

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF MIES VAN DER ROHE

This country may now be assisting at the birth of an architecture as expressive of the industrial age as Gothic was of its age of ecclesiasticism. A curious parallel between the now nameless master builders of the Middle Ages and one of the great architects of modern times is offered in the retrospective exhibition THE ARCHITECTURE OF MIES VAN DER ROHE being held at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, September 17 through November 23.

Designed and installed by Mies van der Rohe himself, the exhibition will consist of plans, renderings, and models of chief works of the architect from 1912 to the present day. On free-standing walls as well as on the rear and sides of the Museum's third floor galleries--which have been thrown into one for this exhibition--will be enormous photo-murals, several of them 20 by 14 feet. Furniture designed by Mies will also be shown.

Outstanding in the exhibition will be the architect's most important work, now in its initial stage--the new campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago where he has been Director of Architecture since 1938. When completed the campus will be a unique example of group planning by a great contemporary artist. No other modern architect has had an opportunity to design on so large a scale.

Simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition the Museum will publish a definitive volume on the architect and his work by Philip C. Johnson, Consultant to the Museum's Department of Architecture. Mies van der Rohe was first brought to the attention of the American public in 1932 when Mr. Johnson directed the Museum's exhibition of International Modern Architecture and edited its accompanying book, now long out of print. In the new book Mr. Johnson presents the first complete analysis and appreciation of Mies van der Rohe's work, together with all of the architect's own writings.

On the first page of his book Mr. Johnson indicates the artistic kinship, through birthplace and early training, of the great modern architect with the master builders of the Gothic age. Mr. Johnson writes:

"Ludwig Mies--he later added his mother's surname, van der Rohe--was born in 1886 in the ancient city of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle)

on the border of Germany and the Low Countries. Aachen, the first capital of the Holy Roman Empire, had been the center of Western Culture during the Early Middle Ages, and the Cathedral School, which Mies attended, had been founded by Charlemagne in the ninth century. He has ever since been conscious of his heritage; the medieval concept of order expressed in the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas has influenced his architectural philosophy fully as much as modern principles of functionalism and structural clarity.

"Mies van der Rohe never received any formal architectural training. He learned the first lesson of building--the placing of stone on stone--from his father, a master mason and the proprietor of a small stone cutting shop. By actually working with stone he acquired as a boy what many school-trained architects never learn: a thorough knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of masonry construction.

"When he was fourteen he left the Cathedral School to work first as an apprentice and then as a draftsman for local designers and architects....In 1905, at the age of nineteen, Mies went to Berlin where he was employed by an architect designing in wood. Soon dissatisfied with his inadequate knowledge of the material, he apprenticed himself to Bruno Paul, the leading furniture and cabinet designer of Germany. Two years later he left Paul's office to build his first house as an independent architect."

For a year Mies van der Rohe worked as an apprentice in Berlin. From 1908 to 1911 he was employed in the office of Peter Behrens where, as an apprentice, he helped design a house for Mme. H.E.L.J. Kröller, owner of the famous Kröller-Müller collection of modern painting in The Hague. For the two years immediately preceding the first world war he was again an independent architect in Berlin. After four years war service he returned to his practice in Berlin, which he continued until 1937. In addition, from 1921 until 1937, he engaged in many activities centering around architecture: directed architectural exhibitions for the November-gruppe, a modern art organization; founded the Zehner Ring, an architecture group formed to offset official prejudice against the modern movement; and, from 1926-1932, was first Vice-President of Deutscher Werkbund, the most powerful European influence for quality in modern design.

In 1929 Mies directed the German section of the International Exposition at Barcelona, Spain and designed for it the German Pavilion, acclaimed by critics and artists alike as one of the milestones of modern architecture. Mr. Johnson writes of it as follows:

"It is truly one of the few manifestations of the contemporary spirit that justifies comparison with the great architecture of the past, and it is lamentable that it existed for only one season. Here for the first time Mies was able to build a structure unhampered by functional requirements or insufficient funds. In doing so he incorporated many characteristics of his previous work, such as insistence on expert craftsmanship and rich materials, respect for the regular steel skeleton and preoccupation with extending walls into space."

Best known of his works abroad were the Barcelona Pavilion, culmination of the architect's European career and the famous Tugendhat House of 1930, in Brno, Czechoslovakia, with the open planning of its classic modern interior and with furniture and fittings especial-

ly designed by the architect. His world-wide reputation in modern architecture rests chiefly on these two structures and on his famous five projects: the first glass skyscraper, 1919; the second glass skyscraper, 1920-21; the glass-and-concrete office building, 1922; the brick country house, 1923; and the concrete country house, 1924. Of these projects Philip Johnson writes:

"Mies's position as a pioneer rests on these five projects. In the Europe of the twenties they were frequently published--so frequently, in fact, that he gained the reputation of being a visionary rather than a practical architect. Nothing could be further from the truth; Mies is first and foremost a builder, and these, unlike many of the projects designed by contemporaries during this period of scant construction, are technically buildable. Their influence was due to at least two factors: the dazzling clarity of the designs and the beautiful manner in which they were presented."

Mr. Johnson further states that:

"Mies's European career reached its zenith in the early thirties. In 1930 he was appointed Director of the Bauhaus School in Dessau at the instigation of the former Director, Walter Gropius; in 1931 he was accorded the signal honor of being named a professor at the Prussian Academy of Arts and Sciences. But the following year, because of the local Nazi regime, he was forced to move the Bauhaus from Dessau. It was re-established in Berlin where it existed precariously until he decided to close it in the fall of 1933. With the Nazis hostile to everything he represented, Mies began to look toward the more hospitable climate of America. He left Germany in the summer of 1937, and in 1944 he became an American citizen."

Although Mies van der Rohe has executed a number of important private commissions in this country, it is in his great project for the new campus and buildings of Illinois Institute of Technology that his kinship with the Gothic cathedral builders is most clearly seen. Fundamental is the identification of the architect with his age. Characteristic also both of the twentieth-century Mies and his spiritual ancestors of the Middle Ages are the incomparable craftsmanship of the true artist who loves to build with his hands; the feeling for materials and the inevitability of their selection for exact function or effect; and, above all, structural honesty. Of the Library and Administration building, most important unit of the Illinois campus plan, Mr. Johnson writes:

"Structural elements are revealed as are those of a Gothic cathedral: the inside and outside of the enclosing walls are identical in appearance, since the same steel columns and brick panels of the exterior are visible on the interior. In other words, he has conceived the design in terms of steel channels and angles, I-beams and H-columns, just as a medieval design is conceived in terms of stone vaults and buttresses. But there is one major difference. He allows no decoration except that formed by the character and juxtaposition of the structural elements. And whereas the medieval architect relied on the collaboration of the sculptor and painter for his ultimate effect, Mies, so to speak, has had to perform the functions of all three professions. He joins steel to steel, or steel to glass or brick, with all the taste and skill that formerly went into the chiseling of a stone capital or the painting of a fresco."

In Mies van der Rohe's philosophy of architecture, given in the book of the exhibition, is to be found the basis of the actual

structures and projects for which he is so justly famous. He has written, in part, as follows:

"Instead of trying to solve the new problems with old forms, we should develop the new forms from the very nature of the new problems."

"Reinforced concrete structures are skeletons by nature. No gingerbread. No fortress. Columns and girders eliminate wearing walls. This is skin and bone construction."

"Greek temples, Roman basilicas and medieval cathedrals are significant to us as creations of a whole epoch rather than as works of individual architects. Who asks for the names of these builders? Of what significance are the fortuitous personalities of their creators? Such buildings are impersonal by their very nature. They are pure expressions of their time. Their true meaning is that they are symbols of their epoch."

"Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space. Until this simple truth is clearly recognized, the new architecture will be uncertain and tentative. Until then it must remain a chaos of undirected forces. The question as to the nature of architecture is of decisive importance. It must be understood that all architecture is bound up with its own time, that it can only be manifested in living tasks and in the medium of its epoch. In no age has it been otherwise."

"It is hopeless to try to use the forms of the past in our architecture. Even the strongest artistic talent must fail in this attempt. Again and again we see talented architects who fall short because their work is not in tune with their age. In the last analysis, in spite of their great gifts, they are dilettantes; for it makes no difference how enthusiastically they do the wrong thing. It is a question of essentials. It is not possible to move forward and look backwards; he who lives in the past cannot advance."

"For what is right and significant for any era, including the new era--is this: to give the spirit the opportunity for existence."

"Create form out of the nature of our tasks with the methods of our time."

"Form, by itself, does not exist."

"Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space; living, changing, new."

"Not yesterday, not tomorrow, only today can be given form."