

## **Marianne Brandt: designer of icons or 'real' industrial designer?**

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### **Abstract**

In 1923, under the slogan 'Art into industry: a new unity', the Bauhaus adopted a new direction. Previously, the emphasis was on engaging with craft as a way to liberate the imagination of the designer, whereas now the teaching of craft was to prepare design for mass production (Marcus, 2008, 346). As a result of this change, the Bauhaus produced an array of what have become design classics which continue to resonate with people a century later. By focusing on light fittings, a prolific and high-profile area of the Bauhaus, our paper will argue that many of the lighting designs had an emphasis on expressing ideas about form and material in accordance with Bauhaus ideology. Yet, very few could be considered genuine pieces of industrial design which aimed to meet user expectations and match manufacturer's needs. In our view, the Bedside Table Lamp designed by Marianne Brandt in collaboration with Hin Bredendiek, is one of few complete industrial design projects to emerge out of the Bauhaus. An analysis of this object reveals an attention to detail, sound technical understanding, an emphasis on user needs and a complexity of form that went beyond the symmetrical and basic geometries of many of the Bauhaus works. At a time when industrial design was emerging as a discipline, this is an example of actual engagement with industry and manufacturing processes. These factors combined to create an innovative light fitting, free of older forms and approaches, which enjoyed both commercial and critical success. This study contributes another layer of understanding to the beginning of the industrial design discipline, it positions Marianne Brandt alongside pioneer industrial designers who designed for manufacture such as Peter Behrens, and Christopher Dresser and it elevates the Bedside Table Lamp from just another Bauhaus light to a unique and important exemplar.

**Keywords:** Industrial Design, Marianne Brandt, Lighting, Bauhaus, Design for Manufacture.

## **Introduction**

In 1926, the Bauhaus moved from existing premises in Weimar to a purpose built building in the industrial city of Dessau. Designed by Walter Gropius, the Dessau building was seen as an expression of the new ideas coming from the school. The metal workshops designed and made a series of pendant lamps for general lighting of areas as well as the more specific task oriented spaces such as the weaving workshop. The 1926 Dessau lights were designed by Bauhaus student and eventual head of the metal workshop, Marianne Brandt either alone or in collaboration with other Bauhaus members. This series of pendant fittings with their pure geometric forms have become identified as Bauhaus 'products' and known for their elegant simplicity. Their appearance was driven very much by what was referred to as the Bauhaus design approach; a focus on pure forms and the idea of truth to materials.

In this paper, we will discuss how Brandt and some of her metal workshop colleagues, in collaboration with lighting company Kandem, subsequently took lighting design beyond the need to express certain type of philosophical approach into the realm of true industrial design. We will articulate a definition of industrial design and discuss how Brandt's career at the Bauhaus took place in the context of a general change in the school's approach from a focus on craft to design for industrial production. We conduct an analysis of the Kandem Bedside Lamp and argue how it should be recognised as an early example of true industrial design free from the need to express principles associated with a particular design approach. In this discussion we suggest that Brandt in particular, was one of the few designers from the Bauhaus that truly met the criteria of industrial designer, and that her role as an early innovator in the area of this emerging profession deserves wider recognition.

## **Transformation in the Bauhaus**

In a special issue of *Offset: Buch und Werbekunst* (Book and advertising art) devoted to the Bauhaus published in July 1926, director Walter Gropius reaffirmed the pedagogical aims of the school which were based on a

redirection towards industrialised mass production. The issue of *Offset* discussed how the Bauhaus would transform from the craft workshops of Weimar to the 'laboratories' of Dessau, where design prototypes were to be given priority (Gropius, 1926, 360).

This transformation did not come about easily as there was resistance from staff, most notably artist and teacher Johannes Itten. In the early days of the Bauhaus, Gropius eagerly courted the involvement of Itten - as a prominent painter and educator. However, by 1923 Itten's emphasis on the personal development of students was at odds with the newer direction. Itten was replaced by the Hungarian Constructivist Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, under whose leadership the metal- workshop shifted from making silverware and jewellery to the production of practical items for serial production by industry. In this redirection towards industry the Bauhaus begins to align itself with a traditional understanding of industrial design.

### **Industrial design.**

The World Design Organization defines industrial design as;

*'a strategic problem-solving process that drives innovation, builds business success, and leads to a better quality of life through innovative products, systems, services, and experiences'* (WDO 2015).

This definition articulates the three core elements of industrial design; the generation of innovative solutions, transformation of abstract ideas into concrete reality and the provision of utility for the end user. Although aspects of industrial design dates back to the activities of early tool-making humans, it is in the twentieth century, on the back of the industrial revolution, that industrial design is formally recognised as design related to serial production.

In the literature of industrial design history there are references to the key protagonists that are recognised for the role they played in defining this discipline. Entrepreneurs Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) and Samuel Colt (1814-1862) made contributions to industrial design by creating systems where abstract ideas were efficiently transformed into commercialised solutions (Heskett 1980, 15-18 and 52-54). Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) and Peter Behrens (1868-1940) were among the first to reconcile aesthetic and

commercial values in the design of products destined for manufacture. Often referred to as the first industrial designer (Lucie-Smith 1983, 70), Dresser's success was borne out of the close consideration of the functional requirements, material quality and efficiency, end use, and importantly ease of production (Heskett 1980, 25-26, Lucie-Smith 1983, 70-75). Peter Behrens was recognised as the first corporate industrial designer worked for German company AEG (Gantz 2011, 102). His kettle from 1909, although not stylistically groundbreaking was innovative in the way the design incorporated standardised components allowing for multiple versions of the kettle to be efficiently manufactured (Heskett 1980, 70). Behrens and Dresser worked closely with industry demonstrating the importance of collaboration.

In contrast to the collaborative spirit of product development adopted by Behrens and Dresser, is the entrepreneurial approach taken by Marcel Breuer. Breuer achieved modest success with his tubular steel furniture designs by forming his own company. Whilst still at the Bauhaus and without the knowledge of Gropius and others from the Bauhaus, Breuer established Standard Möbel to manufacture and commercialise his designs (Macel 2003) (Forgacs 1991). Within two years this adventure would end for Breuer, however, his designs continue to be manufactured up until the present day. Another Bauhaus artist Gunta Stolzl was a master of handwoven techniques but also capable of translating complex weaves for machine production. Gunta like Behrens and Dresser, successfully managed the challenge of working with industry, and the weaving workshop under her management became one of the most successful at the Bauhaus (Whitford 1984, 178). The authors contend that one of the more important and to date, lesser known examples of successful industry collaborations originated out of the metal workshop between Marianne Brandt and lighting company Kandem.

### **Becoming Marianne Brandt**

Marianne Brandt entered the Bauhaus as a student in 1924 having already trained as a painter at art schools in Weimar and Munich. Her transformation from expressionist painter to Bauhaus student was due to a number of factors. A sojourn in Paris in 1920, exposed Brandt to an Avant Garde cultural milieu which was more receptive to the work of women artists and saw the rise of the

*Garconnes* - women who demanded the same privileges as men. Then in 1923, following a visit to a Bauhaus exhibition Brandt burnt all her paintings and enrolled as a student (Otto 2008, 156). It wasn't long before Lazlo Maholy-Nagy recognized her talent and directed her to the metal workshop of which he was head. There were challenges for Brandt in being the only woman in the metal workshop as she noted;

*'At first I was not accepted with pleasure - there was no place for a woman in a metal workshop, they felt. They admitted this to me later on and meanwhile expressed their displeasure by giving me all sorts of dull, dreary work. Later things settled down, and we all got along well together.'* (Brandt 1970, 98).

Brandt's first major project in 1924 was the MT 49 Tea Infuser which became an iconic representation of the Bauhaus. As noted by Christian Will-Dorring, curator of decorative arts at the Neue Galerie, New York:

*'Each individual part - lid, handle, spout and base - can be clearly read. Brandt then put all of them together again by creating an abstract sculpture which, at the same time, is a teapot. The flat and spherical shapes harmonize perfectly'* (Rawsthorn 2007).

Sellers (2017, 49) notes how Brandt attempted to solve practical problems of using such an object in terms of height of the handle and positioning the lid to prevent drips. This approach moved away from the creation of a purely rhetorical object and towards the consideration of the functionality of the object which became a fundamental principle of industrial design. Despite these intentions, the tea infuser was not suitable for mass production at that time and all examples in existence are handmade. Brandt herself wrote about the difficulties of mass producing these types of objects (Brandt 1970, 98). However, the objects (tea sets, ashtrays etc) designed at this time did attain an iconic status in terms of representing a particular approach and have since been mass produced by Italian homewares company, Alessi.

## **Marianne Brandt and lighting**

Along with the various homewares she designed and made, Brandt was also a prolific designer of lighting fixtures, on her own and in collaboration with colleagues Helmut Sculze, Hin Bredendieck and Hans Przyrembel. The shift in focus to lighting was driven in part by the need to create fixtures for the new buildings in Dessau (Marcus 2005, 84). Many of Brandt's early lighting designs reflected the dominant Bauhaus philosophy that privileged pure forms and truth to materials. Brandt herself wrote that using simple geometric forms was a reaction against the 'kitsch of Grunderzeit (historicizing) of the years following the Franco-Prussian war' (Kruger 2002, 24), See figures 1-3 for Marianne Brandt lighting fixtures and note the simple geometric forms.

*Figures 1-3, Various lights, from Marianne Brandt Society archive. Photo Dr Ruth McDermott*

## **Kandem: the company from Leipzig**

The Bauhaus shift to a more industry-centric ideology brought with it a need to both reevaluate the artistic status of objects produced at the Bauhaus and to execute on the stated goal of mass production. Success came in 1928 when Korting and Mathiesen agreed to collaborate with the Bauhaus on the introduction of new lighting designs (Marcus 2005, 87). Korting and Mathiesen was also known as Kandem, a name that originated from the English abbreviation of their initials 'K' and 'M'. Kandem's contract allowed them to produce any new products they wanted, they could patent them and advertise them as their own, in exchange for fees and royalties. In the first four years, Kandem manufactured more than 50,000 Bauhaus lights (Fiel & Fiel 2016, 253). Most notable of the Bauhaus lights produced by Kandem is the model No. 702 designed by Marianne Brandt in collaboration with Hin Bredendieck.

## **Model no. 702**

*Figure 4, Model No. 702, from Marianne Brandt Society archive. Photo Dr Ruth McDermott*

The Bedside Lamp from 1928 also known as the Kandem table light No.680, was the first of its kind to be manufactured by Kandem. No. 680 was launched as a luxury version and was followed soon after by a simpler version the model No. 702, see figure 4. No. 680 was removed from production in 1931 on account of the more popular No. 702 which remained in production until 1942 (Binroth 2002, 106).

The following analysis will focus on No.702, it will first detail specifications of the lamp then discuss the object in terms of; efficiency, usability and meaning. No.702 was a small lamp weighing less than a kilogram (0.95kg), its overall height was 250mm and the diameter of the reflector opening was 105mm. It was recommended that a 15-20 watt (incandescent) light bulb be used, which is equivalent to approximately 300 lumen and the light bulb holder type was an E27 (Binroth 2002, 106).

No.702 was advertised as a bedside or night light. This specific context informed a number of design decisions evident in the final product. Not being tall meant the lamp was extremely stable, this was important because it could withstand any accidental nudging of the lamp from a half asleep user trying to switch the light on in the dead of night. This stability is further reinforced with a solid cast metal base with a wide footprint, providing the lamp with robustness and the opportunity to incorporate hidden features in the underside of the base to locate all electrical connections (wires, on/off switch etc).

Unlike other lighting fixture typologies, No.702 needed to provide the user adjustability in terms of lighting direction. A twin axis rotating joint enabled the user to adjust the lamp head to the most optimum position. This positive object-user interaction of No.702 was further highlighted by the type and location of the on-off switch. Firstly it is located on the base making it visible and easy to recognise, other similar desk and table lamps placed the switch on the shade, or in other less obvious locations making it less intuitive for the user. Secondly, the action of the switch was vertical, this push button feature distinguished itself from other fixtures that used rotating switches. This meant the user needed only to press down on the switch to both activate and deactivate the light, a step that was intuitive and easy to remember. Pressing the switch worked equally well with the precise positioning of a single finger or the approximate placement of a palm, any part of the hand worked, which in the dead of night proved a popular

feature. These were features which were not possible with older typologies of light fitting.

The No.702 was painted in a number of colours, pale blue, pale green, pale yellow and off white. This approach of painting instead of polishing and metal coating was easier, more cost effective and because 'people in those days thought aluminum was dreadful' (Brandt 2006 in Phaidon, 172). Painting also made the lamps more practical, they were easier to clean and keep clean and the painted finish shows less marks than polished aluminium or chromed steel. Formal aspects of No.702 include a shade that has a parabolic form which is an effective way to disperse light in a particular direction, a slightly curved stem that gently ties the base and shade together and the base that has a face inclined toward the user and not anonymously to the sky. This form disperses light toward the user and presents the switch at a convenient angle.

## **Conclusion**

One of the principal objectives of industrial design is to develop *innovative solutions* and in the case of No.702 there are a number of novel developments from previous light fittings designed by Marianne Brandt. For example, all of the No.702 metal components are painted in colour a move away from the once dogged pursuit of the Bauhaus mantra - truth of materials. As Brandt herself noted

*'At the time I was convinced that an object has to be functional and beautiful because of its material. But I later came to the conclusion that the artist provides the final effect.'* (Brandt 1970, 98).

In the case of No.702 the 'final effect' provides improved handling, functionality and a visually homogeneous aesthetic (all the same colour), that privileges form, features and function over type of material and material finish.

The form of No.702 is a departure from the geometric and pure shapes of many of the Bauhaus objects. This development was made possible because of the collaboration with an industry partner who had the capacity to work in a variety of materials. The collaboration and exposure to industrial technology enabled Brandt to extend her design language into new territory and create a shape that was more suitable for the final purpose of the product.

In the context of industrial design concrete reality refers to the tangible object. There are numerous Bauhaus outcomes that, although they never succeeded in successful commercialisation, are important rhetorical objects. So although they exist physically, their tangibility is limited in industrial design terms. The Jucker/Wagenfeld table lamp, known as the 'quintessential Bauhaus design' (Fiell & Fiell 2016, 273), eventually found an industry partner, Schwintzer and Graff, however it was never produced in large quantities (Phaidon 2006, 139) evolving instead, to become a museum piece and collector's item. No. 702 instead, overcame the threshold of industry production and was manufactured in the many thousands over a period of more than a decade. The design became ubiquitous, achieving a kind of anonymity which is possibly its greatest success.

Integral to a successful industrial project is the acknowledgment that design is part of a complex system and that developing fruitful relationships is crucial to achieving the goal of product development, manufacture and use. Brandt and her team were able to develop a close relationship with the manufacturer, a pattern that can be seen in later relationships such as Charles and Ray Eames and Herman Miller. An important but little known aspect of Brandt's work with Kandem is the role she successfully undertook as contract negotiator. Smith (2011, 171) notes that Brandt, as head of the metal workshop, was the key contact between Kandem and the Bauhaus – a role which in some ways lessened opportunities for her own design whilst facilitating the work of her students.

Utility to the user refers to the physical exchange that occurs between an object and a user and that this interaction results in a net benefit to the user. Utility of the No.702 to the user is identified through novel design solutions such as the vertical action switch placed in an easy to access location, the stable fall-proof base, the twin axis rotating joint and the easy-to-clean surface finish. However the most significant proof of successful engagement with the user is provided by the lengthy period (1928-1942) the No.702 remained in production.

The earlier work of Marianne Brandt (tea infuser and ashtrays) are included in publications and museum exhibitions. Brandt also had a vibrant practice in photography and photomontage, frequently addressing the difficult political situation in the 1920s, which has been explored by scholars such as Elizabeth

Otto (2009). What is not so well recognised is her role as an accomplished industrial designer leading a team and collaborating with a manufacturer to create a successful mass produced product. That this was achieved when the profession itself was emerging, points to the magnitude of her accomplishment and we argue a deserved place in the pantheon of pioneer industrial designers.

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