

Toys and the Innocent Eye: Bauhaus toys of the 1920s

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"The whole technical power of painting," wrote John Ruskin in the *Elements of Drawing*, "depends on our recovery of what might be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify." Ruskin's radical transformation of the artist into a child-like visionary, the so-called innocent eye, would go on to become one of the foundations of the 20th century avant-garde and a key premise of Modernist design pedagogy. Through teachers such as Paul Klee and Johannes Itten, the Weimar Bauhaus curriculum developed a comprehensive re-ordering of art education based on the innocent eye. At the same time, and much less studied, the Bauhaus workshops produced a number of now iconic toys that were material embodiments of the innocent eye and demonstrated the potential of child-like play as a fundamental aspect of art and design education.

Building on early pedagogical toys designed specifically for the kindergarten, such as the Fröbel blocks, the Bauhaus toys delighted in the potential of toys to become instruments of social and artistic reform for adults as well. Toys such as the *Bauspiele Schiff* by Alma Siedhoff-Buscher and Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack's *Optischer Farbmischer* were not only objects of play for children, they were also intended as mediating devices for designers and artists to become child-like. Radical for their time, the Bauhaus toys were characterized by fundamental physical conditions such as weight, tactility and color, and they purposely transgressed the notion that a toy should represent something else, such as an animal or human figure. Instead, relying on the principle of the innocent eye, the toys strengthened the analogy between the act of design and play, an enduring legacy still found throughout design education worldwide.

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Jonathan Foote, Ph.D., is currently Associate Professor of History and Theory at the Aarhus School of Architecture in Aarhus, Denmark, and is founder and principal of Atelier U:W, a design research firm. He has taught architecture at various institutions in the USA and Europe since 2004 and has run periodic toy design competitions with architecture students based on the lessons of early Bauhaus toy pedagogy.