

EN

johannes itten

art as life

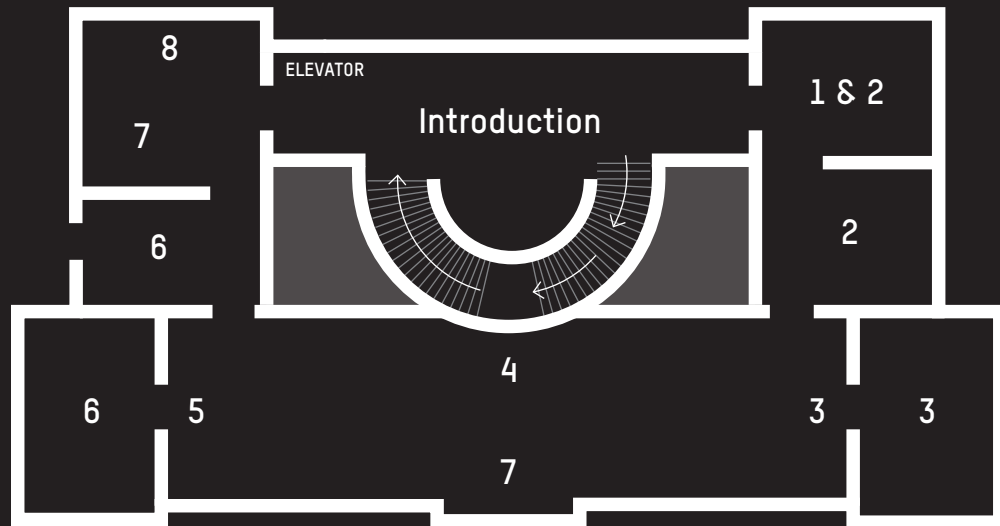
bauhaus utopias
and documents of reality

30.08.2019 – 02.02.2020

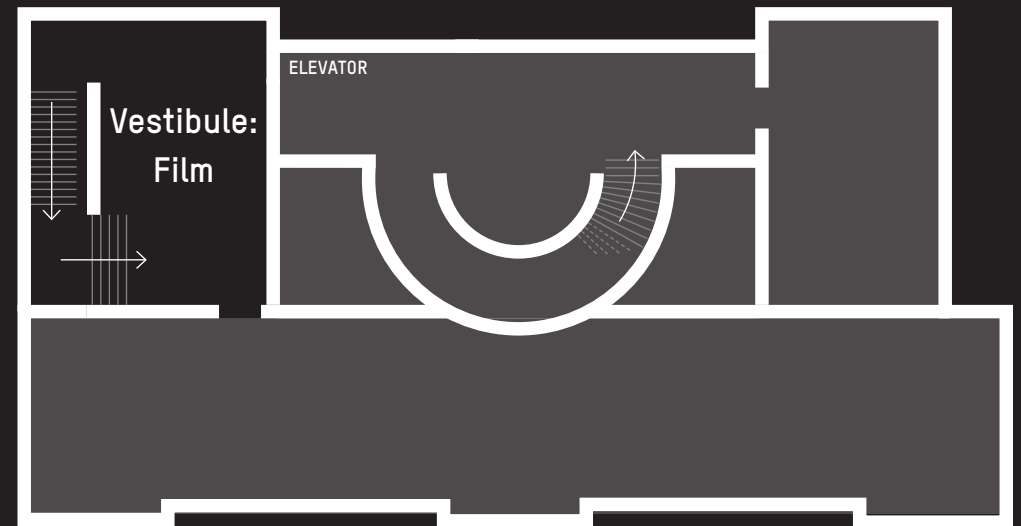
KUNST
MUSEUM
BERN

EXHIBITION GUIDE

Floorplan



Upper floor



Basement floor

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In the vestibule we will be showing the film

Johannes Itten – Bauhaus Pioneer (2018)

The documentary film by Marina Rumjanzewa, with animations by Philipp Seedfeldt, is a journey of discovery into the work and life of Johannes Itten. Not least, the film tells a barely known chapter in the history of the Bauhaus: its beginnings, which were very different from the Bauhaus as we know it today.

A film by Marina Rumjanzewa, produced by SRF for *Sternstunde Kunst*.
Duration: 53 minutes.

You can reach the vestibule by going down the steps behind the cash desk on the ground floor.

Introduction

*"I don't want to make any works of art in future.
I only want to concentrate on my thoughts and depict them.
Praying is also thought concentrated on God.
Painting means concentrating on colour-form."*

Johannes Itten, 1916

Like few other artists, Johannes Itten saw art and life as being closely interconnected. Personal experiences and philosophical considerations are reflected in his art in many different ways. We get unusually close to the artist in his sketchbooks, which he called 'diaries', and are able to penetrate his most intimate zones and thoughts. For Itten, diaries were his travelling companions and accompanied him through his everyday life, they were mirrors of his art-historical analyses, dream-catchers of his ideas for paintings and structural frameworks for his work as a teacher and lecturer.

In the Bauhaus anniversary year of 2019 the Kunstmuseum Bern is devoting an exhibition to the important Swiss artist and Bauhaus master Johannes Itten, one which focuses for the first time on Itten's utopian project of holistically merging life and art. The interplay of key works from his painterly works and numerous pages from his diaries provides a new insight into Itten's hitherto unknown way of opening up the world through drawing and the working processes deriving from that process.

The central pieces in the exhibition are the diaries, newly researched and never previously shown on this scale. They not only contain Itten's pioneering art-theoretical reflections on his colour theory but also reveal traces of his reading of the esoteric and scientific concepts of his time. Aside from numerous notes on everyday life there is also evidence of his engagement with vegetarian food, rhythmic gymnastics and other elements of the alternative lifestyle of the early 20th century. At the same time Itten's sketches reveal a fascinating range of artistic forms of representation between abstraction, diagrammatic reduction, collage and figurative art.

This exhibition, arranged as a tour through the different stages of Johannes Itten's life from 1913 until 1938, allows us to discover new facets of the artist and his manifold work.

Don't miss it! Visit the other big anniversary exhibition *bauhaus imaginista* at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern (20.09.19 - 12.01.20). This show premieres an investigation into Bauhaus reception history that goes beyond the borders of Europe, presenting a totally new angle on the Bauhaus.

1 Early work

Johannes Itten's childhood and adolescence were darkened by a series of deaths in the family. His father died in 1892 and his brother in 1897. Johannes Itten saw his stepfather as 'ruthless'. Many aspects of the years that he initially spent in the countryside, engaging intensely with nature – and then from 1898 onwards, living with his aunt and uncle in Thun where he went to school and lived between castle and church – struck him as 'joyless and grey'. Early in his life Itten was obliged to earn his own living, and as a gifted but penniless young man he opted for the teaching profession, following in the footsteps of his late father. From 1904 until 1906 he trained at the teacher training institute in Hofwil near Bern and worked from 1908 until 1909 as a primary school teacher. The existential experience of a lack of intellectual, material and family security may have been a crucial impulse leading him to seek uncompromisingly for a spiritual home of his own.

Itten's encounters with nature in his youth were certainly among his formative experiences. His oeuvre begins with the depiction of landscapes and people from his immediate surroundings (*Der Erzähler* / The Storyteller, 1912). In 1909 Itten studied briefly at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva, but soon came back to complete a course in science and mathematics at Bern University, qualifying as a secondary school teacher. In December 1911 Itten first entered the public eye as an artist and showed his painting *Vorfrühling an der Rhone* (Early Spring on the Rhône, 1911) at the Christmas exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bern.

2 Stuttgart 1913–1916

In October 1913 Itten set off on foot from Basel to Stuttgart to become a painter. Since the admission committee initially refused him access to Adolf Hölzel's classes at the Academy of Visual Arts, he learned Hölzel's art theory from the artist's student Ida Kerkovius. At this point Itten only had a small body of work consisting of portraits, landscapes and academic figure studies. The first paintings created in Stuttgart are characterized by an intensive reception of Cézanne and Cubism (*Mann im blauen Kittel* / Man in Blue Coat, 1914). Under Hölzel's encouragement, Itten began systematically recording his artistic and art-theoretical reflections in diary entries. From the beginning his interest in non-European cultures is apparent, as for example in his analyses of Egyptian sculpture. The outbreak of the First World War on 27 July 1914 led Itten to return to Switzerland, although in November of the same year he already travelled back to Stuttgart to become a master pupil with Hölzel.

At first Itten – entirely in the spirit of Hölzel – experimented with connecting abstraction and figurative forms. And under the impression of his reading of the art-theoretical disquisitions of Wassily Kandinsky in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* he soon attempted to separate figurative reference and abstraction. From 1915 Itten engaged intensively with the possibilities of an abstract geometrical language of forms, which also left traces in his diary entries. Itten translated this switch to an abstract pictorial language into a series of key works such as *Horizontal-Vertikal* (Horizontal-Vertical, 1915), *Tiefenstufen* (Depth Studies, 1915) and *Begegnung* (The Encounter, 1916). These combine rectangular and circular or spiral structures with model-like colour configurations. Here Itten seems to be testing out fundamental principles of formal and colour organisation, and to want to assemble the totality of colours.

3 Vienna 1916 – 1919

In October 1916 Itten, by now 27, moved from Stuttgart to Vienna and set up an art school in his apartment, where he taught a constantly growing group of female students. In Viennese avant-garde circles he very soon met people such as Carl Moll, Josef Hoffmann, Adolf Loos, Franz Werfel, Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, Josef Matthias Hauer, Hans Pfitzner, Rudolf Steiner, Hans Tietze, Josef Strzygowski and Alma Mahler-Gropius. His friendships with the composer Josef Matthias Hauer and Alma Mahler-Gropius would have major consequences for Itten: conversations with Hauer led him to a foundation of abstraction based on colour harmonies. His encounter with Mahler-Gropius granted him access to the esoteric writings of theosophy and finally, via her husband Walter Gropius, opened the doors to the newly founded Bauhaus for him. In 1918 Itten fell in love with his student Emmy Anbelang, who died of Spanish flu before their planned marriage in 1918. A year later Itten married his late fiancée's sister, Hildegard Anbelang.

In numerous nudes, sculptures and paintings Itten refined his dynamic interpretation of geometrical abstraction and his increasingly sophisticated pictorial structure (*Ländliches Fest* / Rural Gaiety, 1917; *Komposition in Blau* / Composition in Blue, 1917; *Stehende* / Standing Woman, 1919). Moving his private art school to larger spaces, Itten replaced one-to-one teaching with class-based lessons, which he carefully prepared in his diary entries. During his three years in Vienna Itten sketched almost all the artistic and art-theoretical aspects that he would later put into effect at the Bauhaus and then in Berlin, Krefeld and Zurich: rhythm and harmony, polarities theory, colour theory, expressive form, analyses of old masters, time-space-movement. Itten's diary entries also reveal that he had engaged intensely with theosophical and other esoteric writings since his time in Vienna. Presumably it was Itten's Viennese patron Agathe Mark-Kornfeld who brought Itten in contact with anthroposophy, about which he did not speak kindly. His pronounced rejection of Rudolf Steiner should be understood against the background of his adoption, during this time, of the principles of Mazdaznan teachings (more on this subject in the chapter *Weimar 1919-1923*).

4 Weimar 1919 – 1923

On 24 February 1919 Walter Gropius recruited Itten as one of the first masters to the State Bauhaus in Weimar. Itten set up a studio in the so-called Tempelherrenhaus (Templars' House), a neo-gothic building in Weimar Park. It was here that he produced major works such as his *Turm des Feuers / Turm des Lichts* (Tower of Fire or / Tower of Light, 1920) or the *Kinderbild* (Children's Portrait, 1921-22), but also his art-theoretical notes in the *Tempelherrenhaus-Tagebuch* (Tempelherrenhaus Diary, 1920). In sketches Itten tried to capture his idea of man's colourful aura (*Mensch im Farbkreis* / Man in Colour Wheel, 1919), or analyse it in the form of 'magic squares'. During his three-and-a-half years at the Weimar Bauhaus – between October 1919 and March 1923 – Itten did not paint a single geometrical abstract painting, but employed only a figurative representational style. In the context of the almanac *Utopia. Dokumente der Wirklichkeit* (Utopia. Documents of Reality, 1921) Itten published his first theoretical colour model, the *Colour Sphere in 7 Light Values and 12 Tones*. He produced ideologically coined calligraphic works: the overall significance that Itten, under the influence of Mazdaznan teachings, attributed to breathing theory is reflected with mystical-looking intensification in his calligraphic depiction of the saying *Einatmen, ausatmen* (Breathe In, Breathe Out) by Jakob Boehme, which he dedicated to his wife on Christmas 1922. Here art and esoteric theories become programmatically intertwined. The *Kinderbild*, which he painted on the occasion of the birth of his son Matthias, Itten not only turned the child into a pure creation point of all artistic creativity – attempting to encourage this in Berlin with his own courses designed for children – but also designed a symbolic puzzle picture of the esoteric doctrines of the New Man.

For his teaching at the Bauhaus Itten developed the preliminary course as an introductory semester which was compulsory for all students. He ran this until 1923, in alternation with Georg Muche. As a 'master of form', he worked in all Bauhaus workshops except the ceramics workshop, the book-bindery and the print-works. In Itten's life and work at the Bauhaus ideological imprints come to the fore, particularly through his turn towards the religious and esoteric philosophy of Mazdaznan, which he also spread among his colleagues. Zoroastrian, Christian and Hindu-tantric ideas flowed together in this mixed religion founded by Ottoman Zar-Adusht Hanish, along with a vegetarian theory of nutrition, a yoga-based breathing doctrine and a

5 Herrliberg 1923–1925

racial theory influenced by the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, which is extremely unsettling from a contemporary perspective. Itten also referred to Hanish's racial theory in his lecture manuscripts, in which he attempted to unite 'artistic development' with humanity's development over the centuries.

Since 1920 Johannes Itten had plainly – in a self-designed costume and with a shaven head – been working towards a comprehensive spiritualisation of all areas of life. The menu of the Bauhaus canteen was switched to a Mazdaznan diet. After his conflicts with Walter Gropius had raged for almost two years, on 18 March 1923 Itten delivered his farewell lecture – considerably influenced by the teachings of his movement – and left the Bauhaus to join the International Mazdaznan Temple Community in Herrliberg.

In the spring of 1923 Itten joined the International Mazdaznan Temple Community in Herrliberg on Lake Zurich. From 1924, for business purposes that community bore the name the 'Aryana Alliance'. Itten devoted himself comprehensively to Mazdaznan teachings and, together with the former Bauhaus student and future Bauhaus master Gunta Stölzl, established the Ontos workshops for hand-weaving and Smyrna carpet-making. He was a member of the extended committee of the Aryana Alliance, delivered lectures on Mazdaznan teachings and set up a Mazdaznan publishing company. Drawings reveal that Itten devoted himself not only to the theme of childhood but also to landscape and still-life painting. But during his time in Herrliberg he did not draw or paint to any great extent. The catalogue raisonné of paintings, watercolours and drawings does not show a single work for 1924 and only two drawings for 1925. None the less two of Itten's carpets made in Herrliberg were awarded a gold medal at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris in 1925. The highlights of the year included the festivities for Hanish's visit to Herrliberg in July. Following disputes between different currents within the Mazdaznan movement, the Herrliberg Ontos workshops were closed in April. Itten left Herrliberg and moved to Berlin on 1 October.

6 Berlin 1925 – 1934

The contrast between the rural esoteric world of the Herrliberg Mazdaznan community and the metropolis of Berlin, where Itten set up a privately financed art school, could hardly have been greater. Even though Itten continued to deliver Mazdaznan lectures, and the legendary breathing and physical exercises were part of the Itten School's teaching programme, the esoteric side of Mazdaznan teachings now faded into the background. With his courses, initially given alternately in different homes, Itten was so in tune with the times that he was able to build a new Itten School (*Itten-Schule*) at 14 Konstanzer Strasse. Intense press activity brought the school widespread fame. For a time over one hundred students flowed to the Itten School from different countries, including notable artists like Eduard Bäumer, Fritz Brill, Maximilian Debus, Ursula Fischer-Klemm, Lilly Froehlich-Müller, Blida Heynold-von Graefe, Boris Kleint, Lucia Moholy, Eve Neuner-Kayser and others who would continue the traditions of the Itten School into modern movements of the post-war era. Itten employed not only a team of teachers consisting of former Bauhaus members – such as Georg Muche, Gyula Pap and Max Bronstein – but also, from 1928, teachers of Japanese ink brush painting, including Yumeji Takehisa. Within a very short time the Itten School became a serious competitor to the Bauhaus, which had moved to Dessau in 1925. Ironically, in Berlin Itten also returned to the close connection between artistic training and practical professional orientation which had led him to break with Gropius. As well as rising artists, the school was now to train 'architects, photographers, educators and poster and pattern makers', and, from 1932, textile designers. In April 1934 the Itten School in Berlin suffered the same fate as the Bauhaus in Berlin, which was closed under pressure from the National Socialists.

Itten's artistic thought is constantly documented in his *Tagebuch Berlin* (Berlin Diary) during these years: rather than notebooks he now used loose sheets in Japanese book-binding, on which he recorded his creative reflections. The diary form now became his preferred format for the publication of his thoughts on art and colour: his *Tagebuch. Beiträge zu einem Kontrapunkt der Bildenden Kunst* (Diary. Contributions to a Counterpoint of the Visual Arts) was published in 1930.

7 Krefeld 1932 – 1938

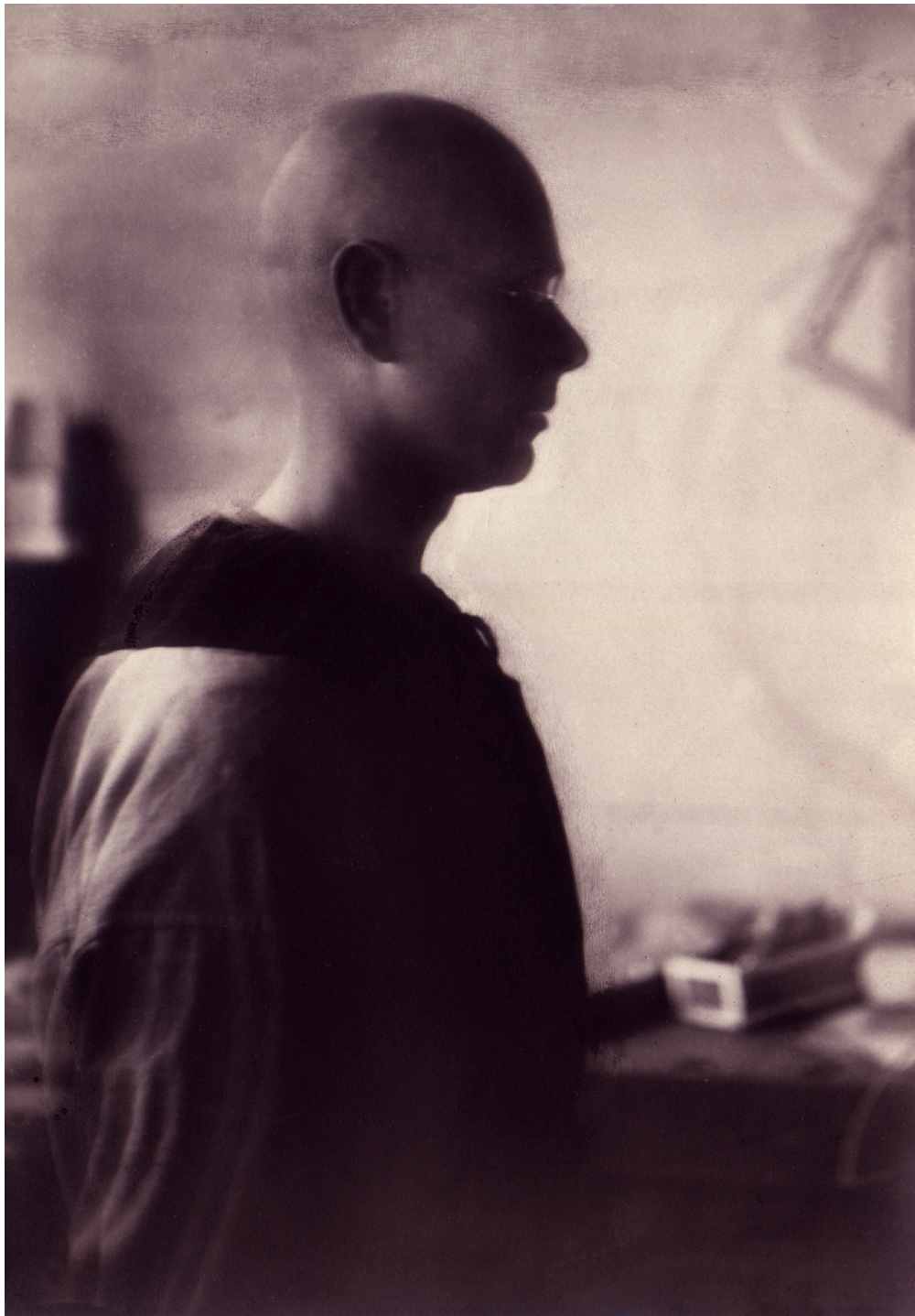
In 1932, alongside his work at the Itten School in Berlin, Johannes Itten took over the running of the newly founded Technical School for Textile Art in Krefeld. The *Tagebuch Krefeld* (Krefeld Diary) – which, like the *Tagebuch Berlin*, has the form a bundle of individual sheets – is being shown for the first time on this scale in this exhibition. On the 276 sheets exhibited here there are sketches for ideas, reflections on colour harmony, but also notes on everyday life in politically uncertain times. Itten commuted weekly between Berlin and Krefeld taking care of the two art schools. With the publication of the *Tagebuch* in 1930 and with a busy schedule of teaching, lectures and exhibitions, Itten reached the peak of his activity in Germany. By now Itten had abandoned the old opposition of art and technology in favour of a new synthesis which was practised at both of his art schools. Itten's comprehensive engagement with the languages of textile decorations in Krefeld also left traces in his painting from 1935 onwards: the modes of representation – like the fabric patterns – become more abstract. In the painting *Vögel am Meer* (Birds by the Sea, 1935) figuration and abstraction are closely intertwined.

On 19 July 1937 the *Degenerate Art* exhibition opened in Munich. In that propaganda exhibition, which was organised by the National Socialist government and shown in various towns and cities in Germany, works by avant-garde artists which were identified as 'degenerate' were subjected to mockery. Johannes Itten was represented with two works, and many more were removed from public collections in Germany by the National Socialists. In November 1937 he was also dismissed from his post as director of the Krefeld Textile School, effective from 31 March 1938. Written requests for help which Itten sent to Walter Gropius on 14 November 1937 and 4 January 1938 reveal that at this point he was still trying to emigrate via the Netherlands to the United States to found a Bauhaus college for the fashion and textile industry. Itten's furious reaction on 26 February 1938, in which he threatens the Reich Chamber of Visual Arts with consequences from the Swiss delegation, shows that he was only gradually coming to grasp the increasingly threatening situation in Germany. With this letter Itten included the 'membership card' that was compulsory for all artists in National Socialist Germany. This made it clear that he would soon be leaving Germany.

8 Amsterdam 1938

In the last days of February 1938 Itten travelled to Amsterdam, where he financed his stay by giving lectures and teaching courses for painters and architects and was also commissioned to design a ceiling covering for the staircase of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. This velum, which has not survived, measured 18 x 9.5 metres and decorated the museum's entrance hall during an exhibition devoted to *100 Years of French Art*. In the mostly figurative cyphers on his *Velum* Itten created a minimally reduced sign-like pictorial language, which revolved with a dancing lightness around the subject of creation myth. In this work Itten formed a synthesis between textile decoration and monumentally pictorial painting.

With his return to Switzerland, where he was appointed director of the School for Decorative Arts and the Museum for Decorative Arts of the City of Zurich on 1 December 1938, a new phase of Itten's life began. From 1943 until 1960 he was also director of the Textile College in Zurich, and from 1949 he was in charge of the construction of the Rietberg Museum for Non-European Art, which he opened on 24 May 1952. In artistic terms as well the period after his return to Switzerland was an extremely fertile and successful period, which represents a chapter of its own in Itten's career. His important international successes include his solo exhibition in New York in 1948 and the two retrospectives in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1957 and in Kunsthaus Zurich in 1964, as well as his participation in the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966. In 1961 the publication of his *Kunst der Farbe* (Art of Colour) caused an international stir; so Itten was able, in several different ways, to continue his artistic life's work in Switzerland.



Biography

1888 Johannes Itten is born on 11 November in Süderen-Linden in the Bernese Oberland.

1892 Death of his father.

1898–1904 Attends school in Thun.

1904–1908 Teacher training college in Hofwil near Bern, from 1906 in Bern.

1908–1909 Primary school teacher in Schwarzenburg near Bern.

1909 From October, art studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva.

1910 Leaves his studies and returns to Bern.

1910–1912 Trains as a secondary school teacher at Bern University.

1911 Exhibition of the oil painting *Vorfrühling an der Rhone* (Early Spring on the Rhône) in the Kunstmuseum Bern.

1912 Travels to exhibitions in Paris, Munich, Cologne and Amsterdam, among other places. From October he resumes his art studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Geneva.

1913 Returns to Bern, transfers to the Academy of Visual Arts in Stuttgart under Adolf Hölzel. Begins keeping art-theoretical diary entries.

1914 With the outbreak of war Itten returns temporarily to Thun. From November he is a master student under Hölzel in Stuttgart.

1916 Solo exhibition in Herwarth Walden's gallery *Der Sturm* in Berlin. Moves to Vienna in October. Foundation of a private art school.

Portrait of Johannes Itten in his studio, Weimar 1921
Photograph: Paula Stockmar

1917–1918 Makes contacts with the Viennese art, music and literature scene, including Walter Gropius.

1919 Gropius recruits Itten to the Bauhaus. Marriage to Hildegard Anbelang. In October, moves to Weimar and takes up a teaching post at the Bauhaus.

1919–1923 Establishment of the preliminary course. Master of form in various workshops. Studio in the Tempelherrenhaus (Templars' House). Produces major works such as *Turm des Feuers / Turm des Lichts* (Tower of Fire / Tower of Light) and the *Kinderbild* (Children's Portrait).

1920 Attends a Mazdaznan conference in Leipzig with Georg Muche. The Mazdaznan teaching of O.Z. Hanish is spread around the Bauhaus. Internal conflicts, including with Gropius.

1923–1925 Leaves the Bauhaus in March. Moves to the International Mazdaznan Temple Community in Herrliberg on Lake Zurich. Finds the Ontos workshops for hand-weaving and carpet-making. Teaches at the affiliated art school. Lectures on Mazdaznan teachings.

1925 Moves to Berlin.

1926 Foundation of the *Moderne Kunstschule Berlin* (Modern Art School Berlin).

1929 On 1 December, opening of the *Itten-Schule* (Itten School) in the new building at 14 Konstanzer Strasse in Berlin-Wilmersdorf.

1930 Publication of *Tagebuch. Beiträge zu einem Kontrapunkt der Bildenden Kunst* (Diary. Contributions to a Counterpoint of Visual Art).

1932 From January, runs the state Technical School for Textile Art in Krefeld. Spends weeks teaching in Berlin and Krefeld.

1934 The Itten School in Berlin is closed.

1937 Itten's works are shown in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich. Dismissal of Itten as director in Krefeld.

1938 On 31 March, closure of the Technical School for Textile Art. Divorce from Hildegard Itten-Anbelang. Emigration to Amsterdam. Contract for the *Velum* in the Stedelijk Museum. From 1 December, director of the Museum for Decorative Arts and School for Decorative Arts in Zurich (until 1953).

1939 Marriage to Anneliese Schlösser.

1943 Runs the Textile School of the Silk Industry Society in Zurich (until 1960).

1944 Exhibition *Die Farbe in Natur, Kunst, Wissenschaft und Technik* (Colour in Nature, Art, Science and Technology) at the Museum for Decorative Arts in Zurich.

1948 Solo exhibition in New York.

1949 Commissioned to construct the Rietberg Museum of Non-European art in Zurich.

1952 Opening of the Rietberg Museum, which he directs until 1956.

1955 Studio in Unterengstringen in the Limmat Valley near Zurich.

1957 Retrospective in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

1961 Publication of *Kunst der Farbe* (The Art of Colour).

1964 Retrospective at the Kunsthaus Zürich.

1966 Itten represents Switzerland at the 33rd Venice Biennale.

1967 Johannes Itten dies in Zurich on 25 March.

The exhibition

Duration of the exhibition	30.08.2019 – 02.02.2020
Ticket prices	CHF 18.00 / red. CHF 14.00
Opening times	Monday: closed, Tuesday: 10.00 am – 9.00 pm Wednesday–Sunday: 10.00 am – 5.00 pm
Holidays	Open on 24, 26 and 31 December 2019, and on 1 and 2 January 2020, from 10.00 am – 5.00 pm Closed on 25 December 2019

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SonntagsZeitung

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