MARIANNE BRANDT

Best remembered for her metal designs, Marianne Brandt (1893-1983) created a small tea extract pot that set a record in 2007 for the highest sum ever paid for a BAUHAUS object. While her work in metal has become iconic, other aspects of Brandt’s diverse oeuvre and her influence on the Bauhaus still remain little studied.

Born Marianne Liebe to an upper-middle class family in the industrial city of Chemnitz, Germany, she received her diploma as a painter in 1918 from Weimar’s Grand Ducal Saxon College of Fine Art (*Grossherzogliche-Sächsische Hochschule für Bildende Kunst*). She married the Norwegian artist Erik Brandt, and they spent the next two years in Norway and France. Marianne Brandt had begun a new course of study in sculpture at the College of Fine Artin Weimar in 1923 when she saw the State Bauhaus Exhibition and was inspired to begin her studies anew at the Bauhaus. Brandt completed the Preliminary Course (*Vorkurs*) under the direction of JOSEF ALBERS and LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY. At the latter’s suggestion she became and apprentice in the Metal Workshop, one of the most male-dominated divisions of the school. Brandt experienced some hazing but also had immediate success with the sleek designs and pure forms of her metal tea services, lamps, and other household items. These epitomized the school’s turn away from craft to a spirit of “Art and Technology, a New Unity,” in Bauhaus director WALTER GROPIUS’s words. The esteem in which Gropius held Brandt’s work is evidenced by the selection of her lighting fixtures in much of the school’s second home, the Gropius-designed Bauhaus Dessau, to which it moved in 1925.

The melding of art and technology is evident in other aspects of Brandt’s work as well, particularly her photographs in experimental, NEW VISION modes, which include an extended series of self portraits. She also made at least forty-five complex and culturally critical photomontages during her Bauhaus years. Brandt worked particularly intensely in this medium while on a year-long sabbatical from the Bauhaus in Paris from 1926-27.

Over the span of her association with the Metal Workshop, Brandt rose quickly through the ranks. She became the shop’s assistant (*Mitarbeiter*) in 1927 and, when Moholy-Nagy left the Bauhaus in 1928, Brandt became acting director. She negotiated numerous contracts for the production of her and others’ lamp designs with the Berlin firm of Schwinzer & Gräff and Leipzig’s Körting & Mathiesen. Brandt was the only woman to receive her diploma from the Metal Workshop, which she did upon leaving the Bauhaus in the summer of 1929.

After half a year working in Gropius’s Berlin office, Brandt became head of design for the division of household goods at the Ruppelwerk in Gotha. She overhauled their entire product line, yet she would later express frustration at how little creative freedom she was given in this work. Ruppel’s fortunes worsened through the ongoing financial crisis, and Brandt left the firm late in 1932. She attempted to secure work in Hamburg and then Oslo, but, with unemployment at extremely high levels, her search did not immediately pan out, and her family soon requested that she return home to Chemnitz to care for her ailing father. Brandt was unable to obtain steady work during the National Socialist period, but she did continue to paint and photograph. When an Allied bomb raid in World War II severely damaged her family home, Brandt spent the next years redesigning and rebuilding it. Multitalented Bauhäusler that she was, she completed much of the construction herself.

As in the Nazi period, Brandt’s life as a former Bauhaus member in East Germany was not easy, but through her teaching she was an important conduit of Bauhaus ideas and philosophy. From 1949-51 she taught at the Dresden College of Art and Craft (*Hochschule für Werkkunst*) under the direction of MART STAM, and she spent the next three years in Berlin-Weissensee teaching industrial design at the College for Applied Art (*Hochschule für angewandte Kunst*). She traveled to Beijing and Shanghai with her exhibition “German Applied Arts of the GDR” in 1954. Brandt lived the rest of her life in or near Chemnitz (then Karl-Marx Stadt). As the East German regime slowly began to recognize the significance of the Bauhaus, Brandt’s work likewise began to be a source of interest and the subject of a few group exhibitions. Today, a number of Brandt’s metal designs are again in production, and her original designs and photomontages are prized possessions in major collections of modern art.

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