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Herbert Bayer

(American Painter, 1900-1985)



Herbert Bayer was born in 1900, the son of a government tax collector, in the small Austrian village of Haag am Hausruck. Bayer's interest in painting was encouraged early in life by his mother, who gave him his first box of watercolors. Bayer received no formal art education, as his father's early death made it financially impossible for him to enroll in a fine arts academy in Vienna, as his family had hoped. Instead, Bayer entered into an apprenticeship under the architect and designer, Georg Smidhammer, where Bayer created posters and advertisements. Under Smidhammer's tutelage, Bayer learned drawing, painting, and architectural drafting. Bayer had no formal knowledge of art history; his work was inspired by his observations of nature. Bayer went on to study at the Darmstadt Artist's Colony where, in 1920, he discovered the theoretical writings of the artist Vassily Kandinsky, as well as Walter Gropius' 1919 Bauhaus manifesto. Bayer traveled to Weimar to meet Gropius in October of 1921 and was immediately accepted into the Bauhaus school. There, he was deeply influenced

by the instruction of Kandinsky, Johannes Itten and Paul Klee.

The Bauhaus, which opened in 1919 and operated until 1933, when it was closed by the Nazi regime, was, and continues to be, one of the most significant movements in modernist art, architecture, and design, and has had more influence on 20th century design than perhaps any other art movement. The Bauhaus emerged from the spirit of increased artistic freedom and experimentation that resulted from the collapse of the German monarchy and the relative liberalism of the Weimar republic in Germany after the first World War. Bauhaus philosophy was inspired by the Arts & Crafts movement of the 19th century and focused on simplified forms, rationality and functionality, and the integration of art and industry.

After four years at the Bauhaus, Bayer was appointed the director of the new printing and advertising workshop which opened when the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau in 1925. In 1928, Bayer left the Bauhaus to become the Art Director of Vogue magazine's Berlin office, as well as the Director of the Dorland Studio in Berlin. In 1938, Bayer immigrated to the United States where he lived in New York before moving with his wife to Aspen, Colorado in 1946.

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In the States, Bayer served as a chairman of the design department for the Container Corporation where he created a series of advertisements called "Great Ideas of Western Man". After his move to Colorado, Bayer became a significant artistic and cultural force in the town Aspen. There, he worked as a Design Consultant for the Aspen Institute, the Atlantic Richfield Company, the Aspen Music Festival, and the town of Aspen itself. In 1968, Bayer designed an articulated wall construction for the Olympics in Mexico City. In 1974, he moved to Montecito, California, where he lived until his death in 1985.

Throughout his career, Bayer turned his creativity and skill to both the applied and fine arts, approaching each project with the unique ability to combine the needs of industry and the structure of Bauhaus style with the sensibility of the avant-garde and the expressiveness of his life-long fascination with nature. He experimented with abstract and surrealist painting, architecture, lithography, mural-painting, photomontage, installation, earthworks and environmental art. He is well-known for his creation of the geometric, sans-serif typeface "Universal". His passion for simplicity and minimalism extended to his 1959 creation of an English phonetic alphabet – all lowercase, sans-serif, employing special symbols for endings, such as '-ed' or '-ing', as well as for digraphs such as 'ch', 'sh', and 'ng'.

Over his lifetime, Bayer donated over 8,000 works to the Denver Art Museum. His work has been exhibited all over the world, including significant exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Marlborough Gallery in New York City.

Bayer said: 'I don't see the artist as an outsider. I think he has responsibilities toward his nation and his environment. The artist is the only one who can solve problems of a visual nature – and there are so many problems of a visual nature today.'

Sources and Further Reading:

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