

Max Bill's Connections with the U.S.

Max Bill was connected with important artists of the older generation exiled to America even during his student days and also cultivated a lively exchange with the younger generation of American artists (especially Don Judd and Richard Serra).

Bill studied at the Bauhaus in Dessau, which Walter Gropius had founded and directed before Gropius emigrated to the U.S. and taught at Harvard. At the Bauhaus in Dessau, Max Bill had contact with Lyonel Feininger and his son, T. Lux Feininger, with whom he appeared together on the Bauhaus stage. Bill studied with the Bauhaus master Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who himself emigrated to America and established the New Bauhaus in Chicago.

Furthermore, Max Bill was closely associated with the former Bauhäusler Anni and Josef Albers, who taught at the famous Black Mountain College in the United States. After World War II, Josef Albers and Max Bill had joint exhibitions in Stuttgart and Berlin; and during their stay in Peru, Bill convinced Josef Albers to come to the Hochschule für Gestaltung (hfg) (School of Design) in Ulm, which he had founded and directed, to teach there as a guest lecturer. The hfg had been financed by the U.S. as a reconstruction project to revive the foundations of the Bauhaus teachings that had been shattered by the Nazis, as well as to update the principles and develop them further in the postwar period, respectively. The Swiss Max Bill had received the commission from the American occupation authorities in Germany (John Mc Cloy) to clarify the situation of the universities after the wartime destruction. Max Bill came to the conclusion: "In Ulm we now want to try to make this school as if the Bauhaus had developed further during the entire Nazi period."

Walter Gropius himself opened the hfg in Ulm in 1955, and as lecturers Bill won Konrad Wachsmann, the German architect who had emigrated to America, as well as the now world-renowned

American designers Charles and Ray Eames, who were Bill's friends.

Beforehand Max Bill had also been able to form close ties with Piet Mondrian and Max Ernst, who fled to the U.S. Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber Arp had facilitated his first meeting with Piet Mondrian in Paris.

Together with that came his lifelong friendship with Georges Vantongerloo, who had lived with Piet Mondrian in Paris for a while. In Paris, both of them belonged to the important artists' group "abstraction création," which Max Bill joined in December 1933 at the age of twenty-five. The closeness of those ties is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the entire "abstraction création" archive (via Georges Vantongerloo) is in Max Bill's estate today.

In the U.S., in 1980 Max Bill arranged a retrospective of the works of his artist friend Vantongerloo, who had died in 1965, at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, then in Los Angeles, with Angela Thomas*, at the County Museum of Art.

During the Nazi period, there were also several famous artists whom Max Bill had hidden at his home in Switzerland, which was spared from the war. One of them was Max Ernst, who later succeeded in fleeing to the U.S. and was married to the collector and gallery owner Peggy Guggenheim there. Other artists whom Bill took in included the artist Friedel Vordemberge-Gildewart (De Stijl movement), who fled from Germany, and his Jewish wife Leda as well as Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber Arp, who died at Max Bill's house on January 13, 1943.

Shortly after his Bauhaus period, Max Bill, who lived from 1908 to 1994, created his first works of art, which today could be described as legitimate inspiration for American Minimal Art. Josef Albers with his "homage to the square" as well as Max Bill with his "well-relief" (1931/1932) un-

doubtedly exerted an influence on the emerging Minimal Art movement in the U.S.

There was a constant exchange of ideas with the younger generation of American artists, for instance, with Donald "Don" Judd, who published an art review on the occasion of Max Bill's first solo exhibition in the U.S. in New York in 1963. Anni and Josef Albers and Marcel Duchamp were also at the opening. Don Judd, who temporarily lived in Switzerland, invited Max Bill and Angela Thomas to his home in Küssnacht am Rigi.

At his solo exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich (Zurich Art Gallery), Max Bill was also involved with the American sculptor Richard Serra. In 1993, Max Bill was awarded the Praemium Imperiale in Tokyo, as was Richard Serra later on.

Richard Serra dedicated "site specific," a two-part steel sculpture (104 x 91 x 78 cm each) to Max Bill's home and studio in Zumikon. Richard Serra: "axiom (elevation bill)" 1998/99, two blocks of solid steel, haus bill garden northern façade, next to Max Bill's former studio.

Other American artists Max Bill was personally involved with include Dan Flavin, Dan Graham, Richard Tuttle, and Robert "Bob" Wilson. That is how Bill also acquired a large-format drawing by Bob Wilson from the "Golden Windows" series for his own art collection.

Why could Max Bill's art attract interest in the U.S. today?

Generally speaking, in an abstract sense it involves the reduction which has become one of the main global themes since the changes in society. In the sense of a reduction of consumption in all areas, global production is undergoing a dramatic, radical change which cannot be further explained here since it is comprehensively noted. In the meantime, in the global community there are important and universally accepted answers to the questions about the radical change in production and in the consumption of goods (energy, transportation, technology, etc.), even if the implementation falls short.

In that societal connection, Max Bill's artistic and design work is exciting and informative; for in the areas of art and aesthetics, he sought and found in design valid and in that sense classic answers to the problem of reduction. He devoted himself to that question in all areas of his artistic and design activity. He is one of the few world-renowned artists who sought aesthetic answers to societal questions in all of his creations, in art and design.

Of course, Max Bill was not alone in that, but had his milieu. But in that milieu, he was probably one of the most important figures of his generation. If the shaping of the environment is viewed in a general sense today, the influence of the concrete and constructive art which Max Bill and his milieu represented is incalculable. In that way, Max Bill's work always had an influence on everyday applied design. His art had an impact on everyday life.

The artist Max Bill endeavored to make very definite reduction-tailored aesthetic demands on society, which also persuaded him to become involved in Swiss politics as a member of the Swiss Parliament (National Council) and a municipal council and, apart from that, in the international bodies of UNESCO.

Max Bill's last big retrospective in the U.S. was held from 1974 to 1975 at Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Art.

Angela Thomas and Erich Schmid

* Dr. Angela Thomas is an art historian and was married to Max Bill.

Further informations:
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www.maxbillfilm.ch

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