

## ADVANCES IN THE APPLIED ARTS &amp; SCIENCES Part 2

# Marcel Breuer and the 'Wassily Chair'

By Cathryn Canelas

When Marcel Breuer designed the 'Wassily Chair' in 1925, he signaled a turning point in furniture design by making a clear aesthetic break with the past. Breuer, a graduate of the Bauhaus and head of the furniture department by the age of 23, was the first to use tubular steel, an industrial material, in the construction of furniture. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist movement, of which Breuer was both influencer and influenced by, was embodied by the Bauhaus in Germany which brought together artists and skilled trades artisans to teach architecture and design. The school took up the phrase coined by Luis Sullivan, "form follows function", the principle that the shape of a building or object should be primarily based upon its intended function or purpose, and used it to rethink how buildings and objects were designed. While founded in response to the chaos in post WWI Germany, the Bauhaus' pursuit of innovation, all-inclusive use of new materials, and goal of making modern design available to all, made the school relevant beyond the forces which prompted its creation and became its legacy. The 'Wassily Chair', a "radical" piece which embodied Bauhaus principles, survived to become a classic and is still in production today.



The incubator for the 'Wassily Chair', the Bauhaus, lasted exactly as long as Germany's Weimar Republic (1919-1933). But the revolutionary school of art and design was also an achievement of modernism, for it answered a conflicted question: was it possible to make a

viable institution out of a movement that had grown out of conflict with institutional authority; for to replace one institutional authority for another would hardly have been worth the struggle.

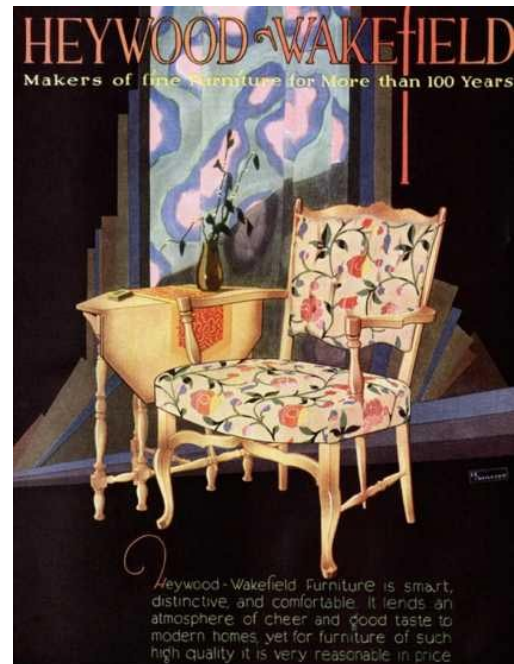
Modernism before the Bauhaus was volatile, many-sided, and there was little reason to believe its various factions and groupings, cubist, futurist, or constructivist, could ever come together. Yet the Bauhaus, by enforcing no aesthetic conformity and by not enforcing an official style, proved to all that modernism could function as a collective enterprise in an institutional setting, and provide a student the widest scope for individual expression. This extraordinary achievement created the mythic Bauhaus of the imagination where the artist toiled away in happy accord, savoring the idyllic fellowship of the guild of the Middle Ages. Of course this was not the case. During its existence the Bauhaus was in a state of constant change.

When founded, the bastion of modernism had craft at the core of its curriculum although; this fact is generally downplayed by those who focus on the institutions' interactions with industry. It embraced self expression and individuality, honored the mark of the maker's hand, and introduced students to the basic elements of design, while it gave them the tools with which to explore form, materials, and their own creativity. The Bauhaus program included traditional craft occupations such as metal chasing, enameling, stucco and mosaic working.

Yet, soon after the Bauhaus was founded, school leaders thought they found a middle ground in the new field of industrial design making models for industry mass production. A school for artists, architects, and designers, the Bauhaus' uniqueness was found in its systematic recasting of the way in which the fine and applied arts were taught. During this transition the school's products were made to appear as though they were made by machine, regardless of how they were actually manufactured. While products produced in the workshops changed only gradually there was a rapid change in the aesthetic they projected. Whereas before they had emphasized the individual expression of the craftsman, now they reflected the impersonal modern

machine. The Bauhaus transitioned from the craft aesthetic to the machine aesthetic. It was within this context that Marcel Breuer designed the “Wassily Chair”.

Whereas, furniture commonly in production in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was ornate, overstuffed, and utilized heavily patterned fabrics, modernist furniture was lightweight and strong. Modernist furniture expressed modernism’s faith in technology, convenience and the promise of a better life. It was designed for a new way of living and dreaming of a better world. Applying strict Bauhaus aesthetic principles, Breuer refined the ‘Wassily Chair’ to a series of base functional units. Based upon the traditional club chair, it was fashioned from a single metal tube bent into a sleek, low-slung frame. The stark lines and simple geometry of the steel frame sketched the outline of the original form, while the head, arms and seat appear to float, yet the sitter never actually touched the frame.



Breuer himself characterized the chair, “my most extreme work...the least artistic, the most logical, the least ‘cozy’ and the most mechanical.” It was a perfect expression of the machine aesthetic and a true antidote to the busy furniture of the day. It was for that reason that it catalyzed an explosion in experimentation with tubular steel, most famously from such figures as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. The ‘Wassily Chair’ perfectly captured the 1920s design moment of youthful discovery and audacity.

Breuer left the Bauhaus and it was later shutdown due to Nazi and financial pressure. However, their influence lasted decades longer. The Bauhaus principle of mass produced design available to everyone is embodied in the

store Ikea today. Their pursuit of innovation, of utilizing new materials, and making art and design available to all is embodied in bus stop shelters on International Drive in Orlando, Florida. Marcel Breuer not only created a revolutionary work, in the end he created a classic which continues to inspire others.

