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**Fig. 1.** Max Bill as a student at the Dessau Bauhaus, 1928. Experimental stage group  
*right to left:* Alexander Schawinsky, Andor Weiniger, Joost Schmidt, Max Bill, Lux Feininger,  
and Clemens Röseler. Max Bill Archive. (See page 104.)

# Max Bill: The Early Years

## An Interview

By Angela Thomas

Translated by Susan Ernst-Peters

Angela Thomas is an art historian and guest curator. Her exhibitions include *Sophie Taeuber-Arp (Ascona, 1983)*, and *Angelica, Anna und andere Schwestern von gestern (Zurich Art Museum, 1987)*. She is married to Max Bill.

**N**ot far from Zurich, in the small town of Winterthur in eastern Switzerland, Max Bill was born on 22 December 1908. He lived with his parents and brother directly above the tracks of the Winterthur railway station, where his father was deputy station manager. Understandably Bill's first drawings were of locomotives. He was conscious of train maneuvers and injured soldiers being transported in troop trains across Switzerland during the First World War. He remembers the whimpering of the wounded and his mother giving the soldiers fruit juice to drink through the train windows.

His mother originally came from Brugg. She always had interesting things to impart, knew the names of plants and what they could be used for, and showed much didactic skill in patient dealings with her sons. Her father owned a wine business. When Bill visited his grandfather in Brugg, a colonel in the Swiss army sometimes took him to town. The colonel showed him different construction models for military bridge building. Bill was never impressed by the military (which in the Swiss scale of values comes close to being a fault!), however later he involved himself extensively in questions of bridge building and materials.<sup>1</sup>

Bill remembers that "in my parents' house, art was something natural." His father took him to the exhibition *Self-Portraits of Contemporary Swiss Artists*, held in Winterthur in 1918. Bill was not yet ten years old. It was the first time he was confronted by post-Hodler painting. He knew nothing of the occasional dada activities in Zurich.

Two of his uncles were painters, from the generation after Giovanni Giacometti and Cuno Amiet. Adolf Weibel, married to one of his mother's sisters, "painted neatly—but like a bourgeois," despite the fact that he was not at all bourgeois himself. The other, his mother's brother Ernst Geiger,<sup>2</sup> had studied medicine, forestry, and natural science, and then "began to paint on the side." Geiger was Bill's favorite uncle and his role model.

1. During the Second World War, Bill photographed most of the bridges in Switzerland by Robert Maillart. After the war's end, he published the photographs with construction plans (*Robert Maillart* [Zurich: Verlag fuer Architektur, 1949], 3rd ed. 1969). Eventually Bill's concept for the Lavin-Tobel Bruecke (Lavina Gorge bridge) was built at Tamins, Graubunden, Switzerland, 1966–1967, with the Roß engineering firm and their associates Aschwanden & Speck, Zurich.
2. Geiger graduated as Doctor of Forestry Science in 1900. After a study trip to France, Germany, and Italy, and several years in a teaching position, he resigned. In 1907 he moved to Berne and from 1911 lived by Biel Lake. He painted oils and watercolors and worked on graphics.



Fig. 2. Center, Max Bill,  
silversmith apprentice,  
Metalwork Department,  
Zurich School of Applied  
Arts, 1925. Max Bill Archive.

Originally Bill wanted to be a geologist,<sup>3</sup> but his school reports were not good enough. It was out of the question to consider studying at university. That he wanted to paint was certain. "Painting was a completely natural thing for me to do...and this naturalness has remained with me, even to this day." Of course his father thought he should learn a trade. "My next interest was gold- and silversmithing, which had a tradition: gold- and silversmiths had existed since the Middle Ages and, like engravers, were concerned with art." So it was that in 1924, at the age of sixteen, Bill was sent to the School of Applied Arts in Zurich.

"We pupils were lucky because the director of the school, Alfred Altherr, was an extraordinarily progressive person." In addition to being director of the Museum of Applied Arts connected to the school, Altherr was also founder and president of the Swiss Werkbund. As a silversmith apprentice (fig. 2), Bill developed a lively interest in the field. The thematically organized exhibitions in the museum comprising basic information ("the form without decoration," "the chair," and so on), a hallmark of Altherr, had a particular influence on him.

There were some extraordinary personalities on the teaching staff: Sophie Taeuber and Otto Morach in the textile department; Wilhelm Kienzle, who made "interesting products"—today one would say "design"; and Ernst Keller, "an outstanding graphic artist" who, despite being traditional, was "for that day somewhat modern." Keller produced, for example, the large clock face of St. Peter, trusted by all Zurich's tourists, and the symbol for the Zuri-Tram.

3. Throughout his life, Bill has maintained a close relationship with rock, granite, and marble—as a collector and as an artist selecting granites for his sculpture.

Then there was "Carl Fischer, the sculptor who made the marionettes designed by Sophie Taeuber<sup>4</sup> for the marionette theater, set up by Altherr, that had an enormous influence on the development of stage drama."

Sophie Taeuber was a jury member of the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, responsible for Swiss participation. Among the objects selected was a metal jug of Bill's. He traveled to Paris with Kienzle and a small group from the school. He went to see the Eiffel Tower as he was already familiar with its technical details.<sup>5</sup> However, the high point of this first trip abroad was two pavilions at the exposition: the Russian pavilion by Konstantin Melnikov and the Esprit Nouveau pavilion by Le Corbusier.

Le Corbusier's pavilion, located at the edge of the exhibition, had the effect of a white cube with large dark openings. The pavilion had been built around a tree that stood in the middle, piercing the terrace and the roof. Inside was an astonishing two-floor living space: the bedroom and an adjoining room on the second floor and an enormous living room and workroom below. There Le Corbusier hung beautiful and modern paintings by Léger, which Bill did not know, and set up sculptures by Lipchitz. The simplicity of external form, the overall impression of complete whiteness, the novel atmosphere were exciting to Bill. He felt that the spaces, so different from what had been seen and experienced before, urged one to live in them in an entirely different way. At the rear of the pavilion, there was a large exhibition on the town planning Le Corbusier had carried out for Paris—the Ville Radieuse.

The Russians had a budget of fifteen thousand rubles for their pavilion (about \$7,560). This gave Melnikov no alternative but to build "simply." In fact, the pavilion, located between the Seine and the Grand Palais, was built of cheap wood roughly cut by workers in Russia and transported to Paris by train. There, in the twinkling of an eye, it was erected and painted red, grey, and white. Its plan, with two diagonally crossing stairways, was incredibly clever. One of the exhibits was a miniature replica of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International (1920).<sup>6</sup>

Also in 1925 a highly remunerative Swiss poster competition was held to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Suchard chocolate factory. Bill participated, and much to everyone's surprise his poster concept *Suchard Chocolate 1826–1926* (fig. 3) won first prize.

He continued at the School of Applied Arts, where there was an excellent library. "There I was impressed by a book, *Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar 1919–1923*.<sup>7</sup> Another book I wanted to have [as a prize for a competition won while at the school] was *Die kommende Baukunst (Vers une Architecture)* by Le Corbusier, which had just been translated into German from the original French. I found both books of the utmost interest." Bill also attended a lecture given by Le Corbusier at the Museum of Applied Arts.

4. In 1918 Taeuber was commissioned by Alfred Altherr to design the marionettes and decor of *King Stag* by Carlo Gozzi for the marionette theater of the Swiss Werkbund. In Max Bill, "Sophie Taeuber-Arp," *Werk*, June 1943, he showed that, with respect to the form-elements of these marionettes, there are only a few related examples in the history of art, namely, those designed by Oskar Schlemmer for his *triadisches ballett* (triadic ballet) and Picasso's cubist figurines for Diaghilev.

5. From documentation in *L'Exposition de Paris*, vol. 2 (1889), left to him by his maternal grandfather.

6. According to Bruce Chatwin, "Konstantin Melnikov: Architect," *What Am I Doing Here* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989).

7. München: Bauhausverlag Weimar, 1923.

Fig. 3. Max Bill, *Suchard  
Chocolat 1826–1926*.  
First prize in the poster  
competition for the one-  
hundredth anniversary of  
the Suchard chocolate  
factory. Max Bill Archive.



Soon after, at the age of seventeen, he undertook his first trip abroad on his own: to Genoa, Rome, Naples, Capri, Florence, Venice, and through Milan to Zurich. Along the way, he painted the watercolors *Genova*, *Napoli*, and *Fiesoli* (1926).<sup>8</sup>

At school he had successfully produced various objects (fig. 4). However at the beginning of 1927, Bill, who always expressed his opinions freely and behaved exactly as he liked ("something that was absolutely not welcome"), was expelled from school.

8. Illustrated in *Max Bill*, Catalogo di Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (Università di Parma, 1977).



Fig. 4. Max Bill, electric samovar, brass, h. ca. 40 cm, 1925. Photograph Binia Bill.

"It certainly had the advantage for me that I could now go ahead and do what I wanted, something I had not known how to bring about before." After hearing Le Corbusier's presentation, he had wanted to become one of those "young rationalists." Also he had seen the first edition of the magazine *Bauhaus* in a progressive Zurich bookstore, and it had an impact on him. He gathered from the magazine that a new Bauhaus had been built in Dessau and that the Swiss Hannes Meyer was setting up an architecture department there. Meyer, who had just submitted (with Hans Wittwer) the daring concept for the Völkerbundpalast (Palais des Nations) in Geneva, took up his position in Dessau on 1 April 1927. Bill registered at the Bauhaus and was accepted for the summer semester in 1927.<sup>9</sup>

"I can still remember that very morning, just before I arrived at the railway station in Dessau, the facade of the Bauhaus building suddenly appearing opposite. There was nothing else like it: striking white walls and large dark glass facades and, in the foreground, the students' house with balconies and red-lead doors. Sensational!"

Since he had not finished his training as a silversmith because of his expulsion from school, he set to work to educate himself further at the newly opened Department of Architecture at the Bauhaus. At first he was assigned to the metal workshop with the master László Moholy-Nagy, but he did not stay long. In a slide-lecture by Moholy, Bill saw a work by Piet Mondrian. Moholy called

9. "Nr. 151 Max Bill" is shown in the registration list of those studying at the Dessau Bauhaus in the summer semester 1927. Quoted from Hans M. Wingler, *Das Bauhaus 1919–1933 Weimar, Dessau, Berlin* (Cologne: Verlag Gebr. Rasch & Co. und Dumont Schauberg, 1962).

Mondrian “the purest of contemporary painters,” an assessment that impressed itself on the young student. When Moholy asked him one day why he did not come to the metal workshop anymore, Bill answered: “I have caught the painting disease.”<sup>10</sup>

Bill went his own “liberal” way, concerned with various things that were not really scheduled into the Bauhaus teaching course. After he left the metal workshop, he joined Oskar Schlemmer’s stage workshop (fig. 1). “The possibility of finding a form of expression on the stage, in movement, fascinated me. The *figurale kabinet*, the *stab-tanz* were partly created there.... Afterwards, during a performance, we students actually tried to dance as well.” There were regular rehearsals, but otherwise one could operate the Bauhaus stage as one wanted, without fixed hours or a daily schedule.

Bill did not realize that there was a library at the Bauhaus. To reach the library, it was necessary to cross through Walter Gropius’s office. During his Bauhaus study years, Bill privately subscribed to *Die Weltbühne*—a weekly paper on politics, art, and science founded by Siegfried Jacobson, managed by Carl von Ossietzky, with many contributions from Kurt Tücholsky; and to the anarchist magazine *Die Schwarze Fabne*, edited by Erich Mühsam. In magazines displayed in the refectory, Bill first saw reproductions of constructivist work originating in the USSR.

The time at the Bauhaus was fruitful. Bill was able to focus on wider questions, such as social issues and personal philosophy. In addition to the basic courses [*Grundkurse*], he took part in the “free painting” [not required] classes of Klee and Kandinsky. “There were many students with Klee, a smaller number with Kandinsky. Access to his art seemed more difficult.... Kandinsky tried, in his caring way, to convince us that the development of art must go on. He kept up a steady flow of constructive criticism and encouraged self-criticism. His humanity, his sensitivity for the situation, and his fatherliness were the secret of his pedagogical success.”<sup>11</sup>

Klee, with whom Bill could speak Swiss-German, interested him with regard to thematics. “For a brief period I was rather strongly influenced by this. The theoretical background that Klee worked out I understood only much later. I maintain that theoretical work from Klee—still not all completely published—is extraordinarily important for the development of the constructivist concept.

“I also had a long contact with Josef Albers, in the beginning as a student. From Albers I learned a number of things that had less to do with painting than with the collective relationship design-oriented people have with their environment. It was the stimuli radiating from Albers that activated the will in me to find the fundamentality of a thing, not to let go of what I had made without justifying it [i.e., being conscious of the reasons for making it a certain way]. With regard to my paintings and sculpture, I take the same responsibility.

10. Later, Bill was delighted to learn that his Bauhaus masters—despite being at least a generation older—accepted him as their colleague. After his emigration to the United States, for instance, Moholy asked Bill whether he would join him there to work in a teaching position.
11. Bill stayed in contact with Kandinsky and, after Kandinsky’s death, he published his writing: *Wassily Kandinsky par Max Bill* (Paris: Maeght Editor, 1951); *Kandinsky: über das Geistige in der Kunst*, introduction by Max Bill (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1952); *Kandinsky: Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*, introduction by Max Bill (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1953); *Kandinsky: Essay über Kunst und Künstler*, edited and with written commentary by Max Bill (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1955), second edition 1956 and further editions published by Benteli Verlag. In addition, *Wassily Kandinsky—Zehnfarbendrucke nach Aquarellen und Gouachen*, ten color prints of Kandinsky watercolors and gouaches, selection and introduction by Max Bill (Basel: Holbein Verlag, 1949).

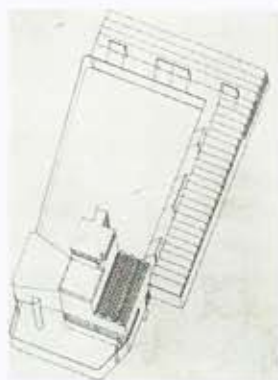


Fig. 5. Max Bill and Hans Fischli, architectural competition project for a kindergarten and district center in Zurich. Dessau, 1928. Max Bill Archive.



Later, Albers and I carried on an extensive correspondence about art. In 1953 we met in Peru, and he agreed to come to the Institute of Design [Ulm, Germany] to work with me on establishing fundamental principles for the basic courses, such as form and color.”

If something general were written about the Bauhaus today, it would be the painters—mainly Klee, Kandinsky, Schlemmer, Moholy, Feininger, and Albers—who would be mentioned. But important people from other disciplines had a significant impact as well. “With Friedrich Koehn, an extraordinary mathematician from the Einstein Institute, I took mathematics and a construction course.” In addition to that came architecture, both lectures and practical exercises. Hans Wittwer, an associate of Hannes Meyer, taught design from 1927 to the beginning of 1929; the Dutchman Mart Stam, with whom Bill also studied, was a guest teacher for town building and elementary construction from mid-1928 to mid-1929; and, starting in 1929, Ludwig Hilberseimer taught construction and constructivist concepts.<sup>12</sup>

At that time a relatively large number of Swiss students were at the Bauhaus. In 1928 Hans Fischli came from Zurich. With this new student colleague, Bill worked on a project for an architectural competition: Kindergarten und Quartierzentrum in Zürich (kindergarten and district center in Zurich) (fig. 5). “From what we heard, we succeeded in attracting attention with this competition, but we did not succeed in winning!” During the summer vacation, Bill traveled to Italy for the second time, to Salerno and Positano. There he visited Arne Meel, a Bauhaus friend, who went with him to Paestum. In Paestum the not yet twenty-year-old Bill saw the basilica, the Poseidon Temple. After a brief stay in Vietri he traveled by train back to Dessau (fig. 6).

He left the Bauhaus and Germany in 1929 and moved to Zurich. In 1930, an extremely active year, he traveled to Strasbourg. There he went to the Aubette rooms whose interior design had been carried out by Sophie Täuber and her husband, Hans Arp, from 1926 to 1928. For part of the decoration, they asked Theo van Doesburg, the Dutch theoretician and painter, to join them. When Bill saw the rooms, they were already completely neglected. Kitsch decoration had been added to the large stylized figures painted on the walls of *le caveau-dancing* by Arp, and *le ciné-dancing* by van Doesburg was no longer in use. After Strasbourg, Bill went to Paris with a friend, the architect Ernst F. Burckhardt, nephew of the well-known Swiss sculptor Carl Burckhardt. In Paris he took his watercolors to Jeanne Buchet’s gallery, hoping to exhibit with her. He did not convince her,<sup>13</sup> but this gave him the opportunity of getting to know Joan Miró and Lipchitz, as well as the young Swiss Serge Brignoni. Bill saw large format paintings by Pablo Picasso (he had never before seen originals) and an exhibition by Max Ernst. Accidentally, he discovered a magazine about the group *ac* [*art concret*],<sup>14</sup> edited by Theo van Doesburg.

During 1930 Binia Spoerri visited Bill to inform herself about current art and typography. Through mutual friends, he learned that she had earned a diploma as a concert cellist at the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris (her examiners were Casals and Alexanian); now she arrived from Berlin after studying



Fig. 6. Max Bill, *räumliche komposition, nr. 9*, oil on plywood, 69 x 44 cm, 1928. Max Bill Collection.

12. The dates are quoted from Klaus-Jürgen Winkler, *Der Architekt Hannes Meyer. Anschauungen und Werk* (Berlin: Veb Verlag für Bauwesen, 1989).

13. Jeanne Buchet told him “Nous aimons tous Paul Klee. Comme vous êtes un jeune homme fort et de talent, venez à Paris et commencez à travailler indépendant, et dans un an, je vous exposerai.” (We all love Paul Klee. As you are a strong, talented young man, come to Paris and start to work independently, and in a year I will exhibit you.)

14. *Numéro d'introduction du groupe ac*, Paris (April 1930). This was the only number of *ac* to be published.

**Fig. 7. Max Bill, design for Swiss Wine, Farm Production Exhibition, Zurich, 1934. Photograph Binia Bill.**



**Fig. 8. Max Bill, sculpture in the exhibition *Konstruktive Kunst 1915–1945* (Constructivist art 1915–1945), Winterthur Museum, 1981.**

**From left: *well-relief* (relief/undulated surface), corrugated iron, synthetic resin, 1931–1932. Max Bill Collection. *konstruktion mit schwebendem kubus* (construction with suspended cube), brass and iron, 120 x 50 x 60 cm, 1935–1936. Max Bill Collection. (See page 109.) *konstruktion*, brass, 140 x 36 x 36 cm, 1939. Zurich Art Museum.**

**Photograph Angela Thomas.**

photography with Lucia Moholy at the Itten Schule, founded by Johannes Itten. She did not agree with the teaching methods there, and a friend suggested that she ask Max Bill for advice. At his behest she visited the photographic laboratory at the ETH (Federal Institute of Technology) in Zurich, where she subsequently worked for about a year doing technical research. Early in 1931 Bill and Spoerri married and began to work together. Apart from joint commissions for advertising graphics, she was recognized in her own right as an avant-garde photographer until she gave up this profession in the 1940s.

Collaborating with his wife during the thirties, Bill earned his living largely from advertising and book typography (e.g., for the Wohnbedarf shop and Europa Publishers) as well as exhibitions (fig. 7). The couple were welcome guests of the writer Aline Valangin and her husband, Vladimir Rosenbaum, at Stadelhoferstrasse 26 in Zurich. Rosenbaum, a brilliant lawyer, dealt with legal issues surrounding *Neues Bauen* (New construction) architects, including the Werkbund housing project Neubühl (Zurich, 1930–1932), then the most notable project of its kind.

Bill would have preferred to work as an architect as well, but for the time being there were no commissions. Colleagues from *Neues Bauen* pulled him in to produce designs in the area of architecture, such as signage for buildings (the Zett-Haus, the Corso). Parallel to these activities, he worked to achieve clarity about how he could get on—in a radical way—with his own art. After the clever remark by Jeanne Buchet (“We all love Paul Klee...”), he moved away from Klee’s artistic thematic.

“In 1931 I began to look for a new concept. The first results emerged in 1932. Some of them were in the yearbook of the international artists association *Abstraction Création*,<sup>15</sup> and some were later exhibited in the *Abstraction*

15. Works by Bill are reproduced in the magazine *Abstraction Création Art Non-figuratif*, no. 2 (1933); no. 3 (1934); no. 4 (1935); and no. 5 (1936), the last edition of the magazine by Editions les Tendances Nouvelles, Paris.



Fig. 9. Max Bill, home and studio, built 1932–1933.

Photograph Binia Bill.



Fig. 10. Max Bill, home and studio, interior. Photograph Binia Bill.



Fig. 11. Max Bill, *konstruktion*, grey granite, d. 120 cm, 1937.

Max Bill Archive.



Fig. 12. Max Bill, *unendliche schleife*, 150 x 100 x 120 cm,

1935–1953. Executed in

black diorite, 1965. Sonja and

Tomas Bata Collection, Ontario,

Canada. Photograph Binia Bill.

Création gallery in Paris.” Besides paintings, a number of sculptures came into being: the *lange plastik* (long sculpture) (1933), *konstruktion mit schwebendem kubus* (construction with suspended cube) (fig. 8), and *unendliche schleife* (endless ribbon) (fig. 12).

Bill took the design of *information* in hand, a small format, antifascist magazine that appeared in Zurich (fig. 15). Its content bore the distinctive characteristics of Ignazio Silone<sup>16</sup> and Georg Schmidt,<sup>17</sup> the Swiss art historian.

In Zurich the number of exiled authors increased.<sup>18</sup> Some held readings at the house of Aline Valangin and Vladimir Rosenbaum, among them Kurt Tucholsky, Thomas Mann, Elias Canetti, James Joyce, Robert Musil, and Ignazio Silone. The philosopher Ernst Bloch and his future wife, Carola, visited Binia and Max Bill in their new home and studio (figs. 9 and 10), where they had moved in 1933.<sup>19</sup> From Bill's point of view, Bloch's writing style was not very appealing because it was too expressionistic, but he enjoyed their discussions.<sup>20</sup>

On the advice of Hans Arp, Bill had joined Abstraction Création and, on his twenty-fifth birthday in December 1933, personally brought some of his work to the Abstraction Création gallery on the Avenue de Wagram. It was his first participation in an exhibition in Paris. (When he went into the gallery, he saw a little old man cleaning the gallery floor; later he learned it was Auguste Herbin, president of the association.)<sup>21</sup> During this stay, Bill struck up friendly contact with Georges Vantongerloo and Piet Mondrian.

In Zurich Siegfried Giedion and Leo Leuppi were preparing the exhibition *Zeitprobleme der Schweizer Malerei und Plastik* (Contemporary problems in Swiss painting and sculpture) for the Zurich Art Museum. Bill took over poster and catalogue design. Published in the catalogue, in addition to a general text by Giedion, was a more personal one by Le Corbusier. Bill wrote his first theoretical text, which he based on *ac* magazine where van Doesburg had represented, somewhat unclearly, what he understood by Concrete Art. Bill sought to define the concept more precisely for the introduction to *Zeitprobleme* (1936). At this important exhibition, Bill's work was the most radical, resulting from his experiments in the early thirties with work logically thought out. His influence as an artist grew (fig. 11).

During this exhibition, frightening news came of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. General Franco and his troops had revolted against the legitimately elected government.<sup>22</sup>

16. Pseudonym for Secondo Tranquili, a writer who was on the black list of wanted persons in fascist Italy. He was among the first group of Italian emigrants to come to Switzerland in 1929.

17. After Hitler seized power in Germany, Georg Schmidt, with several architects from the *Neues Bauen*, established a committee in Zurich for aiding refugees. As a starting point, an office was opened at the Zett-Haus.

18. Scientists fleeing from Germany were advised to go to Geneva because stipends were available there for research workers.

19. Carola Bloch, *Aus Meinem Leben* (Pfullingen: Neske Verlag, 1981).

20. Decades later in Ludwigshafen am Rhein, the birthplace of the philosopher, Bill erected a *Monument für Ernst Bloch* (1989–1990).

21. Abstraction Création was officially founded in 1931. Before its inception, one of the founders, Theo van Doesburg, died; he was replaced on the board by the Flemish artist Georges Vantongerloo, then living in Paris.

22. Vladimir Rosenbaum tried to be of help in arranging used planes for the Spanish Republicans and their antifascist war. For this he was condemned in Switzerland, and his right to practice law was revoked.



Fig. 13. Max Bill, *tektonische konstruktion*, plaster, 80 x 80 x 80 cm, 1935–1936. Set up in the Swiss pavilion at the Triennale, Milan, 1936. Photograph Binia Bill.

Fig. 14. Max Bill, design for the Swiss pavilion at the Triennale, Milan, 1936. Photograph Binia Bill.

Bill prepared the design of the Swiss pavilion for the Triennale di Milano. As he was about to leave for Milan, a foreign, antifascist activist staying at his house was arrested there.<sup>23</sup> The police wanted to prosecute Bill. Fortunately he could show them his Triennale contract with the Swiss Department of the Interior and insist on his immediate departure. He stayed with fellow workers in Milan for about eight days to set up the Swiss pavilion (figs. 13 and 14).<sup>24</sup> Visitors and specialists gave particular attention to his unusual use of spatial room elements.<sup>25</sup>

In 1937 in Zurich, Leo Leuppi founded the Allianz (Alliance) group of modern artists.<sup>26</sup> Bill signed the statutes of the Allianz only after he deleted the passage "the institute is politically and religiously neutral," making the point that in 1937 political neutrality was out of the question.

That year Bill again went to France. He visited the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques in Paris, and he deepened his contact with Nina and Wassily Kandinsky.

Also in 1937 in Basel, the Konstruktivisten exhibition opened showing only constructivist artists, though it was difficult to obtain works from a Europe already half-barricaded. At the opening, Bill got to know the sculptor Antoine Pevsner. He also saw his friend Georges Vantongerloo (who had traveled from Paris) and Sophie Taeuber-Arp.

Bill had not been asked to take part in the Konstruktivisten exhibition, but he did participate in the Neue Schweizer Kunst (New Swiss art) exhibition in Basel in 1938. Not only did he show an entire room of his paintings and sculptures, but he and Georg Schmidt explained his work to a public audience.

In the same year Peter Meyer created an intense controversy over *konkrete kunst* (Concrete art) in the most important Swiss cultural magazine, *Das Werk*, saying that "it is an art that neither sets nor creates values; instead it destroys standards and harbors the intoxication of uncontrolled technology, the sadistic lust for the repression of individual life."<sup>27</sup>

In opposition to this sharp, unjust attack, renowned Basel art collector Oskar Müller wrote a letter of protest. The letter, signed by over fifty people with an interest in cultural matters, was sent to *Das Werk*: "That Peter Meyer, without discernment, rejects this art and fights with moral, even political suspicion, joins him to those [people and politicians] who, in reality, destroy values."<sup>28</sup>

In view of the next large Allianz exhibition to be held at the Zurich Art Museum, for which Bill designed the catalogue, he continued to develop a terminology for contemporary art. In 1938 he was in Paris for a longer period



Fig. 15. Max Bill, design for *information* cover, no. 3, August/September 1932.

23. He came to the Bills through people at the Schauspielhaus in Zurich and incautiously allowed himself to be seen at a party, which led to his arrest.

24. Total production cost (including travel, hotel, and salaries) was fifteen thousand Swiss francs.

25. For information about spatial organization and other technical and esthetic matters, see Max Bill, "The Swiss Exhibition at the 'Triennale di Milano' 1936," in Alfred Roth, *Die neue Architektur the new architecture la nouvelle architecture 1930-40* (Zürich und München: Verlag für Architektur, 1939; Zürich: Edition Girsberger, 1975).

26. On the board were Leo Leuppi as president, Richard Lohse as vice-president, and founding members Walter Bodmer (from Basel) and Hans Erni (from Lucerne).

27. Peter Meyer, *Das Werk*, 3 (March 1938).

28. Oskar Müller, *Das Werk*, 5 (May 1938).

to make sure that his *Fifteen variations on a single theme*<sup>29</sup> were carefully printed. He had found a theme, which he also took up in his painting (fig. 16): a spiral movement that led from a triangle to a square, to a pentagon, to an octagon, and back. The third side of the triangle moved out to form one side of the square, leaving the triangle open. All transitions were made in the same way, resulting in a spiral composed of straight lines of equal length. From this theme, proceeding under severe restrictions, using prismatic colors with black, grey, and white, he developed fifteen precise variations. This was his first systematic series. In addition Bill put together material in Le Corbusier's studio in Paris for a publication that would appear in Zurich the following year.<sup>30</sup>

The general situation in Switzerland toward the end of the thirties was marked by deflation, unemployment, political radicalization under the influence of National Socialism, and the devaluation of the Swiss franc. With uncertainty gripping the country, the 1939 Swiss National Exhibition (Schweizerische Landesausstellung) in Zurich, the "Landi," was a directive to the Swiss people to behave in a way that protected national values and identity. The majority of artists working for the "Landi" relied on traditional forms of expression and avoided experiment. Bill, in contrast, hoped to contribute something more modern.

After his success at the Milan Triennale, he had reason to believe that he might get a substantial commission, but the director explained: "What you did at the Triennale is not what we're looking for in the Landesausstellung." He pretended that commissions were more or less already given out. At this point, Bill seriously considered emigrating to America. Friends of his—an entire group from the Bauhaus (Albers, Schawinsky, Gropius, and Moholy)—were working there. And they had all reacted positively to his Triennale exhibition, which had been publicized in the United States.

He started a project for the Swiss pavilion at the next New York World's Fair (fig. 17) with two Swiss architects who were established in America. "We didn't win this competition; consequently, for the time being, I stayed in Switzerland." Then he was asked by the architect Hans Schmidt whether he would work with him. Schmidt had a commission to organize a Städtebau und Landesplanung (urban and rural planning) theoretical exhibition within the framework of the "Landi." Bill accepted. He knew Hans Schmidt well: "We had been to Paris together and had the same opinion about the problem of urban planning and construction. During the 'Landi,' an International Kongress für Neues Bauen (Congress for new construction) took place. Hans Schmidt, the co-founder of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne took me with him—and I became a member of CIAM."

In July 1939 Bill and his friends Georges Vantongerloo, Alfred Roth, Hans Curjel, and Ernesto Rogers were all invited by Madame de Mandrot to stay at her home, the Château la Sarraz, in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland.<sup>31</sup> From there Bill drove his car to Vevey, where he met Le Corbusier. They continued

29. Max Bill, *Quinze Variations sur un Même Thème* (1935–1938), sixteen lithographs, edition of 220 printed by Moulrot for the publisher Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, Editions des Chroniques du Jour, Paris, 1938, with accompanying text by Max Bill in French, German, and English.

30. Max Bill, *Le Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret, Œuvre Complète 1934–1938* (Zürich: Girsberger, 1939).

31. Hélène de Mandrot often assembled progressive architects from many countries at her medieval chateau. According to Max Bill, Le Corbusier built a house for her in France.



Fig. 18. Max Bill, competition project for the *Monument to the Unknown Swiss Worker*, 1941. Photograph Binia Bill.



work on Bill's Corbusier book in the garden of the house on Lake Geneva belonging to Madame Jeanneret, Le Corbusier's mother. Later, Bill drove the architect to Vallorbe to catch the Paris train. They met up with Le Corbusier's cousin, Louis Soutter. At that time he was almost unknown as a painter, but he gave "Corbu" as well as Bill some of his works.

On 1 September 1939 Poland was attacked by the Nazis. The Second World War had begun. In Switzerland mobilization followed. Between 1939 and 1944 Bill was called up several times to do military service for long periods. Parallel to this, he collected material for a book on Robert Maillart.<sup>1,32</sup> In addition, Allianz Publishing was registered under Bill's name. In 1941 the *5 constructionen + 5 compositionen* edition was produced by Allianz, partly financed by Bill. Then, under his sole organization, outstanding low-priced works appeared: by Leo Leuppi, by Bill himself, the *derniers 9 dessins de Sophie Taeuber-Arp* (1943), and *arp: 11 configurations* (1945). There were few customers abroad because of the war. In America there was some contact with interested artists and art collectors. Nevertheless, editions rarely exceeded one hundred copies.

Alfred Roth had the idea of bringing out an edition under the title *civitas*. A pioneering publication by Hans Bernouli, *Die Stadt und ihr Boden* (1946), was, as it turned out, the only *civitas* book. Bill, who was on the *civitas* advisory committee for a publication of collected works on humane housing, researched material for his own book about prefabricated buildings. It was extremely difficult to get facts and information from abroad. All the same, some of the material, acquired through Swiss embassies, was used by Bill in his book *Wiederaufbau* (Rebuilding) (fig. 19). Because it was not possible to obtain enough material, the systematic book originally planned for *civitas* had to be given up. After the war's end, completely new concerns took priority.

Typical of Bill's activities was that they were (and are today) multidisciplinary. In 1940 he began painting *konstruktion mit 10 vierecken* and also submitted a project for a *Monument to the Unknown Swiss Worker* (not realized) (fig. 18). In 1942 *horizontal-vertikal-diagonal rhythmus* (fig. 20) was finished. As for architecture, in the forties there were few commissions, and they carried heavy restrictions: cement and steel had to be reserved for defense construction. Bill, who had studied prefabricated systems, obtained a commission to construct a small private house in the country (fig. 21). He could use only a modicum of cement—for the foundations. The house itself comprised a skeletal wooden construction with exterior walls made from prefabricated sheets of Durisol. Bill took care to use as much natural material as possible: on the outside, stripped but otherwise unworked tree



Fig. 19. Max Bill, *Wiederaufbau* (Erlenbach, Zurich: Verlag für Architektur AG, 1945).  
Publication documenting war devastation and planning post-war reconstruction.

32. Worldwide recognition of this engineer, admired above all for his extraordinary bridges, came mainly after the 1949 publication of a three-language monograph by Max Bill about Maillart's work. The last construction Maillart completed himself was a railway bridge in Altendorf (canton of Schwyz, Switzerland) in 1940, shortly before his death.

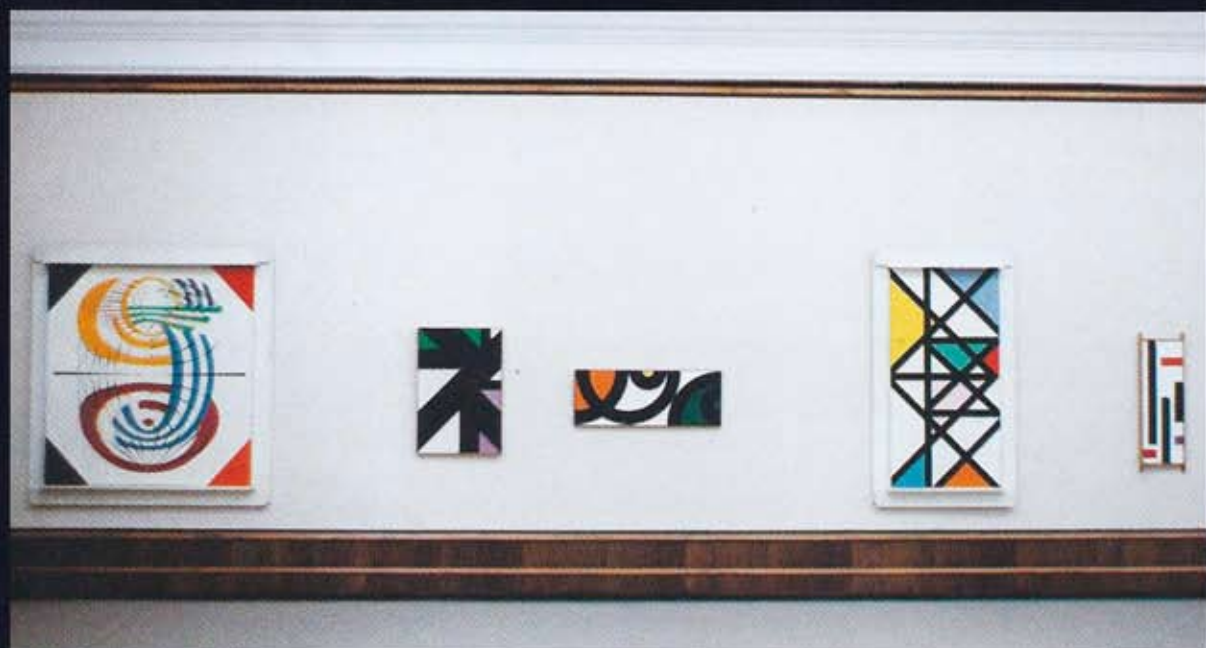


Fig. 20. Max Bill, paintings in the exhibition *Konstruktive Kunst 1915–1945* (Constructivist art 1915–1945), Winterthur Museum, 1981. Oil on canvas. Max Bill Collection. From left: *konstruktive komposition*, 160 x 150 cm, 1941; *achteiliger rhythmus* (rhythm in eight parts), 120 x 80 cm, 1942; *konstruktion aus 2 kreisringen* (construction from two rings), 39 x 105 cm, 1942; *horizontal-vertikal-diagonal-rhythmus*, 160 x 80 cm, 1942; *schwarze vertikal-betonung* (black vertical accents), 90 x 20 cm, 1942. Photograph Angela Thomas.



Figs. 21 and 22. Max Bill,  
house at Bremgarten (canton  
of Aarau, Switzerland), south  
side and courtyard (detail),  
built 1942. Photograph  
Binia Bill.



Fig. 23. Max Bill, lecture for the form course, Zurich School of Applied Arts, 1944. Photograph Ernst Scheidegger.



Fig. 24. Binia Bill (1904–1988) and son Jakob (born 1942), Hoengg, ca. 1946.

trunks served as vertical supports placed on top of rocks (fig. 22).

For the Musik-Sommer Gstaad 1943, Bill organized the exhibition *Moderne Malerei* (Modern painting) at the Palace Hotel, with works by Picasso, Ernst, Mondrian, Vantongerloo, Leuppi, Kandinsky, Bill, and Tœuber-Arp, which despite its small size drew much attention. Then in 1944, as the end of the war was foreseen, the Basel Art Association commissioned Bill to organize the exhibition *Konkrete Kunst*. It was the first chronological, internationally documented (as much as possible during wartime) exhibition of Concrete Art.

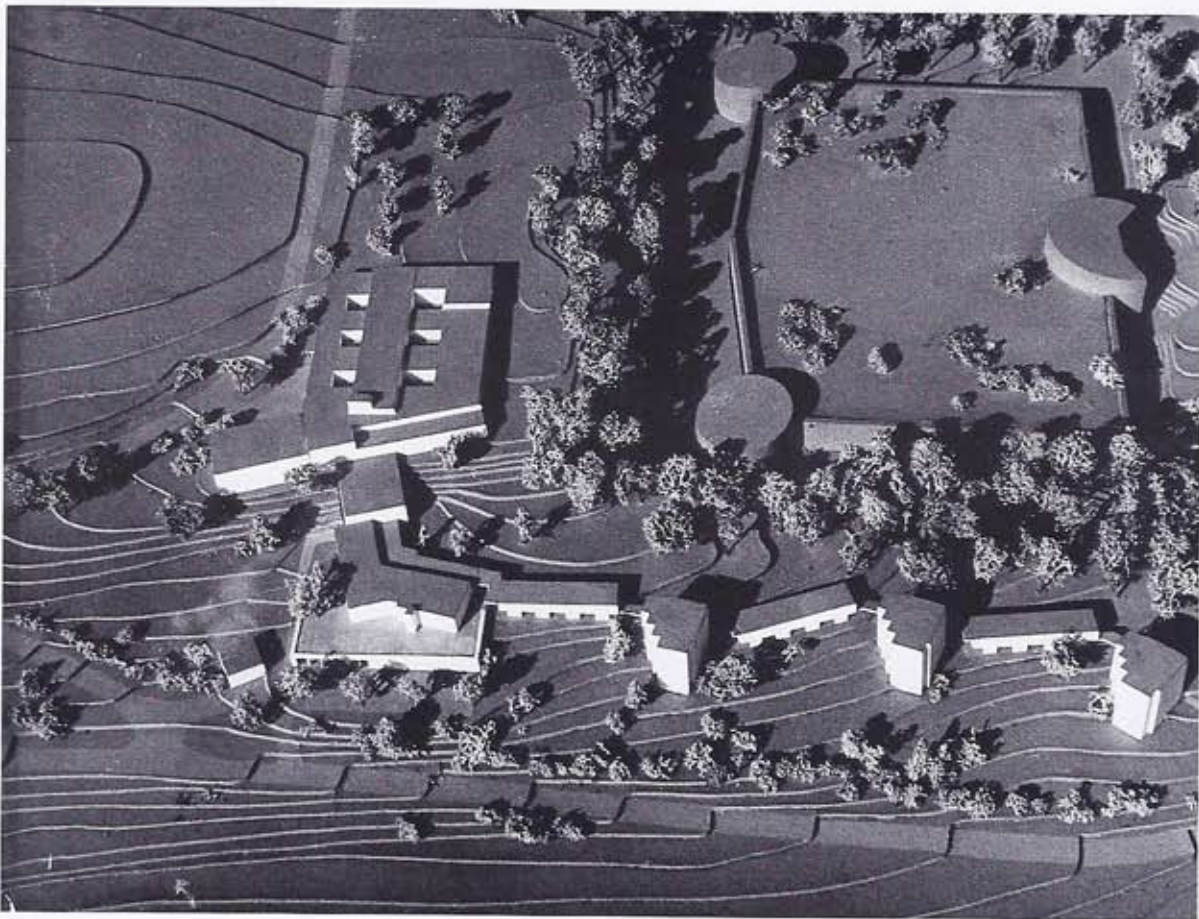
Switzerland was the main place in Europe where Concrete Art had developed. A catalogue appeared with biographies of all participating artists. *Konkrete Kunst* in Basel was much broader than the *Konstruktivisten* exhibition. It was astounding how many such works of art were available in Switzerland. There were also a number of collectors in Basel, Zurich, and Berne who supported the exhibition with loans.

In 1944 Johannes Itten, then director of the School of Applied Arts in Zurich, asked whether Bill wanted to replace him at the school teaching form. Bill accepted and systematically expanded the form course. His most industrious student was the photographer Ernst Scheidegger (fig. 23). Later he and Bill often worked together.

Bill enjoyed teaching and welcomed this supplement to the young family's income (fig. 24). But form theory was not a required subject. Bill's pupils had difficulties with their specialist teachers. At the start of a semester, only five students turned up in Bill's class. One of them said his specialist teacher had persuaded him that he should not go to Bill anymore but only to him. Bill replied: "All right, go ahead." As a result, only four pupils were left in the class. Since regulations stated that a course must have a minimum of five participants, Bill sent the pupils back to their departments, went to the secretary, turned in his key, and canceled his class, citing the regulations. The war was over, and one could travel abroad again. Bill promptly left for Paris.

The stay in Paris with Georges Vantongerloo brought meetings with František Kupka, Le Riccolet, and Le Corbusier. A new epoch began. For several years Bill had been interested in everyday consumer items. With the scarcity of materials, he thought only the best possible items should be produced as economically as possible. This approach was equally applicable to construction. Bill's book *Wiederaufbau* (fig. 19) was talked about everywhere abroad. This led to relationships with people who welcomed Bill's creative thinking. New contacts in Italy and Germany opened up prospects for him to assist. On the occasion of the First Italian Reconstruction Congress in Milan, plans were made by a group called I.P.C. (Institut für Progressive Cultur) to found an institute there similar to the Bauhaus. Bill was the central coordinator of the group; their ideas were precursors of the program that, toward the end of the forties, formed the basis of planning for the Institute of Design (fig. 25), later realized in Ulm, Germany.

At the annual meeting of the Swiss Werkbund, Bill gave a provocative lecture called "Schönheit aus Funktion und als Funktion" (Beauty from function and as function). This led to an exhibition for which Bill was responsible, *Die gute Form*, successfully shown in many venues at home and abroad. Simultaneously Bill carried out a retrospective of his own painting, architecture, and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in São Paulo, Brazil. On the basis of his book *Wiederaufbau*, Bill was invited to Leipzig for the First German Construction



**Fig. 25. Max Bill, model of project for the Institute of Design, Ulm, Germany, 1950–1953.**  
Max Bill Archive.

Congress on the theme "Building Abroad." Through a commission from the American Occupation Administration in the same year (1948), he visited and evaluated various German technical high schools [*Hochschulen*] and cultural institutes in southern Germany. This commission also led him to Ulm, where he met the circle around the public high school and the person in charge, Inge Scholl. Further collaboration with them led to the founding and building of the Institute of Design (fig. 25).

The first of Bill's works produced within the framework of this interview came into being in his seventeenth year, in 1925; the last, twenty years later. From this initial epoch, documented here in detail, followed almost fifty years of diverse work that is not discussed (fig. 26). Throughout his life, Bill has attempted to further the concepts of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Henry van de Velde, and Walter Gropius in a way that is critical and relevant to the times. In all his projects it has been essential for him to analyze problems, taking into account technical as well as economic and ecological issues while he looks for implementation possibilities. He proceeds with design in a lucid way, searching for reasons that emerge from the tasks themselves. Approaching each problem by this method, he avoids fragmentation. In the production of so-called "art objects," he poses the problem himself, then determines the material and the course to be taken. He views his occupation as solving environmental design problems. What he strove to achieve in his early years, he continues to pursue in his later work. He describes his painting and sculpture as items "for spiritual use." □

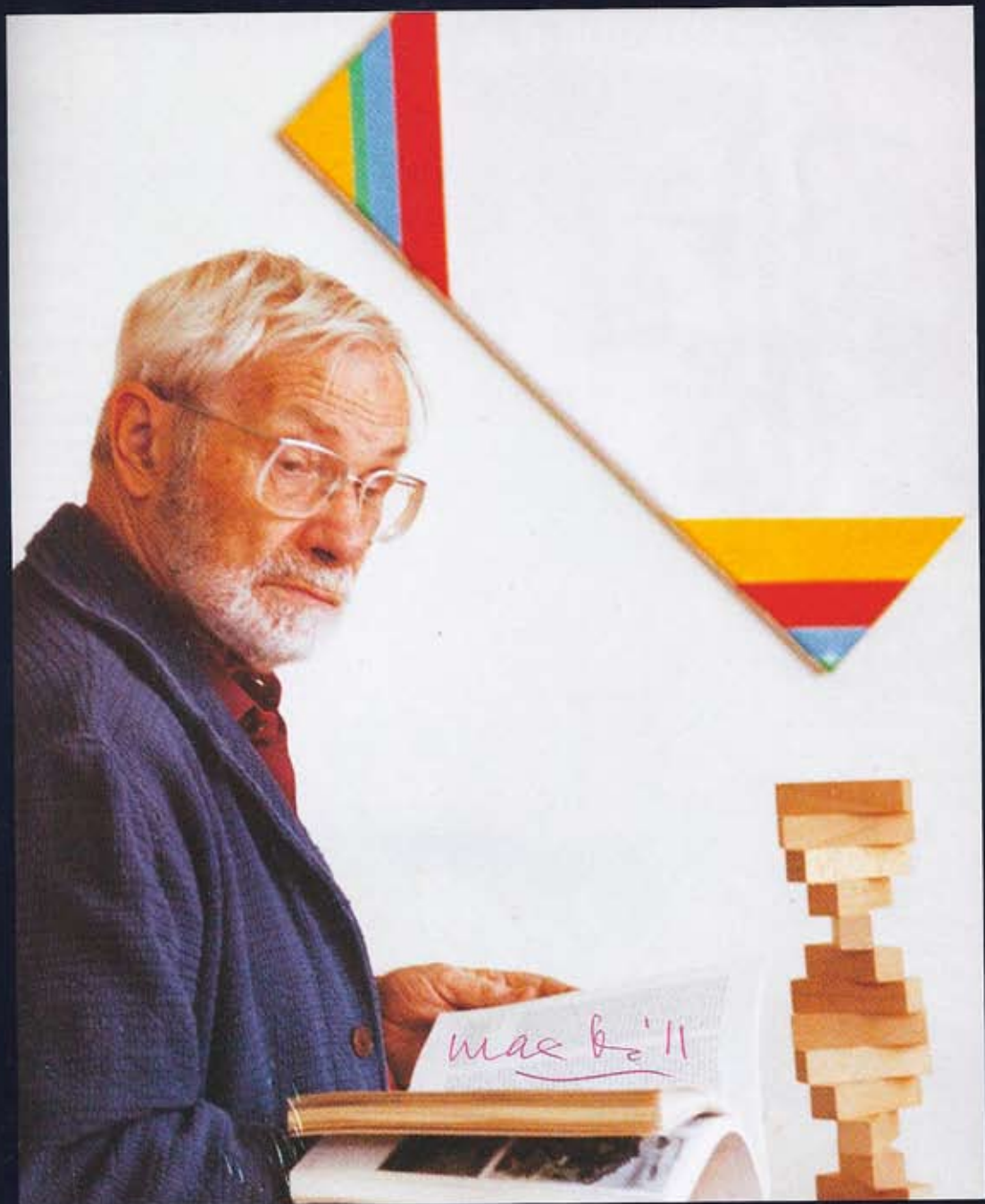


Fig. 26. Max Bill in his studio,

Zumikon, Zurich, 1991.

Photograph Angela Thomas.