

# Exhibition traces Bauhaus luminary's tangled past

BERLIN

## German designer's work for the Nazis is subject of museum retrospective

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Just in case the title of the 1936 brochure "German youth in a changing world" was not enough to identify it as a piece of Nazi propaganda, there were more clues in the cover featuring a handsome blond-haired boy clad in a Hitler Youth uniform, smiling confidently as he gazed into the distance, one hand gripping a German flag.

Unsurprisingly, the brochure was commissioned by the Terramare Office, which published official propaganda intended to paint a glowing picture of life in Nazi Germany for foreign readers. Less predictably, this paean to the Hitler Youth movement was designed by Herbert Bayer, one of the most famous graduates of the Bauhaus, the avant-garde German art and design school

whose alumni were generally considered to be decadent and subversive by the Nazis, and persecuted accordingly.

Nor was the brochure the only piece of Nazi propaganda that Bayer designed. In the 10 years from 1928, when he left the Bauhaus to open a studio in Berlin, until his departure for the United States in 1938, he produced posters, brochures and other promotional material for a succession of government projects. Bayer later tried to erase this period from his biography, describing it as "my advertising purgatory," which is now the title of an exhibition devoted to his work at the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin.

As well as revealing rarely seen projects by one of the most important graphic designers of the 20th century, the exhibition, which runs through Feb. 24, raises fascinating questions about the relationship between design and politics. What are the political responsibilities of designers like Bayer? And how is their work affected by its political context, regardless of their personal politics?

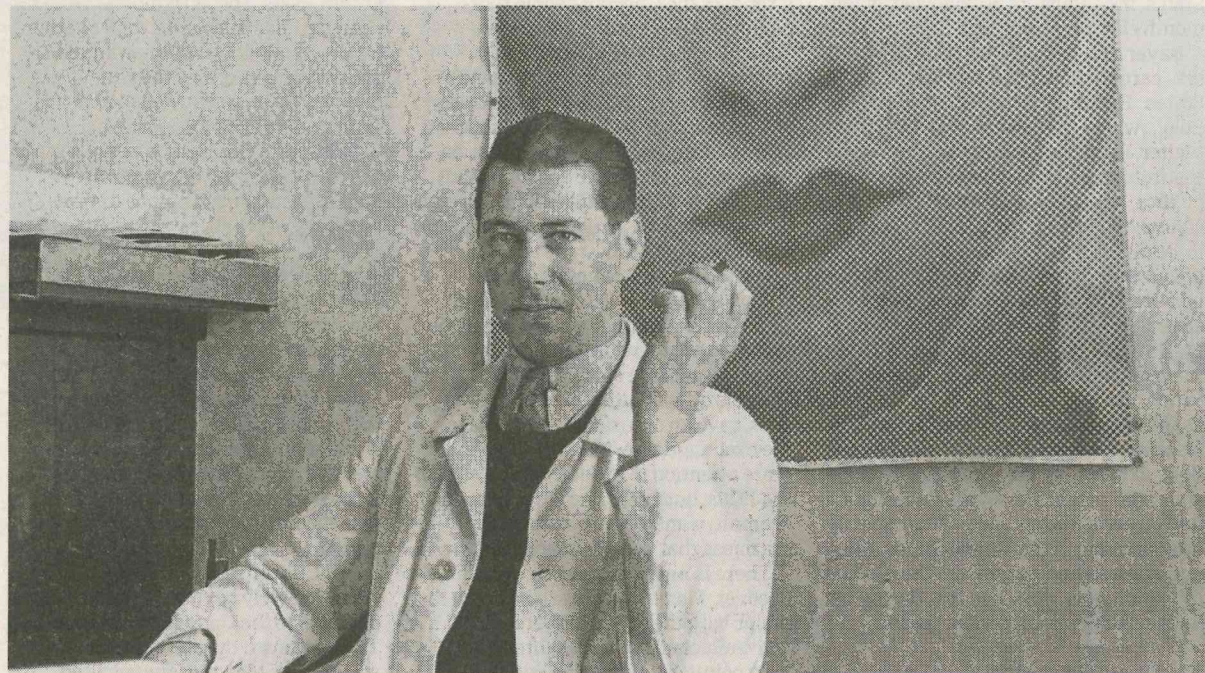
Not that there is any evidence of Bayer being sympathetic to Nazism. His wife, Irene Hecht, was Jewish, as were

many of his friends, and he claimed to have been apolitical when living in Nazi Germany, arguing that he had accepted official commissions only because, like everyone else in the country, he had no choice in the matter.

"As far as I can tell, this was not a defensive lie, but his true state of mind in the 1930s," said Patrick Rössler, a curator of the Bauhaus Archive show. "Bayer was definitely not a Nazi, nor did he work officially for the Party or Goebbels's propaganda ministry. However, it is pretty obvious that he did not hesitate to execute assignments commissioned by institutions close to the government."

Born in Austria in 1900, Bayer had moved to Berlin after seven years of study and teaching at the Bauhaus, where he had pioneered a radically new approach to typography and graphic design characterized by the clarity and simplicity of Modernism. By 1928, he was feted by design journals for his innovative use of crisp sans serif typefaces (ones without decorative flicks at the ends of the characters) and lower case letters. Bayer considered

**BAYER, PAGE 12**



Herbert Bayer at the ad agency Dorland around 1933. He produced material for the German government for a decade.

BAUHAUS ARCHIVE, BERLIN





VG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2013

Top, a Herbert Bayer poster for a German exhibit at a 1930 Paris exposition; bottom, his cover for a state-published book.

## ‘Purgatory’ of a gifted German designer

**BAYER, FROM PAGE 11**

capital letters to be elitist, old-fashioned and too time-consuming to type in the frenzy of modern life.

Handsome and urbane, Bayer was a popular figure at the Bauhaus and a favorite of its founder, the architect Walter Gropius and his wife Isa. Once in Berlin, he and Irene socialized with them and other Bauhäuslers, including the furniture designer Marcel Breuer and the graphic designer Xanti Schawinsky.

After a stint as art director of German Vogue, Bayer opened a studio in the offices of the advertising agency Dorland. As the Bauhaus Archive exhibition illustrates, his early work there shared the dynamism of his Bauhaus experiments, particularly in the striking juxtaposition of typography and imagery in projects like his poster for the 1930 “Werkbund” exhibition in Paris.

Bayer rapidly became one of Ger

Bayer rapidly became one of Germany's most prolific commercial designers. But by the mid-1930s, the Nazi regime was increasingly repressive and many of his friends, including the Gropiuses, had left the country. Bayer remained, and worked on high-profile government projects, including the propaganda exhibitions "German People, German Work" and "Germany." Disapproving though the Nazis were of Modernist design, they were willing to use it whenever it seemed expedient.

His official assignments, like his other mid-1930s designs, lack the energy of his earlier work, reflecting the constraints imposed by his political patrons and the turbulence of his private life. Not only was Bayer struggling to justify his "apolitical" position in so dictatorial a regime, he missed his departed friends and his marriage was foundering. An inveterate womanizer, he had had a string of affairs, including one with Isa Gropius, which had imperiled, but not ended, his friendship with her husband. Despairing of his infidelities, Irene left him, taking their daughter, Julia, with her.

During 1937, Bayer also fell from political favor. Mr. Rössler suspects the authorities were disquieted both by his decision to stage a solo show in London and the inclusion of one of his paintings in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition of banned artworks in Munich. Bayer was desperate to leave Germany, but too broke to do so until Gropius arranged for him to curate an exhibition about the Bauhaus at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He left for the United States in August 1938, followed a few months later by Irene and Julia.

Bayer and Irene divorced in 1944, but his career flourished in the United States. Eventually, he settled in Aspen, Colo., where he and the industrialist Walter Paepcke established the Aspen Institute as a forum where leaders from politics, the arts and other fields exchanged ideas. Looking back on his life in Berlin, Bayer admitted to being "appalled how blind" he had been to the horrors of Nazism. He also acknowledged the folly of thinking that designers, artists or anyone else could isolate themselves from politics, as he had tried to do.

The impact of Bayer's dealings with Nazism on his work is illustrated by the final exhibits in the Bauhaus Archive show, the magazine covers he designed for Harper's Bazaar and Fortune shortly after arriving in the United States. Elegant, spirited and optimistic, they exude the vitality his work had lost during his "advertising purgatory" in Berlin.

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