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HELVECIA

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SWISS ARTS: MAX BILL

Iconic designer with a single-minded approach

The late Swiss artist, architect and designer Max Bill left a lasting impression thanks to his determined idealism that sometimes fell foul of the establishment. Bill made waves in his lifetime by pushing the boundaries through his work, ideas and teaching. A Winterthur exhibition commemorated the iconic figure of 20th century design on the centenary of his birth.

Bill drew upon mathematics and physics to generate his unique abstract geometric style. He employed different shapes, textures and materials to create paintings, sculptures, buildings, bridges, furniture and household utensils.

He had an unwavering desire to unlock the inert potential he saw in his fellow human beings and make them self aware. This conviction eventually led him into teaching, politics and the creation of art movements.

Born in 1908 in Winterthur, Bill started training as a silversmith before moving to Germany to study as an artist under Swiss legend Paul Klee. From 1929 Bill started training as an architect in Zurich and designed his own home in his early 20s. He made his name as an artist and sculptor in the 1930s with his abstract geometric creations and swiftly became a focal point in the Swiss art scene.

In 1936 he became the flag bearer for the Concrete Art scene, the translation of abstract ideas into physical works that could both be enjoyed and solve

design problems. A year later he formed the Allianz of Swiss artists, which spawned a publishing house.

Bill's determination to spread his ideas took him into teaching, first at the Zurich school for art and design and later as founder member of the design college of Ulm in Germany. But his vision of unleashing the dormant power of young people was met with some suspicion in post-war Germany.

His son, Jakob Bill, recalls a perfectionist and occasionally abrasive father who did not always see eye to eye with authority figures: "My father had two characters depending on whom he met. He could be in some instances very rough and in others very friendly. It depended on what people wanted to know from him. He was very precise and knew quite well what he wanted and he was prepared to fight for it. You could not change the character of the man."

But his brushes with authority did not prevent Bill from becoming a member of the Federal Art Commission from 1961 to 1969 and a Swiss parliamentarian from 1967 to 1971.

He later became chair of environmental design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg, an associate member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Science, Literature and Fine Art in Brussels and a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts.

Max Bill died in Berlin in 1994, but his influence continues to this day.

from swissinfo



San Lazzaro by Max Bill