

Out of the Shadows: The Work of Marianne Brandt at Ruppelwerk

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Abstract

Marianne Brandt is renowned for some of the most iconic design objects associated with the Bauhaus, the highly influential early 20th century design school in Germany that was one of the cradles of functional modernism. However, this work has overshadowed her later role as an in-house designer with German company Ruppelwerk. In-house designers manage the design process from within the company and the role demands a unique set of skills. To develop an understanding of Brandt's practice, an analysis of Ruppelwerk objects and other historical materials was conducted, supported by the authors' own first-hand experience as in-house designers. The research revealed Brandt's thorough understanding of manufacturing techniques and her project management expertise. The outcomes of Brandt's time at Ruppelwerk demonstrates a shift from a visual language of the 19th century to designs that reflected 20th century modernism and is one of the first examples of a designer practicing within the unique constraints of a single company. This role in a manufacturing company during the 1930s confirms Marianne Brandt as one of industrial design's earliest and most important pioneers.

Keywords

Marianne Brandt, Ruppelwerk, Industrial Design, In-House Design.

Introduction

In the history of industrial design, a number of figures are noted as key pioneers in developing this area of creative practice. Many texts recognize Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) as one of the first, if not the first, industrial designers ([Heskett, 1980](#); [Lucie-Smith, 1983](#)). Originally trained as a botanical illustrator, Dresser operated mainly as a freelance commercial designer from his own office on a range of objects made from a diverse range of materials for manufacturing companies. Importantly, differing from contemporaries like William Morris who railed against the use of technology, Dresser fully supported the use of machines to produce his designs ([Gorman, 2003](#)). Dresser provided manufacturers with designs of objects that were elegant, simple, functional and able to be manufactured ([Heskett, 1980](#)). His range was extensive, including ceramic tableware, glass vases, silver and steel containers and cast-iron furniture ([Halen, 1990](#)), as well as carpets, wallpapers and textiles ([Oshinsky, 2006](#)). Dresser consulted to more than 30 companies throughout Great Britain. Testament to the success of Dresser as a designer is that some of his designs were put into production more than a century later, e.g., the Toast Rack ([Victoria and Albert Museum, 2021](#)) and the Christy sugar bowl ([The Met, 2021](#)) manufactured by Italian homeware company Alessi.

Another name similarly noted in texts on the history of industrial design is that of Peter Behrens ([Lucie-Smith, 1983](#)). Behrens (1868-1940) was originally trained as a painter, illustrator and bookbinder until his involvement in the Munich art scene resulted in architectural commissions. He was instrumental in setting up the Deutscher Werkbund, which led to his employment as artistic advisor to German company AEG (Allgemeine Electricitas-Gesellschaft) between 1907 and 1914. In this consultant role, Behrens was charged with designing buildings, exhibition stands, products and corporate graphics for the company. Behrens' most recognized industrial design piece is the AEG electric kettle of 1909, for which he developed a system using standardized parts that allowed AEG to manufacture a range of up to 80 different kettle designs ([Heskett, 1980](#)).

Along with this role, Behrens continued to take on private domestic, commercial and industrial architectural commissions ([Edwards, 2016](#)), whilst working from a separate office to that at AEG. For example, in the same year (1909) he designed the electric kettle, he completed the architectural design for the AEG Turbine Factory building. By commissioning artists like Behrens, companies such as AEG were addressing the gap that had been emerged in the late 19th century between progress in new technologies and an appropriate response to the design of mass produced objects ([Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, 2021](#)).

Design: The Missing Ingredient

By the beginning of the 20th century, mass manufacture had made significant progress and, more importantly, the market was evolving into a development that demanded a higher standard of design. Perhaps this is best illustrated by the situation in which the German company Ruppelwerk found itself in the 1920s. Ruppelwerk, a manufacturer of metal goods based in Gotha, had grown with the rise of industrialization in Germany. However, while it had embraced mass manufacturing, it had not evolved in terms of design or equipment. This situation came to a peak in 1928 when the organizers of the Leipzig Fair told Ruppelwerk that its future participation in this major trade event was in jeopardy unless updates were undertaken ([Otto, 2019](#)).

Rather than consult with an external designer, Ruppelwerk searched for a designer who would work alongside its own employees. In December 1929, it settled on a designer with an impeccable design pedigree, a world class education, a background in metal work and especially experience in designing for mass manufacture – Marianne Brandt (1893–1983). This was one of the first examples of a different type of relationship in the modern era between company and designer. Particularly, an in-house designer being on the company payroll, was embedded within the company structure and with no external office or practice.

The Role of the In-House Designer

Industrial design is an internationally recognized discipline practiced by professionals around the world. The World Design Organization defines industrial design *as a strategic problem-solving process that drives innovation, builds business success and leads to a better quality of life through innovative products, systems, services and experiences* (World Design Organization, 2021). While the primary focus of the profession has always been on design for mass manufacture using industrial processes, it now also addresses the design of intangible experiences such as service design. Industrial design can design for both craft-based and large-scale industrial production. Typically, the focus of an industrial designer is on user needs, appearance, functionality and manufacturability.

Industrial designers can practice in a number of ways; one of which, like Marianne Brandt, is as an in-house designer who is employed to design exclusively for a company. Many large companies with extensive product ranges such as Electrolux, Philips and Apple, have dedicated design departments. A well-documented example of this type of role in industrial design is that of Dieter Rams, who for many years worked as an in-house designer for German electrical goods company Braun. Rams claims that one of the most significant advantages of working as an in-house designer is the ability to develop relationships with colleagues in other parts of the company. This proximity and the detailed knowledge that can be shared and built upon is something that external consultant designers cannot achieve (Kemp, 2009). Another advantage of the in-house design team is that it allows other parts of the company to experience design (Lee & Joo, 2015).

This was reflected in product development activities at Apple. A key part of Apple's ability to develop new and innovative product design solutions has been attributed to the relationship between the company's late strategic leader Steve Jobs and in-house product designer Jonathon Ive. Ive describes their unique approach to design as a conversation, an ongoing discussion between Jobs and himself that went back and forth, wherein ideas were put forward, proposals were argued and final solutions were eventually agreed upon (Dubberly, 2012). It is doubtful that the unplanned encounters and informal conversations that led to the success of Apple products would have been possible had Ive been an external consultant limited to discussions at official meetings or corporate presentations.

Both authors of this paper spent periods of their professional careers as in-house industrial designers. They acknowledge the importance of working as part of a team and taking into consideration the entire organization from the strategic objectives of senior management to the tangible challenges faced by toolmakers on the shop floor. The in-house designer is uniquely placed to participate in and contribute to the complex and challenging process that takes an idea through design to functioning object. As the authors, and also Brandt, experienced, the challenges throughout this process are constant requiring the designer to present both pragmatic and creative solutions.

Employing Marianne Brandt

The name Marianne Brandt is most commonly associated with a series of objects that have become synonymous with the Bauhaus. Brandt — who had a background in painting — entered the Bauhaus in 1923 as a student. After completing the compulsory basic training, she became one of the few women to enter the metal workshops and her impact on this field of practice was almost immediate. For example, one of her earliest student projects was the MT 49 tea infuser, as in Figure 1, which would go on to become an iconic representation of the Bauhaus. As noted by Christian Will-Dorring — Curator of Decorative Arts at the Neue Galerie New York — Each individual part — lid, handle, spout and base — can be clearly read. Brandt then put all of them together again by creating an abstract sculpture which, at the same time, is a teapot. The flat and spherical shapes harmonize perfectly (Rawsthorn, 2007).



Figure 1: Tea infuser (MT 49) from a display at the Bauhaus Museum Weimar. Designed by Marianne Brandt in 1924.

However, despite the undoubted beauty of this object and the stated aim of the designer, it was not suitable for mass production. The only examples are all handmade and are valuable items (Sellers, 2017).

Brandt expanded her practice to include other household items. When the Bauhaus moved to its new purpose-built premises in Dessau in 1923, the light fittings were designed by Brandt alone or in collaboration with colleagues Helmut Sculze, Hin Bredendieck and Hans Przyrembel. These light fittings reflected the dominant Bauhaus philosophy that privileged pure forms and truth to materials (McDermott & Pandolfo, 2019). It seems that Brandt's work at this time was so bound up with the Bauhaus narrative that it is hard to separate the two and today there is barely a book or exhibition about the Bauhaus that does not feature Brandt's designs for the tea infuser, lights and ashtrays. In 1928, Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, the well-known Constructivist sculptor and designer, left his position as head of the metal workshop at the Bauhaus and Brandt took the position becoming the first woman to lead a Bauhaus workshop other than the weaving workshop. It was in this position that she, with colleagues, became involved in the design of lighting products for outside manufacturers. One commission in particular was with Korting and Mathiesen, also known as Kandem, an established Leipzig lighting manufacturer (Sellers, 2017). The role of designing for an external manufacturing company represented another step in the evolution of Brandt's practice.

An analysis of the Bedside Light designed for Kandem (Figure 2) reveals that Brandt was moving on from some of the original Bauhaus ideals that were so elegantly expressed in her earlier works. From a focus on form and materials, Brandt was now engaging with the challenge of designing usable, economical and aesthetically pleasing objects in the context of mass production. The Kandem project represents Brandt's first move away from the creation of iconic objects to the role of industrial designer for manufacturers of mass-produced objects (McDermott & Pandolfo, 2019).



Figure 2: "Kandem" Bedside-Table Lamp, Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Anonymous gift. Designed by Marianne Brandt in 1928.

Brandt's relationship with Kandem was mainly as a consultant in the context of her employment at the Bauhaus. Nonetheless, barely a year later in 1929, she took another step into the emerging profession of industrial design by becoming the artistic director of the Ruppelwerk company and, in effect, its head in-house industrial designer.

The step taken by Ruppelwerk to employ Marianne Brandt to guide its future design direction was inspired, but in other ways obvious. Brandt had been associated with the Bauhaus — an institution known for embracing new design approaches— as she had the experience of successfully designing with manufacturers e.g., the Kandem light, which sold 50,000 units (Fiell & Fiell, 2016). This made the Bedside Light one of the Bauhaus' bestselling products (Sellers, 2017). Because of her metal working background, Brandt brought the necessary technical understanding of materials and manufacturing methods to create commercially viable products. As noted by Otto (2019), it was not only Brandt's technical and artistic expertise that were important, but she had also emphatically demonstrated her ability to negotiate the politics of the male-dominated environment of the Bauhaus metal workshop. In addition, her experience as workshop head negotiating with outside companies during her Bauhaus tenure showed both an understanding of the aesthetic, manufacturing and functional aspects of product design and also the necessary political savvy to ensure the designs were realised in their correct form.

Marianne Brandt and Ruppelwerk

At Ruppelwerk, Brandt was tasked with redesigning a range of objects that originated during the previous century. The existing Ruppelwerk range at the time consisted of various homeware and novelty items such as humorous bottle tops in the form of animal heads and general bric-a-brac that displayed a distinct 19th century aesthetic. The use of floral-like details and excessive ornamentation resulted in a visually cluttered appearance. This reflected an approach to object design and manufacturing commonly used by many industrialists as they attempted to replicate the appearance of objects handmade by skilled artisans. In communication with Walter Gropius, Brandt described Ruppelwerk's range of objects as *tasteless* and *confused* (Otto, 2019). She was clearly aware of the scale of the task in front of her.

Brandt took advantage of her position as in-house designer to radically update the Ruppelwerk collection. The disruptive nature of Brandt's task would have required all of her ability to communicate clearly, empathize with existing workers and persevere in the face of seemingly insurmountable hurdles. She would have had to collaborate with all parts of the company, from key decision makers and general office workers to factory and workshop technicians, press operators and toolmakers.

Brandt's achievement at Ruppelwerk was greatly impressive because she was a female and in sharp contrast to her time at the Bauhaus when she was initially forced to complete menial tasks because of her gender (Brandt, 1971). As mentioned earlier, her determination and her ability eventually led to her becoming the first woman head of the metal workshop at the Bauhaus, a significant achievement. Her previous experience at the Bauhaus and Kandem without a doubt assisted in enabling her to convince Ruppelwerk of the value of her proposals.

The Work of Brandt

The Ruppelwerk collection designed by Brandt included more than 50 objects that ranged from watering cans to napkin holders, and all embodied an aesthetic that spoke of modernism and looking forward rather than into the past. While Brandt's success was due in part to her ability to manage and work with people, her capacity as a designer to maximize the manufacturing technologies available at Ruppelwerk was critical. The final objects were made of *mostly lacquerware in tin-free steel* (Otto, 2019) and the processes and techniques included punching, *pressing, pulling and spot welding* (ibid).



Figure 3: *Sugar Bowl, Candelabra and Napkin Holder. Designed by Marianne Brandt.*

While Brandt remained faithful to the Bauhaus goal of avoiding ornamentation in object design, she was resourceful in achieving high aesthetic qualities as she understood that a visually appealing object would impact positively on the customer. She stated that *Instead of painted or sprayed decorations [...] I created effects by screwing or riveting other coloured parts, e.g., wooden balls, and chrome metal* (ibid). This approach to create an *effect* is evident in the Sugar Bowl and Candelabra in Figure 3 where contrast between finishes is highlighted.

The incorporation of brighter colours was another hallmark of Brandt's Ruppelwerk collection, creating a more playful and enticing range of products. This approach signalled a departure from the various metal finishes and monochromatic color choices used in her Bauhaus objects. Brandt also recognized that manufacturing costs needed to be kept as low as possible so as not to impact negatively on commercial viability. Therefore, painting was less demanding in terms of resources compared to traditional metal finishing such as polishing and chrome plating.

The lineage of the forms in many of the Ruppelwerk objects can be traced back to those used extensively during the Bauhaus. The Sugar Bowl, Candelabra and Napkin Holder (Figure 3) do use pure geometric forms as seen in the Bauhaus; however, these forms are transformed as products suitable for a domestic context. As a further step, Brandt went on to challenge this approach of using simple geometric forms in the Desk Set she designed for the Ruppelwerk collection.



Figure 4: *Desk Set for Ruppelwerk, Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, Purchased 2002. Designed by Marianne Brandt in 1930-31.*

Brandt's reimagining of the traditional Desk Set as seen in [Figure 4](#) began with a reevaluation of materials. Desk sets were a product commonly made from prestigious materials such as brass, leather and stones such as alabaster and quartz. Not only did Brandt's Desk Set deviate from this group of materials but her designs in terms of form, detailing and finish were void of any reference to past styles. They were innovative for their time and they had a distinctly modernist aesthetic yet still formed part of an extensive and coherent Ruppelwerk collection. The Desk Set comprised a blotter, pen rest and ink holder. Except for an internal glass ink container and integrated leather blotting pad, it was made entirely from painted sheet metal. The incorporation of the spherical handle on the ink pot displays a slightly playful approach — a detail used in other objects of the collection— and the long soft edges of the blotter demonstrate a sensitivity to user needs.

Apart from a concerted effort to address user needs, Brandt was exploring new territory in terms of design. The compound curves of the blotter, the asymmetric nature of the ink holder and the slim yet soft lines of the pen rest introduced a departure from her iconic work at the Bauhaus. Whether or not it was access to the superior methods of production available at the Ruppelwerk factory that allowed for this type of investigation, Brandt demonstrated a desire to move forward into the new and unknown.

Brandt After Ruppelwerk

The economic hardship in Germany from the late 1920s meant that Ruppelwerk could no longer afford to employ Brandt. Despite her Bauhaus accomplishments and her achievements at Ruppelwerk, her creative practice fell into obscurity. The rise of Nazism meant her connection to the Bauhaus became a negative and she struggled to continue her practice in industrial design. During World War II, her home in Chemnitz was bombed and many of her records were forever lost. After the World War II, creative practice generally became difficult and Brandt had to join a particular organization, the Reichskulturrekammer — Reich's Chamber of Culture— to practise as an artist ([Otto, 2019](#)). The German Democratic Republic regarded her with suspicion and Brandt found herself on the wrong side of the political regime of the time ([Sellers, 2017](#)).

Proper recognition of Brandt's work from this period was made difficult in part by the lack of attribution by Ruppelwerk of her role in the design process. This is not unusual; as in-house designers did not have their name associated with the objects they design; they were after all employees of the company. Publicly, it was always the Ruppelwerk or Ruppel name that was used for any sort of promotional activity. However, recent research has referenced pattern books and Brandt's remaining records to confirm her as author of dozens of objects, all bearing the hallmarks of her distinctive approach. During Brandt's time at Ruppelwerk, more products were put into industrial series production than during the Weimar and Dessau Bauhaus periods combined ([Blechschiidt, 2019](#)).

This more recent research informed one of the first comprehensive overviews of Brandt's work, *Modern, but not fashionable - Bauhaus artists in Gotha*, held at the Schollmuseum in Gotha, Germany, from 11 October 2009 to 3 January 2010. This led to a more expanded exhibition, inspired by the Bauhaus - Gotha experiences modernity, held at the KunstForum in Gotha from November 15 to December 29, 2019. An accompanying catalogue included a comprehensive overview of some of the original documents and images of Brandt's work completed during her Ruppelwerk period ([Blechschiidt, 2019](#)).

Conclusion

Brandt's time at Ruppel demonstrated how far she had moved on from being the creator of iconic objects such as the Tea Infuser. She was able to apply the design principles she had learned at the Bauhaus to instigate change in a real company with commercial and manufacturing needs. Perhaps this was best summarized by the designer herself, who, in a letter to Walter Gropius, described how she *endeavoured to introduce things more in line with real needs and practical demands than so-called luxury needs and joke articles*, taking into account the idiosyncrasies of the factory ([Otto, 2019](#)). This comment shows Brandt's understanding of the need for design to fulfill needs rather than just be a manifesto for change.

She also alluded to the need to relate to the manufacturing techniques and materials available and use them to their best advantage. Her worldly-wise understanding of the need to market and promote the designs saw her influence extended to the printed catalogue material associated with her work (Otto, 2019).

The timeless and elegant look of Brandt's Ruppelwerk creations are as fresh today as when she was forging new ground in the early 1930s. However, it was not only the design of the objects that demonstrated innovation, but also Brandt's position as one of the first in-house industrial designers employed by a manufacturer. In a time when it was rare for a woman to have key design responsibilities in a manufacturing company, this little-known role and the outcomes of her employment need to be acknowledged as a real breakthrough and Brandt herself recognized as a true pioneer in the history of industrial design.

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