

Oskar Schlemmer's 'Bauhaustreppe', 1932: part I

by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

FEW WORKS HAVE BORNE such dramatic witness to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century political and cultural history as Oskar Schlemmer's painting *Bauhaustreppe* of 1932 (Fig. 17).¹ It is the artist's last major painting, and an extraordinary synthesis of his work as a choreographer, easel- and wall-painter and theoretician, and capped the development of what Schlemmer termed a 'grand figural style', a classical, monumental approach to the human form that he had been developing throughout the 1920s. Schlemmer painted *Bauhaustreppe* in a studio at the Breslau Art Academy in September 1932, shortly before he left for a teaching job in Berlin, a final, short-lived employment before his career fell full victim to Nazi cultural politics. Schlemmer was one of the first artists to suffer persecution when his murals for the Weimar Bauhaus were painted over in October 1930.² From the time of his dismissal from the Berlin Academy in 1933 to his death in 1943 he was able intermittently to work as an artist but was also obliged to do manual work that irreparably damaged his health. The last ten years of his life, wrote Max Bill in his obituary, were as if a curtain of silence had descended.³

Existing accounts of Schlemmer's painting are largely in agreement that it was made in response to news of the closure of the Dessau Bauhaus, and must therefore be considered as an elegy to the institution where Schlemmer had worked from 1920 to 1929.⁴ A preparatory drawing (Fig. 18), first published in 1979, carries the date 4th September 1932, and has been taken to indicate the speed with which Schlemmer reacted to the news of the closure, officially announced on 24th August, revealing Schlemmer's conception of the Bauhaus itself as a symbol of resistance. Further, the purchase in early 1933 of the painting by Philip Johnson, thanks to the intercession of Alfred Barr, and its consequent display at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (where it hangs to this day), has been described as an expression of solidarity with the German avant-garde in the face of Nazi censorship.⁵ Both views reinforce the idea that the painting

should be taken as a political statement of resistance to Nazism, in the light of Schlemmer's own persecution and that of the Bauhaus and the Breslau Academy where he had taught.

These two interpretations, however, fall short of describing the work in its original context. The purpose of this article, which will appear in two parts, is to expand understanding of the circumstances in which the painting was made, and how it so quickly found its way to America, making a journey that, tragically, its creator was unable to replicate.⁶ The notion that the creation, display and sale of *Bauhaustreppe* was an act of resistance to Nazism is inadequate as an explanation as to why Schlemmer thought that it was his 'best work', as he wrote to Philip Johnson (Schlemmer was unaware of Johnson's commitment to nationalist politics along Fascist lines and his admiration for Hitler) in March 1933.⁷ The story of oppression and resistance is only one side of the history of *Bauhaustreppe*, which must also take into account Schlemmer's affinity with nationalist politics, his 'reactionary modernism' and the contradictions of his relations with Nazism throughout the 1930s, as well as his difficult relationship with the Bauhaus itself. The consequence of this re-reading of Schlemmer's masterpiece for the 'Bauhausian' ideals of the Museum of Modern Art will be discussed in the second part of this article.

Unlike the 'imaginary architecture' deployed by Schlemmer in his paintings of around 1930, *Bauhaustreppe* shows an identifiable setting: the main stairway of Walter Gropius's building for the Dessau Bauhaus, which had been inaugurated in December 1926 (Fig. 19). The painting is further anchored to a real space by a photograph (Fig. 20) that was staged by Schlemmer but taken in 1928 by the young photographer T. Lux Feininger while Schlemmer was still employed as a Bauhaus master.⁸ Feininger's photograph, which was brought to light by Wulf Herzogenrath in 1979, shows Gunta Stölzl and her students from the Textile Department posed on a stairway in the Dessau Bauhaus.⁹ Such staging of photographs was not unusual for Schlemmer.

The author wishes to thank the following for their help in the preparation of this article: Torsten Blume, Leah Dickermann, Michael Duffy, Elke Eckhart, John Elderfield, Paul Jaxy, Birgit Jooss, Sabine Hartmann, Illona Lützens, Marcie Muscat, Roland Prügel, Sean Rainbird, Adrian Sudhalter, Freerk Valentien and Aurélie Verdier. Particular acknowledgement is due to the support of Janine Schlemmer, Ute Jaina Schlemmer and Raman Schlemmer. All images are copyright of the Oskar Schlemmer Estate and Archive, Oggebbio; and 2009 estate of Oskar Schlemmer, Munich, unless otherwise stated.

¹ The most important general account remains that included in Karin von Maur's exemplary two-volume monograph and catalogue raisonné; K. von Maur: *Oskar Schlemmer. Monographie*, Munich 1979, I, esp. pp. 221–25; *idem: Oskar Schlemmer. Oeurekatalog der Gemälde, Aquarelle, Pastelle und Plastiken*, Munich 1979, II, pp. 105–07, including a bibliography relating to the painting up to 1977. Most recent coverage of the painting has focused on disputed claims of ownership, a subject beyond the scope of the current article; for a summary, see U. Knöfel: 'Das Erbe des Malers', in *Der Spiegel* 18 (2008), pp. 160–62.

² See K. von Maur: 'Im Schatten der Diktatur – Zum Beispiel Oskar Schlemmer', in exh. cat. *Zwischen Widerstand und Anpassung. Kunst in Deutschland 1933–1945*, Berlin (Akademie der Künste) 1978, pp. 18–31, esp. p. 18. The Nazi election victories in September 1930 were a major step in public mass recognition of the party; see I. Kershaw: *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich. Bavaria 1933–1945*, Oxford 1983, p. 29.

³ M. Bill: 'Oskar Schlemmer', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 721 (4th May 1943), p. 8.

⁴ See, for example, K. von Maur: exh. cat. *Oskar Schlemmer*, New York (Spencer A.

Samuels & Company, Ltd.) 1969, p. 31.

⁵ M. Kentgens-Craig: *The Bauhaus and America. First Contacts 1919–1936*, Cambridge MA and London 2001, p. 78.

⁶ Schlemmer remained in Germany, in a state of 'inner emigration', until his death in 1943.

⁷ Johnson left his position at the Museum of Modern Art in December 1934 to found an ill-fated American Fascist party; see F. Schulze: *Philip Johnson. Life and Work*, New York 1994, p. 113.

⁸ Feininger was eighteen years old at that time and, having joined the Bauhaus in 1926, worked with Schlemmer in the Bauhaus theatre between 1927 and 1929. Wulf Herzogenrath originally ascribed the photograph to Schlemmer himself, but Feininger has recently corroborated that 'the celebrated staircase picture was taken at his [Schlemmer's] request'; see J. Fiedler: 'T. Lux Feininger: "I am a painter and not a photographer"', in *idem, ed.: Photography at the Bauhaus*, London 1990, pp. 45–53, esp. p. 48.

⁹ Herzogenrath describes how he was passed the previously unpublished photograph by a former Bauhaus student, Lisbeth Birman-Österreicher, and was able to date it to 1927/28 on the basis of the students depicted; see W. Herzogenrath: 'Die Überwindung der Schwere. Die Bauhaustreppe – Zur Geschichte eines Bildes und einer Epoche', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 269 (19th November 1977), unpaginated. Herzogenrath used the newly discovered photographic source for the painting to advance a memorialising theory of the work, drawing on Elly Jaffé-Freem's book *Alain Robbe-Grillet et le peinture cubiste*, Amsterdam 1966, which freely associates the 'frozen movement' of Schlemmer's work to the famous tableaux of human figures depicted in Alain Resnais's film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

SCHLEMMER'S 'BAUHAUSTREPPE'



17. *Bauhaustreppe*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1932. Canvas, 161 by 113 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; digital image 2009 Scala Archives, Florence). Copyright the Oskar Schlemmer Estate and Archive, Oggebbio; and 2009 estate of Oskar Schlemmer, Munich.

SCHLEMMER'S 'BAUHAUSTREPPE'



18. *Bauhaustreppe*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1932. Charcoal and graphite on transparent paper, 162.3 by 113.6 cm. (Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin).

Photographs by Erich Consemüller of dancers (mostly Bauhaus students) in costumes designed by Schlemmer and posed by the artist demonstrates his interest in creating *tableaux vivants*, capturing frozen gestures in a pictorial manner.¹⁰ In this sense the Bauhaus weavers were being photographed in exactly the same manner, as if this were an everyday 'staircase' dance that Schlemmer had opportunely arranged and recorded.¹¹

Earlier accounts have suggested that Feininger's image was taken on a back stairway;¹² comparison with a photograph of the building in its current restored state shows that this is not the case, and it was in fact staged between the first and second floors on the staircase above the main entrance in the workshop building (Fig.21).¹³ The same staircase is depicted in *Bauhaustreppe* but one flight up from that shown in the photograph, from the vantage point of the second floor, looking up to the landing between the second and third floors. This is hardly recognisable from the interior shown in Schlemmer's painting, but is clear from the disposition of the outside buildings Schlemmer depicts through the large window, which can be loosely identified as the Technical School, and the 'bridge' that linked the two parts of the building, occupied by Gropius's Architekturbüro and administrative offices. Although in the top window the connecting bridge is shown erroneously as a separate block, through the window beneath the stairs the continuous underside of this part of the architecture can clearly be seen.

A comparison of Feininger's photograph with *Bauhaustreppe* shows, however, that Schlemmer departed considerably from the putative source image both in the disposition of his classicised figures in his depiction of Gropius's architecture.¹⁴ By moving



19. Photograph of the main staircase (restored) of Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building, Dessau. Stairs leading to third floor. 2009 (Author's photograph).

the scene to an upper staircase, Schlemmer was able to depict a deeper, more transparent space, and to include the large gridded curtain-wall window that is found only on the side of the staircase facing into the building towards the Technical School. But where the window panes in the original are rectangular, Schlemmer's are square, and he has introduced three blue bands that break up the window in a way not comparable with the original glazed curtain wall. Most strikingly he has turned the upper staircase through ninety degrees so that it is parallel with the picture plane. Similarly, the yellow floor on which the dancer is posed *en pointe* has been tilted towards the viewer, in a way that is not contiguous with the lower staircase, whose perspectival recession suggests a much deeper view. A small preparatory sketch (Fig.22) made around the same time as Feininger's photograph was taken suggests that this compositional solution was reached in 1928 rather than four years later when the painting was made.¹⁵ It is also clear that the figures posed in the photograph do not constitute the sources for the poses of the nine figures in *Bauhaustreppe*. Where the weavers face the photographer, Schlemmer's figures are turned away or incline their heads, giving an appearance of inner concentration; they are of the 'Rückenfigur' type used by Schlemmer to convey a de-psychologised, monumental approach to the human form. He had described in 1930 how a focus on composition led to this particular type of figure: 'Kunstwesen' (art-beings), rather than 'Naturwesen' (natural-beings), that stood as 'allegories [Gleichnis], symbols of the human form'.¹⁶

Photography played an important role at the Bauhaus from around 1928, as part of a widespread increase in interest in *Neue Fotografie* developed by, among others, Moholy-Nagy, and

¹⁰ See G. Barche: 'The photographic staging of the image – on stage photography at the Bauhaus', in Fiedler, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.238–45.

¹¹ Feininger's photograph may be compared with the staged photograph taken of Schlemmer's 1927 Bauhaus dance 'Treppentanz' ('Esprit d'escalier'), showing costumed dancers on a stair and platform construction; it is reproduced in *ibid.*, p.149.

¹² See K. Weber's catalogue entry on the preparatory drawing for *Bauhaustreppe* in P. Hahn, ed.: *Experiment Bauhaus: das Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin (West) zu Gast im Bauhaus Dessau*, Berlin 1988, pp.370–71.

¹³ The author thanks Torsten Blume for his assistance in identifying the precise location.

¹⁴ It is not known to the present author if Schlemmer owned the photograph at the time he made the painting. Another painting made contemporaneously, *Selbstbildnis mit erhobener Hand* (1931/32; Peter Kamm, Switzerland), was painted from a self-portrait photograph of Schlemmer.

¹⁵ This small sketch may in turn be related to a corpus of drawings exploring the staircase motif in Schlemmer's work that stretches back to the early 1920s; see H. Meyer-Ellinger: exh. cat. *Oskar Schlemmer 1888–1943. Werke Zyklischer Themen*.

20. Photograph by T. Lux Feininger of Gunta Stözl and students from the Bauhaus Textile Department posed on the main staircase of the Bauhaus, Dessau. c.1928. (Private collection).



21. Photograph of the main staircase (restored) of Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building, Dessau. Stairs leading to second floor. 2009 (Author's photograph).



22. *Bauhaustreppe*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1928. Pencil drawing on coloured paper, 21 by 14.9 cm. (Depositum Schlemmer, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).



consecrated by two important exhibitions in 1929, *Fotografie der Gegenwart* at the Folkwang-Museum, Essen, and *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart. That the emergence of photography as a separate artistic medium occurred at a time of escalating cultural repression is significant, although it was largely within an earlier tradition of photomontage, rather than the spectacular cool of *Neue Fotografie*, that anti-Fascist imagery appeared. It is nevertheless striking that the 'rediscovery' in the late 1970s of Feininger's photograph coincided with a recoding of *Bauhaustreppe* as a memorial and symbol of resistance, as though a 'photographic' quality in the painting

Ölbilder, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Skulpturen, Hoechst (Jahrhunderthalle and other locations) 1984, in particular, section four: 'Der Mensch im Raum. Treppen- und Geländerszenen' ('Man in Space. Stair and Landing Scenes').

¹⁶ O. Schlemmer: 'Zu meinem Wandbildern für das Museum Folkwang in Essen', *Museum der Gegenwart* 1/4 (1931), pp.147–53. Schlemmer's humanism and mysticism have been lost in more recent interpretations that impose an idea of cool *Sachlichkeit*: Janet Ward describes *Bauhaustreppe* as a 'New Objectivity' painting, answering Le Corbusier's call for purism in architecture: 'its denizens' bodies and cladding in



23. *Bauhaustreppe*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1932/33. Watercolour and body colour over pencil on paper, 27.7 by 21.9 cm. (Karl Ströher, Darmstadt).

had been disinterred. Although the myth of resistance was part of the life of *Bauhaustreppe* from the moment of its arrival in America, early German-language writings on Schlemmer make no reference to political resistance, emphasising rather the transcendent, unpolitical nature of his work.¹⁷ Such a view was part of the broader perception of the Bauhaus during the early years of

literal step with the functionality of the school's ascent of glass, cement, and steel'; see J. Ward: *Weimar Surfaces. Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2001, p.60.

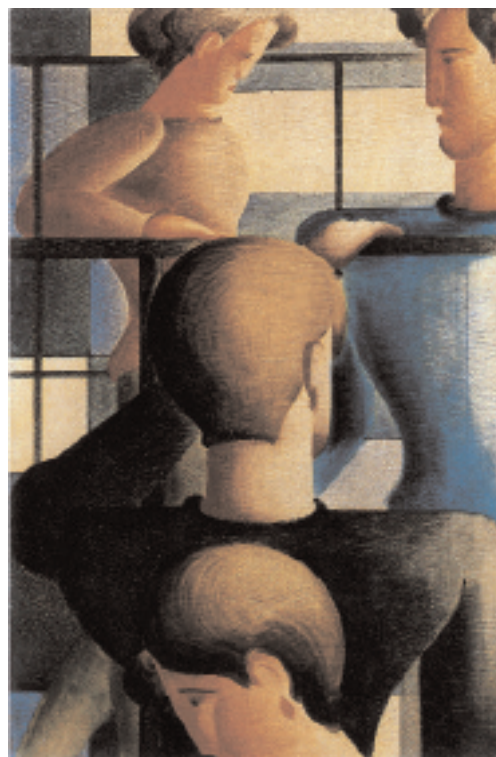
¹⁷ In 1960 Klaus Norbert Scheffler could ask: 'Had he and his colleagues let themselves become involved in the politics of the time, could they have avoided later disastrous consequences?'; see K.N. Scheffler: 'Die Tragik des unpolitischen Künstlers. Zu einer bedeutsamen Ausstellung von Handzeichnungen und Aquarellen Oskar Schlemmers', in *Deutsche Woche* (4th May 1960), p.11.

SCHLEMMER'S 'BAUHAUSTREPPE'

the Federal Republic as a 'polestar of International Style liberalism', aloof from any political entanglements, a view that has now been significantly questioned.¹⁸

Two further preparatory works for *Bauhaustreppe*, a watercolour (Fig.23) in which the composition has been largely determined, and the life-size preparatory drawing mentioned above (Fig.18), in which the composition was refined, were both made in 1932, around the same time as the painting. The watercolour is notable for the degree to which much of the composition and colouring of the final painting has already been resolved. The changes made in the final painting are chiefly the addition of the gridded window, allowing a view onto a further ghostly figure behind the window on the right who holds no place in real space and hovers on the façade of the building. But the distribution and poses of the other figures have already been fixed, as has, most strikingly, the colour of the central figure's clothing (the importance of which will be discussed in the second part of this article). If Schlemmer painted *Bauhaustreppe* as a response to news of the Dessau Bauhaus's final closure in September 1932, then this watercolour was necessarily made at the same moment, and the Bauhaus staircase theme opportunely taken up.¹⁹ The presence of these preparatory works and the careful development of a composition may be set against the notion of a quick reaction to stirring news. Schlemmer had not only been developing ideas for the painting for some time, but had also known of the probable closure of the Bauhaus since earlier in the year. As early as February 1932 he expressed concern that the Nazis wanted to 'tear it [the Bauhaus] down'.²⁰ In July the process seemed irreversible, and Schlemmer wrote of his outrage and powerlessness in a letter to the former Bauhäusler Christof Hertel: 'In spite of Mies van der Rohe's attempts at depoliticisation, the toll will have to be paid for past sins. And yet: can't the closure be revoked? A disgrace! And a disgrace, too, that the entire cultured world does not rise up and firmly say no. But apparently we are all so worn down and resigned that we have no power to stop anything'.²¹

Furthermore, Schlemmer's ambivalent relation to the Bauhaus must be brought into a consideration of how much *Bauhaustreppe* was marked by this 'resignation' and the implication of withdrawal. For his figurative painting Schlemmer felt that he was considered 'reactionary' by other Bauhaus masters.²² With the focus, particularly from 1923, on problems of applied design,²³ easel painting was a diminished part of the Bauhaus curriculum, and while he was at Dessau, Schlemmer focused largely on theatre – in mid-1926 painting was a 'dim, faraway memory', as he wrote to his wife, Tut.²⁴ The possibility of fresco painting, 'large figures on a large surface', was, as he wrote to the painter Otto Meyer-Amden, 'anti-Bauhaus': painters were 'tolerated as a necessary evil'.²⁵ *Bauhaustreppe* therefore represents a class of objects – products of the Bauhaus – of which it is clearly not a member, and the premises of which it may be seen at least in part to contradict,



24. *Gruppe am Geländer*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1931. Canvas, 92.5 by 60.5 cm. (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf).

particularly as a 'masterpiece', a concept antithetical to the tenets of the Bauhaus, at least in its later manifestation.²⁶ The early orientation of the Bauhaus towards painting suggests a deeper level of nostalgia at work in *Bauhaustreppe*; it is certainly difficult not to recall Kandinsky's description of 'dramatic' and 'light' qualities given by an 'upward-tending vertical format' in his *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*, published in Dessau in 1926, and the more general utopian tone of his book in trying to find a rigorous scientific basis for the description of the elements of pictorial form.²⁷

In addition, Schlemmer was at odds politically with the Bauhaus. The eventual reason for his departure was the politicisation of students under the directorship of the architect Hannes Meyer, who took control in April 1928. The previous year Schlemmer had turned down theatrical collaboration with Erwin Piscator on the grounds of Piscator's left-wing orientation.²⁸ His work on the Bauhaus theatre – the 'fifth wheel on the Bauhaus cart' – presented continual problems and at the end of 1926 he reported that 'an offer to go to New York did not leave me cold'.²⁹ When the Nazi campaign against him, largely on the grounds of his involvement with the Bauhaus, was in full force, he protested vociferously, and not without genuine feeling, that he was in no way connected with the Bolshevism of the Dessau Bauhaus. As early as January 1928 he had been tempted to resign, as had Marcel Breuer and Herbert Bayer, in response to the 'Hannes Meyer program', and more general difficulties, including

¹⁸ See P. Betts: *The Authority of Everyday Objects. A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2004, p.13.

¹⁹ It was certainly not unusual for Schlemmer to re-use older material: for the wall-sculpture designed for the residence of Dr Rabe in Zwenkau, Schlemmer had used a figure, 'Homo', first sketched in 1919–20.

²⁰ OS to Gunta Stözl, 8th February 1932; in T. Schlemmer, ed.: *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*, transl. K. Winston, Illinois 1990, p.288 (hereafter cited as LDOS).

²¹ OS to Christof Hertel, 28th July 1932; LDOS, p.297.

²² *Ibid.*, p.185. Schlemmer wrote that Mondrian was the true 'god of the Bauhaus', 'and Doesburg his prophet'; *ibid.*, p.188.

²³ See the periodising of the Bauhaus history in F. Kröll: *Bauhaus, 1919–1933: Künstler zwischen Isolation und kollektiver Praxis*, Düsseldorf 1974; see also R. Wick: *Teaching at the*

Bauhaus, Stuttgart 2000, p.45. It should not be forgotten that painting played an important role in the early years of the Bauhaus, and continued to do so largely through the agency of Kandinsky; see: R.-C. Washton Long: 'From Metaphysics to Material Culture. Painting and photography at the Bauhaus', in K. James-Chakraborty, ed.: *Bauhaus Culture. From Weimar to the Cold War*, Minneapolis and London 2006, pp.43–62.

²⁴ LDOS, p.193.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.211.

²⁶ H. Belting: *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk: die modernen Mythen der Kunst*, Munich 2001, esp. pp.381–88.

²⁷ '... a concentration of active tensions tending upwards upon a colder BP [Basic Plane] (horizontal format) will always more or less "dramatize" these tensions [between compositional elements]'; W. Kandinsky: *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*, Dessau



25. *Geländerszene*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1932. Canvas, 105.5 by 70.5 cm. (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

the 'crushing' financial crisis, and opposition from the mayor of Dessau.³⁰ Gropius's departure in 1928 was the final straw for the 'old' Bauhaus, and it was then that Schlemmer realised that his departure too was necessary: to pursue his 'true calling' as a painter he realised that he would need to move to an art academy.³¹ The situation with Meyer became increasingly untenable – 'just let him try to get Klee to be a George Grosz', wrote Schlemmer in April 1929, when he was already negotiating his move to Breslau, the 'citadel of Catholicism', as he described it in a letter to Willi Baumeister.³² By June that year Meyer's 'total failure as a director' had become evident, and Schlemmer's turn to painting as a refuge was confirmed.³³

Schlemmer moved to Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) to take up a teaching position at the Academy during October 1929. The liberal atmosphere of Breslau, and in particular of the Academy of Art and Applied Arts on Kaiserin-Augusta-Platz, would have been particularly congenial, at least initially, after the heady politics of his last days in Dessau.³⁴ The Academy has been described as a forerunner to the Bauhaus in offering, at an earlier date than the Bauhaus, workshop-based instruction across a range of disciplines, and was a pioneering institution in this respect.³⁵ Yet it remained committed to traditional notions of the fine arts – 'imaginative form' – including painting, and was thus at odds with the focus on technology and 'useful objects' upheld at the Bauhaus.³⁶

In Breslau Schlemmer was also finally presented with the freedom to develop his painting, and was given time that at the Bauhaus he claimed he was forced to 'steal'.³⁷ He began by immersing himself in completing work on the final two versions of a cycle of paintings commissioned by Ernst Gosebruch for the Folkwang-Museum, eventually completed in May 1931. He had intended to recreate the Bauhaus theatre in Breslau, but this came to nothing after the planned studio theatre at the Academy was not given approval by the Ministry.³⁸ The absence of theatrical work meant that Schlemmer was able to focus entirely on his painting, and, in the latter part of 1932 when *Bauhaustreppe* was painted, he experienced a serendipitous moment, a calm point within a gathering storm, during which he made a series of major works. These circumstances were created largely by the closure of the Breslau Academy in April 1932, and the fact that Schlemmer was nevertheless able to remain there and pursue his own work until the end of October that year. The Academy, which was under Prussian jurisdiction, was closed, along with those at Kassel and Königsberg, for financial rather than political reasons, following Heinrich Brüning's Emergency Decree of 1932 and the imposition of stringent fiscal controls after the 1929 financial crash.³⁹ From April only three master's studios remained open. Schlemmer's contract ran until the end of October. Since May Schlemmer had been living in his studio, having given up his apartment with Tut, who had gone to live with friends. During the first week of July he was in Paris presenting his by then well-known dance the *Triadic Ballet* at a modern dance competition. From the time of his return until his departure for Berlin at the beginning of October, where he had secured a teaching position at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, he was able to focus on painting.

Schlemmer's concentration during these final months in Breslau is remarkable considering contemporary political events. The liberal environment he encountered on first arriving in the city had become increasingly tense. By mid-1932 Breslau was in the front line of political radicalism, seeing an escalation in violence between Communists and Nationalists during the summer months. In the elections at the end of July the third-highest Nazi return in Germany was recorded in Breslau, with 43.5 percent of the vote.⁴⁰ In a letter to Otto Meyer-Amden at the end of August, Schlemmer described the confusion he was experiencing with his own work and wondered whether 'the present political events may account for my inner uncertainty'.⁴¹ Interestingly, it is in this letter that Schlemmer makes one of his most direct statements on the possibility of a national revolution in the arts, noting that a 'revival of the classics' as an 'alternative modernism' would be nothing new. 'It most looks as though modernism will now be considered unpatriotic. We shall see. The Bauhaus will lead off. I also believe, however, that the nationalists' unadulterated conservatism will almost have to generate some form of revolutionary modernism, either within the Nazi camp or in an opposing

1926; English version: *Point and Line to Plane*, New York 1979, esp. p.115.

²⁸ LDOS, p.204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.199.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.219.

³¹ OS diary entry, 4th February 1928; *ibid.*, p.224.

³² OS to Willi Baumeister; *ibid.*, p.241.

³³ OS to Otto Meyer-Amden, 9th June 1928; *ibid.*, p.244.

³⁴ For a description of Breslau at this time, see Von Maur, *op. cit.* (note 1), I, pp.198–99.

³⁵ See D.A. Barnstone: 'Not the Bauhaus. The Breslau Academy of Art and Applied Art', in *Journal of Architectural Education* (September 2008), pp.46–55. For a survey of reformist art schools in Germany, including the Vereinigte Staatsschulen für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe in Berlin and Folkwang-Schule in Dresden, see H.M. Wingler, ed.:

Kunstschulreform, 1900–1933, Berlin 1977; see also Wick, *op. cit.* (note 23), pp.56–61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.47.

³⁷ OS to Baumeister, 15th February 1928; LDOS, p.227.

³⁸ OS to Baumeister, 30th December 1930; *ibid.*, p.269; see also P. Hölscher, ed.: *Die Akademie für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe zu Breslau. Wege einer Kunstschule 1791–1932*, Kiel 2003, p.339.

³⁹ See J. Brade: 'Zur Geschichte der Breslauer Akademie 1791–1932', in *idem*, ed.: *exh. cat. Werkstätten der Moderne. Lehrer und Schüler der Breslauer Akademie 1903–1932*, Görlitz (Schlesisches Museum) 2004, pp.19–28, esp. p.26.

⁴⁰ See N. Davies and R. Moorhouse: *Microcosm. Portrait of a Central European City*, London 2002, p.337.

⁴¹ OS to Meyer-Amden, 26th August 1932; LDOS, p.299.

SCHLEMMER'S 'BAUHAUSTREPPE'



26. *Dreiergruppe mit Kopf in Fensterausschnitt*, by Oskar Schlemmer. 1930. Pastel and charcoal on transparent paper, 23.4 x 15.5 cm. (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).



27. *Treppensteigende*, by Oskar Schlemmer (mutilated). 1932. Canvas, 99 by 88 cm. (Lower fragment in the collection of Mr and Mrs Leonard A. Lauder, New York).

camp'.⁴² It is against this background that just over one week later, on 4th September, Schlemmer recorded a 'crisis' in his diary: 'either I draw the curtain once again and plunge myself into total darkness (for purposes of meditation), or I commit myself to all-out use of colour, not for decorative purposes but as an essential element of painting'.⁴³ On the same day, Schlemmer completed the large preparatory drawing, using charcoal and graphite on transparent paper, in which the composition of *Bauhaustreppe* is largely resolved.⁴⁴ Superimposition of the drawing over the painting shows an accurate concordance between the two, and it may be assumed that Schlemmer used a transfer technique.⁴⁵ As a classical 'alternative to modernism' inspired by the Bauhaus, and as a demonstration of commitment to an 'all-out use of colour' as an 'essential element of painting', *Bauhaustreppe* must indeed have appeared as a successful resolution of the crisis that Schlemmer had been facing and, as it transpired, the culmination of his life's work in painting: politics, however, was distant from his aesthetic concerns at that time. A photograph (Fig.28) taken most probably by the artist in his Breslau studio later that September, shows the finished painting alongside other works made at this moment, all in frames, ready for exhibition in Berlin (see below). On his last day at the deserted Academy, Schlemmer described in a letter to Willi Baumeister his regret at leaving such a felicitous location: 'Last day in Breslau, in the only nice studio, which I leave very reluctantly. I live and cook in it too. Lovely view over the Dominsel and the greenery, and quiet in the Academy'.⁴⁶

Karin von Maur has described *Bauhaustreppe* as belonging to a series of five large figurative compositions undertaken by Schlemmer in Breslau which may be seen as the culmination of his long interest in a 'grand figural style'. The series is identified by the motif of the staircase or 'geländermotiv' ('landing motif'). It was begun during summer 1931 with *Gruppe am Geländer* (Fig.24) and *Szene am Geländer* (private collection, Stuttgart), continued the next year with *Treppenszene* (Kunsthalle, Hamburg), and then *Bauhaustreppe* and *Geländerszene* (Fig.25), both painted in September 1932.⁴⁷ The grouping is credible in terms of the motifs used, yet the three earlier works have more in common with Schlemmer's earlier large figural compositions, particularly those made in 1930 that comprise frieze-like compositions of hieratic figures, composed with a variety of horizontal and vertical bars and bands, and in which the staircase plays a minimal role.⁴⁸ Although the final painting in the group, *Geländerszene*, repeats the motif of the three central figures in *Bauhaustreppe*, it appears more of a derivative work than a development of Schlemmer's ideas. *Bauhaustreppe* in this sense is a unique and sovereign moment in the evolution of his painting since the early 1920s.

Karin von Maur's psychological interpretation of the 'geländermotiv' as a psycho-structural motif used to keep irrational forces in check is surely correct.⁴⁹ But the stairway also functioned in the same way as stage property in allowing a solution to the depiction of figures in depth and at different registers on the canvas, a problem that Schlemmer had previously addressed by using a steep

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.300. Schlemmer's conservative position should not be confused with an allegiance to Nazism as is sometimes suggested; see, for example, J. Koss: 'Bauhaus Theatre of Human Dolls', in James-Chakraborty, *op. cit.* (note 23), pp.90–114, esp. p.94. This question will be addressed in more detail in the second part of this article.

⁴³ OS diary entry, 4th September 1932; LDOS, pp.301–02.

⁴⁴ The drawing is inscribed at the centre top: 'Bhs. Treppe 4. Sept.32'. It was acquired in 1981 from the Estate of Oskar Schlemmer by the Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.

⁴⁵ The possibility may be raised that the use of transparent paper, and the fact that the drawing is dated where there is no inscription on the painting, both indicate that the drawing was made after the painting, as a way of recording the composition. This interpretation is, however, made unlikely by the fact that the drawing is not entirely accurate.

⁴⁶ 'Letzte Tage im Breslau, im einzig schönen Atelier, das ich sehr ungern verlasse. Ich wohne und koche darin. Schönster blick auf die Dominsel, Wiesengrün, Ruhe im Haus'; OS to Baumeister, 29th September 1932; Oskar Schlemmer-Archiv, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart (hereafter cited as OSA).

⁴⁷ Von Maur, *op. cit.* (note 1), I, p.221. Von Maur refers to an unpublished diary entry by Schlemmer from 10th December 1935 in which he describes *Geländerszene* as his 'last Breslau painting'; see *ibid.*, II, p.107.

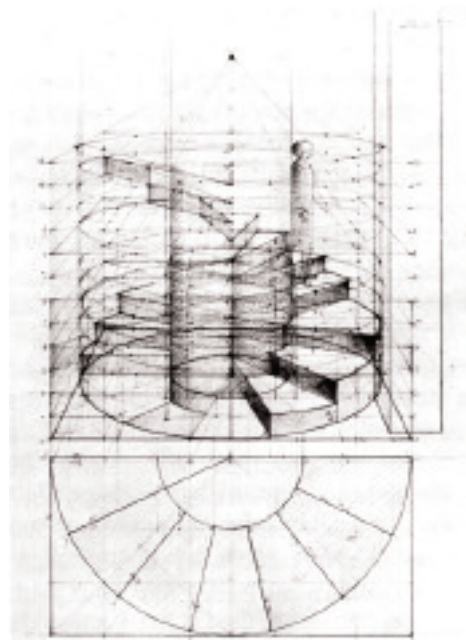
⁴⁸ Examples of these paintings from the 1930s include *Vierzehnergruppe in imaginärer Architektur* (1930–36, oil and tempera on canvas, 91.5 by 120.5 cm., Museum Ludwig, Cologne), and *Eingang zum Stadion* (1930–36, canvas, 162 by 98 cm., Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart). A design for a further painting, *Männertreppe*, was published by Von Maur, who notes Schlemmer's technique, carried over from the preparations for



28. Photograph of Oskar Schlemmer's studio in Breslau, September 1932. (Oskar Schlemmer-Archiv, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

perspectival recession of an interior space, like a sloping stage, as in, for example, *Gruppe mit Sitzender. Fünf Figuren im Raum* (1928; private collection, Stuttgart). Such use of imaginary architectural motifs may best be described in relation to his designs for the cycle of paintings for the fountain room at Essen's Folkwang-Museum (1928–30). The commission acted as a new source of inspiration for Schlemmer, giving him 'many new ideas, and some of the by-products have turned out even better, because they are free of restraint', as he wrote to Baumeister in April 1929, while still in Dessau.⁵⁰ In the first version of the Folkwang paintings (there are three), figures are either lost in a mist or, as in the *Gestürzter mit Säule*, apparently swimming; the theme of pedagogy is also strong, with scenes of teachers and students (it may be noted that Feininger's photograph of the Bauhaus weavers was taken around the time Schlemmer began work on this first version). The second and third versions were produced, as we have seen, after his arrival in Breslau in late 1930. In the second set of designs, which survive in the form of twenty-one pastel and chalk drawings on paper, the figures are located either by abstract architectural motifs or by free-floating stairwells, as in *Dreiergruppe mit Kopf in Fensterausschnitt* of 1930 (Fig.26). In the third and final set (now destroyed) the architectural motifs have become entirely abstract and the figures are suspended in an unnaturalistic space.⁵¹ The third set was exhibited at the Schlesisches Museum in Berlin during November 1930, just at the moment when Schlemmer heard news of the destruction of his murals in the Weimar Bauhaus, before being shipped to the Folkwang-Museum in Essen.

It is clear that from an early moment Schlemmer associated the stepped movement of a stairway with a staged deployment of figures, as well as with the possibility of creating wall-paintings and reliefs, as he had in Weimar in 1923.⁵² Stairways held a peculiar choreographic charm for him. This becomes particularly clear in another painting made in Breslau in the summer of 1932,



29. *Wendeltreppe* (Spiral staircase), by Oskar Schlemmer. Pencil on paper. (Depositum Schlemmer, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart).

Treppensteigende, less well-known as it was mutilated by the artist, who most likely considered it a failure. Two fragments, the largest rediscovered in 1968, remain of the work,⁵³ which is also known from a photograph (Fig.27) and from a series of preparatory drawings. The compositional deficiencies of the work are clear when compared with *Bauhaustreppe*, although it seems that in *Treppensteigende* Schlemmer was making a first attempt to depict a recognisable interior space with a figure ascending a stairway.⁵⁴

It is also unsurprising that the staircase motif, which implies regular recession in space, could be successfully allied with Schlemmer's pedagogical work on perspective (Fig.29). During March 1932 he had finalised his appointment at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen in Berlin, specifically to lecture on the subject of perspective. It was also in mid-March that he made a final visit to Dessau, which he described to Otto Meyer-Amden as a 'violently politicised' city.⁵⁵ The Bauhaus had been overtaken by the 'Communist clique', with the backing of the Party. To a great extent his work on perspective, which he prepared during the time between his return to Breslau at the end of July and his departure for Berlin at the end of August, became a refuge from the increasingly chaotic political situation enveloping him. At the beginning of September, at the time *Bauhaustreppe* was painted, he wrote to Tut, describing his daily routine: 'I divide my time thus: mornings perspective and lectures. Afternoons, painting'.⁵⁶ That Schlemmer considered perspective as a refuge from political violence is made clear in a number of statements from the time; an undated letter to Baumeister, probably from around February 1933, written while Schlemmer was still in Berlin, described the

the Folkwang murals, of creating a large cartoon that was then transferred in outline to the canvas; see *ibid.*, I, p.221; and *ibid.*, II, pp.358–59.

⁴⁹ K. von Maur: exh. cat. *Oskar Schlemmer*, Stuttgart (Staatsgalerie) 1977, p.32.

⁵⁰ OS to Baumeister, 24th April 1929; LDOS, p.242.

⁵¹ The third version of the cycle was installed in the Museum in December 1930, but removed in 1934, and then destroyed during the Entartete Kunst campaign in 1937; see K. von Maur: exh. cat. *Oskar Schlemmer. Der Folkwang-Zyklus. Malerei um 1930*, Stuttgart (Staatsgalerie) and Essen (Folkwang-Museum) 1993–94; see also W. Herzogenrath: *Oskar Schlemmer. Die Wandgestaltung der neuen Architektur*, Munich 1973, pp.89–97; and Schlemmer's own account: 'Zu Meinem Wandbildern für das Museum Folkwang in Essen', *Museum der Gegenwart* 1/4 (1931), pp.147–53.

⁵² A further example of a fresco made in a stairway, although of more simple, abstract

character, was that produced by Schlemmer in 1931 for the house of Dr Rabe in Zwenkau; see Herzogenrath, *op. cit.* (note 51), pp.98–106.

⁵³ Aside from the fragment now catalogued as *Treppensteigende*, the other part is catalogued as *Geneigter Kopf nach Links* (1932, oil on canvas, glued to cardboard, 22 by 32 cm., private collection).

⁵⁴ The space depicted, with a background arched passageway, is to some extent reminiscent of the hallway and staircase of the Weimar Bauhaus building. Further research may demonstrate if the staircase depicted was associated with any part of the Breslau Academy building.

⁵⁵ OS to Meyer-Amden, 21st March 1932; LDOS, p.290.

⁵⁶ OS to Tut Schlemmer, 1st September 1932; OSA.

beginning of Nazi politics at the Vereinigte Staatsschulen, and how various members of the teaching staff had been targeted due to their political sympathies: 'perhaps if things get critical in the end I will be rescued by perspective! It is unpolitical!'.⁵⁷ The lecture he delivered on arriving in Berlin demonstrated his peculiar, metaphysical approach to the subject, which, as Von Maur has noted, referred back to the intuitive elaborations of Philipp Otto Runge.⁵⁸ As Rainer Wick has pointed out, the first large figurative paintings he made in the mid-1920s, such as *Fünf Figuren im Raum: Römisches* (*Five figures in a space: Roman*) (1925; Kunstmuseum, Basel), which employed perspective effects to show pictorial depth, are not 'Euclidean' but follow rather the intuitive rules of construction that governed the *pittura metafisica* of Carrà and de Chirico; a painting by the latter was the sole image Schlemmer showed during his inaugural lecture.⁵⁹

In this light, *Bauhaustreppe* can be seen as a withdrawal, upwards – or 'inner emigration', to use a term that became current only after 1945 – from the politics of both left and right, Communist and Nazi. By memorialising the Bauhaus in a manner that reached back to its origins, in particular the type of utopian idea of painting promoted by Kandinsky, *Bauhaustreppe* stages a withdrawal from the image of the Bauhaus as it was after 1928, both in terms of the ascendancy of photography and by its politicisation under Meyer. In his early deliberations on the Bauhaus, Schlemmer wrote in his diary that to reject the Expressionist, medievalist origins of the Bauhaus was 'turning one's back on Utopia'.⁶⁰ Close inspection of *Bauhaustreppe* shows the use of charcoal or graphite, as well as oil pastel, to reinforce the linear structure of the painting, suggesting the type of measured construction of an exercise in perspective. As part of his developing studies in perspective, and as an evolution of his compositional ideas of figures in space, *Bauhaustreppe* is witness to the hope that painting, and non-political art in general, could provide a refuge from the gathering cultural disasters of National Socialism.

Consideration of a broader historical context, as well as the historiography of German resistance to Nazism, help explain Schlemmer's position. Strong support for the 'national revolution' could be found among the professional middle class to which Schlemmer belonged, particularly the *Beamte*, or civil servants, to the extent that the Nazi party has been referred to as being a '*Beamtenpartei*'.⁶¹ Schlemmer's allegiance to nationalist trends should nevertheless be linked not to Nazi ideals but to the anti-democratic, conservative romanticism that stretches back to the nineteenth century. Out of this tradition grew some of the most striking forms of resistance, staged from a position that saw itself as being above the violence and corruption of the Nazi party, and assumed the burden of cultural renewal on the basis of deep national traditions. Driven by material need, and by a natural sympathy for the conservative, nationalistic aspects of the 'New Germany', Schlemmer sought on

a number of occasions to prove his allegiance to the National Revolution, but was also clearly shocked that he was publicly labelled a Jew and a Marxist. In April 1933 he wrote to Goebbels to protest against the defamation of modern artists, positing their war service as justification for their avant-garde experiments, and stating that artists 'are fundamentally unpolitical' of necessity.⁶²

Thus, although the painting is a memorial of sorts, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider it as a comment on the changing fortunes of those artists involved in the Bauhaus, a wheel of fortune on which Schlemmer himself had risen and then fallen. The cyclical movement may also be taken to refer to the hope and resignation that underlie the painting's memorial aspect. Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* was included by Schlemmer on the short reading list he drew up for the philosophy component of his course 'Man', taught at the Bauhaus from early 1928,⁶³ the same moment the preparatory photograph for the *Bauhaustreppe* was taken, and it is tempting to draw a connection between the Roman philosopher's famous wheel of fortune and the movement of figures in *Bauhaustreppe*. With the gravity of his anonymous figures Schlemmer conveys his feeling of the symbolic importance of choreographed movement: 'For taking a step is a grave event, and no less raising a hand, moving a finger'.⁶⁴ The ascent and descent of figures in *Bauhaustreppe* may be taken to indicate the vicissitudes of the fate of the arts and artists in Germany in the early 1930s, when dramatic changes of fortune were becoming clear. 'Isn't this what tragedy commemorates with its tears and tumult – the overthrow of happy realms by the random strokes of Fortune?', Boethius' personification of philosophy asks. Schlemmer's tragic optimism, which survived right until his death in 1943, bears out the subsequent advice that Fortune, by its very mutability, 'gives you just cause to hope for better things'.⁶⁵

Bauhaustreppe was first exhibited in December 1932, in the first instalment of a three-part exhibition organised by Alfred Flechtheim, *Lebendige Deutsche Kunst*.⁶⁶ Schlemmer was particularly pleased with the appearance of his painting, writing to Baumeister on 20th December: 'In the middle my large "Bauhaustreppe", which makes a particularly strong impression (perhaps it really isn't bad at all, with the new colour-scheme blue-gray-cinnabar)'. It was given the high price of 2,000 RM, and perhaps as a result failed to sell.⁶⁷ The subsequent fate of the painting, its journey to Stuttgart, then to New York, took place against the tumultuous events of the following year, after the swearing-in of Hitler as Chancellor at the end of January. Schlemmer's ambivalence around the time he painted *Bauhaustreppe*, which continued until his death, was intriguingly reflected in the relationship between the two Americans who were instrumental in its purchase and in its transplantation to New York, Alfred Barr and Philip Johnson. These events will be recounted in the second part of this article.

⁵⁷ '... vielleicht wenns kritisch wird, rettet mich am ende die Perspektive! Sie ist unpolitisch!'; OS to Baumeister, undated letter; OSA, file: Oskar Schlemmer Briefe 1933–1943.

⁵⁸ Von Maur, *op. cit.* (note 1), I, pp.227–28.

⁵⁹ Wick, *op. cit.* (note 23), p.260.

⁶⁰ OS diary entry, June 1922; LDOS, p.124.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.115.

⁶² OS, 'Letter of Protest to Minister Goebbels', 25th April 1933; LDOS, p.310.

⁶³ The course titled 'Man' that he devised and began teaching at the Bauhaus in early 1928 was divided into three parts, the formal, the biological and the philosophical, and aimed to provide a rounded view of man in all his faculties. The part concerned with drawing the figure began with a study of proportion and led to a consideration of the body in movement, 'both within itself and in space, both in natural space and in civilized space', and developed the notion of a 'choreography of the everyday'; see

O. Schlemmer: 'Syllabuses – Teaching schedules', in *idem: Man. Teaching notes from the Bauhaus*, ed. H. Kuchling, transl. J. Seligman, Cambridge MA 1971, p.26.

⁶⁴ OS diary entry, May 1929; LDOS, p.243.

⁶⁵ Boethius: *The Consolation of Philosophy*, transl. V. Watts, London 1999, p.26.

⁶⁶ The exhibition was displayed at Paul Cassirer's gallery at 35 Viktoriastrasse and ran from 10th December 1932 to the middle of January 1933. Cassirer was not involved in the organisation, as is usually claimed; see Von Maur, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.210; he had shot himself in 1926. Flechtheim took on Cassirer's stock and managed his business until he was forced to leave Germany. It was probably at this moment that a small copy of *Bauhaustreppe* was made by Carl Schlemmer, the artist's brother (oil on paper, 60 by 45 cm., collection of Mrs Helmuth Morgenstern, Chepachet/Rhode Island).

⁶⁷ OSA, file: 'Diverse Schriften', 'Bilderliste ULM/D (von Hannover and Berlin)', with handwritten note '*Anfang 1933*'.