

**Marxism, Abstraction, Ideology, and Vkhutemas:
The Design Laboratory Reassessed, 1935-1940**

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Introduction

The Design Laboratory (1935-1940) exists today as a critical, but little-known moment in American design history. Supported by American industrialists and the Federal Art Project, a division of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, the school embodied a utopian desire to merge the aspirations of the Machine Age with the social policies of the Depression Era. With a faculty and advisory board including some of the most significant names in the arts, namely Gilbert Rohde, the school's director, and Meyer Schapiro, an influential Marxist art historian, the Design Laboratory sought to educate a semi-skilled labor force for careers in industrial design.

Most related historical articles tend to compare American modernist industrial design and its teachings at the Design Laboratory with the Bauhaus, a German school that espoused an idealist, utopian vision to create a new design concept to bring about democratic change in society. The personnel, curriculum and objects of the Design Laboratory essentially do relate to the Bauhaus. Former Bauhaus students Hilde Reiss, Lila Ulrich, and William Priestly served as Design Laboratory faculty members, and Gilbert Rohde traveled to the Dessau Bauhaus in 1927.¹ The preliminary course, "Basic Courses: Tools of the Designer," and other classes offered at the Design Laboratory closely relate to the curriculum of the Bauhaus and its famed preliminary course, *Vorkurs*. Even the student and faculty-designed work evoke a utilitarian aesthetic commonly termed as "Bauhaus style." For example, one table clock designed by a Design Laboratory student displays visual similarities to a table clock designed by Marion Brandt while a student at the Bauhaus. **(Figs 1, 2)** Both clocks demonstrate a machine aesthetic characterized by square and rectangular forms and are devoid of

ornamentation to facilitate mass production at an economical price. However, comparing the Design Laboratory to the Bauhaus reveals several historical misunderstandings.

The genesis of the Design Laboratory occurred during the rise of a dissident group of influential New York Marxists such as Design Laboratory affiliates Gilbert Rohde and Meyer Schapiro. Supporting the communist ideology of Marxism/Leninism, they concerned themselves with culture, ideology, politics, and the general theory of the mode of production. Through these foundational elements of Marxist critical theory, they sought to make possible radical political change.

To advance the Marxist/Leninist, cultural dimension of revolution, the New York Marxists critiqued formalist art theory, endorsed by the dominant cultural institutions of not only American elitist art historians and critics, but also rigid, Stalinist Official Soviet Marxism. The New York Marxists drew attention to not only the inflexibility of the Stalinists and various other dominant communist groups who banned experimental art which they thought to be cut off from reality and isolated in an ivory tower in favor of the 1932 Social Realist doctrine, but also the elitism of traditional, formalist art historians and critics. Many of the historians and critics were closely associated with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), an agent of both the United States government and the Rockefellers, who based the value of art on superficialities rather than context and tended to depoliticize art of radical political content.

In contrast with the Stalinists and traditional formalist art historians and critics, the New York Marxists endorsed not only experimental, abstract art, which included industrial art, but also the contextual significance of abstract art. Through scholarly articles and essays, the New York Marxists argued that a purely formalist approach to

abstract art was logically unfounded and that abstract art truly could possess social and political significance.

In his now famous article titled “Nature of Abstract” first published in 1937 in the legendary academic journal, *Marxist Quarterly*, Schapiro argued any great art, specifically abstract art, is not an isolated phenomenon, but interwoven within the economic and social conditions of its time. He explained all art, including abstract art, develops as a result of social and political conflictions caused by technological innovation within a particular context. Schapiro documented in his article the groups of European abstract artists, many who were supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution and living in socially and politically torn countries caused by World War One and/or Revolution at the height of the Machine Age’s productive power, developed a new form of abstract art, called industrial art, as an assertion of personal freedom in the face of the increasing oppressiveness and depersonalization of individual life brought about by capitalist institutions.² “Mechanical abstract forms arise in modern art...because of the values assigned to the human being and the machine in the ideologies projected by the conflicting interests and situation in society, which vary from country to country.”³

According to Schapiro, these abstract artists turned to new forms of abstraction in such a context to accomplish two major social goals. Schapiro wrote:

Their conception of the technology as a norm in art was largely conditioned, on the one hand, by the stringent rationalization of industry in post-war Europe in the drive to reduce costs and widen the market as the only hope of a strangling capitalism threatened by American domination, and, on the other hand, by the reformist illusion, which was especially widespread in the brief period of post-war prosperity during this economic impasse, that the technological advance, in raising the living standards of the people, in lowering the costs of housing and other necessities, would resolve the conflict of classes.⁴

As Schapiro implied that the significance of abstraction was greater than the formalists allowed, his art theory cut two ways. First, the article refuted traditional, formalist art historians, specifically Alfred Barr, curator of the elite Museum of Modern Art, for basing the value of art on superficial, stylistic qualities, stripping art of ideological value and radical political content, and deeming abstract art as a phenomenon isolated from social reality. Secondly, Schapiro's Marxist notion of abstract art ultimately challenged the Stalinist Social Realists who disdained abstraction as irreverent, decadent, and bourgeois.

Schapiro's theory of art not only broke ground, but also came during a critical period in American history. During the mid to later thirties not only did support for dominant Stalinist orthodoxy and the endorsement of Social Realist art diminish with the beginning of the Moscow Trials, but also an increase in resentment from left-leaning artists toward MoMA's and other formalist art historians and critics for repeatedly presenting modern art to an American audience in an a-political manner. Because of Meyer Schapiro's progressive theory on art, American left-leaning artists and other professionals now possessed the rationale to use abstraction as well as examine former twentieth-century abstract art movements as tools to ideologically combat not only capitalism, but also dominant Stalinist orthodoxy as well as American dominant culture.

Shapiro's pioneering argument ultimately helped shape the art thinking and actions of Gilbert Rohde, founding Director of the Design Laboratory. Gilbert Rohde wrote an essay titled *Aptitudes and Training for Industrial Design* that appeared in the *National Society for the Study of Education and Committee for Art in American Life and*

Education following the establishment of the Design Laboratory in which he too scorned the traditional formalist methods and declared the ideological importance of industrial design as the best form with which to represent the current state of affairs in the United States:

As for training for industrial design... There must be some study of the history of art, but it is here that we strike what is probably the greatest difficulty, because despite all that has been written on what is the matter with art education, very little change has taken place. It still tends to be taught in the Beaux Arts manner, as if art were an isolated phenomenon, unrelated to other experience, as if the 'styles' sprang full-blown from the head of Jove. If we can forget all about styles and get a sense of art as merely one human activity conditioned by wars, climate, geography, distribution of wealth, trade, religion, raw materials, invention, and temperament of local potentates, we will have a much better feeling for the appropriateness of form in our culture.⁵

In his disapproval for traditional, formalist art theory, Rohde further confronted the dominant force of formalism by advocating abstraction in his pseudo-manifesto "The Design Laboratory (1936)." Throughout his essay, Rohde continuously argued for American left-leaning artists to turn to abstract art in its most modern form, the mechanical form of industrial design, to better transcend a critical social consciousness. "What industrial design now needs is the active support of those interested in design as art. Stripped of hocus-pocus, industrial design is a very simple matter; it is design brought up to date, design in terms of mass production instead of hand-craft economy."⁶

To give his argument weight, Rohde next circuitously highlighted and condemned Stalin and his decision to denounce all forms of experimental art. Rohde professed:

The sudden emergence of this very vigorous creative design activity is not, however, an indication of a new-born impulse. The impulse to create has always existed in the human being; it has now been suddenly released after nearly a

century of almost complete repression. And the forces that released the impulse were the same that repressed it-crude economic determinism.⁷

Through Rohde's critique of "crude economic determinism", he articulated his anti-Stalinist, Marxist/Leninist political and cultural leanings. In accordance with the New York Marxists, Rohde viewed crude economic determinism, as an incomplete, vulgar interpretation of Marxism. Negating the ideals of the New York Marxists, crude economic determinism attributes too much emphasis on the ability of the economic base, upon which society has been built, to influence the production of culture and ideas. From the days of the First International (1864-1877) and intensifying with the Second International (1889-1916) and Engels, the notion of rigid, crude economic determinism intensified until World War One.⁸ When the Russian Revolution took place, Lenin's unparalleled achievement was viewed as the resurrection of political will against the economic determinism of those who reduced Marxism to the historical laws of Marx's best-known work.⁹ The Leninist legacy would soon be betrayed however as Stalin came into power and deviated away from the philosophy of Marxism/Leninism to support full blown economic determinism, notably termed Stalinist economic determinism.

Significantly, the notion of crude economic determinism necessarily implies that form visually reflects content and presupposes the absolute subordination of art to political ends. Stalin and his Communist International best typified crude economic determinism through their implementation of the oppressive 1932 Socialist Realist doctrine. The doctrine ended all revolutionary experimental activities, specifically those of the post-revolutionary Russian Constructivist and Productivist abstract artists that had been endorsed by Lenin. Importantly, Russian Constructivism and Productivism's

enthusiastic participation in Soviet revolutionary culture had made it perhaps the most exemplary Marxist avant-garde of the twentieth century.¹⁰ In his critique of crude economic determinism, Rohde supported Marxism/Leninism as well as condemned Stalin and his repression of the post-revolutionary political and cultural efforts and goals of the Russian Constructivist and Productivist abstract artists.

Another historical misunderstanding concerning the Design Laboratory lies with MoMA's tendency to present politically-charged art as apolitical. An agent of the United States government and the Rockefellers, the historians and critics connected to MoMA gave Americans a lasting, de-politicized version of the European movements in abstract art, which included the Bauhaus. MoMA assimilated Americans to the "beauty, majesty and simplicity" of the Bauhaus through formalist terms rather than focusing on historical specificity.¹¹ In the 1934 MoMA exhibition, "Machine Art", Johnson showcased work by former Bauhaus students and faculty members on white pedestals and platforms and against white walls that de-contextualized the objects as they were installed with the same focus and drama that was often reserved for sculpture.¹² In "Cubism and Abstract Art" (1936), Barr largely glossed over the political significance of Constructivism and the movement's connection to the Bauhaus. By the second half of the 1930's, Barr and former Bauhaus director, Walter Gropius, presumably because of his recent status as an emigrant from an extremely politically tense, anti-communist Germany, had successfully neutralized the social and political history of the Bauhaus with the 1938 exhibition, "Bauhaus 1919-1928". Socialism, and with it the important contributions made by Hannes Meyer, were eliminated from the exhibition in favor of focusing upon an aesthetic that was justified as the logical artistic response to mass production.¹³

In presenting Americans with a depoliticized version of the Bauhaus, MoMA also censored the Design Laboratory's social and political agenda. Importantly, Barr and Gropius cited the Design Laboratory in the catalog "Bauhaus 1919-1928" as one of several new American design schools influenced by MoMA's distorted version of the Bauhaus. In the catalog, Barr and Gropius displayed four examples of preliminary work by Design Laboratory students that demonstrated only visual similarities to that of *Vorkurs* Bauhaus students. **(Figs 3, 4)** Besides mentioning the preliminary work as studies in formal problems and material characteristics as well as the date and designers of such works, Barr and Gropius deliberately neglected to provide any additional information. By making only superficial comparisons between the Design Laboratory and an apolitical Bauhaus, Barr and Gropius presented the Design Laboratory to Americans as a school only concerned with the formal qualities, rather than the social function, of Bauhaus design.

The most critical of the historical misunderstandings regarding the Design Laboratory is the total oversight of the school's real model. MoMA's affirmation of the Bauhaus makes one believe that the school emerged as the only significant manifestation of the European avant-garde during the early twentieth century. However this is false. Interestingly, Barr had visited Russia in the winter of 1927-28 to explore current avant-garde production; specifically, paintings by the avant-garde Russian abstract artists working in the new revolutionary society.¹⁴ Remarkably, in light of his later apolitical representation of the Bauhaus and the European avant-garde, Barr had also made numerous visits to the Vkhutemas (1920-1930), the Russian art and design school

supported by the state and managed by the Russian avant-garde. He was very familiar with its curriculum and design and achievements.

To advance his quest to lay the foundations of an avant-garde art in the United States and establish an apolitical Bauhaus as the primary influence of American modern industrial design, Barr refused to convey to an American audience the stakes of vanguard modernism in Russia that was promised to a new socialist culture but instead delivered to a Stalinist totalitarian regime. Barr highlighted “the formal inventions of Russian suprematism and constructivism discrete from praxis without popularizing productivism,” a description of abstract art used for utilitarian and popular purposes developed at the Vkhutemas during the immediate post-revolutionary period.¹⁵ It was Barr’s perseverance, as much as anything else that prevented the Vkhutemas and its program of productivism from entering the general consciousness of American and European audiences.¹⁶

Szymon Bojko, a Polish art historian, provided an essay titled *Vkhutemas* for the exhibition catalog, *The Avant-garde in Russia, 1910-1930: new perspectives*, published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In *Vkhutemas*, Bojko helps to enlighten why the Vkhutemas went unnoticed for so many years. Bojko stated:

The well known Bauhaus legend is joined today by the myth of a kindred experiment of the same period: the Vkhutemas, a school of art and a center of creative inspiration, which occupied in post-Revolutionary Russia the same place which the Bauhaus did for the Left in Weimar Germany. The name Vkhutemas, (the) contraction of...Higher Art and Technical Studios, has appeared for some time in publications and at times is also used as symbol of an intellectual and artistic spirit of the Revolutions new art. The history of the Bauhaus and the Vkhutemas belongs to the ethos of the avant-garde. Both centers are its pride, and its unfulfilled utopia; both made a deeper and more durable impact on culture and history than such didactic institutions usually did. There remains for each a legend for succeeding generations, the legend of the Vkhutemas, as distinct from

that of the Bauhaus, has been based thus far mainly on reports that were emotional in nature. In the period of struggle against Formalism, the legacy of the Vkhutemas had been rejected for ideological reasons and this circumstance may have stimulated the legend.¹⁷

Schapiro, Rohde, and the other New York Marxists identified with the revolutionary goals of the Bolsheviks. By founding the Design Laboratory, they tried to emulate the Russian revolutionary model of art and design schools designed to foster a new type of artist who could train a (largely illiterate) populace in the ideals and goals of the Bolshevik Revolution. This important aspect of the Design Laboratory has been neglected in subsequent scholarship of the school because of the political developments in the States in the subsequent decades and during the Cold War. There is a degree of difficulty in assessing the Design Laboratory because of a dearth of information in the specifics of the school, and the objects produced by its students. My thesis sets out to shed light on the radical social agenda of the Design Laboratory by studying both the political preferences and affiliations of the school's founders, faculty, and supporters and to consider the school in comparison to the educational objectives of the Vkhutemas.

Chapter 1

The Design Laboratory: Founding an American Version of the Vkhutemas

Around the time when the *Marxist Quarterly* published Meyer Schapiro's essay *Nature of Abstract Art* (1937), a group of New York art educators, industrial designers, intellectuals, artists, and other professionals influenced by Marxism/Leninism took an interest in the history of Productivism. Referenced in Schapiro's essay, Productivism was a description of abstract art used for utilitarian and popular purposes developed in a post-war, industrializing Soviet Union by the Russian avant-garde supportive of the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁸ Importantly, both the Russian avant-garde abstract artists and Productivism were inseparable from the history of the most influential Soviet art school of the period: the Vkhutemas.¹⁹ Through art and design education, an accomplished group of Russian avant-garde abstract artists supported by Lenin and the state aspired to establish the Vkhutemas to train a vast student body to assist in reconstructing the culture of the past to conform to the new proletarian democracy. In doing so, the Russian avant-garde abstract artists at the school assumed the leading role in the shaping of proletarian culture in a post-revolutionary Soviet Union.

Although officially founded in 1920 to serve as a specialized educational institution to train highly qualified professional artists for careers in industry or education, the idea for the Vkhutemas is rooted in 1918, the period following the Bolshevik Revolution in which the proletariat, led by the Bolshevik party, triumphed over the capitalist classes. After the revolution, a close connection formed between government initiatives in art and education and the attitude of the artists.²⁰ Likeminded,

the government and the artists both sought to eradicate the art school system connected with the old regime.²¹ In replacement of the old school system, a complex of non-bureaucratic art schools known as the Svomas (Free State Art Studios) was created in Moscow, Leningrad, and other Russian cities. The state removed the old faculty members and appointed a new faculty of Russian avant-garde, artists, specifically the Suprematists and Constructivists including Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Olga Rozanova, and Alexandr Rodchenko, who had spearheaded abstract art. At the Svomas aggressive ideas were realized: entrance exams were eliminated, art history courses were optional, some studios without supervisors were established, and the students at each school, numbering on average 1500, chose their own professors.²² However, the implementation of several of these ideas led to confusion and embarrassment among both faculty and students. As a result the Svomas closed, reorganized, and reopened in 1920 to adopt a partial return to more traditional methods. The Svomas in Moscow reopened as the Vkhutemas (Higher Art and Technical Studios).

After the founding of the Vkhutemas, the thinking of what the artist and art should be in the new Communist society according to the Russian avant-garde abstract artists often shifted in response to the developing proletariat.²³ Indeed, ideological disputes often broke out amongst the faculty members at the INKHUK (Institute of Artistic Culture), a center largely supported by Wassily Kandinsky, which had a direct bearing on the development of the Vkhutemas.²⁴ On one side stood Tatlin, the ardent Communist Rodchenko, and other Constructivists, who called for the abandonment of the traditional tools used by the artist such as the brush, canvas, and easel, as well as paintings created by such tools. Instead, to reflect a rapidly industrializing, newly

communist Soviet Union, the Constructivists asserted that the artist must become a technician and master of the tools and material of modern machine production in order to offer his energies directly for the benefit of the developing Proletariat. In doing so, they desired to create art that would help free society from its bourgeois past.²⁵ On the other side stood Kandinsky and Malevich, the Suprematist, who argued art essentially was a spiritual activity. Hence it was the artist's business to order man's vision of the world. With interests in the spirituality of art, they sided against utilitarian art, believing that when art wants to become useful, it ceases to exist and when an artist focuses solely on the utilitarian designer, he loses his innate creativity and with that the ability to create truly innovative design.²⁶ The majority of the faculty was in favor of the new ideas of the Constructivists and rejected Kandinsky's program, deeming his theories elitist, bourgeois, and 'harmful to the proletariat'.²⁷ Devoted to his ideas concerning the spirituality of art, Kandinsky left the Vkhutemas and by 1922, Kandinsky joined the Bauhaus faculty after a like-minded Walter Gropius invited him to come to the German school.

When the Constructivists assumed leadership at the Vkhutemas they put their newest ideas into practice instituting the program of Productivism, which was not a stylistic term but the description of art used for utilitarian and popular purposes.²⁸ Still as abstract artists, the Productivists applied the utilitarian application to the method of Constructivism which emphasized technique over 'style' of any kind.²⁹ Consequently, the Productivists believed "Art is dead!" and exclaimed other defining, radical slogans. In no capitalist country other than the Soviet Union and at the Vkhutemas at this point was there such "an upsurge of violent opposition to contemplative art, and nowhere else,

including the intellectually restrained Bauhaus, was there a recourse to radical acts such as the rejection of the value of artistic experience.”³⁰

To introduce the students at the Vkhutemas to Productivism the school essentially endorsed didactic aims with purely theoretical experiments.³¹ To do this, the Vkhutemas “presented a coherent didactic and academic whole from the conceptual point of view, combining the interpenetrating areas of classical and design discipline. Its integration was apparent in both vertical and horizontal profiles in all branches—something quite unknown in the practice of art studies even in the Bauhaus”.³² The school had a Basic Division and independent faculties of architecture, painting, sculpture and metal and woodworking design. At the Basic Division, methodological and educational experiences as well as innovative ideas converged, often identified through a language of science that replaced traditional art terminology.³³ To further replace the traditional and to avoid a narrow professionalism, the work at the Basic Division and the subsequent mastering of subjects did not take place in isolation, but rather in interaction and complementation to promote a cultural unity.³⁴ This aim “governed the whole of the intellectual outlook of the Vkhutemas: the work of the academic groups, activities of collectives..., publications, exhibitions, and contacts with the trade unions as well as with industry”.³⁵ By receiving training at the Vkhutemas in a collective environment led by artists of the Russian avant-garde, the new type of artist was to become an “art engineer” or “art constructor” and develop a creative sense, inventive instinct, critical attitude, yet be able to work with others in their efforts to design industrial art for industry.³⁶ Working with industry in an effort to reconstruct the culture of the past to conform to the new proletarian democracy, Tatlin entered the Lessner metallurgical factory near

Leningrad as an ‘artist-engineer’; Popova and Stepnova worked in the textile factory, the Tsindel, designing fabrics; and Rodchenko began cooperating with Vladimir Mayakovsky, a poet and photcollage artist, on poster-propaganda work.³⁷ Yet in 1930, the VKhUTEMAS (renamed VKhUTEIN in 1928) closed as Stalin and the Communist Party abolished all artistic groups and created a single union of artists under Party control, paving the way for the establishment of Socialist Realism two years later as the officially sanctioned acceptable style.

Situated in the most industrialized country in the world and the most politically radical state within that country as the Depression exacerbated class conflict, the New York group of art educators, industrial designers, and other professionals influenced by Marxism/Leninism set out to establish through the state their own Vkhutemas, the Design Laboratory. Part of this group, Ms. Frances M. Pollak is interestingly credited as the originator of the Design Laboratory both administratively and philosophically. As director of art teaching at the Federal Art Project in New York, she worked within the liberal artistic educational goals of the state project to found the school. In the fall of 1935, Pollak reached out to Holger Cahill, the National Director of the Federal Art Project and former admirer of the Bolshevik Revolution to obtain approval for the launching of the Design Laboratory.³⁸ With enthusiasm, Cahill approved the project asserting, “This is one of the most interesting and creative teaching projects under the Federal Art Project, and we are hoping for a great many things from it.”³⁹ Following approval, Pollak picked a league of professionals to guide the direction of the new school. First, she selected Gilbert Rohde, an industrial designer predisposed to Marxism/Leninism, to serve as Director of the Design Laboratory. Together, the two

worked to choose a selection of expert artists, designers, intellectuals, writers and other professionals to fill positions on the faculty and advisory board and, as stated by the Design Laboratory, to work together “in the most real sense of those over-worked words”.⁴⁰ As a league of professionals who evidently viewed themselves as the indispensable aesthetic prophets of a new order in life, the primarily state-funded Design Laboratory trained a semi-skilled working class student body to develop abstract art, primarily in the form of industrial design, as an ideology of protest against not only the socioeconomic injustice caused by capitalism, but also formalist art historians and Stalinists.

Concerned with educating the working classes the importance of the radical political movement through art and design reform, Pollak worked at various positions in New York’s cultural sphere directing free adult art educational programs for the working classes prior to the founding of the Design Laboratory. In her line of work, Pollack established many friendships with New York’s ethnically diverse painters, sculptors, and designer-craftsmen. Several of these relationships formed during her work as the supervisor of the art students’ project of the Works Division only several months prior to her Federal Art Project hiring.

At this point Pollak contributed part of her efforts to the Hudson Guild, designated as a social reformist organization in New York often viewed as Communist, to promote social change by using historical materialism.⁴¹ Crude economic determinists neglect the double sided nature of change central to historical materialism valued by Marxists/Leninists and evidently Frances Pollak and that “is the notion that social change is the outcome of ideal and material causality. Human beings are the active agents and

seek to bring their ideas into being so their ideas shape their histories, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.”⁴² Pollak, working with the Guild, one of the earliest proponents of government-funded housing and management for the poor and working poor, designed a demonstration tenement apartment to train housewives how to obtain the maximum in utility, comfort, and beauty, furnishing tenement flats on fifteen to twenty-five dollars a week earnings.⁴³ Additionally, “...the apartment [was] to be maintained to serve as a working laboratory for studying methods used and costs involved in furnishing and maintaining it.”⁴⁴ By keeping the tenement as a working laboratory, Pollak and the Guild sought to continuously conduct social and economic analyses of the tenants. By understanding the tenants material needs and wants and how those material needs and wants were produced and distributed in the present and future society, Pollak could better educate and persuade the tenants the benefits of use-value furnishings rather than the traditional styles reflective of capitalist decadence and fetishism. In doing so, the communist Guild and Marxist/Leninist Pollack aspired to present and persuade the working class the value of socialist design to promote social change.

Pollak’s pre-Design Laboratory design and education initiatives paralleled those of Gilbert Rohde, which made her decision to select Rohde as the Design Laboratory’s director understandable. The shaping of Rohde’s radical political attitude originated from experiences in his early education, relationships, and design work. Beginning in 1909, Rohde attended Stuyvesant High, a vocational school where he first experimented with furniture design.⁴⁵ While attending Stuyvesant, Rohde established a long lasting

friendship and working relationship with fellow classmate Lewis Mumford, an intellectual, who like Rohde, would side with the New York Marxists.⁴⁶

After Stuyvesant, Rohde's radical political viewpoints began to take shape during his work as a political cartoonist. From 1913-1916, Rohde penned political cartoons for the *Bronx Home News*, known for its liberal political views and frequent muckraking attacks. For example, in October 1917, the *Bronx Home News* issued its legendary, local angle headline which read "Bronx Man Leads Russian Revolution," referring to none other than Leon Trotsky who lived in the borough from January to March of 1917.⁴⁷

After a five year stint as a commercial artist, Rohde quit the profession in 1929 to return to the socialist principles often portrayed by the *Bronx Home News* by taking on the vocation of furniture and industrial designer.⁴⁸ The significant influence in Rohde's occupational shift lay in Lewis Mumford's article written that same year for the magazine *Creative Arts* titled, "The Economics of Contemporary Decoration." In his article, Mumford discussed the "socializing" effect of the machine, asserting "the machine is a communist".⁴⁹ Mumford believed in the potential of the designer to fulfill "the great principle of machine production, that of conspicuous economy":

If the decision against conspicuous waste cuts the designer off from the single wealthy patron, let him be consoled by this: the community as a whole is a much wealthier patron, and once it begins to be well-housed and furnished-even a "prosperous" country like the United States is far from such a general goal-once it begins to demand modern and well-designed houses as it now demands its 1930 car, there will be more work for the artist in the factory than he has dared to dream of for many a century, as he waited in the ante-rooms of the well-to-do.⁵⁰

Mumford, as a prominent proponent of a Marxist/Leninist theory of design, profoundly influenced Rohde, who, after a decade's lapse in communication made the

effort to write to his former classmate concerning Mumford's article. "Your article in the Jan. Creative Arts...stated so clearly the very points I have been striving to express in my designs..."⁵¹ As evident in the article, Mumford, like Pollak and Schapiro, believed design developed by the Marxist/Leninist designer, possessed the ability to disseminate the ideology of Marxism/Leninism among the working class people, if the Marxist/Leninist designer continually presented the benefits of industrial, use-value, abstract design to the community over design associated with the decadence and wastefulness of capitalist culture.

Because Mumford's article truly inspired Rohde, he made a career shift to that of industrial designer to educate the radical political movement through the development of abstract art, specifically in the form of industrial design. Rohde's career shift and adoption of Mumford's design theory help confirm Rohde's support for ideology and Marxism/Leninism. Consequently, Rohde's reasoning to collaborate with other Marxists, namely Pollak and Meyer Shapiro, to formulate the Design Laboratory, was understandable.

Even though an established furniture and industrial designer designing for industry and mass production by the thirties, Rohde's designs typically failed to appear in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibitions. The lack of exposure of Rohde's work at MoMA seemed to be directly attributable to the museum's formalist art historians, Phillip Johnson and Alfred Barr. Although Johnson selected approximately four hundred industrial designed, machine-made items for their exhibition *Machine Art (1934)*, he only chose one clock by Rohde to appear in the exhibition.⁵² **(Fig 5)** Johnson preferred to exhibit designs representative of the International Style, Johnson's term for the formal

qualities of Western European design by designers such as Marcel Breuer, a former Bauhaus student. **(Fig 6)** Possibly one of the primary reasons Johnson did accept Rohde's clock, constructed of metal, glass and other new industrial materials and void of ornament, was for its formal resemblance to the International Style. In addition to only selecting one example of Rohde's designs for the exhibition, Johnson further snubbed the American designer by deciding not to purchase Rohde's clock to supplement the museum's collection. Johnson, who acquired many of the items that appeared in the show for their formal qualities, including the work of Breuer, seemingly perceived Rohde's clock as an unoriginal formal depiction of the International Style.

Rejected by MoMA, an elitist institution, may have further radicalized Rohde and inspired him to find ways to fully reflect his interest in Marxism/Leninism in his design.⁵³ A first example of his radicalized efforts is evident in his *Side Chair (1934)*. **(Fig 7)** In observance of the form of *Side Chair*, Rohde intended the chair for machine mass production. Inexpensive and devoid of any type of ornamentation, the chair included only five wooden elements, two metal rods, and bolts and screws.⁵⁴ Thus, the chair could easily be assembled, and without glued joints, was made to last.⁵⁵ Influenced by Marxism/Leninism, Rohde intended *Side Chair* not only to better serve a communist working class in form, but also, more importantly, to function as an impressive reflection of the ideology of Marxist/Leninism.

Just months prior to the launching of the Design Laboratory, the New School for Social Research, a school in New York fostering high standards of scholarly inquiry while addressing issues of major political, cultural, and economic concern, understandably hired Rohde to teach a series of fifteen evening lectures during the 1934-

35 school year. Significantly during the thirties, the New School for Social Research addressed cultural themes and embraced many communist artist refugees from various European countries, both in its faculty and student body. While at the school, Rohde spoke on a wide range of topics. Such topics included: the history of modern design in a cultural and economic context; the leading modern designers and examples of their work; “aesthetic, technical and economic principles and practice”; and the machine.⁵⁶

When Rohde came on board as Director of the Design Laboratory in the fall of 1935, Pollak and he jointly sought to assemble a faculty of politically radical, like-minded artists, designers, photographers, graphic artists and other professionals to train students at the Design Laboratory in the fields of design, painting, textiles, graphic arts, sculpture, metal, wood, pottery, and photography, as well as preparatory courses. **(Fig 8)** For example, Irene Rice Pereira, occupying the position as an instructor of painting and preparatory courses, deeply believed in art’s social function, considered abstract art the key to the future, and was heavily influenced by the Russian avant-garde.⁵⁷ Pereira’s thinking first originated while she attended the Art Students League specifically under Jan Matulka, the only modernist faculty member at the League.⁵⁸ Beginning in October 1929, Matulka introduced to his students the art and theories of the European avant-garde, particularly Cubism and Russian Constructivism, which would have a profound impact on Pereira and several other students. Consequently, Matulka attracted a group of artists including Pereira, David Smith, and Lucille Corcos, as well as Burgoyne Diller, who, although not part of the permanent faculty of the Design Laboratory, also taught classes at the school. Matulka’s following gained the moniker “the Communists” for

their rebellious insistence upon keeping abreast of the revolutionary stylistic developments in Europe.⁵⁹

Pereira's early art displayed a formal robust, semi-abstract manner, often depicting nautical themes and the machine, but subsequently shifted in 1937. The same year of the releasing of *Nature of Abstract Art (1937)*, Pereira's art embraced the purely abstract and over the next ten years experimented with a wide range of less traditional materials and unusual paints, as well as glass, plastic, gold leaf, and other reflective materials.⁶⁰ **(Fig 9)** Educated by Matulka in the revolutionary artistic developments of the Russian avant-garde in the pre-Stalinist period and ultimately inspired by *Nature of Abstract Art*, written by Schapiro, who at the time was serving on the Design Laboratory advisory board, Pereira's abstract art demonstrated the specifically Russian avant-garde use of *faktura*. *Faktura* refers to the material aspect of the surface of the pictorial or sculptural construct, which had to visually demonstrate to the viewer the quasi-scientific, systematic manner in how the construct had been made, exhibiting its own distinct property.⁶¹ Ultimately a combination of form and content, *faktura*, to the Russian avant-garde, was the materialization of Marxist-Leninist ideology.⁶² The *faktura* in the work of Rodchenko, one of the most recognized of the Russian avant-garde artists teaching at the Vkhutemas, and essentially in Pereira's work, demonstrates the artist's systematic experimental use of the newest technological materials that had reflective qualities, to place the viewer and viewer's surroundings into the *faktura* itself so that the viewer, now part of the artist's construct, became a component of the social processes that occurred within the construct.⁶³

Helping to round out the faculty, Alfons Goldschmidt, a Marxist economist with an interest in art and who had received his doctorate in political science, was added to the Design Laboratory faculty to teach social science classes at the school. Not only well educated, the Marxist Goldschmidt had already a prior extensive teaching career educating in nations experiencing social and political conflict. Goldschmidt taught Political Economy at the National University of Mexico from 1923-1925, and was a founder of the Latin-American Economic Institute in Berlin in 1929; he also taught at College of the City of New York in 1934. In regard to art and similar to the ideals of the Design Laboratory, Goldschmidt particularly held an interest in the collective spirit of the arts during the period of the Bolshevik Revolution, the time of the Vkhutemas.⁶⁴ Goldschmidt believed “the culture hero of a new golden age was Lenin.”⁶⁵

The faculty at the Design Laboratory was required to have some previous experience in industrial design and continue to retain some business accounts after they became instructors. The necessity for professionalism apparently grew out of the theory of Marxism/Leninism. Lewis Corey, a New York Intellectual, argued in his *Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935) that “the mass of lower salaried employees and professionals (the “new” middle class) are not ‘allies’ of the working class, they are part of the working class and its struggle for socialism because of their economically proletarian condition, their identification with collectivism [by which he means their work within the large bureaucratic structures of the corporation], and the necessity of their labor under socialism...”⁶⁶ In 1938, the *On the Cultural Front* section of *Architectural Record* endorsed a Design Laboratory faculty exhibition held at the school to exhibit their recent work and promote their current professionalism. In the article the author makes it clear

the entire faculty “is active in their various professions” and the show was “requested by the students.” As proof of the faculty’s labor, a photograph of a knock-down armchair by Design Laboratory faculty members Hilde Reiss and William Friedman accompanies the article. **(Fig 10)** Further linking Reiss and Friedman to industrial design and describing the chair itself as a form of ideology, the article attempts to persuade the *On the Cultural Front* reader to buy the machine-formed, inexpensive chair by explaining the mass produced chair sold at for a retail of ten to twelve dollars.⁶⁷

To help guide the faculty and the direction of the Design Laboratory in general, Pollak and Rohde sought to formulate an advisory board of like-minded editors, museum directors, professors, architects, and other professionals working within institutions connected to the forms of modern mental labor which included mass education, industries of culture and entertainment, state cultural bureaucracies, and white collar employment.⁶⁸ Formulating a working list of potential advisory board members, Pollak and Rohde looked primarily to Meyer Schapiro as noted in the Introduction, but also to others including Ralph Pearson, an unorthodox communist etcher and writer, and Philip Youtz, Director of the Brooklyn Museum and author of *The Social Science Approach to Art in Adult Education* (1930). By October 1935, Cahill approved the initial list with enthusiasm, writing “I think you have an excellent list of people for your advisory board...The more I think about the Design Laboratory the more I think it ought to turn out and be a very splendid thing.”⁶⁹ Among the names on the list of prospect advisory board members, all but four appeared on the finalized list. **(Fig 11)** Those who did not included Alfred Barr, Director of MoMA which was established primarily by the philanthropy of a baron of industry, Abby Rockefeller, and Frederick Keppel, President

of Carnegie Corporation. Alfred Barr and the others who were in occupations funded by industrialists more than likely declined the offer understanding the possible consequences of attaching themselves to a school influenced by Marxism/Leninism.

The names that appeared on the initial Design Laboratory board's list and lists to come, including some of the most significant names in the arts such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, and Russel Wright, validated the Design Laboratory's development of industrial design as a form of abstract art that ideologically expressed support for socialist beliefs. Affirming and praising the concept of the Design Laboratory in a letter to Frances Schwab, administrator of the Design Laboratory, Carl Feiss, a Design Laboratory advisory board member and regarded architect, wrote:

I am always very much disturbed whenever one of our present-day so-called philosophers begins asking whether or not America has reached the zenith of its creative capacities. ...it has not even begun to tap its resources; that it is only beginning to feel its strength, to sense its power, and to understand the potential beauty which lies within the dynamics of its industrial and mechanical future. Its scientists have not yet learned the social implications or the artistic potentialities which lie behind the things which they are creating. The artists, the sociologists, and the philosophers are not yet awake to the vast powers which are at their command towards the improvement and civilization as a whole.

(The Design Laboratory) can be just one more contribution in the development of a National awareness of what technics can do for us, whether in mass production, for housing, for industry, for health, or for any other civilizing trend. The Laboratory School has contributed and can continue to contribute a great deal to design education through a clear understanding of the real value of this element being designed and its place in the social structure."⁷⁰

With an advisory board and faculty selected, the school committed itself to raise the amateur, working-class student to the level of revolutionary rather than keeping the student at the level of a degraded, semi-unskilled person. The school's student body was

purposely comprised of an egalitarian group of approximately two hundred semi-skilled workers. Students regardless of age, gender or national origin unable to afford tuition required by private schools could apply to the Design Laboratory, because the state project provided free tuition for all students. The school accommodated its working class student body by offering a flexible class schedule of day, afternoon and night classes, Monday through Friday. The Design Laboratory often publicly supported its working class, egalitarian student body through the forms of modern mental labor to enhance group solidarity. For example, a photographer snapped photographs intended for the media of numerous men, women, students, and faculty of varying ethnicities as well as Gilbert Rohde himself actively working on projects. **(Fig 12, 13)**

In addition to state funds provided by the Federal Art Project, the Design Laboratory collaborated with institutions and individuals that shared similar political and social opinions. These additional funds initially came from likely and unlikely sources. The Education Department of the Young Men's Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.) provided initial housing for the incoming Design Laboratory's students to help alleviate space limitations. The left-leaning Design Laboratory must have appealed to the Y.M.H.A., a predominantly communist, Jewish Guild.

Holger Cahill requested a grant of approximately twenty-five thousand dollars from the American Council of Education (ACE), funded by, paradoxically, the Rockefeller Foundation. Holger asked the ACE for funding intended for equipment, materials, and supplies as well as transportation, to send trained students from the Design Laboratory to states and regions under-privileged in art.⁷¹ Cahill obtained the funding for the Design Laboratory from Rockefeller, an industrialist apparently concerned with

supporting a school whose better trained industrial designers could ultimately benefit himself. However, Cahill's request unfolded as a Marxist/Leninist strategy that would ultimately succeed. By establishing a working relationship with Rockefeller, Cahill created a window of opportunity to exhibit student's designs that ideologically supported radical socialist beliefs at one of the most dominant cultural centers of New York City, the Rockefeller Center, in retrospect to an earlier event, "The Battle at the Rockefeller Center".

Nelson Rockefeller angered many politically radical artists during the thirties when the industrialist presented himself as an art patron to the Mexican muralists. Rockefeller supported the work of the muralists in hopes of establishing rapport with Mexican society to prevent his oil refineries from being nationalized by the Mexican government. The superficial relationship outraged politically radical artists and they acted accordingly.

One of the most famous of these controversies occurred in 1932 when Rockefeller commissioned Diego Rivera, an ardent Trotskyist, to create a fresco on one of the walls in the RCA Building, the centerpiece of the Rockefeller Center. Such support showed its limitations when the Trotskyist painted several unapproved Bolshevik subjects in the mural, including Moscow May Day scenes and a clear portrait of Lenin. When Rivera refused Rockefeller's insistence to remove the controversial subjects, the industrialist had the mural covered, which spawned a famous case of censorship.

"The Battle of the Rockefeller Center" revealed the manifestation of the cultural controversies transpiring in this era. Firstly, "The Battle of the Rockefeller Center" marked the cultural clash between dissident and Stalinist, mainstream communists. On

one side stood the mainstream communists who denounced Rivera's work as 'reactionary' and 'counterrevolutionary' and refused to support the Mexican artist, who they believed betrayed the masses by painting in buildings owned by capitalists.⁷² On the other side stood the dissident communists, the Trotskyists, Lovestoneites, and those influenced by Marxism/Leninism, who reacted in an exactly opposite manner.^{73 74} Secondly, dissident communists, angered by formalist art critics tendency to de-politicize art, strongly disagreed with Rockefeller's initial attempt to edit the revolutionary Russian content Rivera sited in his mural.

Significantly, several years after the Rockefeller controversy, the Design Laboratory held an exhibition at the Horticulture Hall in the Gardens of the Nations, Thirty Rockefeller Center from April 6-20 in 1936 in an effort to confirm the Design Laboratory's siding with the dissident communists and attempt to avenge Rivera for Rockefeller's censorship. Jacket designs, travel posters, and posters of other types, by the Design Laboratory students and instructor Wesley Whitfield Walker of the night class in graphic arts, appeared in the exhibition, as venerated in an exhibition flyer.⁷⁵ **(Fig 14)** The Art Director's Club, a club formed in 1920 to not only address the uncertain relationship between advertising art and fine art, but to also judge entries according to aesthetic merits rather than effectiveness of persuasion, sponsored the exhibition.⁷⁶ Because of the formal judging specifications, the Design Laboratory possessed the ability to display student work that demonstrated the ideology of Marxism/Leninism similar to the social content Rivera portrayed in his mural, but through abstraction.⁷⁷ Consequently, by promoting radical socio-political ideologies through abstract design in the Rockefeller Center, the Design Laboratory not only confirmed its position on the side of the dissident

communists, but also actively retaliated against Rockefeller's propensity to de-politicize revolutionary Russian culture.

As exemplified at the student exhibition held at the Rockefeller Center, the students demonstrated the goals of the state's own new art school, the Design Laboratory. With a Marxist/Leninist faculty and advisory board of professionals, the Design Laboratory intended to train its own rising generation of artists in the spirit of its own ideology. They trained the student to undertake the position of productivist abstract artist, for the Design Laboratory ardently believed that art and design needed to not only fulfill a social function, but to also be expressive of the ideological aspirations of the anticipated revolutionary state. As opposed to the situation of the Design Laboratory and the Vkhutemas, the Bauhaus had faced violent antipathy and resistance in its immediate environment, forcing it to be on the defensive during its entire history.⁷⁸ The Vkhutemas, the brainchild of a victorious revolution in which the avant-garde, abstract artists were elevated to the status of official art, consecrated by the signature of Lenin and the state, would consequently serve as the best model for the Design Laboratory.

Chapter 2

Historical Materialism: A Critical Component of the Design Laboratory

With similar political affinities, the Design Laboratory's advisory board and faculty members structured the school's curriculum by studying Deweyan Pragmatism and the curricula of European art and design schools that advocated social change and reform. Although the Design Laboratory group examined the progressive Bauhaus' model of art and design education which was founded on the coattails of the Arts and Crafts tradition, itself inspired by an older utopian socialism, Marxists viewed utopian socialism as inadequate, for idealism presented a vision and long-term goal for society.⁷⁹ To facilitate revolution through culture and ideas, the Design Laboratory members scrutinized the modern philosophical and intellectual work of John Dewey and the Bauhaus in conjunction with the productivist design theory, inseparable from the Vkhutemas' model of art and design education. Unlike the Bauhaus, the Vkhutemas offered a multi-pronged model that must have appealed to the Design Laboratory: On the one hand, the Vkhutemas' embrace of Productivism complemented the school's understanding of Marxism/Leninism, for the Vkhutemas proclaimed that their ideological foundation was scientific communism, built on the theory of historical materialism, and that they intended to attain the communistic expression of material structures; on the other, the Russian school's embrace of abstraction associated with the revolutionary period before the Stalinist purges and repression could now be supported by the Design Laboratory to express the school's own anti-Stalinist vision of Marxism and to highlight the politically radical content of abstract art censored by American formalist art historians and critics.⁸⁰

In following the ideals of the New York Marxists, the Design Laboratory studied Deweyan Pragmatism. John Dewey, a United States pragmatic philosopher who advocated progressive education, sought to create schools that both reflected and changed the real world. To do this, Dewey believed that in an American industrial democracy, an industrial design education was needed.⁸¹ Dewey advocated that these schools be “child centered” with the curriculum and instruction tailored to the scientific method to facilitate the development of the individual. The Design Laboratory followed Dewey’s pioneering thoughts on education and developed, as Elizabeth McClausland, art critic and advisory board member, stated “...the idea of letting a child (or an adolescent or an adult) learn by doing, learn by trying, learn by making mistakes, learn by rejecting his mistakes and incorporating the hard-won experience into his new efforts.”⁸²

To better satisfy the radical goals of the Design Laboratory, the school based itself not only on Deweyan Pragmatism, but also considered the educational programs of the Bauhaus and the Vkhutemas. The Vkhutemas based its industrial design educational on the theory of Marxist historical materialism, the methodological approach to the study of society, economics, and history. As a materialist conception of history, Marxist historical materialism looks for the causes of developments and changes in human society in the means by which humans collectively produce the necessities of life. By educating its working-class students, many from backgrounds of poverty, insecurity, and degradation, to understand the science of society, the Vkhutemas intended to help create a revolutionary ferment powerful enough to liberate humanity.

Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus based on the idealistic, Arts and Crafts tradition and Expressionism; both inspired by utopian socialism, not on the rigidity of

Marxist historical materialism. Although Gropius was later influenced by the era's Marxist obsession with ridding society of class differences, he was not a Bolshevik. In the founding Bauhaus Manifesto, an idealist, expressionist Gropius clarified, "If the young person who rejoices in creative activity begins his career as in the older days by learning a craft, then the unproductive "artist" will no longer be condemned to inadequate artistry, for his skills will be preserved for the crafts in which he can achieve great things."⁸³ The Bauhaus faculty similarly kept a cautious distance from Marxism. For example, Moholy-Nagy, an influential faculty member of the Bauhaus and in charge of the foundation course since late 1922, felt dissatisfaction with Marxian communism after the failed Bolshevik revolution in his homeland of Hungary. According to Nagy, who wished to remove all historical art forms, felt Marxian historical materialism was insufficiently revolutionary.⁸⁴ Moholy-Nagy also felt that Marxism paid insufficient attention to the individual and excluded the creative individuality of the artist.⁸⁵

Comparing the Bauhaus' and Vkhutemas' mandatory preliminary courses helps to highlight the historical materialist component of the Vkhutemas' curriculum that the Bauhaus lacked. The Vkhutemas' mandatory preliminary course, the Basic Division, did have a similar function to that of the Bauhaus' *Vorkurs*. Both the *Vorkurs* and Basic Division required students to familiarize themselves with materials, textures, and color through experimentation. However, the Basic Division was a convergence of educational experimentation and methodological study of society, economics, and history.⁸⁶ A shortcoming of the Bauhaus' preliminary course, was the fact that it did not address history, human nature, or the environment.⁸⁷

In recognizing these differences, the structure of the Design Laboratory's prerequisite basic courses, later termed "Basic Courses: Tools of the Designer" primarily followed the educational model of the Vkhutemas and the Soviet school's principles of historical materialism. Aimed to give the student a broad technical as well as cultural background, the Design Laboratory required the student to take Basic Courses prior to entering one of the specific fields of industrial design. Part of the Basic Course curriculum included Materials Laboratory, Design Synthesis, and Color, as well as industrial design and drafting courses which exhibited similarity to the technical studies required by both the Vkhutemas and the Bauhaus. Unlike the Bauhaus, however, the Design Laboratory added a historical materialist component to its Basic Courses. In order to supplement the technical component of the Basic Courses, the Design Laboratory required students to complete historical, social, and economic courses, including Social Science I, II, and III as well as Consumer Analysis I. Social Science I was a survey of economics, technology, architecture and allied arts in their historical development from beginnings to present. Social Science II examined the technological developments since the Industrial Revolution and their social implications. Social Science III looked carefully at literature, painting, music, architecture, and allied arts since the Renaissance as aspects of social movement. Lastly, a Consumer Analysis course required students to study people's needs to determine necessary and desirable applications of technological achievement, with a view to creating more usable designs.⁸⁸ By using a methodological approach to the study of society, economics and history the Design Laboratory like the Vkhutemas supported the materialist conception of history. .

In supporting the education of Marxist/Leninist historical materialism, which calls attention to the interrelationship of ideology and social psychology, an anti-Stalinist Design Laboratory educated students on the criticisms of mainstream Communist thought. Mainstream Communist thought, supported by the Stalinist Communist International and backed by almost all of the various traditional and new American Communist Parties, focused on modern manual labor - industrial unionism, direct action, factory councils, and direct control - to aid revolutionary action. As an industrial design school concerned with the education of mass culture, the culture industry, and the cultural apparatus, the Design Laboratory valued the persuasive power of culture, also known as “accumulated mental labor” much more so than economic forces.⁸⁹ Demonstrating the school’s opposition toward mainstream Communist thought, the Design Laboratory offered the basic course Social Science IV. Offered only to advanced students, Social Science IV covered the “History of American Labor, the American Labor Movement, its present organizational form and problems.”⁹⁰

Referencing the Design Laboratory’s basic courses and principles, William Friedman, one of the Design Laboratory’s most active faculty members, clarified, “We have basic courses for all students regardless of whether they intend to be painters, sculptors, designers or architects. This, in a sense, stems from certain educational principles and philosophies that were developed in Europe, principally in Germany, and carried over here into some of the schools in the United States.”⁹¹ Friedman made this statement in 1965 at the height of the Cold War. We may assume that because of the earlier persecution of communists during the McCarthy era, Friedman still chose to highlight a depoliticized Bauhaus rather than the Vkhutemas as the Design Laboratory’s

main source of inspiration. In doing so, he was careful to only give partial credit to the Bauhaus presumably, so as to not distort too much the actual historical facts of the period.

The Design Laboratory, like the Vkhutemas, carried the interpenetrative structure of the basic courses into its design departments, as evidenced in the Textile Design Department's teaching method. The Textile Design Department required the student to carry out a series of technical exercises, intended for the student to develop designs of originality. To supplement the technical exercises, the course required the student to become conscious of the fact that the study of ancient cultures was very valuable to the designer – “not for the purpose of imitation, but rather for the purpose of assimilation and evolution of new conceptions.”⁹²

In adopting the art philosophy of Productivism, based on the ideology of “scientific communism” and “historical materialism”, the Design Laboratory rejected the value of artistic experience to realize the full affirmation of the ideology of work. Like the Vkhutemas, the Design Laboratory did everything possible; even denouncing one's own creativity, in order to become part and parcel with the everyday world of consumerism. Both the Vkhutemas and the Design Laboratory accepted the design of everyday use - any means of penetrating into people's lives - precisely into that world of sensationalism and ready-made goods, albeit maintaining a claim for universality.⁹³

In contrast, the Bauhaus sought “to remain a stranger to the department store mentality, the world of sensationalism and ready-made goods.”⁹⁴ For the Bauhaus artist, art could not keep a great enough distance from this sort of reality. They made every

effort to stay aloof from the leveling force of the daily grind - and its concomitant – the marketplace.⁹⁵

Apparently aware of the distinction between the productivist approach and the Bauhaus approach, Rohde and the Design Laboratory showed an affinity for the “industrial design-minded” student who demonstrated the productivist approach, rather than the Bauhaus “craft-minded” student. Rohde highlighted the historical materialist component of the productivist approach used by the Design Laboratory and with it the need to replicate the design of everyday use in order for the school to become an essential part of consumerism:

All the objects finished thus far in the school bear witness to the kind of approach that the Design Laboratory seeks to establish. A group of cigarette boxes and a group of clock models are reproduced as an example of the simpler type of problem that was at first considered. **(Figs 15, 16)** Several of these designs are ready for production in their present form, but much more important is the fact that every one of them demonstrates that the student is “industrial-design minded” rather than craft minded. The question is not whether the perfect solution was found for all the elements of fabrication, material, price, function, salability, and aesthetic concept; the important thing is that every one of these elements was consciously considered by the student.⁹⁶

Actively supporting the productivist approach, the Design Laboratory’s Product Design Department conducted systematic education in historical materialism and in doing so denounced all artistic merit. In a report of the activities of the Design Laboratory, the Product Design Department noted, “The object set for the beginning student in Product Design is not so much the designing of great works of art; the emphasis is placed on developing an ability to analyze a problem, - do the necessary research into function,

materials and fabrication processes, - bearing in mind psychological considerations inherent in the problems.”⁹⁷

Subsequent in the report, the Product Design Department selected the cigarette box, as being a most simple article for a beginning student, to elude the Design Laboratory’s methodological approach:

After making the survey of the various classes of cigarette box users as to their habits, etc., the student arrives at the number of cigarettes that will need to be contained. Calculations of the cubic contents of the box is made, and an isometric drawing of this volume is done...After an investigation into methods of fabrication of wooden boxes, as well as an analysis of existing cigarette boxes...the student proceeds to develop his design at full size...Although none of the students may have produced objects of high artistic merit, they have acquired a method of logically approaching any problem of designing... At this point it should be mentioned that all studying is carried on with a view to producing the object designed through mass production methods...Trips to factories, museums, and exhibits are very valuable to the student in this connection.⁹⁸

After Design Laboratory students developed their “manual dexterity and their mental facility” during the initial cigarette box exercise, only then could they approach the problem of designing complex objects void of individual expression.⁹⁹ Following learning and understanding the fundamental ideas of historical materialism, the student could take Product Design I, II, III, IV, and V classes and in each class, the student was presented with specific problems such as a book-case unit with storage compartment, thermometer, bootblack kit for home use, sterno auxiliary stove, electrically lighted portable shaving mirror, etc, that exemplified the typical categories into which the product designer’s work was to be classed: namely household accessories, mechanical appliances, furniture, “heavy” products, prefabricated shelter, etc.¹⁰⁰ In Product Design III for example, each student selected one project, either an electric mixing machine,

stenographer's desk, or a chair for thorough solution. After completion of rough working drawings the entire class selected the three best solutions (one of each project) for modeling. Then, each group collaboratively constructed the selected design.¹⁰¹ One of these selected chairs designed by Don Wallance, a student attending the Design Laboratory, was published in the Design Laboratory's 1937-38 course catalog. The chair, constructed of only two innovative, industrial materials - molybdenum alloy and Lucite - exemplifies the distinctive character of the historical materialist approach as Wallance supported the full affirmation of the ideology of work. **(Fig 17)**

Influenced by another critical component of the Vkhutemas educational model, the Design Laboratory found art to be most organizable unlike the Bauhaus. At the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius had faith in the persuasive power of culture and art, and endeavored to stay away from any type of political power-play.¹⁰² Taking a stance on the relation of art and the state, he wrote in 1919: 'There is no need for artists' councils and interest groups. Art is not organizable.'¹⁰³ However, in the Soviet Union art was found to be most organizable, and in this respect the position of the artist was not even a subject for discussion. During the first years after the revolution, it was impossible to separate serving the revolutionary cause from serving that of the state or art.¹⁰⁴

To strengthen the development of Productivism within the new revolutionary state, the Vkhutemas not only discussed productivist theories in the classroom, but more importantly in seminars which were open to the public.¹⁰⁵ At the seminars, artists not officially on the faculty spoke and gave lessons to students and the public. All attending the seminars thrashed out many ideological questions and discussed diverse problems in attempting to devise a universal design theory to serve the developing proletariat.¹⁰⁶

Similar to the collaborative structure and function of the Vkhutemas seminars, the Design Laboratory held a weekly series of lectures by recognized leaders in the varied fields of industrial design, such as stage design, merchandising, and photography, which were often open to the public, because the Design Laboratory, “(b)elieving that industrial designers are integrally part of the society in which they must live and that their work, to have artistic validity, must necessarily be integrated with all other contemporary productive endeavors...”¹⁰⁷ During the spring of 1937, the Design Laboratory formatted the lecture series into a mandatory lecture course known as “Design Analysis.”¹⁰⁸ According to the Design Analysis Lecture Schedule, the Design Laboratory had each lecturer present his lecture twice, once during the day and again for the night classes, to allow the participation of all students, most of whom came from the working class. Following each lecture, the Design Laboratory held a question and discussion period in the form of “Summaries” to discuss points made in the lecture.¹⁰⁹

One lecture given by Meyer Schapiro titled “Art and the Machine” further cemented the Design Laboratory’s Marxist design theory. Although the content of “Art and the Machine” is currently unknown, Schapiro presented his lecture just a couple months after the *Marxist Quarterly* had published his groundbreaking essay “Nature of Abstract Art” which claimed that all art, even the most abstract, is rooted in the conditions in which it is produced. In his essay and probably in his lecture, Schapiro discussed twentieth-century discoveries in abstract art and their connection to the machine as a socializing device in reflection of the Machine Age. Significantly, Schapiro explained that previous abstract artists, such as those who were supportive of the

Bolshevik Revolution, assigned to the machine the role of translator of the old categories of art into the new language of modern technology.

To coordinate students with other similar contemporary productive endeavors and theories, the Design Laboratory teamed up with the politically, pedagogically, and artistically like-minded American Artists School in the beginning of the fall of 1937 in an attempt to “...break down the arbitrary and harmful distinction between the fine and industrial arts and to equip the student technically and intellectually to work as a contemporary creative artist.”¹¹⁰ Opening just one month after the establishment of the Design Laboratory on February 1, 1936, The American Artists School was founded by a group of professional associations varying in political involvement, such as the members of the American Artists Congress, the Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, and the American Group.¹¹¹ Like the Design Laboratory, the American Artists School advisory board included Meyer Schapiro, but also Gilbert Rohde’s friend Lewis Mumford, as well as former members of the John Reed Club and contributors to the *New Masses*, both politically radical institutions, and other artists, writers, and gallery owners. The American Artists School’s faculty itself was comprised primarily of former John Reed Club members.¹¹²

As the Design Laboratory structured its curriculum based on the historical materialist approach of dually emphasizing technical training and social research., the American Artists School similarly supported art of social content that was not only technically well executed, but also reflected contemporary social reality based on an understanding of social patterns and class psychology.¹¹³ Students from the Design Laboratory and American Artists School were afforded the opportunity to take American

Artists School classes such as “Composition through Social Research.” Directed by a psychologist in collaboration with the art instructor, the course introduced social and historical research on topics such as politics, economics, religion, family, and sex as the basis of interpreting American life.¹¹⁴ To supplement the curriculum and accommodate working-class students, the American Artists School held Wednesday evening lectures on topics of “general and technical matters and current happenings in economic life which will be valuable in interpreting American life.”¹¹⁵

From April to December of 1936, the American Artists School issued as a fundraiser a series of lithographs entitled *First Annual Print Series/ American Artists School 1936* and *Second Edition, First Annual Print Series/ American Artists School 1936* that demonstrated the school’s, and consequently the Design Laboratory’s, endorsement of the new use of abstraction as social content art in New York. In 1936, before the advent of the Moscow Trials (1936-1938) and the Stalin-Hitler Pact (1939), artists, intellectuals and other affiliates of the American Artists School unified to combat fascism, despite espousing varying radical viewpoints towards politics and artwork. Endorsing all forms of social content art, a statement appeared in the communist *Daily Worker* that regarded the American Artists School as a “pioneer” in freeing its students and faculty from “dogmatic and stereotyped approaches to art and in fostering “a people’s art.”¹¹⁶

Because most of the affiliates at the American Artists School identified with Stalinist, mainstream communism, most of the artists at the school produced figurative and realist artworks. However, a small number of anti-Stalinists occupied positions at the American Artists School including Meyer Schapiro, Lewis Mumford, and Stuart Davis, an abstract artist. The few anti-Stalinist artists at the school used abstraction to individually express

radical protest. In reflection of the school's political make-up, the *First Annual Print Series/ American Artists School 1936* included not only figurative and social realist artworks such as David Alfaro Siqueiros' untitled depiction of a Russian worker carrying an I-beam and striding across a swastika, but also one abstraction by Stuart Davis titled *Abstraction* (subsequently retitled *Anchor*).¹¹⁷ **(Figs 18, 19)**

As an anti-Stalinist, independent Marxist thinker, Stuart Davis worked within the framework of Marxism/Leninism. Davis' *Abstraction* helped lay the groundwork for Marxist/Leninist students attending the American Artists School and Design Laboratory to use abstraction instead of social realism to intellectually communicate individual radical political protest. In a statement Davis made later in 1940 regarding his own practice of abstract art, he seemed to indirectly explain that the ideas of his friend Meyer Schapiro, as well as past abstract art movements, helped him define his own abstract art and abstract art in general as a "progressive social force":

...a genuine contemporary expression...it has created a new reality. Abstract art is an integral part of the changing contemporary reality and, it is an active agent in that objective process. The brains, arms, materials, and democratic purpose of abstract artists have literally changed the face of our physical world in the last years. And it must be noted that the changes were constructive and progressive, which puts abstract painting in direct opposition to the destructive forces of totalitarianism and reaction. Abstract art has been and is now a direct progressive social force, not simply a theory of progress.¹¹⁸

Through technical work, lectures, and cooperation with other political like-minded individuals, the Design Laboratory demonstrated the approach of Marxist historical materialism. In recognizing the historical materialist component of the productivist approach, the school gave objects an innovative language that ideologically

distinguished them from other ideologies. Unlike the Design Laboratory and the Vkhutemas, the idealist Bauhaus discouraged the theory of historical materialism and organizing art in terms of cultural politics.

Chapter 3

Angled Against Streamlining: Countering Established Functions and Forms of Industrial Design

The Design Laboratory, as well as Vkhutemas and the Bauhaus, saw abstraction as a progressive social force. By training students to capture the abstract qualities of the industrial environment, the progressive schools sought to, on the one hand, end capitalism by reducing costs and widening the market, and, on the other, resolve the conflict of classes by raising people's standards of living and lowering the costs of necessities.¹¹⁹ As all three school's explorations of abstraction were directed toward the development of a collectivist aesthetic, many of the objects designed and intended for machine production at the Design Laboratory, Bauhaus, and Vkhutemas demonstrate visible similarities.

The differences between the schools existed not so much in the outcome and appearance of student work, but more so in the design methods. All three schools supported the economic system and political philosophy of socialism, but the Design Laboratory and the Vkhutemas demonstrated a critically different design method and process from that of the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus adhered primarily to a model of utopian socialism whereas the Vkhutemas ardently abided by Marxism/Leninism. To train students to aid social reform by using abstraction, to literally represent the momentary suppression of the signs and symbols of the old order, the Design Laboratory, supporting an ideology of a purely Marxist/Leninist and political kind, used the design strategy and process demonstrated at the Vkhutemas rather than the Bauhaus.

The Design Laboratory, like the Vkhutemas and Bauhaus, trained students to use abstraction to facilitate a collectivist aesthetic. Committed to abstraction as a progressive

tendency, specifically in the form of industrial art, the Design Laboratory offered courses such as a “course in three-dimensional abstract design for form and texture” and provided an entire page of abstract, “Student Work” in the school’s fall/spring 1937-38 catalog.¹²⁰

(Fig 20) On the page, one student’s abstract, preliminary painting pulls the viewer into the center of an ordered collage of student abstractions including the abstract painting, geometric abstractions, abstract photomontages, and industrial art. The abstract painting by the Design Laboratory student, surrounded by a thermometer, a chair, an ashtray, textiles, photomontages and other industrial art objects, all exemplify a deconstruction in form to enhance its function and assist in confirming the designs on the page as forms of abstraction. In producing and presenting abstract art by students as well as providing courses concerning the development of “abstract design”, the Design Laboratory sought to ideologically assist in the establishment of a new socialist culture.

As the Design Laboratory, Vkhutemas, and Bauhaus evidently supported abstraction, only the Design Laboratory and Vkhutemas presented a coherent didactic and academic whole that combined classical and progressive design disciplines into an interpenetrating mix. Consciously aware of this distinctive approach used at the Design Laboratory that was unknown to the Bauhaus, Rohde stated, “There is an integration that could never be achieved by isolated bits of training in the arts, crafts, and theories of design.”¹²¹ The classical component of this formula appears to have been influenced by Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric, and it is in this link to the classics that we find a connection to Marxism. Among the classics of Greek philosophy, Karl Marx ardently admired Aristotle and his discussion of rhetoric in relation to ethics and politics.¹²²

In support of Marxism/Leninism, the abstract art designed by the Productivists at the Vkhutemas took on an important rhetorical objective. Because the Productivists

emphasized that objects possess a rhetorical dimension, their work can be held less accountable for the satisfaction of current needs and recognize it instead as an argument for new values.¹²³ To the Productivists, the designed objects needed to make a case to the viewer to embrace Marx's abstraction of the social form of capitalism and oppose outmoded conventional intuitions, public culture, and art of the old order. For example, a kiosk by Zakhar Bykov, one of Rodchenko's students while at the Vkhutemas, demonstrated not only the relationship of purpose, construction, and material in a unified way, but also a rhetorical argument in form.¹²⁴ **(Fig 21)** Its portability was entirely suited to its use for temporary gatherings of all kinds. Its modular construction was also highly appropriate to industrial production. Most of the support pieces, probably wood, were straight and could be cut to varying lengths. They then could be attached to the planar surfaces, which might also be cut relatively easily. However, the kiosk also demonstrated metaphorical significance in its straight lines and planes. In his INKHUK lecture of 1921, "Line", Rodchenko explained:

Line has revealed a new world-view-to construct essence, and not to depict, to objectivise or to non-objectivise; to build new, expedient, constructive structures in life, and not from life or outside life.¹²⁵

Summarizing Rodchenko's observation of Bykov's project as a convergence of rhetorical argument (the new order versus that of the old) and pragmatic construction, both in form and production, Margolin stated, "as a structural support, line connoted for Rodchenko an emphasis on essentials-structure rather than decoration, economy rather than excess, strength and direction rather than weakness. Bykov's kiosk was not only an abstraction of

the historic content of economic and social intuitions, but it also exemplified an object whose rhetorical statement was synonymous with its efficacy of use.”¹²⁶

In order to persuade the viewer to accept the modern logic and ideological implications of productivism over that of traditional styles, the Productivists concerned themselves with industrial design that was not only a matter of aesthetics, but, instead, a synthesis of ideological and formal aspects. The Productivists’ methodical approach differed drastically from the theory of functionalism which grew out of the Constructivist movement in Germany and at the Bauhaus.¹²⁷ Functionalism is the doctrine that the function of an object should determine its design and materials.¹²⁸ The Productivists’ aim, by contrast, was not simply to be objective and economical in the use of materials and formal organizations, but instead to advance an argument about human action through abstract art objects.¹²⁹ Apparently aware of this distinction between the Vkhutemas and Bauhaus, the Design Laboratory adopted the Productivist pedagogy to train the “designer for industry” who could deal with not so much the craftsman’s concern for function, but Marxist rhetoric:

It is not the intention of the Design Laboratory to hand down dogmas about functionalism and modern design. Rather, the facts of present-day materials and manufacturing process are presented in the theoretical courses in industrial design. Then the student is free to make his mistakes, to carry out his own interpretation of what a contemporary chair, table, clock, etc., should be like. In the end, if he is intelligent and sensitive, he will assimilate those basic intellectual and esthetic concepts which underlie the best modern design.¹³⁰

The design of objects of use for machine production is not essentially different from design of objects for hand production, and certain common abilities are required by both types of designers. The formula calls for approximately equal parts of creative art sense, manipulative ability or sense of materials and construction, awareness of human needs and some ingenuity in filling them. The designer for industry is commonly supposed to possess another sense that the craftsman had no need for—something uncanny which enables him to make things that have “sales appeal.”¹³¹

In the second statement, Rohde indirectly asserted that the “designer of industry” needed to not only possess technical skills when developing industrial design, but, as adherent to the communist ideology of Marxism/Leninism and the Vkhutemas, also possess the intellect to create sophisticated industrial design that embodied rhetorical arguments, referred to by Rohde as “sales appeal”, to persuade the viewer to embrace the new values assigned to industrial design by the “designer of industry.”

Supporting Marxist rhetoric, the Design Laboratory set out to counter established forms and functions of industrial design. In acknowledgement of the Design Laboratory’s mission, the Federal Art Project’s Department of Information underscored this contradiction in its August 1936 report, “To avoid clamping a formula down on students and yet to suggest to them those intellectual and esthetic criteria which enable their possessor to make the differentiation between good and bad is the task of the Design Laboratory.”¹³²

The Design Laboratory ultimately realized that the student first needed to clearly understand the school’s viewpoint toward established, elitist American industrial designers and design, specifically “streamlining”, a corporate strategy to design products of sleek surfaces solely for marketability, and such design’s connection with the workings of capitalism before being able to critique it and embody the critique in the design proper. Rohde strongly disapproved of the exclusiveness of the established industrial designer and stated satirically that, “‘Industrial Design’ had become a glamorous name. Certain magazine articles, calculated to ‘dramatize’ a new profession, drew a picture of industrial design as being the exclusive and mysterious milieu of a

handful of supermen who were revolutionizing everything from hairpins to locomotives at a fabulous price. The stories are exaggerated...”¹³³ In his remark, Rohde indirectly referenced established, elitist industrial designers like Raymond Loewy, Bel Geddes, Henry Dreyfuss, and Walter Dorwin Teague who were quickly given the moniker “The Big Four.” They gave legitimacy to the new vocation of industrial designer in the United States during the twenties and thirties-industrial design that was defined in fundamentally different ways than at the Design Laboratory.

A briefing of Raymond Lowey allows us to assess how these men’s concept of industrial design was driven by profit and status. Loewy believed that design should make the manufacturer profit and the user happy, and, if possible, not to offend the aesthete.¹³⁴ Also, Loewy often publicly took full credit for successful designs from his studio, even though his associates took part in much of the design work.¹³⁵

Throughout the thirties, Loewy provided many big business clients with designs, and they appreciated that he measured the success of a product’s design by its sales. Not only did Loewy work for Westinghouse designing radio cabinets, but he also designed the Lucky Strike package for Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company and the Coldspot refrigerator for Sears, Roebuck, and Company. The Coldspot refrigerator exhibited “automotive styling” like that of a car and each year received a new look to fuel the desire of the new style and thus increase sales.¹³⁶

“Automotive styling” signified “streamlining”, and “streamlining” emerged as a dominant American national style during the late twenties and thirties to superficially contour the exterior of a product for marketability. Designers adorned buildings, radios, and soon applied the same design principle to other stationary objects. A streamlined

pencil sharpener developed by industrial designer Loewy in 1933 articulates the superficial application of the style to products. (**Fig 22**) Although the pencil sharpener's sleek bullet-form could minimize air resistance if need be, its operation required that the pencil sharpener be firmly attached to a stationary surface.

As these quickly arrived-at design solutions became the accepted strategy for many corporations recovering from the Depression, the Design Laboratory trained its students to understand the workings of capitalism and appreciate how some designs were merely superficial to enhance the marketability of the product. Through the Design Laboratory's lecture series, the school's faculty and other invited lecturers taught students streamlined forms and other established examples of modern industrial in a different light. Lecturers included Percival Goodman, an urban theorist, who talked about "What Industrial Design Should Be"; Richard Bach, associate at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who lectured on "Modern Design, Yesterday and Tomorrow"; and Egmond Arends who addressed "Streamlining, What Is It?"

Titling her term paper, "Why Streamline?", Esther Merlin, a Design Laboratory student in Textile Design, shows how a critique of "streamlining" had indeed found resonance in the classrooms. Throughout her paper, Merlin wittily dismissed streamlining:

A fad, the sudden flame in the popular mind that sweeps through the fancies of millions of people and then burns out of its own intensity, is always of great commercial value to some lucky manufacturers. Certainly, the industrial designer, paid by some such industrialist, must take advantage of these mental conflagrations not alone to satisfy the lucre-lust of his employer, but also to justify his acceptance of the few golden crumbs which he picks up from under the table after his masters have glutted themselves on the plentiful, golden ambrosia.¹³⁷

Next, Merlin discussed the subject of streamlining to give her argument weight. She added:

...So, a year or two ago, the password to popular, commercial success was “streamline”. Promptly, every conceivable object that could possibly be forced or distorted into some semblance of the teardrop emerged into the market. We had a plethora of streamlined baby-carriages, streamlined candy bars, streamlined typewriters, streamlined fountain pens, and the ultimate in streamlining—the streamlined pencil sharpener. That streamlining all these staples of modern existence were ridiculous on the face of it and that the industrial designers knew it, was proven by the speed with which they rushed to its defense. Elaborate processes of rationalization emanated from the responsible artists. And no one of them admitted that everything was built so as to decrease air-resistance, even stationary objects, solely because it was profitable.”¹³⁸

The lectures and course of instruction, which guided students to reevaluate established forms and functions of industrial design, underscored the Design Laboratory’s emphasis on infusing designs with rhetorical arguments as evident in student work.

An electric mixer prototype designed by one student in the Product Design III course and selected by the class as a “best” solution to a problem of design, exemplifies an object whose rhetorical statement was synonymous with its efficacy of use. **(Fig 23)** The student’s electric mixer epitomizes the term sleek, but strictly for purposes of practicality. The mixer’s outer shell of what appears to be metal, covered by an uninterrupted coat of plastic, encapsulates and protects the motor of the machine. The trunk and base of the mixer slightly bow outward to adapt to the curvature of varied size mixing bowls. The smoothness of the handle is designed to better accommodate the innate grip of the user. In observance of the student’s design for the mixer, a

metaphorical argument starts to unfold. To understand this argument it is best to first have a clear understanding of the use of metaphor in rhetoric. In rhetoric, the use of metaphor is to convey to the audience a new idea or meaning by linking it to an existing idea or meaning with which the audience is already familiar. By making the new appear to the known, or be a part of the old and familiar, the person using the metaphor hopes to help the audience understand the new.

In understanding the purpose of Marxist rhetoric and viewing the mixer, the Design Laboratory student sought to argue to the viewer that prerevolutionary desires for superfluous commodities must be redeemed into a more conscious and collective desire for objects in the anticipated socialist future. In viewing the Design Laboratory student's electric mixer, it resembles the form of the popular fad of "streamlining", where, during the thirties, curved, smooth forms were used to attract buyers. By signaling the popular form of streamlining, the sophisticated design of the mixer served to attract as many working-class persons as possible in order to educate such persons not only the benefits of an electric mixer of strict, practical and useful purposes, but also its Marxist integrity. It is important to note again that the Design Laboratory, like the Vkhutemas, did everything possible in order to become part and parcel of the everyday world of consumerism. By any means, they sought to penetrate into people's lives, precisely into that world of readymade goods while still maintaining a claim for universality. By participating in this organization of widespread, social life through the rhetorical operation of the electric mixer, the student attempted to persuade the viewer, on the one hand, to reject not necessarily the familiar form of "streamlining," but instead its

ideology of modern industrial capitalism, and, on the other, consider the possibilities of a new, radical design language supportive of revolutionary social practice.

In the pursuit to design objects of rhetorical meaning, the Design Laboratory educated the student on the rhetoric of class struggle in current society. The school took a particular interest in training students about the ongoing publicized struggle between the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation and the company's workers. The struggle between Nash-Kelvinator Corporation and the company's workers began in 1936 when Kelvinator Appliance Company merged with Nash Motors due to the efforts of George W. Mason, a Detroit industrialist as well as Chairman and CEO of Kelvinator Corp and subsequently the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation. The merger resulted in the closure of plants, layoffs, and wage reductions. However, unionized workers, with the support of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), fought back.

Elizabeth McClausland, an art critic and invited teacher in 1939, brought the significance of the social struggle of Nash-Kelvinator into her Design Laboratory course, "Culture Morphology". In her lecture notes for the course, "there exists a newspaper clipping titled "Nash Pact Ratified by UAW Members". The 1939 clipping boasts that Nash-Kelvinator restored 6100 jobs, along with other worker benefits, after the workers and the UAW initiated a strike following a breakdown in negotiations for a contract.¹³⁹

Even prior to offering the course "Culture Morphology", the Design Laboratory provided students with critical texts concerning not only the ongoing struggle between the workers and management of Nash-Kelvinator Corp and the elitism surrounding the corporation, but also the use of dominant practices of advertising, specifically photomontage, as an agitational tool as evident in one student's advertising layout of

rhetorical significance. **(Fig 24)** In observing the advertising layout, the viewer sees the phrase “Let Us Help You Plan” which runs the entire length of the left side of the layout in large, boldface letters. An advertisement cutout of a Georgian colonial style home comes into sight at the top of the layout. A blueprint, sized much larger than the Georgian colonial, rolls out from the front of the home toward the base of the layout and meets the text, “Kelvinator Corp, Detroit, Mich.” An image of a compass as big as the house situates in the middle of the blueprint.

The advertising layout is the student’s ideological response to the advertisements by Nash-Kelvinator Corp. and George W. Mason that displayed two “Kelvin Homes,” built in a traditional, Georgian colonial style. **(Fig 25)** The two Kelvin homes featured in the advertisement demonstrated “the latest discoveries and achievements of housing science,” with air conditioning and electric Kelvinator appliances including a range, refrigerator, washing machine and ironer.¹⁴⁰ Nash-Kelvinator Corporation’s advertisements tended to appear only in publications geared towards the upper middle class.¹⁴¹ By advertising through elitist types of media geared toward an upscale audience, the corporation sought to provide “A New and Better Way of Living” only for the privileged minority.¹⁴²

To present the elitism associated with Nash-Kelvinator Corp. to the working class, the student used abstract photomontage, owing to its capacity to show visibly and in an astonishing way the great social work under construction. In the layout, the student proposed to the viewer the new order by essentially deconstructing the advertisements and ideology of Nash-Kelvinator Corp. as well as printouts of a compass, blueprint, and words, and then reconstructing them to communicate both the Marxist/Leninist ideology

and design theory of the Design Laboratory. The student positioned the cut-out of the Kelvinator House at the top of a drawn horizon, presumably to emphasize the house's inaccessibility to the masses. To firmly ground the elitism of Nash-Kelvinator, the student placed the Kelvinator house at the pinnacle of a blueprint that branches outward toward the base of the advertising layout. At the bottom of the advertisement, the student positioned the words "Kelvinator Corp. Detroit Mich." By abstracting and reorganizing forms and functions, the student's poster presented a clear argument, to shift away from the dominant ideology of bourgeois-capitalism and consider the modern, revolutionary ideology of the Design Laboratory, which the working class viewer could easily understand. In observance of the layout, the Design Laboratory considered the documentary character of abstract photomontage as a powerful means of political persuasion and influence, with the ability to educate and inform the masses.

In their efforts to use the widespread and commonly used technique of photomontage to assist in the transformation of the dominant modernist paradigm, the Design Laboratory student's priority for photomontage related to that of the militant, political, Soviet type created on the soil of the Soviet Union which differed from the photomontage form supported in Western Europe. Benjamin Buchloh highlighted these differences in his authorship of "From Faktura to Factography:"

The productivist artists realized that that in order to address a new audience not only did the techniques of production needed to be changed but the forms of distribution and institutions of dissemination and reception had to be transformed as well. The photomontage technique, as an artistic procedure that supposedly carries transformative potential *qua* procedure, as the Berlin Dadaists seemed to have believed, therefore, in the work of Rodchenko and Lissitsky, becomes integrated as only *one* among several techniques - typography, advertising, propaganda - that attempted to redefine the representational systems of a new society.¹⁴³

Other students produced similar sophisticated designs of abstraction. At first glance, one student's design of a poster appeared to promote a product by the elitist tobacco manufacturer Dunhill. But in actuality due to the ideology of the Design Laboratory, the student's poster design exploited the growing uprising of Cuban workers against elitism and abuse by Dunhill and other capitalist companies in their country. In a visual examination of the poster, the Design Laboratory student provided an image of a semi-abstract, strong figure, composed of geometric configurations and bold forms, enduring a forceful wind. The words "Storm King", a product produced by Dunhill, appear to be one with the wind. **(Fig 26)** By offering an abstract version of the struggle between the figure and the "Storm King", the student sought to highlight the social controversy surrounding Dunhill.

Significantly differing from the ideology of the Design Laboratory, Alfred Dunhill, a master of marketing and advertising for profit, was among the first to recognize the importance of humidifying and aging cigars before they were sold to his privileged customers. Starting out in Europe, his success brought him to open his first store in New York in 1921.¹⁴⁴ Prior to its opening, Dunhill had a history and relationship with pre-revolutionary Cuba, encompassing numerous distributions and marketing agreements with several Cuban cigar manufacturers. Before the revolution, the industrial and social situation of Cuba was bleak. Most of Cuba's industry was dominated by US capital, and 90 percent of the country's raw sugar and tobacco exports were sent to the USA.¹⁴⁵

As a result, Cuba's population suffered chronic unemployment and deep poverty, and mobilized toward revolution in the thirties. The Communist Party of Cuba was directed to organize and unite the Cuban proletariat under the guidance of the US Communist Party and the New York-based Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern.¹⁴⁶ Yet it is important to know, according to M. Caballero, author of *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1945*, that "(t)he slogan of the Third International, its appraisal of the Latin American Continent and its revolutionary possibilities, set the tone for long theoretical discussions on the left and beyond, in a process which led to the Cuban Revolution to proclaim itself Leninist, twenty years after the dissolution of the International which Lenin had founded."¹⁴⁷

Other students also produced designs embodying rhetorical arguments as evident in one Design Laboratory student's exercise to straightforwardly communicate the social significance of Earl Derr Biggers' novel, *The House without a Key*. Written in 1925, the story begins with the murder of a former member of Boston society who had lived in Hawaii for a number of years. The main character is the victim's nephew, John Quincy Winterslip, who, while staying on the island, meets an attractive young native woman, breaks his engagement to his straitlaced Bostonian fiancée, and decides after the murder is solved to move to San Francisco. In the interval, he is introduced to many levels of Hawaiian society and is of some assistance to Detective Charlie Chan, a Chinese man, in solving the mystery.

The literary significance of the book implies that although Chan is the detective, his role in the book is fairly small. He does figure out the solution to the case, but it is the elitist Bostonian who has the honor of catching the murderer. Second, the novel's

portrayal of the Chinese, specifically Charlie Chan, is forward-looking for its era. The Bostonians find it hard to accept a Chinese detective on the case, but the locals know him by reputation and show him respect. While some of the descriptions demonstrate some of the stereotypes of the day, Biggers portrays Chan sympathetically, as an equal to the whites who surround him.

The student designed a visual abstraction of the social significance of the story to visually convey to the working class (many illiterate) the main idea of the novel. The abstraction objectifies simplified imagery of several house keys emerging from a dark mass into a surrounding light with one carrying the title *The House without a Key* and another, *Earl Derr Biggers*. **(Fig 27)** As Biggers' name and the title of his novel rise above the darkness of tradition and into the light of contemporary society together with the other keys, the abstract design clearly advocates Biggers and the social implications of his novel.

Like the Vkhutemas, the Design Laboratory sought to collaborate with commercial enterprises to provide students the opportunity and experience of having their abstractions of rhetorical significance mass produced and distributed to the working classes. Because of their traditions, commercial enterprises in the United States often turned down proposals made to them by the Design Laboratory. Just months after the Design Laboratory opened, the school made an effort to collaborate with the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor (A.I.C.P.).¹⁴⁸ Established in 1843, the A.I.C.P. formed as a charitable organization in New York City with the aim of helping the deserving poor and providing for their moral uplift. According to the agreement between the A.I.C.P.; A. Conger Goodyear, President of the Museum of Modern Art; and the

Design Laboratory, the students were to create designs for rugs and textiles which would then be produced by the workers at the A.I.C.P. However, because of limited evidence it seems the implementation of the agreement never transpired.

The Design Laboratory further attempted to establish a relationship with commercial enterprises by appointing Oswald W. Knauth, an economist and President of the Associated Dry Goods Cooperation (a group of department stores), as head of a Design Laboratory business finance committee.¹⁴⁹ Due to Knauth's prior work and contacts, he seemed to be a great candidate for the position. Prior to the establishment of the Design Laboratory, Knauth analyzed the problems of industrial monopolies in his book, *The Policy of the United States towards Industrial Monopoly* (1913). While vice-president of Macy's in the late twenties, Knauth offered Henry Dreyfuss, a celebrity industrial designer, a five-figure salary to leave Europe and come to New York to work at Macy's as a stylist, but Dreyfuss refused Knauth's offer in order to remain independent and act as a design consultant to a variety of manufacturers, rather than become an employee of one firm.¹⁵⁰ By 1935, New York Mayor LaGuardia appointed Knauth as the Director of the Emergency Relief Bureau.

Although interested in the "story" of the Design Laboratory, approving of the school "in principle", and visiting a student exhibition, Knauth seemed to hesitate to connect himself to a school advocating radical political viewpoints. After stressing his intended industrial support for the school from the "viewpoint of obligation rather than a commercial investment positioning" and suggesting names of people who might also be interested in supporting the school, he added not to follow up with any of the names until further discussion, because he wanted to assure himself that the Design Laboratory was

“the right school to support.”¹⁵¹ If any cooperating activity ever actually occurred, I could not find any evidence.

Persevering, the school sought to initiate an expansion campaign in August 1939 to provide students with industrial opportunities and essentially revive the school’s apparent failing economic situation. The idea for an expansion campaign received backing from the school’s eleven trustees “who occup(ied) important positions in the country commercially and industrially.”¹⁵² Notable trustees included Ruth Reeves, Frederick Kiesler, and R. Buckminster Fuller. As part of the expansion campaign, the school proposed to form a small administrative council to be headed by George Sakier, who at the time worked as a designer for Fostoria Glass Company. The Design Laboratory desired that the administrative council include one individual each from the fields of manufacturing-architecture-graphic arts and education, “who although ‘successful’ have retained their larger vision and progressive viewpoint.”¹⁵³

Although there is some limited documentation, it is uncertain that the expansion campaign and the administrative council as well as the collaboration with Knauth and the A.I.C.P ever transpired, but we must assume that it is highly unlikely. Beginning during the late thirties, the political viewpoints of many American dissident communists took a drastic turn and abstract art in the United States soon took on a different political meaning.

Conclusion

(The Design Laboratory) started as a group, but it became in not too great a time a unit that was becoming less productive and more in a sense of a great deal of political dissension. You know there was a terrific strain there. Actually the problem there was to produce, and apparently the political factor became much more important to them than anything else...

--Burgoyne Diller (1964)¹⁵⁴

It is no coincidence the Design Laboratory closed the same year Sidney Hook, a New York Marxist, stated “Marxism as a movement is dying.”¹⁵⁵ The Moscow Trials (1936-38), Nazi-Soviet Pact (August 1939) and the Soviet Invasion of Finland (November 1939-40) caused many dissident communist intellectuals to rethink completely the value of Marxism-Leninism. During the trials, the art historian Serge Guilbaut, author of *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* noted, “...what began to emerge from the interrogations of Trotsky and from analyses of the trials and ruminations on the guilt of the accused was the shamefaced realization, which a few writers began to articulate, that communism could serve as a cover for the same kinds of injustice as fascism.”¹⁵⁶

Hand in hand with the Soviet Union’s alarming actions and the dying Marxist movement, American abstract art lost its political edge. This demise occurred just a couple of years after Meyer the publication of Schapiro’s, “Nature of Abstract Art” (1937), which enabled the interpreters of his essay to consider abstraction, located in the dominant form of production, as a language of protest by affirming that the meaning of art was inseparable from the social circumstances of its production. At this point, artists developed abstract art to ideologically convey principles of Marxism/Leninism. Just as artists began using abstraction as an individual form of political protest, Clement

Greenberg, an art critic temporarily allied with the Trotskyist movement, argued in his influential essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939) that abstract was apolitical. Like Schapiro’s “Nature of Abstract Art” and Rivera, Breton, and Trotsky’s “Towards a Revolutionary Art (1938)” which declared all “true art” was revolutionary, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” insisted on the artist’s independence.¹⁵⁷ However, Greenberg’s essay lacked the revolutionary optimism of Rivera, Breton, and Trotsky’s manifesto. Greenberg abandoned Trotsky’s critical position of “eclectic action” and instead saw art in terms of self-referential formalism.¹⁵⁸ In doing so, Greenberg’s concept left behind politics and political commitment. Because of “Avant-garde and Kitsch”, many abstract artists started to use abstraction not as a means to represent left-wing politics, but instead as a form of apolitical experimentalism better known as Abstract Expressionism.¹⁵⁹

During the period of Stalinist terror and the publishing of Greenberg’s “Avant-garde and Kitsch”, the Design Laboratory struggled. The school’s league of professionals who were inspired by the innovative Marxist art theory of Schapiro, had founded the Design Laboratory on the Marxist/Leninist Vkhutemas model of education to better train students to develop abstract art and highlight revolutionary Russian culture. However, many of the members of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Architects, Chemists, and Technicians as well as New York artists, designers, and other professionals who supported the Design Laboratory felt alarmed by the Soviet Union’s proceedings and influenced by Greenberg’s “Avant-garde and Kitsch”, many gradually abandoned their radical political viewpoints and dissociated abstract art with the radical political movement. In this adoption of an increasingly apolitical artistic mindset, they justifiably withdrew their support from the Design Laboratory.

The Design Laboratory ultimately felt the effect. During the final year of the Moscow Trails the Design Laboratory possessed only eighty one dollars in the bank after paying its bills and still needed to pay rent, salaries, and supplies.¹⁶⁰ To help with funding, the school set up a drive to generate one thousand dollars by soliciting forty of the school's supporters to contribute a minimum of twenty dollars to help with funding.¹⁶¹ The Design Laboratory kept afloat temporarily, but still financially strapped continued to ask its supporters for funds.¹⁶² By 1940 the union, more than likely battling a decline in membership due to the political developments in the Soviet Union, no longer could fund the school.¹⁶³ Without a main source of financial backing and dwindling support, the Design Laboratory ultimately closed.¹⁶⁴

As the New York art artists accepted abstraction as an apolitical, individualized art form and Marxism as no longer a viable movement, William Friedman expressed his disappointment with New York immediately after the Design Laboratory closed. Friedman stated, "By 1940 the union was no longer able to keep the (Design Laboratory) going. I began to get a little fed up with New York and decided to go to the Midwest".¹⁶⁵ Evidently holding on to the progressive principles of the Design Laboratory, Friedman practiced collectivism in the face of individualism. While in Iowa, Friedman took a supervisory position to help redesign facilities, including an old store building and its basement, to serve as community Art Centers in various Iowa cities.¹⁶⁶ While in Iowa, Friedman participated in the statewide craft project by designing and producing furniture and certain kinds of equipment in addition to posters, booklets and other informative materials "not for private, but specifically for public institutions including schools, hospitals, and libraries".¹⁶⁷ Later adopting a life career as an art and design educator at

major universities, Friedman explained, "...the Design Laboratory and...the contacts and the fraternal feelings that were generated between and among individuals in all of the creative fields has had, I am sure, some influence on my ultimate actions and philosophy.”¹⁶⁸

Although Friedman did not mention any of the names of his former students in his interview, he did praise one unnamed Design Laboratory standout that also left New York following the closure of the school and held on to the ideals of the Design Laboratory. When Friedman commented in his interview that, “One of my best students, at that time, had been an English major, a graduate of New York University and today is one of the good designers in the country” he was talking about Don Aaron Wallance.¹⁶⁹ In 1941, Wallance like Friedman moved away from New York, but Wallance moved to Louisiana to work as the state’s technical and design director for the National Youth Administration, a position that was established in 1940 by President Roosevelt to help build a young, technically capable work force.¹⁷⁰ During World War II, he designed mass produced-furniture for servicemen’s families living abroad for the Office of the Quartermaster General, Washington.¹⁷¹ In a reflection on his endeavors, Wallance similar to Friedman often stated his years at the Design Laboratory were some of the most important in his life.¹⁷²

The period in which Wallance reminisces, is the brief, but critical period before the de-Marxification of abstract art and Meyer Schapiro’s influential *Nature of Abstract Art*. Within this unique period, the Design Laboratory’s founders, a “league of professionals”, appropriately based the Design Laboratory primarily on the ideologically received Vkhutemas model of education, itself founded by the Marxist-Leninist, Russian

avant-garde abstract artists. By doing so, the Design Laboratory, like some of the American artists during the period, felt empowered to use abstraction as not only individual expressions of political protest against capitalism and Stalinism, but also to advertise revolutionary Russian culture in the face of formalist art critic's highly-edited interpretations.

The influence of the Vkhutemas over on the Design Laboratory, evidently more so than that of the formalist received Bauhaus, emerged in the Design Laboratory's curriculum, production, and goals. The Design Laboratory assumed its leading role in the shaping of working class culture, in partnership with the American Artists School and trained students by using the Marxist theory of historical materialism. Significantly, this approach was developed at the Vkhutemas and in spite of its socialist and later Marxist leaning, not to the same degree at the Bauhaus. Through historical materialism, the Design Laboratory provided students with a better understanding of the working conditions of the working class.

As students gained a better understanding of historical materialist analysis, the Design Laboratory encouraged students to develop sophisticated industrial design that was not only objective and economical in the use of materials and formal organizations, like that of the Bauhaus, but also embodied rhetorical arguments, an approach favored at the Vkhutemas. By developing industrial design that embodied rhetorical arguments, the students at the Design Laboratory attempted to popularize the Design Laboratory's new definition of industrial design as embodying the ideals and goals of the American radical movement. In doing so, they pitted the Design Laboratory's design theory against current, established design theories such as streamlining.

To disseminate these politically charged, abstract art forms to the masses and challenge the highly edited reception of revolutionary Russian culture by American formalist art critics such as Barr, Johnson, and Rockefeller the Design Laboratory employed various methods. For example, the Design Laboratory held student exhibitions at the Rockefeller Center. Although the school attempted to collaborate with industrial subsidiaries, the Design Laboratory's political dissension, as Burgoyne Diller stated, took precedent. All methods were the schools attempts to confront elitist formalist art critics with the political significance of industrial design.

Revealing the Design Laboratory as a school founded by a "league of professionals" and based primarily on the principles of the Vkhutemas model of education serves two functions. First, such evidence highlights Barr, Johnson, Rockefeller, and other American formalist art critics' tendencies to edit the reception of art. As we have seen, the American formalist art critics de-politicized art which was particularly evident in the highly depoliticized representation of the Bauhaus at MoMA. It is thus not surprising to find that these very critics also tried to depoliticize home-grown artistic radicalism as evident in their reception of the Design Laboratory. In the process they obfuscated the Design Laboratory's political agenda and similarly de-politicized its history. As a result of the censorship of the Design Laboratory's agenda and objects, more research is needed on this neglected aspect of American design history. Secondly, this study sought to establish that the Design Laboratory contributed to the brief but critical point in American art and design history when a dissident group of New York, abstract artists believed because technology was conceived abstractly as an

independent force, they could apply their methods of design to the industrial arts to express an anti-Stalinist, anti-formalist, social consciousness.

Notes

- ¹ Karen A. Bearor, *Irene Rice Pereira: Her Paintings and Philosophy*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 66.
- ² Louis Torres, Michelle Marder Kamhi, *What Art Is: the Esthetic of Ayn Rand* (Open Court Publishing, 2000), 147.
- ³ Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* (1937): 15, homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/schapiro-naa.pdf (accessed August 5, 2009).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Gilbert Rohde, *Art in American Life and Education: National Society for the Study of Education*, (Bloomington, Ill: Public School Publishing Company, 1941), 651.
- ⁶ Gilbert Rohde, "The Design Laboratory," *American Magazine of Art*, October 1936, 638.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 638.
- ⁸ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, (Yale University Press, 1992), 115.
- ⁹ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: the Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*, (University of California Press, 1986), 155.
- ¹⁰ Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemmingway, Esther Leslie, *As Radical as Reality Itself – Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century*, (Peter Lang, 2007), 125.
- ¹¹ Tom Ambrose, *Hitler's Loss: What Britain and America Gained from Europe's Cultural Exiles*, (Philadelphia: Peter Owen in association with the European Jewish, 2001), 232.
- ¹² Paola Antonelli, *Objects of Design from the Museum of Modern Art*, (New York City: the Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 11.
- ¹³ Kathleen James-Chakraborty, *From Isolationism to Internationalism: American Acceptance of the Bauhaus*, (Minneapolis.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 154.
- ¹⁴ Benjamin H. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *MIT Press* 30 (1984): 82, realismworkinggroup.files.wordpress.com/.../buchloh_factography.pdf (accessed November 2010).
- ¹⁵ Suzanne P. Hudson, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 267.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 79.

¹⁸ Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* (1937): 16, homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/schapiro-naa.pdf (accessed August 5, 2009).

¹⁹ Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 16.

²⁰ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 78.

²¹ Ibid., 79.

²² Wassily Kandinsky and Kenneth C. Lindsay, *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art*, illustrated, reprinted ed., (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1994), 488.

²³ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 78.

²⁴ Ibid., 79.

²⁵ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 78.

²⁶ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 246-7.

²⁷ Jack Miller, *Jews in Soviet Culture*, (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1984), 36.

²⁸ Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 12.

²⁹ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 258.

³⁰ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 78-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

³² *Ibid.*, 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 299.

³⁸ Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement 1926-1956*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 151.

³⁹ WPA Central Files 1935-1944, NA RG-69.

⁴⁰ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395].

⁴¹ Historical materialism is associated with Karl Marx and is a perspective that foregrounds the reproduction of everyday life. Economic and social analyses begin by explaining how material needs and wants have been and continue to be produced and distributed in any given society. It focuses on how people obtain their daily survival, in terms of what and how things are produced and consumed, that is with the material and social relations of reproduction and in class societies how a surplus is produced and appropriated. Understanding how life is reproduced on a day to day basis is regarded as the key to a wider understanding of how any given society works. Within this perspective people's ideas and social institutions are shaped by the material circumstances and social relations within which they live.

⁴² Dianne Perrons, *Globalization and Social Change: People and Places in a Divided World*, (Psychology Press: 2004), 6.

⁴³ "3-Room Apartment for Furnished for \$55," *New York Times*, May 16, 1935.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 9-11.

⁴⁶ Mumford participated in the writing of the Western Marxist influential manifesto *Culture and the Crisis*, issued by the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford in 1932. A dissident communist, Mumford criticized the Popular Front as intellectually sterile, opportunistic, and unduly influenced by the Stalinism

⁴⁷ Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ Hyungmin Pai, *The Portfolio and the Diagram: Architecture, Discourse, and Modernity in America*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 331.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵¹ Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 26.

⁵² Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 124.

⁵³ James M. Thompson, *Twentieth Century Theories of Art*, (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's Press, 1990), 256.

⁵⁴ Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 131.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *The New School for Social Research*, Catalogue 1934-35, 43 in Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 132.

⁵⁷ Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery, "I. Rice Pereira," <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=3761> (accessed September 22).

⁵⁸ Karen A. Bearor, *Irene Rice Pereira: Her Paintings and Philosophy*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

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- ⁶⁰ Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Renwick Gallery, "I. Rice Pereira," <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=3761> (accessed September 22, 2010).
- ⁶¹ Benjamin H. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *MIT Press* 30 (1984): 87, realismworkinggroup.files.wordpress.com/.../buchloh_factography.pdf (accessed November 2010).
- ⁶² Shkandrij, Myroslav. *Modernists, Marxists and the nation: the Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s.*, Ukraine: CIUS Press, 1992. 154
- ⁶³ Benjamin H. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *MIT Press* 30 (1984): 89, realismworkinggroup.files.wordpress.com/.../buchloh_factography.pdf (accessed November 2010).
- ⁶⁴ Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 192.
- ⁶⁵ R. S. Knox, *Weimar Germany between Two Worlds: the American and Russian Travels of Kisch, Toller, Holitscher, Goldschmidt, and Rundt*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 218.
- ⁶⁶ Lewis Corey, *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1935), pp. 24, 249, 259, 344-5, 355, in Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York City: Verso, 1988), 101.
- ⁶⁷ "Cultural Front," *Architectural Record*, June 1938, 72.
- ⁶⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York City: Verso, 1988), 97.
- ⁶⁹ Cahill to Pollak, October 21, 1935, WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.
- ⁷⁰ Letter from Feiss to Schwab, WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.
- ⁷¹ Holger Cahill Papers, 1910-1993, bulk 1910-1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 1107].
- ⁷² American Studies at the University of Virginia, "In This Corner," <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma04/hess/rockrivera/mainframe5.html> (accessed March 25, 2010).

⁷³ The Lovestoneites were a group of dissident communists who formed around Jay Lovestone when he established a new party after being expelled from the Stalinist Communist International in 1929.

⁷⁴ American Studies at the University of Virginia, "In This Corner," <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma04/hess/rockrivera/mainframe5.html> (accessed June 10, 2010). American Studies at the University of Virginia. "In This Corner." Accessed March 25, 2010.

⁷⁵ "WPA Art on Exhibition," *New York Times*, April 7, 1936.

⁷⁶ Art Directors Club, "Our History," <http://www.adcglobal.org/adc/history/> (accessed November 29, 2010).

⁷⁷ Student work will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

⁷⁸ Eva Forgacs, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Central European University Press, 1995), 188.

⁷⁹ Hannes Meyer, the Bauhaus' second director as well as ardent Marxist, changed aspects of the school such as adding a few social science classes, which further moved the Bauhaus in a direction away from the school's Arts and Crafts roots. However, from a formal perspective, Meyer positioned himself against the integration of art and architecture at a school that was originally founded to pursue the idea of the total work of art and consequently explains the negative perception of him, his program, and his almost complete exclusion from the reception of the Bauhaus in the United States.

⁸⁰ Martin Hammer, Naum Gabo, and Christina Lodder, *Constructing modernity: the Art & Career of Naum Gabo*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 90-1.

⁸¹ John Dewey, *Political Theory and Social Practice* Routledge Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, vol. 2 of John Dewey: Critical Assessments (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 1992), 149.

⁸² Elizabeth McClausland Papers, 1838-1980, bulk 1920-1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 26, Folder 24].

⁸³ "Bauhaus Manifesto," http://www.dmoma.org/lobby/Bauhaus_manifesto.html (accessed March 16, 2010).

⁸⁴ Donald D. Egbert, Stow Persons, and Thomas Seymour Bassett. *Socialism and American life*, vol. 1 of. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952. 669

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Szymon Bojko, "VKhUTEMAS," in Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930: New Perspectives* (Los Angeles: George Rice & Sons, 1980), 79.

⁸⁷ Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus: 1919-1933 Reform and Avant-Garde*, (Hohenzollernring: Taschen, 2006), 17.

⁸⁸ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Reel 11].

⁸⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1998), 96.

⁹⁰ Catalogue of the Design Laboratory of the Federation Technical School, Fall-Spring 1937-38, (New York: 1937), New York Public Library.

⁹¹ Oral history interview with William Friedman, 1965 June 16, Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution.

⁹² Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Reel 55].

⁹³ Eva Forgacs, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Central European University Press, 1995), 192.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Gilbert Rohde, "The Design Laboratory," *American Magazine of Art*, October 1936, 643.

⁹⁷ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Reel 34].

⁹⁸ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Reel 34-35].

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Eva Forgacs, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Central European University Press, 1995), 189.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), 233.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Reel 80].

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Catalogue of the Design Laboratory of the Federation Technical School, Fall-Spring 1937-38, (New York: 1937),15 in New York Public Library.

¹¹¹ Catalogue of the Design Laboratory of the Federation Technical School, Fall-Spring 1937-38, (New York: 1937),14 in New York Public Library.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Virginia H. Marquardt, "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 26 (1986): 17.

¹¹⁴ Virginia H. Marquardt. "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art." *Archives of American Art Journal* 26 (1986): 19.

¹¹⁵ *American Artists School*, September, 21, 1936-June 12, 1937 [brochure], Phillip Evergood Papers, microfilm roll 429: 1130 in Virginia H. Marquardt. "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art." *Archives of American Art Journal* 26 (1986): 18.

¹¹⁶ Lee Stanley, "Teaching Democracy in Art." *Daily Worker*, April 12, 1940, p 7 in

¹¹⁷ Virginia H. Marquardt, "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 26 (1986): 7.

¹¹⁸ Wood, Paul. *Modernism in Dispute: Art since the Forties*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993.

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- ¹¹⁹ Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly* (1937): 16-7, homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/schapiro-naa.pdf (accessed August 5, 2009).
- ¹²⁰ Elizabeth McCausland Papers Subject Files: Design Laboratory, 1936, Smithsonian Institution. [Box 26, Folder 24].
- ¹²¹ Gilbert Rohde, "The Design Laboratory," *American Magazine of Art*, October 1936, 643.
- ¹²² Martin J. Medhurst, *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology*, (East Lansing, Mich.: MSU Press, 1997), 134.
- ¹²³ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy: 1917-1946*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 85.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁷ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy: 1917-1946*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 102.
- ¹²⁸ Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/> (accessed January 5, 2011).
- ¹²⁹ Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy: 1917-1946*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 102
- ¹³⁰ Elizabeth McCausland Papers, 1838-1980, bulk 1920-1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 26, Folder 24].
- ¹³¹ Gilbert Rohde, "The Design Laboratory," *American Magazine of Art*, October 1936, 639.
- ¹³² Elizabeth McCausland Papers, 1838-1980, bulk 1920-1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 26, Folder 24].
- ¹³³ Gilbert Rohde, "The Design Laboratory," *American Magazine of Art*, October 1936, 638.
- ¹³⁴ Thomas P. Hughes, *Human-built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 138.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ William Young and Nancy Young, *The 1930s: American Popular Culture Through History*, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 77.

¹³⁷ Irene Rice Pereira papers, 1930-1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 2395, Roll 0087].

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Elizabeth McCausland Papers, 1838-1980, bulk 1920-1960, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Reel 27, Folder 20-27].

¹⁴⁰ Christopher J. Hubbert, "The Kelvin Home: Cleveland Heights Leads the Way to a New and Better Way of Living," Cleveland Heights and the National Register of Historical Places <http://www.chhistory.org/FeatureStories.php?Story=KelvinHome> (accessed February 5, 2011).

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¹⁴⁵ *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

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¹⁴⁷ Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2.

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- ¹⁵⁸ Kate McGowan, *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, vol. 6 of *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 178.
- ¹⁵⁹ Proyect, L., <http://www.columbia.edu/~lnp3/mydocs/culture/gui> (accessed November 21, 2009).
- ¹⁶⁰ Schwab to Feiss, June 10th 1938, WPA Central Files 1935-1944, NA RG-69, College Park, MD.
- ¹⁶¹ Carl L. Feiss Papers, #2635. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.
- ¹⁶² Ibid.
- ¹⁶³ Oral history interview with William Friedman, 1965 June 16, Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution.
- ¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ellen Marriott Dodington, “Changing the Look of American Flatware Through Craft and Industrial Design” (master’s thesis, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum and Parsons School of Design, 2002), 8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ellen Marriott Dodington, “Changing the Look of American Flatware Through Craft and Industrial Design” (master’s thesis, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum and Parsons School of Design, 2002), 6.

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Illustrations

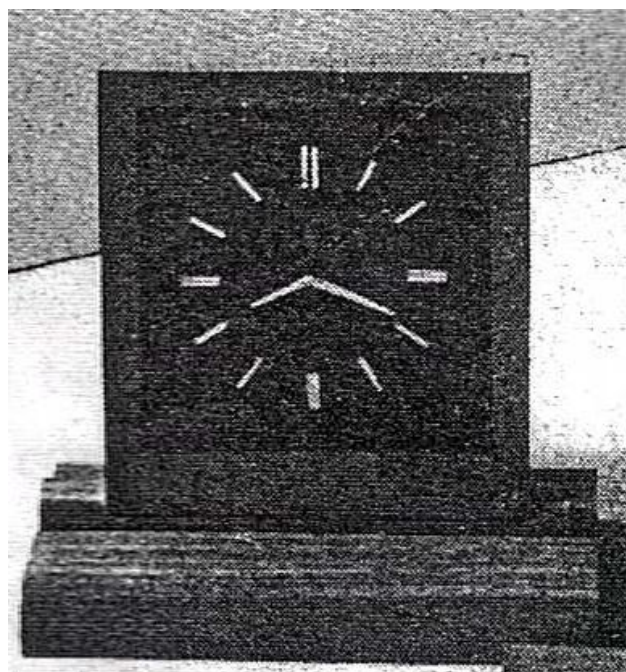


Figure 1: (Unknown) Design Laboratory Student, *Clock*, 1936, *American Magazine of Art*.



Figure 2: Marianne Brandt, *Clock*, c. 1930, Museum of Modern Art.

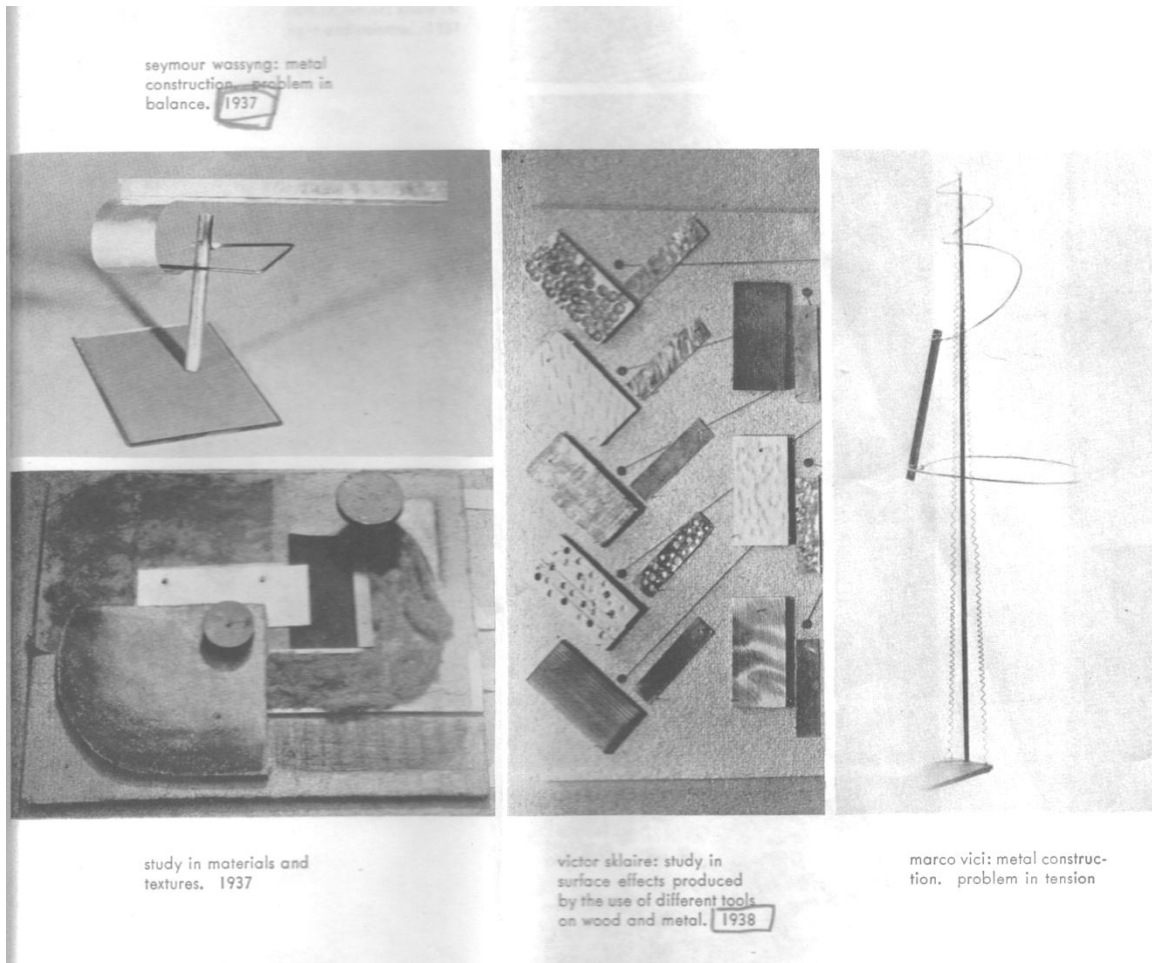


Figure 3: Design Laboratory Students, *Preliminary Work*, c. 1938, *Bauhaus, 1919-1928 Exhibition Catalog*, Museum of Modern Art.

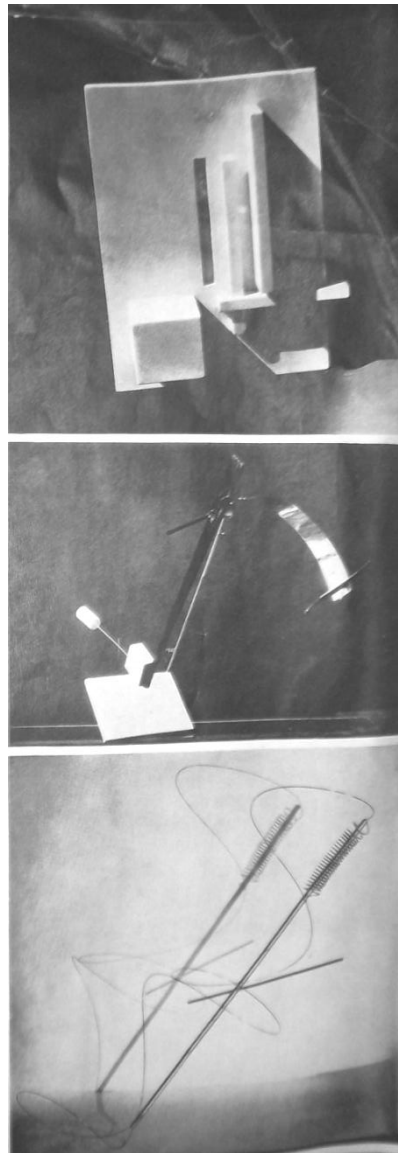


Figure 4: Bauhaus Students, *Preliminary Work*, 1919-1928, *Bauhaus, 1919-1928 Exhibition Catalog*, Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 5: Gilbert Rohde, *Clock*, 1934,
Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living, (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2009).



Figure 6: Marcel Breuer, *Cesca Chair*, 1935,
Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living, (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2009).



Figure 7: Gilbert Rohde, *Chair*, 1935,
Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living, (New Haven: Yale University Press,
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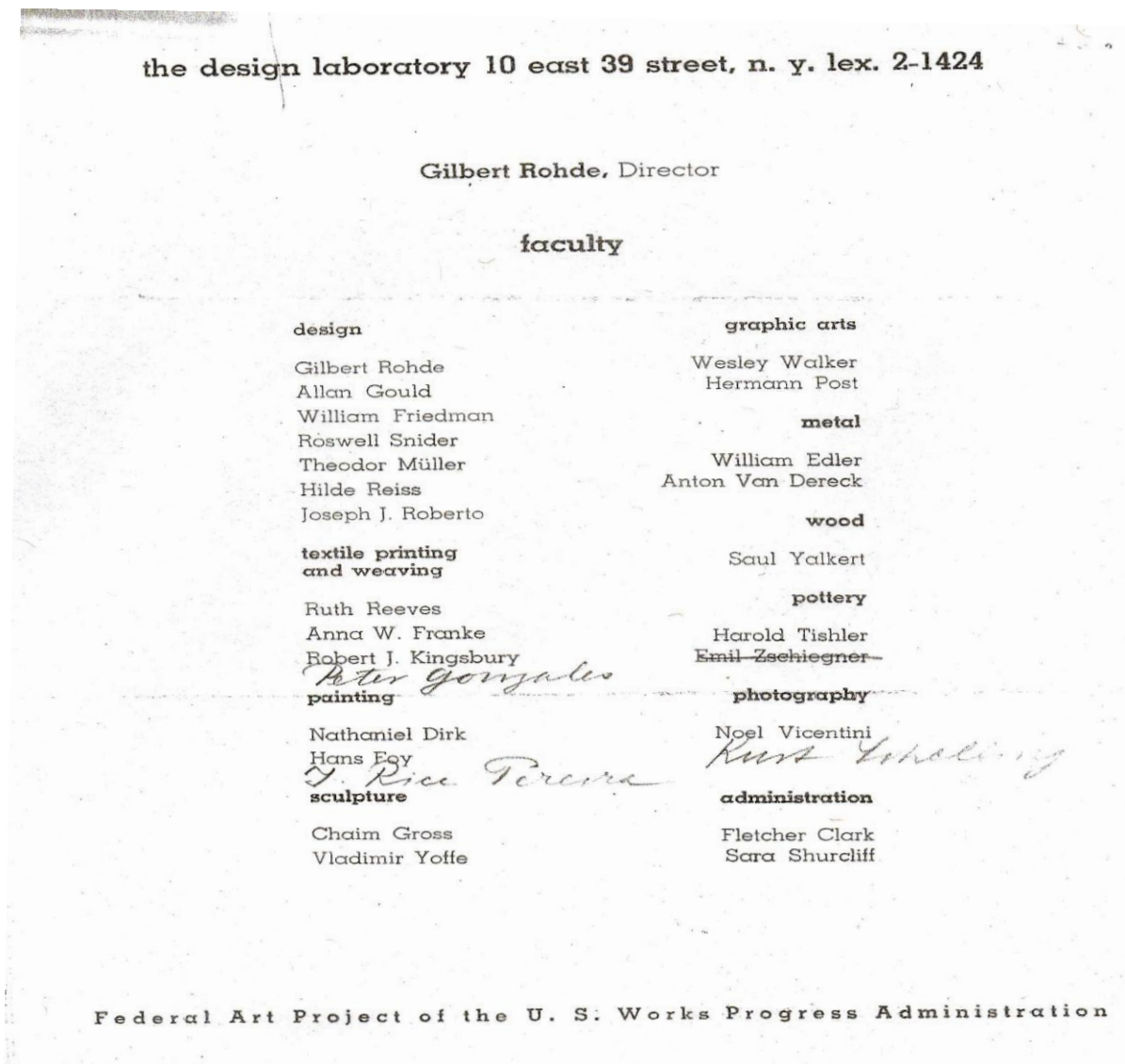


Figure 11: WPA, *List of Design Laboratory Faculty Members*, 1935,
US National Archives, RG 69, College Park, MD.

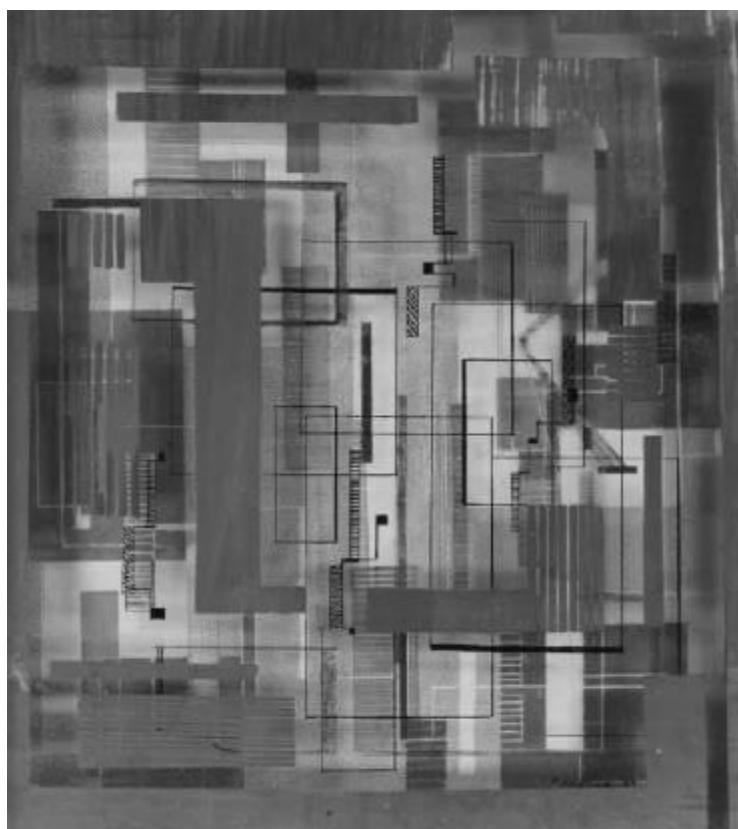


Figure 9: Irene R. Pereira, *Reflection*, c. 1937-.
Christie's, New York, 2003.

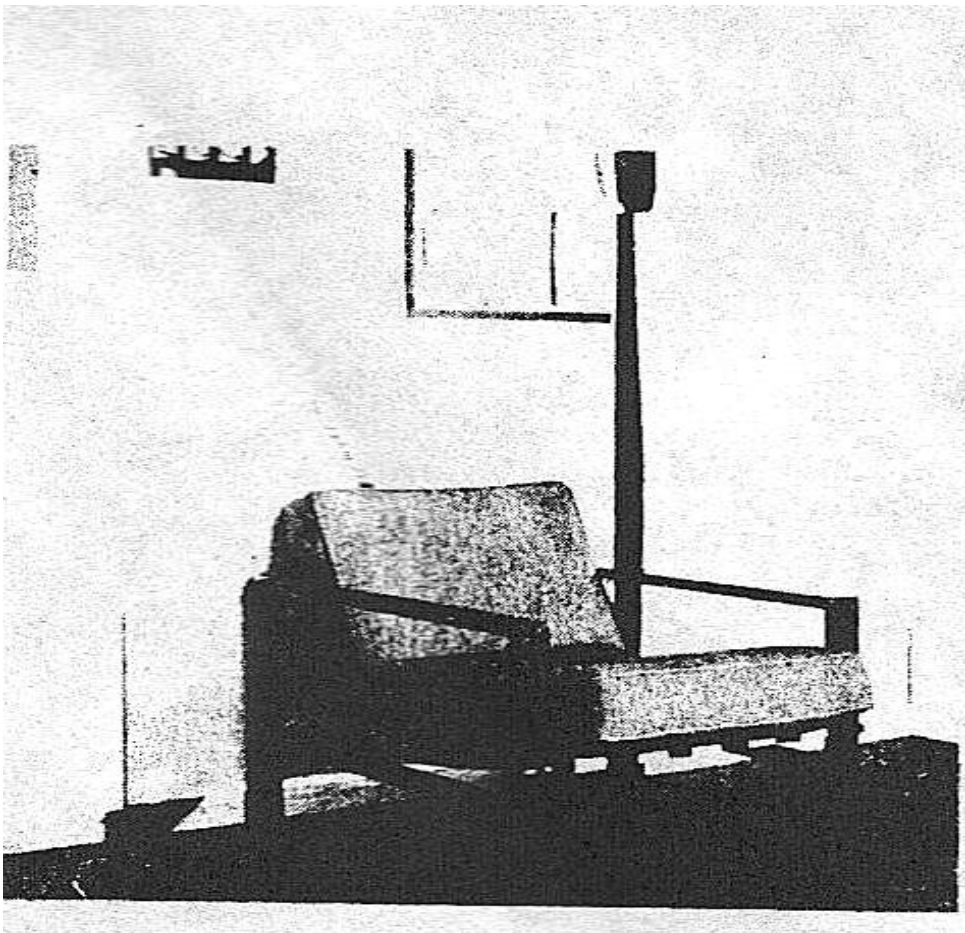


Figure 10: Hilde Reiss, William Friedman, *Knockdown Arm Chair*, 1938.
Cultural Front, Architectural Record.

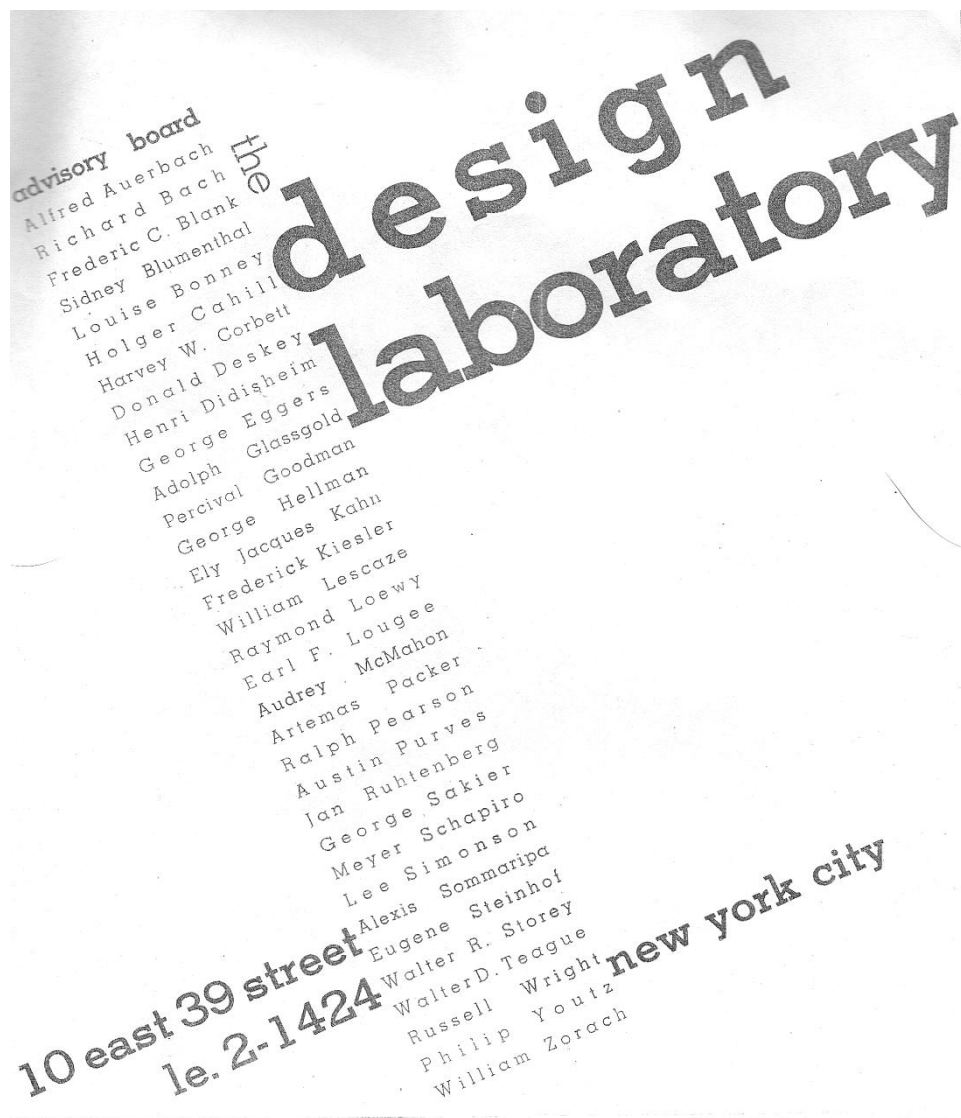


Figure 11: WPA, *List of Design Laboratory Advisory Board*, 1936,
 WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.



Figure 12: WPA, *Photograph of Working Design Laboratory Students*, 1936, WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.

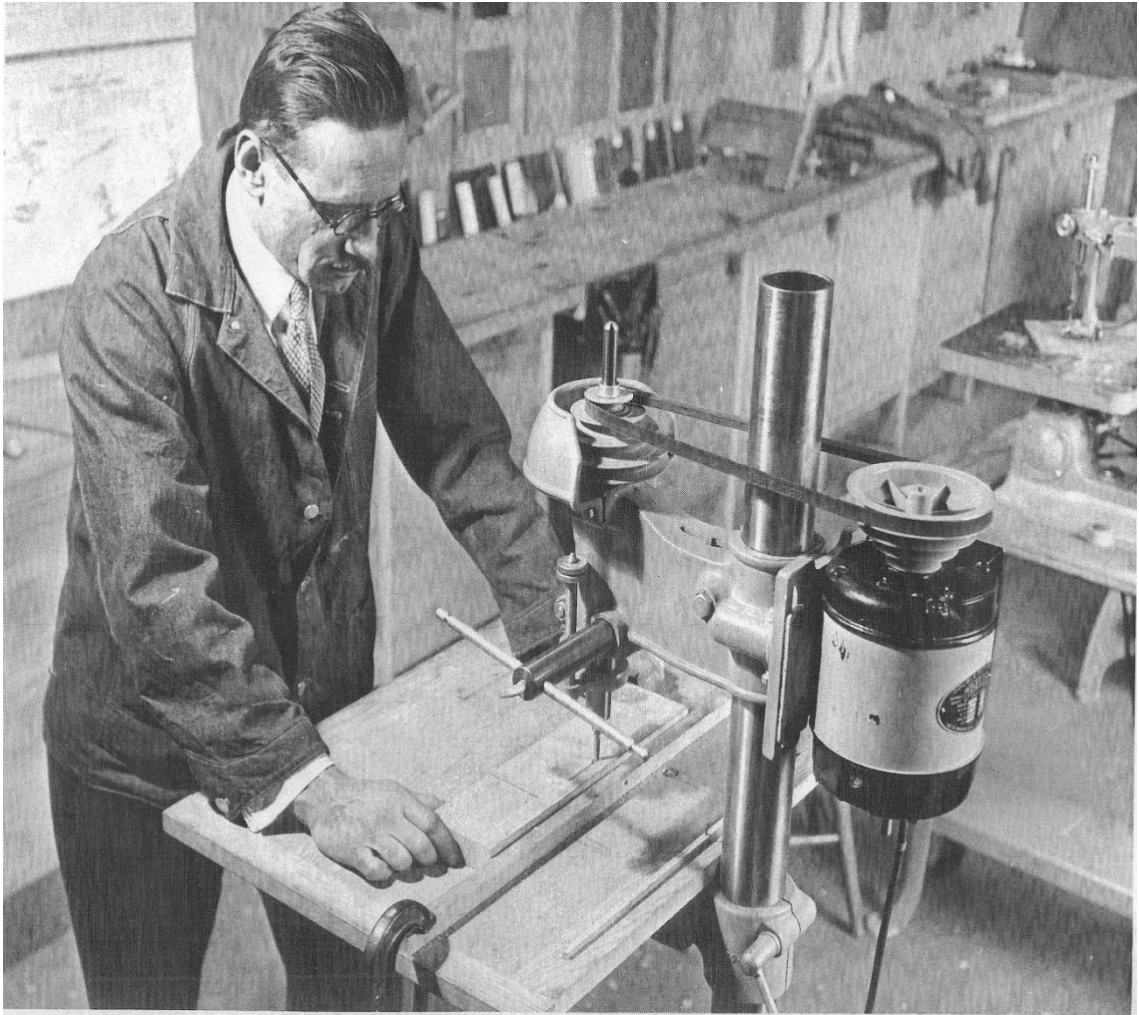


Figure 13: WPA, Photograph of *Gilbert Rohde Trying the Drill Press at the Design Laboratory, 1936,*
WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.

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Figure 14: WPA, *Exhibition Flyer*, 1936,
WPA Central Files 1935-1944, National Archives RG-69, College Park, MD.

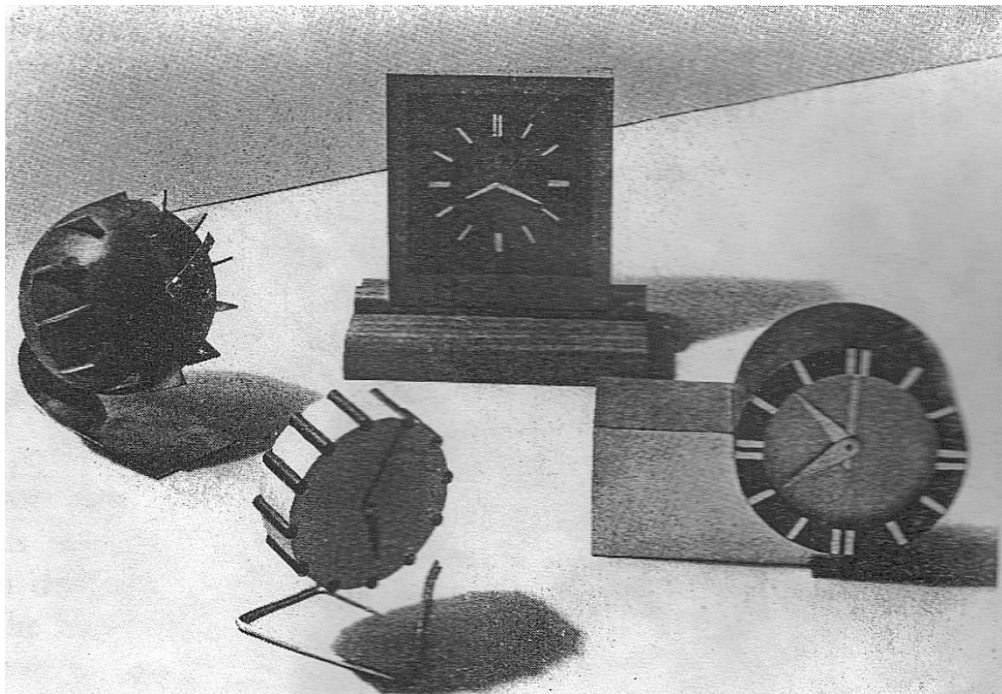


Figure 15: Unknown (Design Laboratory Students), *Clocks*, 1936, *American Magazine of Art*.

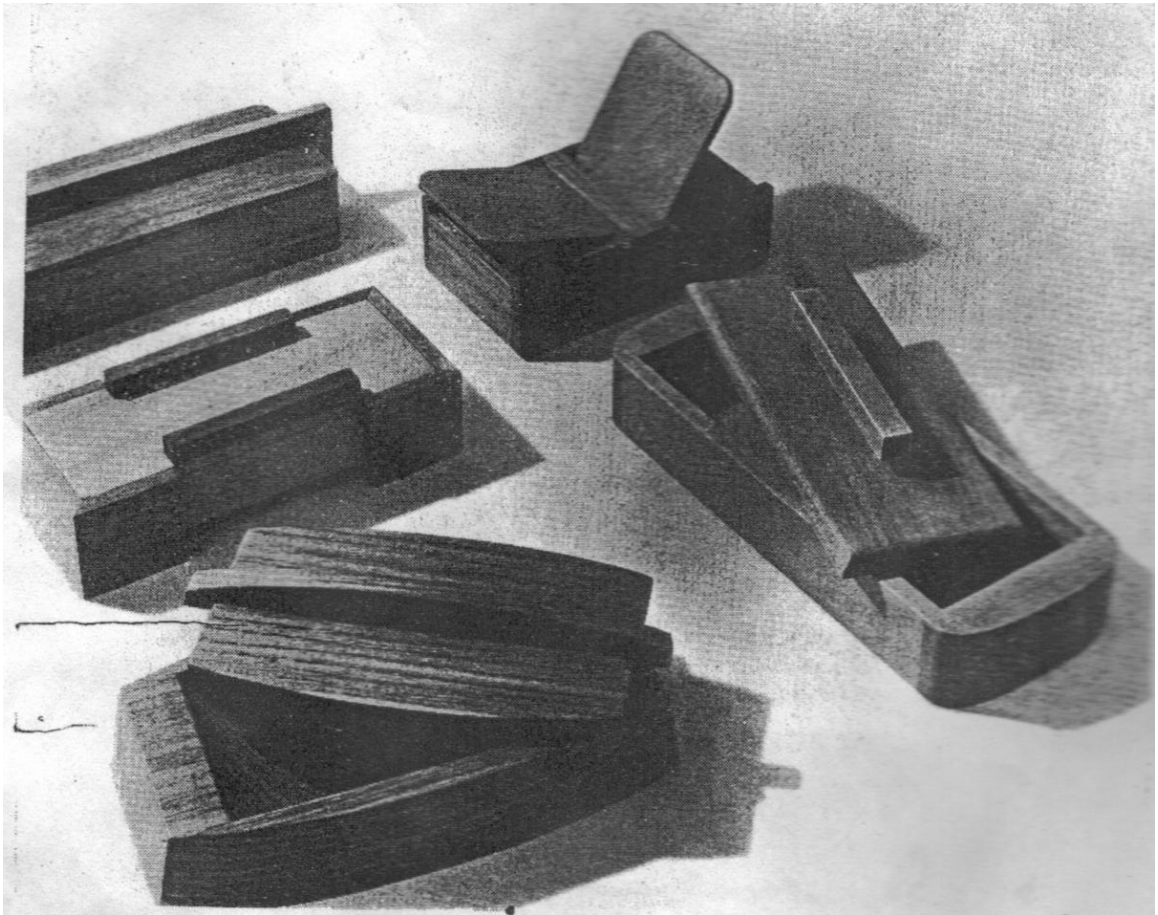


Figure 16: Unknown (Design Laboratory Students), *Cigarette Boxes*, 1936, *American Magazine of Art*.



Figure 17: Don Wallace, *Chair*, 1938,
Catalogue of Courses 1937-38, Design Laboratory, New York Public Library

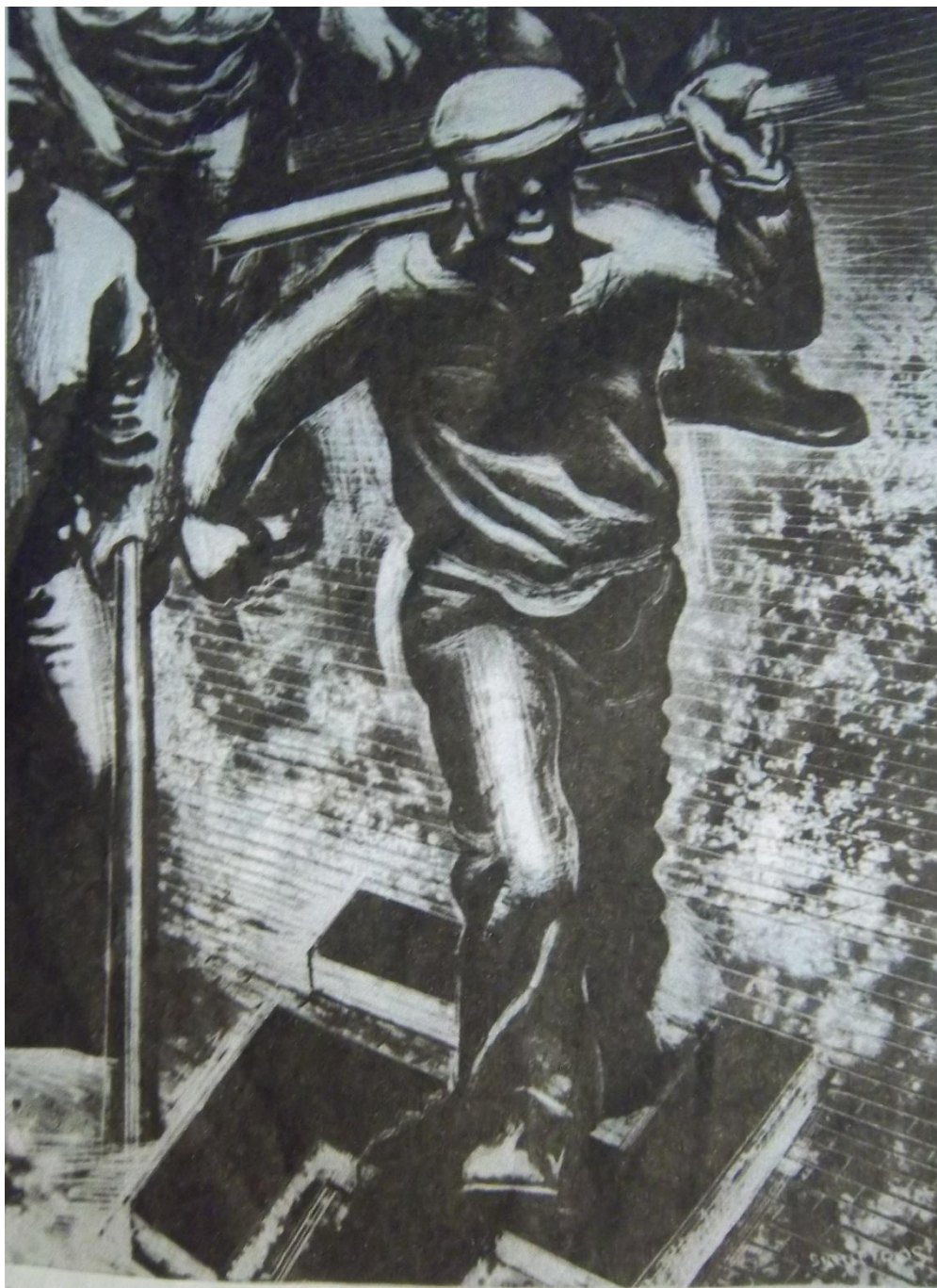


Figure 18: David Alfaro Siqueiros, Untitled, 1936, Sylvan Cole Gallery, New York.



Figure 19: Stuart Davis, Abstraction (Later Titled Anchor), 1935, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

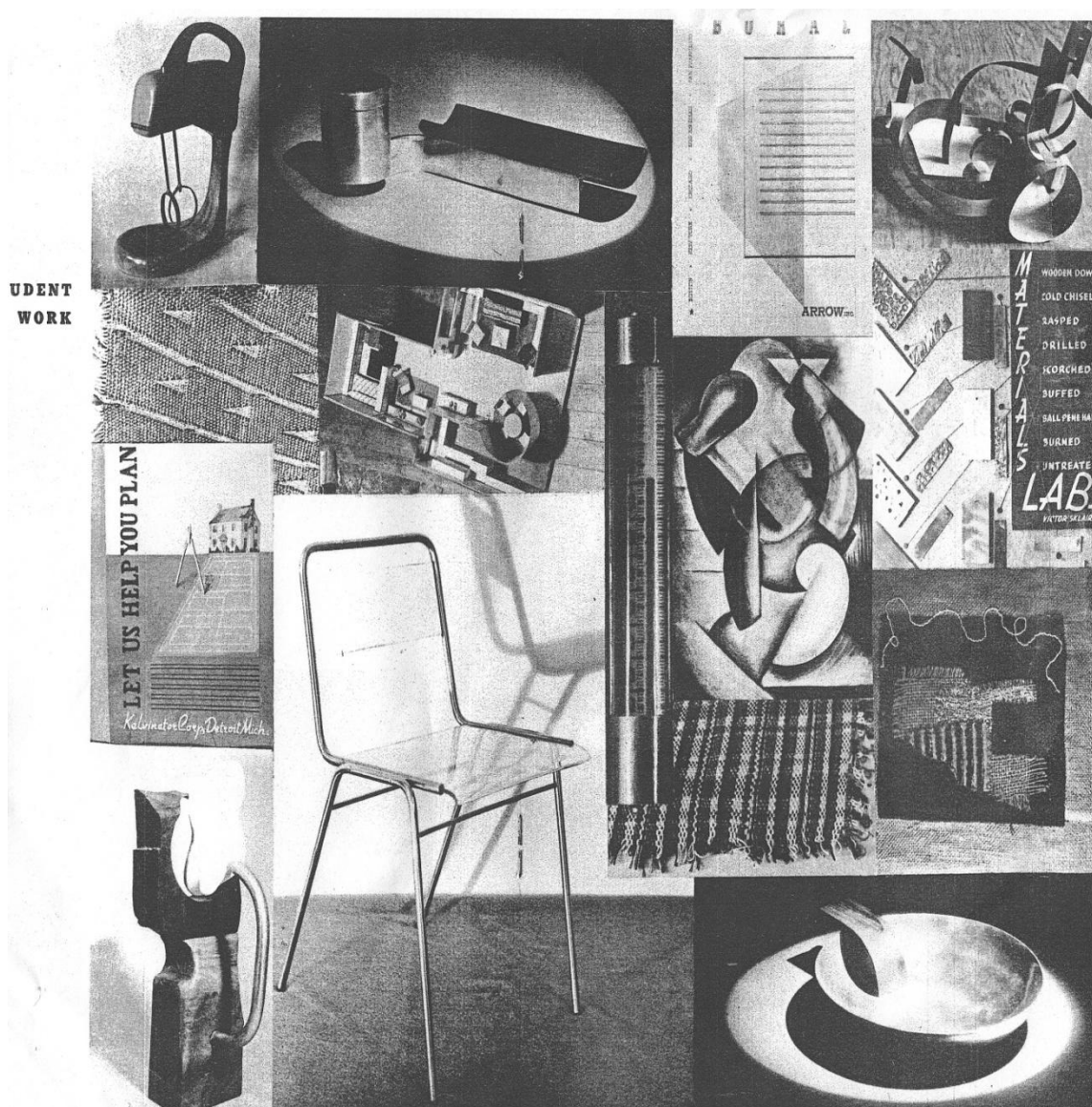


Figure 20: *Student Work (Design Laboratory), 1938,*
Catalogue of Courses 1937-38, Design Laboratory, New York Public Library.

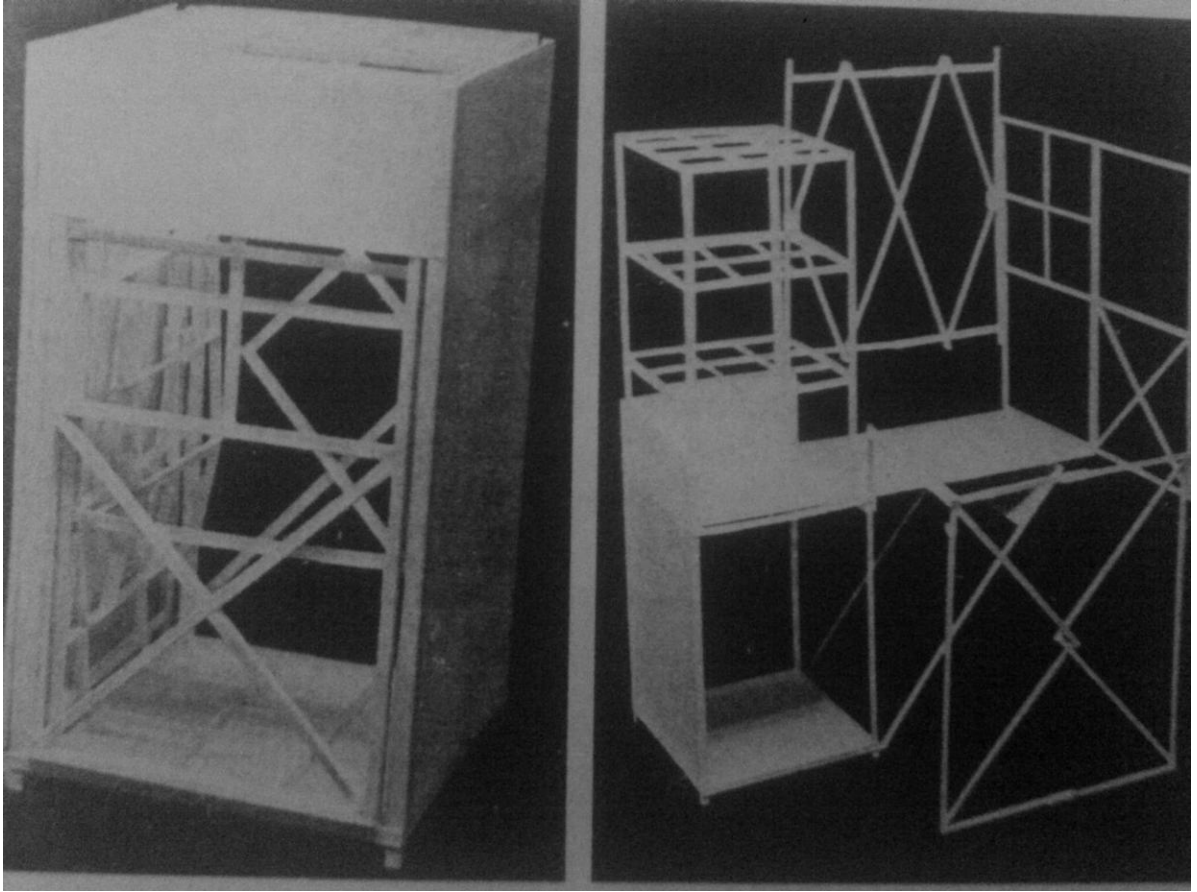


Figure 21: Zakhar Bykov, *Kiosk (folded and assembled)*, c. 1923.
The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy: 1917-1946, 1997.



Figure 22: Raymond Loewy, *Pencil Sharpener*, 1933,
Henry Ford, Mass Production, Modernism, and Design, 1994.

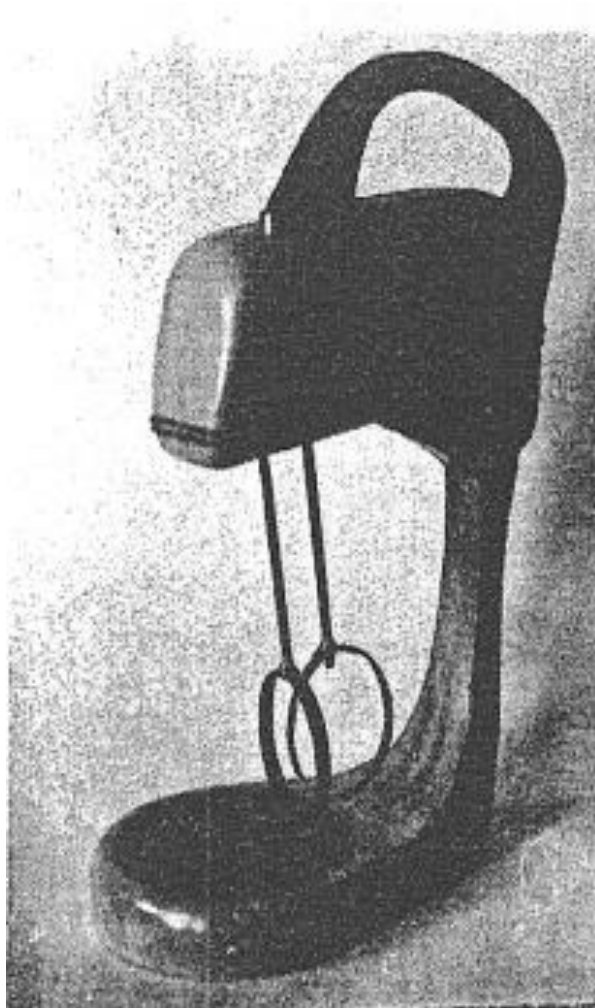


Figure 23: (Unknown) Design Laboratory Student, *Electric Mixer*, c. 1937, *Catalogue of Courses 1937-38*, *Design Laboratory*, New York Public Library.

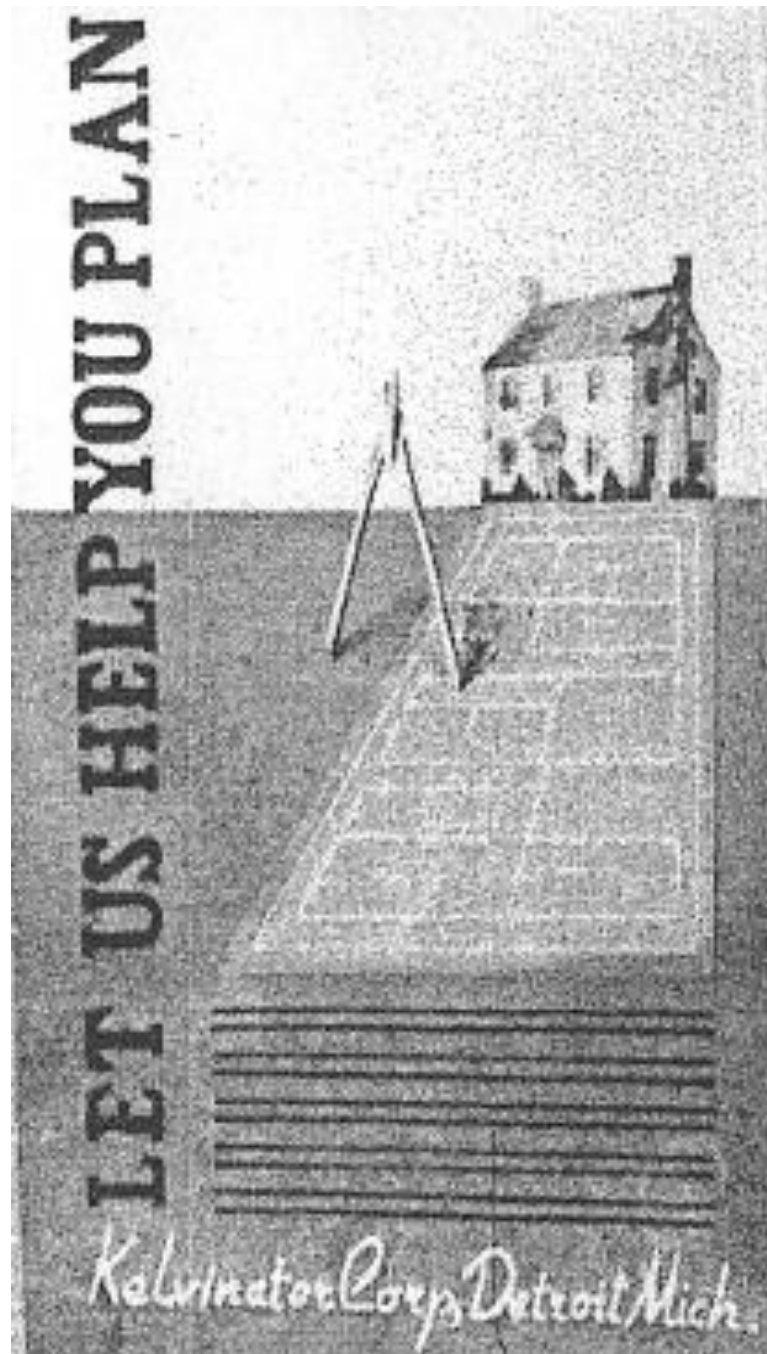


Figure 24: (Unknown) Design Laboratory Student, *Advertising Layout*, c.1937. *Catalogue of Courses 1937-38*, *Design Laboratory*, New York Public Library.



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Figure 25: Kelvinator Homes, *Current Photo*, 2011 and *Advertisement*, 1937. Cleveland Heights and the National Register of Historical Places <http://www.chhistory.org/FeatureStories.php?Story=KelvinHome>.



Figure 26: Unknown (Design Laboratory Student), *Poster*, 1936,
American Magazine of Art.

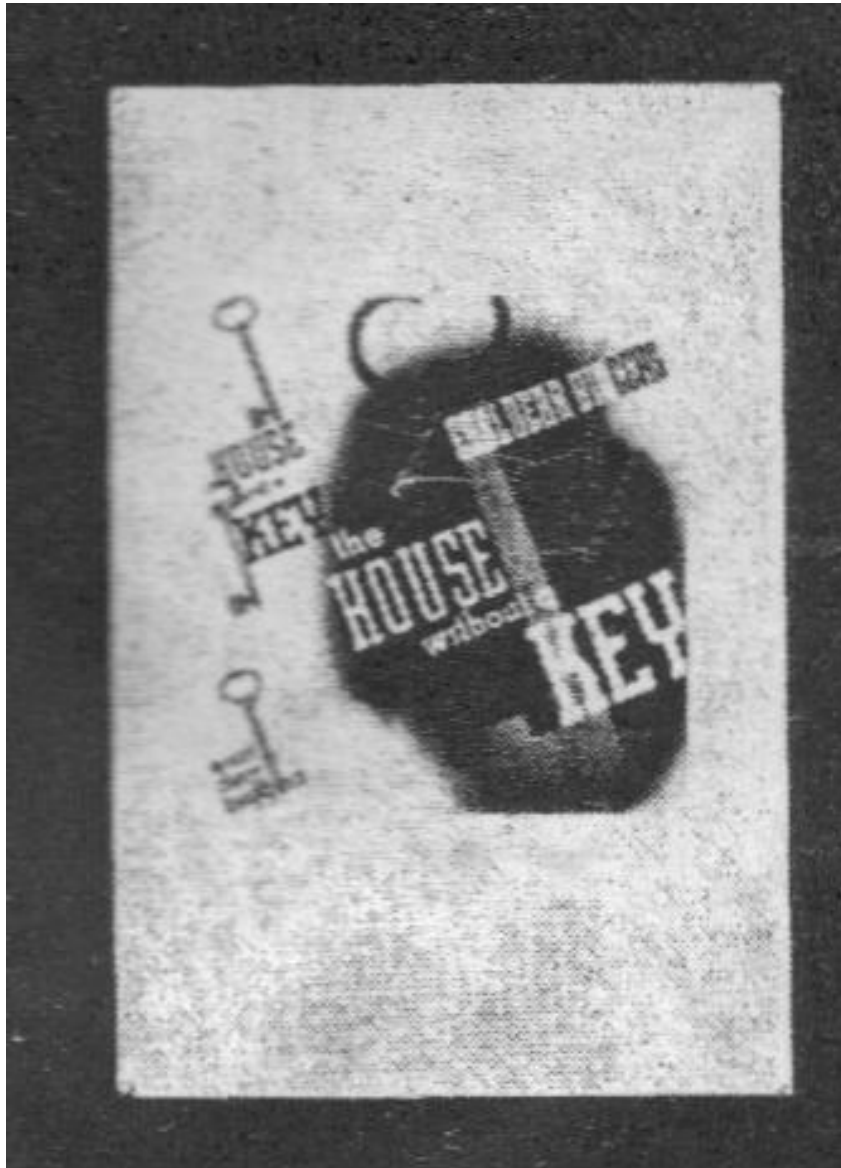


Figure 27: Unknown (Design Laboratory Student), *Book Cover*, 1936, *American Magazine of Art*.