by reasoning, and the result of this survey was an attempt to create a universal theory of general forms and colors. (URL-4)

preparation stages of the first year and to create a thought system based on this development.

As stated by Whitford, “Moholy changed the Preliminary Course drastically. All the metaphysics, meditation, breathing exercises, intuition, emotional apprehension of forms and colors, were blown out of the window” (Whitford, 1984, p.128). This educational philosophy sought to integrate common biological traits with objective, scientific, and technological facts rather than highlighting individual differences and creativity (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, p. 19). Projects developed under Moholy-Nagy’s period thus diverged fundamentally from those of Itten’s, aiming not for self-expression but for creating rich sensory and optical impressions through experimental use of materials and technology. The projects exuded a certain objectivity and pursuit of objectiveness does not present during Itten’s time, aligning more closely with Gropius’s vision of training designers who could more readily serve industry and society. Meanwhile this shift in the main approach of the course also coincided with the period when the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, getting away from being a part of the art school in Weimar, and developed within a much more modern building, which we know as Bauhaus Building today. Therefore, behind this pedagogical shift lies not only the change in the master / instructor of the course, but also the location change as having a great impact on the individual creativity coming from art education, remaining in the background and being replaced by different techniques of design education.

Moholy-Nagy was primarily interested in the process itself rather than the final product, a stance perhaps influenced by his being among the least attached to painting among his painter peers. Perhaps this attitude was due to the fact that, as Forgács mentioned, Moholy-Nagy was the least attached to painting among his fellow painters like Kandinski or Klee. He therefore diverted the focus of his activity with incredible speed from painting to the discovery of mechanical or technical painting procedures (Forgács, 2017, p.128). Consequently, changing the focus of *Vorkurs* from painting to exploring mechanical or technical drawing processes. This prioritization of method was evident in both the *Vorkurs* productions and Moholy-Nagy’s own design works (Moholy-Nagy, 1930).

One of his most radical work of this approach is the Telephone Pictures series, where Moholy-Nagy ordered the production of five enamel-coated porcelain paintings from a local plate manufacturing factory in Germany in 1922, providing instructions over the telephone (Figure 4). He describes the images to be included in the painting to be created with the colors he chooses from the Oswald color scale step by step over a scaled grid diagram over the phone to the factory. The names of this series, which he calls EM1, EM2, EM3, etc., are the codes of the materials they are made of, while the numbers 1,2,3 indicate the scale differences of the work. This method involved translating a pre-designed painting into an intermediary language (in this case, numbers conveyed by telephone) and then back into the language of visual elements in a realized composition. Moholy-Nagy highlighted in later discussions that the design process for an art object produced via telephone offered a radical expansion to the contemporary definition of an artist, emphasizing the role of conceptualizing ideas over craftsmanship (URL-5).

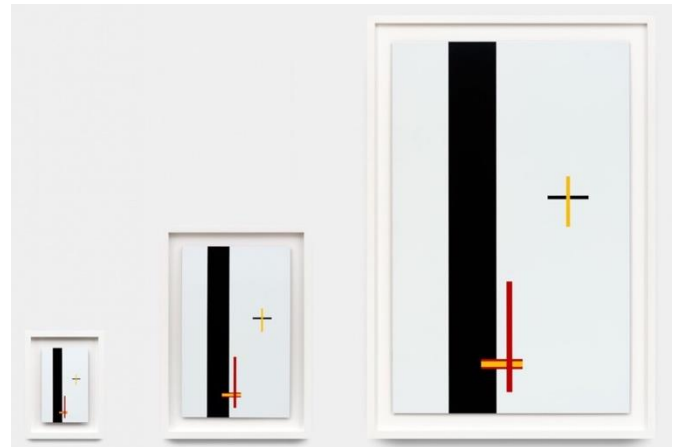


Figure 4. Telephone Pictures series exhibition by Moholy-Nagy, 1923.

This approach also referenced a rationalization of design and a move away from the understanding of individual traits and craftsmanship in a traditional sense in the scope of design education. In Moholy-Nagy’s approach we started to observe the breakdown of how individual creative thinking is defined in terms of skill in design of any design or artistic product. In this approach, we can start to trace the disappearance of the definition of the artist / designer through his/her unique individual production methods for the sake of enabling design as an object that can be understood, shared, legible and of course produced by everyone, thus reproducible. Moholy-Nagy, in this regard, was a pioneer in questioning the definition of art and the artist in modern times, influencing many artists thereafter in the examination of art and artist definition processes.<sup>8</sup>

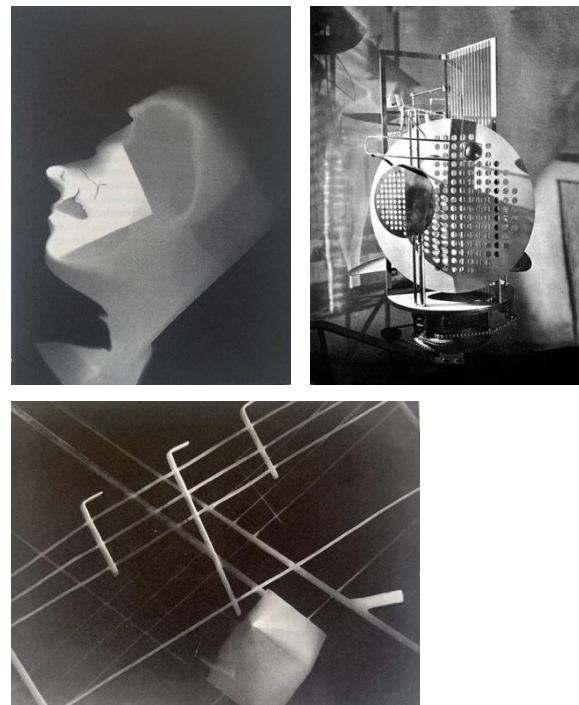


Figure 5. Photogram works and other experimental sculptors for working with light and its possible effects, Moholy-Nagy 1922-1930

<sup>8</sup> Moholy-Nagy’s work coincides with the years when Marcel Duchamp began to produce readymade sculptures. Like Duchamp, Moholy-Nagy’s Telephone

Paintings series are the products of a critical approach and reflection on what can be defined as ‘art’.

Vorkurs' Moholy-Nagy period productions were entirely the products of this understanding, where production and re-production techniques and technologies dominate the strategies of design and creation. In this understanding Moholy-Nagy emphasized not only the testing of new materials and techniques but also the loss of the individuality of the artist on the work produced. As also highlighted by Kaplan, this was the introduction of the anonymous hand of the author on the work he/she produces. The abstract of an artist in his book, which focuses on the work of Moholy-Nagy clearly refers to this loss as: "I was not afraid of losing the 'personal touch' so highly valued in previous painting. On the contrary, I even gave up signing my paintings. I put numbers and letters with the necessary data on the back of the canvas, as if they were cars, airplanes, or other industrial products" (Kaplan, 1995, p. 119). The students and works of this period enable the concept of designer to emerge in society autonomously from the concept of artist. In Moholy-Nagy's studio while the individuality of the art/design work loses its significance, the individuality of the artist/designer also started to dissolve, leading more to the idea of industrial design. The notion of intuition, which was so important in Itten's studio was started to leave its place to definition of artist/designer who has the necessary technical and practical knowledge to produce. Therefore, as seen from the figure 5 the experimental processes of Moholy-Nagy's studio structured around the testing of different mediums, technologies and techniques.

#### Josef Albers Testing with Social and Cultural Interactions

Josef Albers took over as the sole director of the *Vorkurs* in 1928, transitioning from the collective guidance of Moholy-Nagy, marking the third and final phase of the Preliminary course. Interestingly, Albers himself was a Bauhaus student who had been educated under Johannes Itten. When Walter Gropius decided to leave Bauhaus in 1928 together with Moholy-Nagy, he entrusted the full responsibility of the *Vorkurs* to Albers. (URL-6) Albers' period overseeing the *Vorkurs* was notably longer than his predecessors, Itten and Moholy-Nagy, partly due to the period he co-directed it for a while with Moholy-Nagy. Given his prolonged involvement, Albers was essentially the primary instructor behind many of the course's emphases and changes. The *Vorkurs* under Albers acted as a bridge within the school, facilitating a cohesive working environment amid varying focuses—from the expressionist initiatives of the early years towards a more objective approach emphasizing the functional use of materials, bridging the widening gap between fine arts education and architectural emphasis led by Hannes Meyer and Mies van der Rohe. Dearstyne highlighted that the worldwide adopted and replicated *Vorkurs*, or Preliminary Course, reached its final form under Albers' stewardship (Dearstyne, 1986, p.94).

The period in which Albers took the helm of the course coincided with a rupture in the Bauhaus' management structure. The departure of founding director Gropius and his replacement by Hennes Meyer opened a new chapter not only in *Vorkurs* but also in the school's approach to design. In the years following Gropius's departure, the Bauhaus's main teachers such as Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, Moholy-Nagy (1928), Schlemmer (1929) and Klee (1930) left the school one by one (Droste, 2006). Both this losses and Meyer's taking Bauhaus education in a very different political direction from Gropius, significant impact on the general functioning of the school and the content of the

*Vorkurs* course. To start with, Meyer doubted the necessity of the course, and therefore started to implement new substitute courses like Gestalt psychology, sociology or social economics for instead of the *Vorkurs*.<sup>9</sup> Only after the directorship of Mies van der Rohe, *Vorkurs* regained the importance it deserved, even though it was no longer a compulsory course in the school curriculum (Droste, 2006).

Therefore, Albers' leadership coincides with the most turbulent and changing years of the school's administration. During this period, the approach rooted in exploring the potentials of materials, initiated during Moholy-Nagy's era, was continued and even further emphasized, especially in the course's initial phase. However, Albers distinguished his period by placing less emphasis on experimental attitudes towards methods and procedures. Instead, the exploration of basic materials such as metal, wood, or paper using simple tools became central. The course aimed broadly at developing spatial structures that achieved optimal performance with minimal material, energy, and time inputs through understanding the correlation between material, structure, function, and production technology (URL-6).

Albers grounded the *Vorkurs* in this philosophy, expecting students to produce primal compositions aligned with these objectives. Unlike the *Vorkurs* under Itten and Moholy-Nagy, Albers focused on discovering various materials and textures using basic graphic and painting tools rather than producing the textures themselves. Simple tools and methods, such as cutting with scissors, were used to create complex compositions, emphasizing the efficient and economical use of materials, for example, waste was never an option under Albers' guidance. (Forgács, 2017, p.181) Another notable difference in Albers' period was the expansion of the *Vorkurs* curriculum to include additional lessons by Kandinsky, Klee, and Schlemmer (Forgács, 2017, p.204). Kandinsky and Klee had already been supporting the *Vorkurs* with their lessons on form and color from the beginning. Under Albers, this support was significantly enhanced, enabling a more comprehensive instructional structure that benefited from the diverse experiences of other school instructors. This move away from the individual expression and creativity, initiated during Moholy-Nagy's time and solidified in Albers' tenure, marked a critical step towards closing the gap between art and craft education. Gropius's views on industrial mass production and standardization also supported this differentiation and diversification. Possibly, Gropius's departure from Bauhaus contributed to finding a middle ground for the ongoing struggle between art and craft, and also artist and designer, through the *Vorkurs*, with Albers effectively blending the teachings he acquired from both Itten and Moholy-Nagy during his student years at Bauhaus (Figure 6).

Albers consistently emphasized the work of art and design as a means of communication, bridging craft and individual experimental views. He contended that a painting is not a lesson nor directly didactic to the observer; instead, it should foster a relationship inherent in progressive education, prompting the observer to become aware of their own perceptions. According to Redensek, this represents a generous and democratic understanding of art (Redensek, 2014, p.22). Albers's choice in materials and painting techniques went beyond mere composition, positioning the artwork as part of a communication system between the individual and their environment. His

<sup>9</sup> Although Meyer's directorship lasted only a short period less than 2 and a half years, most of the productions during this period had political content. In addition to Meyer's anti-academic attitude, the number of students at the

school was increased and the academic structure of the school was shaken in order to prevent the Bauhaus from becoming an elitist school (Dearstyne, 1986).

approach, especially in color experiments and applications, shifted from theoretical to practical concerns, focusing not on the object itself but on the viewer's perception and observation practices (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Josef Albers discussing paper sculptures presented by his students during *Vorkurs*

This approach underlined the examination of material nature and fundamentals as the essence of *Vorkurs*. Therefore, the *Vorkurs* ideals while thought by Albers radically differ from Itten's design approach, which was nourished by individual creativity, or Moholy's approach, which focused on the design of the process rather than the final product by instrumentalising the possibilities of technology. Therefore, for Albers neither the product (as in Itten) nor the processes of design (as in Moholy-Nagy) dominate one another as he is concerned more on the afterlife of the work of art or designed objects, on how they are perceived and understood. The emphasis of the Albers period was not only on the artist who created the work of art, nor on the work of art itself. It could be argued that the emphasis was on discovering the potentials of how any design work is perceived and interact within a certain culture and society and therefore the design process and the design itself should benefit from discovering such potentials and unfolding interactions (Albers, 2014 33). It is a period when the framework of design education has been much expanded and an education system, including its social and cultural dimensions, was discussed within the scope of *Vorkurs*, perhaps for the first time. As stated by Weber: "Alber's approach was revolutionary, putting experimentation at the fore. It disputed traditional notions of taste. It sought to engage rather than merely inform" (Albers, 2013, p.xi).



Figure 7. Colour and contrast perception studies, Josef Albers

On another level, the sensitivity developed towards the use of materials was influenced by the economic and political conditions

of the time, which Albers often highlighted as the defining characteristic of the era, underscoring the inseparability of production and economy. The material-focused work during Albers's era coinciding with the school's venture into architecture instruction post-1927 is no coincidence. The *Vorkurs* under Albers was also marked by structuralism, with a primary focus on unlocking the potentials of materials (Albers, 2014, p. 211). He frequently discussed how seemingly fragile and brittle materials like paper could acquire strength and rigidity through various methods of folding and tearing. Even simple and basic materials in Albers's classes could be functionalized to solve complex problems and questions (Whitford, 1984, pp. 133-134) (Figure 6). Germany on the eve of World War II was inevitably affected by all the economic hardships of the pre-war period, and Bauhaus's educational life was never insulated from the country's political climate. A look at the history of the *Vorkurs* reveals how these external factors have been foundational in shaping the course's evolving structure and approach.

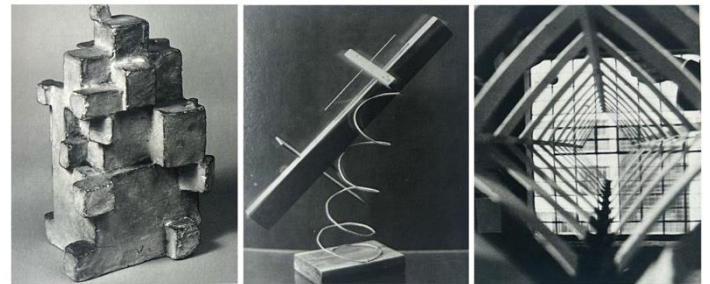


Figure 8. Productions from the studios of different masters, Itten's search for intuition, Moholy-Nagy's test with new mediums and Albers' pursuit for discovering basic materials

The reasons behind the existence of the *Vorkurs* have never been solely educational; the course has always been affected by contemporary social and even political issues and discussions. Thus, not only the instructors of the *Vorkurs* but also the prevailing conditions often influenced the content's development and transformation as discussed in detail above. This remains a pertinent consideration for foundational design education even today, as academic courses and their missions are continually influenced by current realities and needs, undergoing transformation accordingly. It is a fact that no theoretical approach or academic course can develop in isolation, devoid of external factors and relations.

As the discussion folds in the Bauhaus, it is very hard to talk about a continuity or consistency between the different periods of the *Vorkurs*. Instead, it was a course responsive to environmental or political changes and capable of generating its own critique. The products of the course, like the course itself, cannot be assessed independently of the period, instructor, and prevailing circumstances and even at times from the location of the school. From Itten's focus on individual expression to Moholy-Nagy's emphasis on method, and Albers's focus on social and cultural interactions and the rational - functional aspects of materials in perceptual education, the *Vorkurs* has continually adapted to the current definitions of designers (or sometimes artists), their needs, and what constitutes a design product.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

*Vorkurs*, a fundamental course at the Bauhaus, was a key focus of the article. It highlights that throughout the school's 14-year existence, the course was in a state of continual evolution. Since it is one of the most referred courses even today in many academic discussions, the article tried to unfold the layers of



change within its history. It can be argued that reference to this fluid state of the course is seldom mentioned in academic discussions. On another level, development of individual traits and individual creativity in design education are still issues of contemporary debates and the history of the school offers a unique example in terms of observing that design education cannot often be regarded as definite and fixed.

For example, as often the case in many schools of design and architecture, foundation course can be defined as basic design or introduction course, where the main intention is to develop fundamental skills such as abstract thinking, perception, awareness, and material knowledge to students in their first year at the university or higher education. However, in contemporary introductory design courses, the diversity once seen across different periods at the Bauhaus is often absent (Inan, 2020). Increasing the emphasis on this pluralism and differentiation in the references given to the course may also make it possible to create up-to-date and more flexible courses for introduction to design.

Today, the individual competencies required for design and the concept of creativity are undergoing radical changes. Relationships with technology bring along new design methods and processes in very different ways than before. Similarly, our relationships with materials undergo quite different transformations with the changes in the way we produce the materials, intervene and even work with them. In light of all these changes, design education needs to be able to better read the social expectations from design, even investigate the potentials that can guide it in more depth and produce much more flexible answers to the pre-definitions on design and individual creativity. As we can trace in the Bauhaus *Vorkurs* discussion, the need to redefine what constitutes contemporary qualities of designer, artist or architect should always be an integral part of the content of the introductory design courses and current discussions is still a very important issue today. While the introductory design courses form the basis of many different professions, ranging from architecture to industrial product design, they already have the potentials to be inclusive, transformative and dynamic courses by nature. For this reason, the content of such courses may vary from one another in different universities and may contain different interpretations, and may take on a structure that questions our relationship with design over and over again each and every year.

Exploring and debating these methods could lead to a more experimental and diversified approach in contemporary design education, preventing the homogenization of products and discussions across universities and be shaped by the issues of our current environment, rather than in isolation. *Vorkurs*, with its provision for diversity and various discussions, can serve as a reference for showing that the distinctive feature of Bauhaus compared to other schools was not just about what was taught and produced but about developing different ideas on how learning and teaching design could occur. A similar diversification and variety would undoubtedly be enlightening for design education, individual creativity and even traits.

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