**Oskar Schlemmer (b. 4 September 1888, Stuttgart, Germany; d. 13 April 1943, Baden-Baden, Germany)**

**Summary**

Oskar Schlemmer was a painter, sculptor, choreographer, stage designer, and theorist most recognized as a master at the Bauhaus, where he taught from 1921 to 1929. There, he served as Master of Form in the workshops for mural painting, stone sculpture, wood carving, and theatre, and taught life drawing. An active mentor of Bauhaus students, he served as faculty advisor for the Bauhaus festivals. As a choreographer, Schlemmer is known for works such as the *Triadic Ballet* and the *Bauhaus Dances*, choreographies that maximized the geometric and axial qualities of the stage and human movement while also deploying costumes that abstracted the human body. Coupled with his theoretical writings, his investigations of two- and three-dimensional media share several common threads: classicism and the centrality of the human figure; modernist abstraction expressed through geometry and simplicity; and an engagement with architectural structures and total environments. In these ways, Schlemmer provided a modern, machine-oriented take on classicism, whether Renaissance notions of the body and illusionism or Neoclassical ideas on movement and the marionette. Schlemmer exemplified the practices of modernist artists through his exploration of the properties of specific materials as well as his collaborative work, distinguishing himself through his engagement and expertise in many media.

**Training**

Schlemmer began his art studies at Stuttgart’s School of Arts and Crafts (Kunstgewerbeschule) in 1903 and apprenticed in marquetry. He then trained in painting at Stuttgart’s Art Academy (Kunstakademie) from 1906 to 1911. Like many artists of his generation, Schlemmer fought in the First World War. While wounded and convalescing in Stuttgart, he painted and created preliminary costumes for the *Triadic Ballet*, an early portion of which was performed in 1916 as a benefit for his regiment. After the war in 1919, Schlemmer returned to study painting at the Art Academy, where as a student representative he advocated for curricular and institutional reforms.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Schlemmer served on the faculty at the Bauhaus, an art and design school whose faculty and students theorized and produced innovations in modernism. In each workshop where he was appointed Schlemmer espoused the Bauhaus’ modernist investigation of the formal properties of materials. Schlemmer taught as Master of Form in workshops for Mural Painting (1921-22), Stone Sculpture (1921-25), and Wood Carving (1922-25). He also taught life drawing (1922-29), served as faculty advisor for the Bauhaus festivals, and published on theatre, the human form, and dance. As Master in the Theatre Workshop (1923-29) Schlemmer promoted the Bauhaus’ vision of unifying the arts into a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk). He simultaneously worked as a stage and costume designer for productions in Dessau, Berlin, and Stuttgart, among other cities, in part because his Bauhaus contract offered him only part-time work.

Schlemmer’s work in fine arts participated in what Gropius termed an ‘architectonic spirit’: sculpture, like painting and furniture, would contribute to larger architectural programs rather than stand alone as an autonomous art.[[1]](#endnote-1) In 1922 Schlemmer expressed a similar desire, hoping ‘to raise painting and sculpture to the functions that they had in the great ages: part of architecture as space and wall-creation.’[[2]](#endnote-2) To that end, Schlemmer preoccupied himself with three-dimensional structures and architectural spaces. Paintings such as *Female Dancer* (1923) situate the body within perspectival systems and grids, providing a modern interpretation of Renaissance illusory space, whereas his mural paintings become part of the architectural wall, echoing both its surface and the building’s shape.

Schlemmer’s interest in the architectonic related to his fascination with the structure and proportions of the human body. Schlemmer’s classicized bodies are at the humanistic centre of geometry and creation, but they are also mechanized, hard-edged, machine-age bodies for a rationalist modern age. This combination of classicism with modernity, rendered with clean geometries and planes, relates Schlemmer’s work to the cool, detached attitude of New Objectivity, an art and cultural movement in 1920s Germany.

Both the architectural and the human are manifest in Schlemmer’s work for the theatre, such as the *Triadic Ballet* (first full performance 1922). Broken into three acts, most versions of the ballet feature a ‘gay burlesque’ classical ballet act in yellow, a ‘ceremonious and solemn’ character dance act in pink, and a ‘mystical fantasy’ abstract act in black.[[3]](#endnote-3) *Triadic Ballet* humorously abstracts classical dance, but the anti-naturalistic movements also evoke the physical limits of the war-torn body.

The *Bauhaus Dances* (1926-29), a series of short works, explored dancers’ movements across the axes of the stage and performers’ investigations of materials (such as blocks, poles, and hoops) within those geometric confines. Titles such as *Metal Dance* and *Hoop Dance* suggest the play of material and form as pivotal at the Bauhaus as well as the choreographies’ non-allegorical purposes. The works also highlighted Bauhaus artistic practices and priorities. In *Block Play* performers moved large building blocks around the stage, evoking Bauhaus engagement with architecture. Primary colours in costumes for *Space Dance* and *Form Dance* complemented the colour theory teachings in the Preliminary Course. Bulky, padded costumes abstracted dancers’ bodies and evoked marionettes, dolls, and automata. Through machine-like movements, dancers explored the human body’s functional limits. These details of the Bauhaus Dances paralleled Bauhaus principles of modernist abstraction, in which investigations of elemental properties and forms were paramount.

After the Bauhaus, Schlemmer taught at Breslau’s State Academy (Staatliche Akademie) from 1929 to 1932. As the Nazis came to power, he sought work in many cities. Included in the 1937 Degenerate Art (Entartete Kunst) exhibition and forbidden by the Nazis to sell his art, Schlemmer nonetheless sought commissions from the new government, made camouflage for a painting firm, and worked in a varnish factory. This complicated history of resistance, acquiescence, and collaboration was typical of many German modernists who wanted to remain and work in Germany and who sought a place for themselves within the new political order.

**Legacy**

Schlemmer’s works anticipated several dimensions of the postwar avant-garde—the use of humour and geometric forms, body-distorting costumes and untrained performers—evident in varying ways in works by Alwin Nikolais, Merce Cunningham, choreographers associated with Judson Church and their counterparts in Germany and elsewhere. The link between Schlemmer and the postwar avant-garde was direct as well as indirect, for many postwar performers first learned of his choreographies from Bauhaus faculty and students who had fled Nazi Germany.

Starting in the late 1960s, dancers reconstructed Schlemmer’s dances, almost always in collaboration with Bauhaus-era artists. Among the notable reconstructions were Gerhard Bohner’s *Triadic Ballet* in Berlin in 1977 and Debra McCall’s *Bauhaus Dances* in New York in 1982. Given restrictions imposed by the Schlemmer estate, these stagings recreated the costumes and steps as faithfully as possible. After Schlemmer’s works entered the public domain seventy years after his death in 2013, artists more playfully interpreted his works, such as a project to update Schlemmer’s dances in the experimental spirit of the Bauhaus studio funded by the German Cultural Foundation.

**Susan Funkenstein**

**Selected Works**

Painting and Sculpture:

*Abstract Figure* (*Free Sculpture G or Freiplastik G*), 1921-23

*Female Dancer* (*Tänzerin*), 1923

Wall murals, Weimar Bauhaus Building (Die Wandgestaltung im Werkstattgebäude des Weimarer Bauhauses), created for the Bauhaus Week Celebrations, 1923 (destroyed)

Wall murals for the Museum Folkwang (Der Folkwang-Zyklus), Essen, 1928-30 (destroyed)

Bauhaus Staircase (Bauhaustreppe), 1932

Choreography:

*Triadic Ballet* (*Das Triadische Ballett*), preliminary performance 1916, first full performance 1922, revised 1923, 1926, 1932

*Bauhaus Dances* (*Die Bauhaustänze*), 1926-29. Examples include:

*Block Play* (*Baukastenspiel*)

*Figure in Space* (*Kunstfigur*)

*Flats Dance* (*Kulissentanz*)

*Form Dance* (*Formentanz*)

*Gesture Dance* (*Gestentanz*)

*Glass Dance* (*Glastanz*)

*Hoop Dance* (*Reifentanz*)

*Metal Dance* (*Metalltanz*)

*Pole Dance* (*Stäbetanz*)

*Space Dance* (*Raumtanz*)

Writings by the artist:

Schlemmer, O. ([1969] 1971) *Man: Teaching Notes from the Bauhaus*, ed. H. Kuchling, trans. J. Seligman, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Schlemmer, T., ed. ([1958] 1972) *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*. Trans K. Winston, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Schlemmer, O., L. Moholy-Nagy and F. Molnár. ([1925] 1961) *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. W. Gropius, trans. A.S. Wensinger, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

References and further reading

Elswit, K. (2008) ‘The Some of the Parts: Prothesis and Function in Bertolt Brecht, Oskar Schlemmer, and Kurt Jooss,’ *Modern Drama* 51 (3): 389-410.

Koss, J. (2006) ‘The Bauhaus Theater of Human Dolls,’ in *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to*

*Cold War*, ed. K. James-Chakraborty, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 90-114.

Maur, K. (1979) *Oskar Schlemmer*, Munich: Prestel Verlag.

Preston, C. (2014) ‘Modernism’s Dancing Marionettes: Oskar Schlemmer, Michel Fokine, and Ito Michio,’ *Modernist Cultures* 9 (1): 115-33.

Film Documentation

Edition Bauhaus (2014) *Bühne und Tanz/Stage and Dance/Oskar Schlemmer*, absolut Medien.

McCall, D. and R. Leacock (1986) *Bauhaus Dances*. See ordering and supplementary material at www.bauhausdances.org

Suggested Paratexts

Schlemmer’s costume designs for the Triadic Ballet (1926 version)

<http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/304377>

T. Lux Feininger, photograph of Metal Dance, 1928-9

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/34701/t-lux-feininger-metalltanz-american-about-1928-1929/>

Notes

1. W. Gropius, ‘Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar,’ first published as ‘Programm des Staatliches Bauhauses in Weimar’ (April 1919), in *Weimar Republic Sourcebook,* eds. A. Kaes, M. Jay, E. Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 435. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. O. Schlemmer, proposal to the State Ministry of Education, 11 November 1922, quoted in Wulf Herzogenrath, *Oskar Schlemmer: Die Wandgestaltung der neuen Architektur* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1973), 35, trans. in P. Paret, ‘Picturing Sculpture: Object, Image and Archive,’ in *Bauhaus Construct: Fashining Identity, Discourse and Modernism*, eds. J. Saletnik and R. Schuldenfrei (London and New York: Routlege, 2009), 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. O. Schlemmer, ‘Man and Art Figure,’ in O. Schlemmer, L. Moholy-Nagy and F. Molnár, ([1925] 1961) *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. W. Gropius, trans. A.S. Wensinger, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)