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A pioneer of Swiss art in the 20th century has died

Max Bill: a model for generations to follow

The celebrated Swiss artist, Max Bill, has died in Berlin at the age of 86. The announcement of his death reverberated across Europe.

Switzerland has lost a world-renowned and much-loved painter, art theoretician, designer and architect, perhaps one of the most important universal artists of our time. Max Bill is a figure who has left his mark on the

Alice Baumann

20th century. He designed products and created new print styles and posters. As a teacher he influenced many other artists, and as an architect he set an example for generations to come.

Untiring explorer

Max Bill was fired by an unbridled spirit of creation right up until the last

were a fine and sensational example of the New Building movement. By the time he moved into his second self-designed house in Zumikon in 1970 he was a celebrity. He was showered with international prizes and awards. Just a few weeks before he died the Department of Architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich conferred upon him an honorary doctorate: the first from his native Switzerland.

Max Bill was as much a creative artist as a theoretician. In solving artistic problems he based himself on functionality, which is the relationship of human beings with the objects around them. This is why he liked to call his artistic creations "objects for spiritual use". Painting was for him the freest creative medium, the one with the least need for compromise. He was open-minded as a thinker, but unyielding and without any kind of pathos, a characteristic which emphasised his pioneering role. In the last years of his life he suffered from a sight deficiency which drove him in-

solutions for everyday use. An example of such usability was the "pavilion sculpture" set up in Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse in 1983 – something which is genuinely functional. This was extremely controversial and sharply criticised at the time, but today it has become an integral part of Zurich's urban structure and city culture. You can eat a picnic on it or calmly meditate and rest there. Such dreams of merging art with the daily life of human beings were at the heart of his whole thinking and feeling. As an advocate of such ideas and as a creator of works based upon them, Max Bill can stand alongside his great countrymen, Le Corbusier and Alberto Giacometti.

The artist in parliament

For Max Bill, art itself was the most noble form of politics. But in spite of that he did become involved in party life. From 1961–1967 he was a member of the Zurich City Council. In 1976 he was elected to the National Council on the National Association of Independents list. During his four years in Berne he concerned himself especially with problems of area planning and construction in general. As one of his colleagues of the time relates, he stood out against the sobriety of the other parliamentarians with his eccentric dress and his passion for sweets and sticky cakes.



With works like the Zurich "Pavilion Sculpture", Max Bill succeeded in polarising opinion all his life. (Photo: Keystone)

days of his life. With clear-cut lucidity and enormous drive he persisted doggedly with all his various activities. His road through life took him from training as a silversmith at Zurich's School of Arts, then to architectural studies at the Bauhaus in Dessau in Germany at the end of the 1920s and back to Zurich in 1930. His first studios in Zurich-Höngg

creasingly towards sculpture, especially big open-air monuments in urban areas.

The search for the "perfect form"

Here too he worked with elementary materials; he sought typical and simple

Max Bill's inheritance

But back to art. It is sad that this international figure identified with the language of geometric perfection cannot be laid easily to rest. There is argument about what should be done with his artistic heritage. Max Bill left no will behind him. His heirs would like to hand over the works they have inherited to a foundation and welcome plans to set up a Max Bill Museum or a "Bill House" in Zurich. This should be a consolation to his admirers after the artist suddenly and unpredictably cancelled an exhibition entitled "bill shows bill" which had been enthusiastically publicised by the Zurich Art Museum and indeed by the artist himself and was due to open on September 9 last year. This was because work he was offered in Berlin and Munich interested him more than retrospection. He was always attracted to the new. Max Bill remained true to himself until the last day of his life. ■