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# Marianne Brandt: Making Great Contributions to the Independence of New Women

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**Abstract:** This article deeply explores the life story of German female artist and designer Marianne Brandt and her profound influence on the field of industrial design. Brandt was born in an era when female artists and designers were not well-regarded. However, with her talent and tenacity, she laid a solid foundation for the equal status of women in the design field.

Marianne Brandt's design career began at the Grand Ducal Saxon Art School in Weimar. Inspired by the Bauhaus exhibition, she resolutely joined this vanguard institution and stood out with her outstanding talent. Her design philosophy emphasized the perfect unity of "form follows function" and aesthetic value. Her masterpieces, whether it is the exquisitely structured ashtray or the revolutionary Model 702 lamp, all demonstrate the perfect integration of simple lines and practical functions. Brandt successfully constructed a unique design language, showing a profound understanding of material properties and spatial aesthetics.

After leaving the Bauhaus in 1933, Brandt moved around in Berlin and other places to continue her design exploration. However, the rise of the Nazi regime put her artistic career in trouble. In the face of the loss of creative freedom, she still persisted in artistic practice. By returning to Expressionist painting and figurative art, she expressed her silent protest against totalitarian rule.

Brandt's legendary life is not only a model of a female designer breaking through gender barriers, striving for equal rights, and realizing self-value in the design field but also a model of pursuing artistic ideals and upholding creative freedom in the history of modern design. Her artistic heritage is not only reflected in those timeless design classics but also in the creative path she opened up for future female artists, highlighting the importance of gender equality and individual expression in artistic creation.

**Keywords:** Design history; Female designers; Bauhaus; Marianne Brandt

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## 1. Research background

### 1.1. The era background

In 1919, after the end of World War I, the world ushered in a wave of new ideas and profound changes. The rapid development of military technology promoted the innovation of civilian technology. Germany experienced a fundamental change in its political system. The monarchy collapsed, and a democratic regime was born. Women obtained unprecedented political rights. Against this background, the Bauhaus experimental art school was founded

in Weimar, marking a new starting point for modern design education and becoming a cradle of innovation in the fields of art and industrial design. Despite gender-discriminatory practices, the Bauhaus still cultivated a generation of outstanding female artists who demonstrated extraordinary talent by responding to challenges with innovative designs.

## **1.2. Marianne Brandt's life**

Brandt, originally named Marianne Liebe, studied painting and sculpture at the Grand Ducal Saxon Art School in Weimar in 1918. Later, she married her art classmate Erik Brandt. In 1920, she traveled and studied in Paris and the south of France and participated in art courses. In 1921, inspired by visiting the Bauhaus exhibition, she decided to join and restart her studies. At the Bauhaus, after completing the preparatory course, she became an apprentice in the metal workshop and later was promoted to assistant and acting director. After leaving the Bauhaus, she worked in Berlin, Gotha, and other places but lost her job due to the Great Depression and the rise of the Nazi Party. During the Nazi period, although she joined the official artists' organization to obtain materials, she never became a member of the Nazi Party. After World War II, she remained in Chemnitz to help with the reconstruction and spent the rest of her life in East Germany<sup>[1]</sup>.

## **1.3. Marianne Brandt's educational background**

In the early 20th century, occupations such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and metalworking were regarded as male-dominated. However, Brandt ignored the stereotypes and became the first woman to enter the metalworking workshop. During her studies at the Bauhaus, she not only demonstrated extraordinary talent but also overcame numerous difficulties to help establish a gender-equal workplace. As Brandt wrote in "Letter to the Young Generation" in 1970: "At first, I was not welcome—they thought there was no place for a woman in the metal workshop. They later admitted this to me and gave me all kinds of boring jobs to show their dissatisfaction. I thought this was the inevitable path, and everything is difficult at the beginning. Later, things calmed down, and we got along well." For this reason, she will always be associated with the Bauhaus and become an outstanding representative of promoting gender equality and innovation.

## **2. Marianne Brandt's design achievements**

### **2.1. The Bauhaus period (1923–1929)**

In Brandt's design concept, function and art were equally important, which was particularly unique in her era. The household items designed by Brandt, such as lamps, ashtrays, and teapots, were not only highly practical but also became classic works of modern industrial design with their simple and clear lines and unique shapes. These works were deeply influenced by the modernist style of her mentor, showing Brandt's profound understanding and unique insights into design aesthetics.

In industrial design, the designed products not only carry the creativity and ideas of designers but also need to be commercialized in the market to meet the actual needs of users. However, many Bauhaus-style design works, although of high artistic value, failed to be successfully commercialized for various reasons. For example, the Wagenfeld lamp, known as "the essence of Bauhaus design," failed to achieve large-scale production and instead became more of a museum exhibit and a treasure for collectors.

In contrast, the Model 702 lamp stood out with its excellent design practicality. The Model 702 lamp was a table lamp jointly launched by Brandt, a prolific lamp designer, and the Kandem company in 1928. As a simplified and upgraded version of the Model 680 deluxe edition, it quickly became popular in the market. Compared with the lamps designed by Brandt before, all the metal parts of the Model 702 lamp were painted. This innovative design not only brought users visual aesthetic enjoyment but also was more in line with modern aesthetic trends.

This lamp not only broke through the shackles of the traditional Bauhaus style in design but also made many

innovations in practicality. For example, its easy-to-reach vertical-action switch, stable anti-tipping base, double-axis swivel joint, and easy-to-clean surface treatment and other design details greatly enhanced the user experience. These designs not only met the basic lighting needs of users but also reflected the designer's deep understanding and attention to the user experience in details.

The success of the Model 702 lamp was also reflected in its commercialization process. Brandt showed extraordinary intelligence in contract negotiations and became a key link connecting the manufacturing company and the Bauhaus. This cooperation model not only promoted the commercialization process of the product but also promoted the in-depth integration of design education and industrial production.

The Model 702 lamp, with its unparalleled practicality and artistic appearance, has won the lasting favor of the market. This is one of the reasons why the Model 702 lamp has remained popular despite years of market competition and technological innovation. Its classic shape can still be seen today, making it a classic case in the field of industrial design.

Brandt set a new benchmark for industrially-manufactured metal products and assembled a series of works that would become the epitome of typical Bauhaus aesthetics: rigorous, radical, and practical.

## **2.2. The Ruppelwerk period (1929–1932)**

Despite these numerous successes, Brandt's importance to the Bauhaus, its history, and its heritage was not duly recognized. As Magdalena Droste said, gender became a key factor influencing Brandt's fate and acceptance. She not only encountered resistance to her leadership in the metal workshop but also, after leaving the Bauhaus, compared with male counterparts such as Herbert Bayer and Marcel Breuer, Brandt did not achieve the same level of fame.

In 1929, she left the Bauhaus and came to the Ruppelwerk factory.

At the Ruppelwerk, Brandt was responsible for redesigning a series of items dating back to the last century. At that time, these products used floral-like details and excessive decoration, resulting in a cluttered visual appearance. Brandt, taking advantage of her position as an in-house designer, completely updated the factory's product line. As a woman, this subversive task required her to fully demonstrate her communication skills, empathy for existing workers, and perseverance in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. She had to cooperate with various departments of the company, from key decision-makers, ordinary office employees to factory and workshop technicians. Her previous experience at the Bauhaus undoubtedly helped her convince her factory colleagues of the value of her proposals.

From watering cans to napkin holders, Brandt designed more than 50 items for the factory. All of them reflected an aesthetic that looked towards the modern and the future rather than the past. These works not only demonstrated Brandt's profound understanding of modern design but also her excellent skills in material selection and manufacturing processes. By using modern manufacturing techniques, she successfully transformed traditional household items into practical works of art with a modern aesthetic. Brandt's series of works not only brought commercial success to the Ruppelwerk but also set a new benchmark for the industrial design field, demonstrating the talent and contributions of female designers in the industrial design field.

Another feature of Brandt was the use of more vivid colors, making the product line more interesting and attractive. This marked a departure from the various metal surface treatments and monochromatic color choices in her previous Bauhaus works.

During her tenure at the Ruppelwerk, Brandt fully demonstrated the far-reaching development of her design career. She successfully applied the design principles learned at the Bauhaus to an entity enterprise with both commercial and production needs, thus promoting substantial changes.

Brandt once mentioned that design should not only pursue novelty or uniqueness but, more importantly, be able to effectively solve problems in life and meet people's actual needs. The factory work experience provided her with the opportunity to put this concept into practice. By designing products that were both practical and met market demands, she made important contributions to the company's commercial success. At the same time, it also reflected the practical application value of the Bauhaus design principles in a commercial environment, that is, "design should serve people,

not dominate people.”

The works created by Brandt at the Ruppelwerk still look avant-garde today with their elegant appearance. However, the innovation of these products lies not only in the design itself but also in Brandt’s identity as one of the first in-house industrial designers of the manufacturer. In an era when few women held key design positions in manufacturing companies, this little-known role and her work achievements should be regarded as a real historical breakthrough. She broke through gender barriers and wrote a glorious chapter of outstanding achievements of women in the industrial design field. Brandt’s work not only proved that women could also play an important role in this field but also promoted the development of this field<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.3. After the Ruppelwerk

At the end of the 1920s, the economic turmoil in Germany forced the Ruppelwerk to part ways with Brandt, and the rise of Nazism made it even more difficult for Brandt to practice in the field of industrial design. During World War II, her home was reduced to ruins, and precious records were burned. After the war, the creative environment remained harsh. Brandt could only continue to create as an artist by joining the Reich Chamber of Culture.

Although Brandt had burned her Bauhaus-era works to show her break, in the 1930s, she returned to figurative painting, deeply influenced by Expressionism. Works such as “Our Garden,” although very different in style from her Bauhaus works, still implied traces of the past, expressing her artistic exploration and profound world view of survival in adversity. By rejecting abstraction, she mourned the loss of creative freedom and at the same time satirized the kitsch art advocated by the Nazis. These paintings were not only a reflection on history but also a protest against reality<sup>[3]</sup>.

During the Nazi period, although Brandt was immersed in mourning for the past and the emptiness of the present, her overseas photography works witnessed her determination to continuously pursue the improvement of her skills and innovation and to break through the predicament. Her photography works combined mountain landscapes with film imagery, transforming the beauty of nature into Bauhaus aesthetics. At the same time, she created a series of images of free and capable women, voicing the vision of a free and independent life for women.

These works were not only Brandt’s yearning for an open imaginative world but also a tribute and inheritance of the Bauhaus spirit. Through these works, she resisted the shackles of that era, transcended the constraints of region and time, and returned to the free thinking and creative passion of the Bauhaus period, looking forward to a future of gender equality and freedom for women. The mountains were not only a symbol of anti-modernism but also the sustenance of Brandt’s spiritual liberation and free dreams, leading her to cross reality and touch the realm of infinite possibilities.

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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