

p r o v e n a n c e
r e s e a r c h
case 4

The Legacy of Otti Berger at the
Bauhaus-Archiv / Museum für Gestaltung

Motivation for Provenance Assessment

The collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv contains documents, photos, rugs and weaving samples verified as originating in the estate of textile designer Otti Berger, who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. When Berger left her home in London in 1938 to care for her mother, who was suffering from cancer in what was then the Yugoslavian province of Baranya, she placed a large portion of her possessions in storage in London. She made her friends Karl (1889–1963) and Ellen Otten (1909–1999) responsible for her belongings; like Berger, they had fled to England to escape persecution by the Nazis. In 1938 Berger additionally loaned a selection of works to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where a Bauhaus exhibition would be shown at the end of that year and the beginning of the next. Both groups of works made it through the war. A few of these pieces have found their way into the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv by various paths, and their legitimacy is to be evaluated here.



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The Museum of Modern Art /
Scala, Florence

Two rugs by Otti Berger in the exhibition »Bauhaus: 1919–1928« at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Dec 7, 1938–Jan 30, 1939). installation view, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Photographic Archive, New York, IN82.6C

While the woven rug at the front of the picture (inv. no. 10115) was purchased from a New York art dealer, the knotted rug (inv. no. 3831) entered the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv as a gift.

Who was Otti Berger?

On 4 October 1898, Otilija Ester Berger was born into a Danube-Swabian family in the village of Zmajevac, which was then located in the Baranya province and is now in Croatia. Zmajevac is very close to the Serbian and Hungarian borders. When she was born, this stretch of land still belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary and was called Vörösmart. After the First World War, the area became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. In 1941 it once again became a part of Hungary and then, after 1945, the People's Republic of Yugoslavia.¹

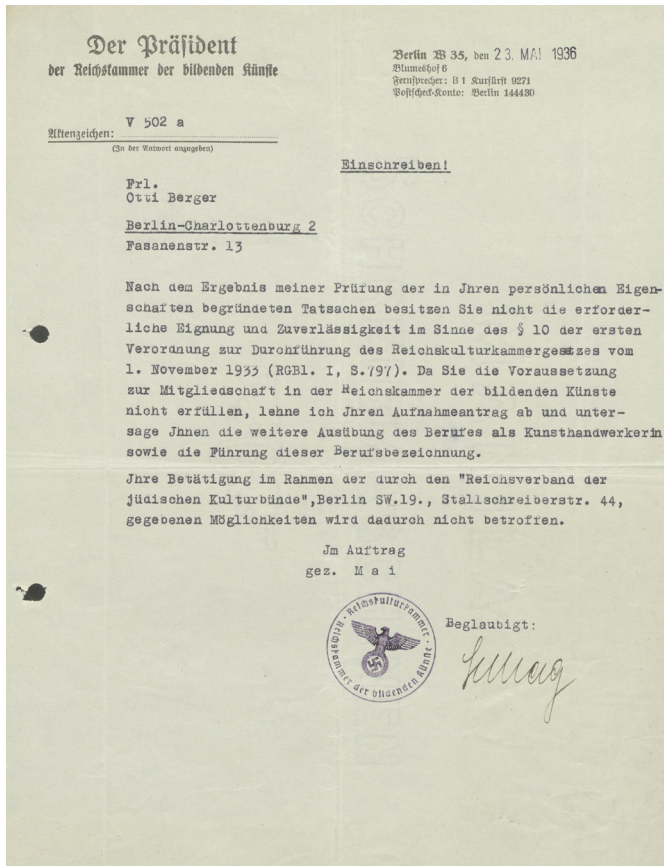
¹ Mária Varga: Ég és föld között: Berger Otti, a vörösmarti textilművész (Pécs 2017); short biography in Volkhard Knigge and Harry Stein, Franz Ehrlich: Ein Bauhäusler in Widerstand und Konzentrationslager, exhibition catalogue (Weimar, 2009), p. 142.

Berger first attended a boarding school in Vienna. From 1922 she studied at the Royal Academy of Fine and Applied Art in Zagreb, which she left in 1926. On 1 January 1927, at the age of 28, she enrolled at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where she completed her training in the weaving workshop and received her Bauhaus diploma and journeyman's licence in 1930. She was briefly placed in charge of the weaving workshop during the winter semester of 1931/32. In 1932 this position was reassigned to Lilly Reich (1885–1947), while Berger remained her deputy director. Shortly afterwards she left the Bauhaus to found her own studio for textile design in Berlin, the »otti berger atelier für textilien«. At the same time, Berger began to use patents to secure legal protection for her innovative textiles, which were water- and tear-resistant, among other things.



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Gertrud Arndt, Otti Berger at the Loom in the Weaving Workshop of the Bauhaus in Dessau, 1930, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, inv. no. 2003/6.2



With this letter, the President of the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts pronounced that Otti Berger was prohibited from practising her profession: as a result there was scarcely any opportunity for her to earn a living in Germany.

Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin,
Document Collection, inv. no. 645/627

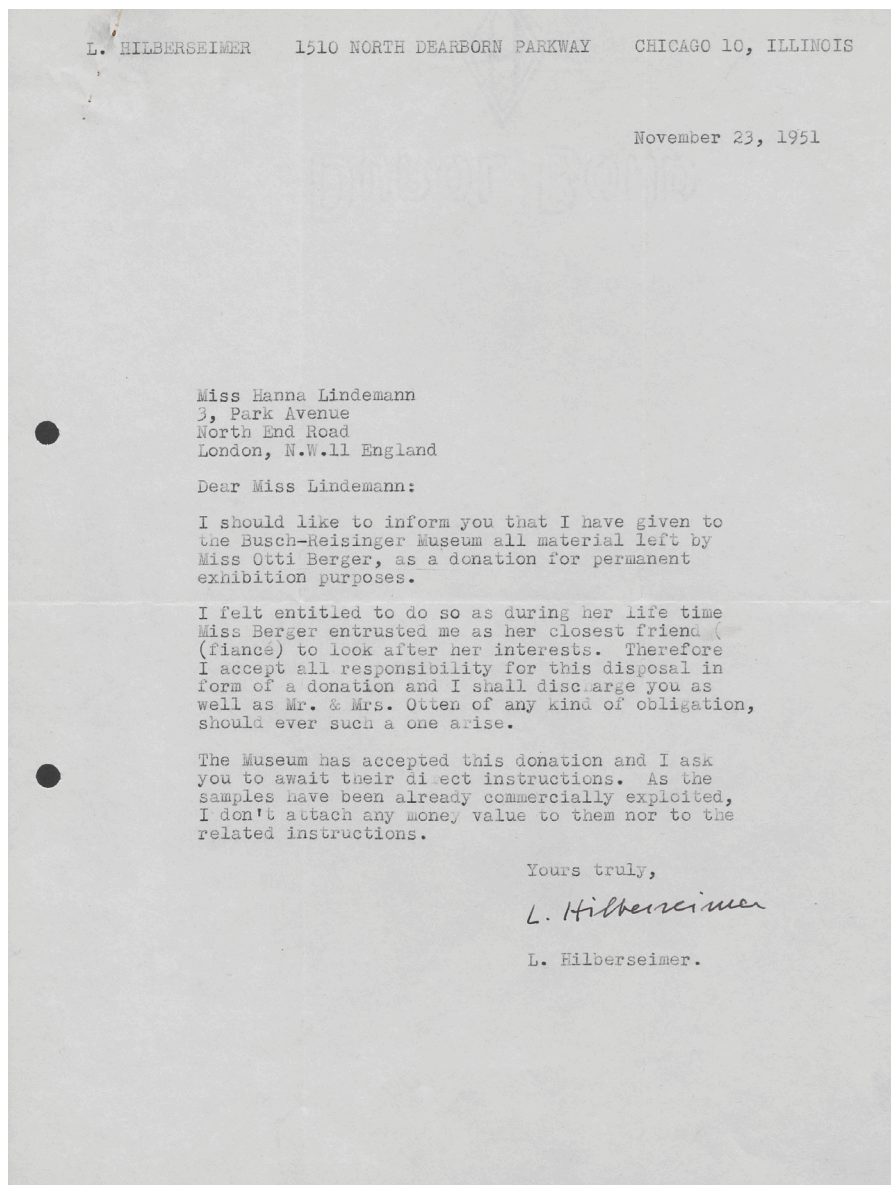
As a foreign Jew, Otti Berger was prohibited from practising her profession by the Nazis on 23 May 1936. She responded by going to England but had little success finding work, partly due to her difficulties with the language. Berger had suffered from severe hearing loss since receiving improper medical treatment as a child, and this made it very difficult for her to learn a foreign language.

Berger had met the urban planner and architect Ludwig Hilberseimer (1885–1967) at the Bauhaus. The couple planned to spend their lives together in the US, where Hilberseimer had accepted a position at the Armour Institute of Technology (later IIT). Their paths diverged on 20 August 1938 in Southampton harbour. Regarding the final days before his departure, Hilberseimer later wrote: »I saw Otti Berger August 1938 in London on my way to the United States. We did not talk about her work in London, but talked mostly about her intention to go back to Yugoslavia to nurse her mother who was sick. I warned her not to do this as I foresaw the danger she would be in. I am sorry to say I have been right [...].«² As the Second World War was laying waste to Europe, Berger found herself trapped in Yugoslavia. Every effort made to enable her to emigrate failed. Otti Berger was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in the summer of 1944. Her older brother Oskar and his wife died with her. Her younger brother Otto (1900–1960) was the only member of the Berger family to survive the Holocaust.

² Ludwig Hilberseimer, Letter to De Ploeg, 26 July 1965, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, Internal Correspondence, Folder Otti Berger.

The London Portion of the Estate

In 1951 Hilberseimer assumed responsibility for the property that Otti Berger had stored in London, which had been in the safekeeping of Karl and Ellen Otten up to that point. As her fiancé and as someone who had substantially helped finance her work, he was seen as the legitimate and the only accessible legal successor of Berger. While her younger brother Otto was still alive at that time, living in their parents' former home in Zmajevac, Baranya, he could not be consulted due to the postal censorship under the Yugoslavian dictator Tito (1892–1980). Otto Berger had contacted Hilberseimer in August 1945, but their correspondence came to an abrupt end. At the urging of Walter (1883–1969) and Ise Gropius (1897–1983), Hilberseimer therefore declared himself to be her heir and donated the majority of the London estate to Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



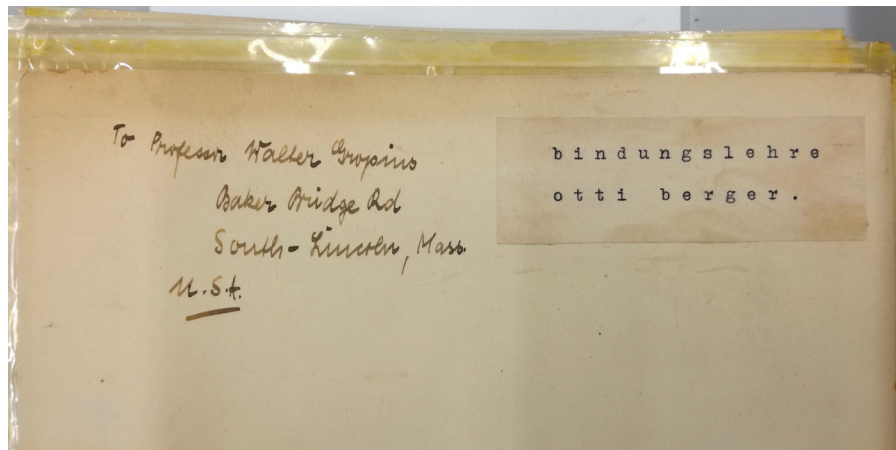
Ellen Otten and Walter Gropius's former secretary Hanna Lindemann (1897–1969) organised the packing and shipping of the items in London. In this letter to Lindemann, Hilberseimer declares his right to Otti Berger's property and releases her and the Ottens from any responsibility.

Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin,
Document Collection, inv. no. 2397/14

Two binders, which contained documents Hilberseimer considered uninteresting and therefore wished to have destroyed, survived in the possession of Ellen Otten, who donated them to the Bauhaus-Archiv in 1965 (see Table, Group I). Precisely these files document the Nazis' 1936 announcement that Otti Berger was prohibited from practising her profession as well as her tenacious struggles to secure patents and, in them, we see her as a self-assured businesswoman.

Additional documents from the London portion of the estate came into the possession of Walter and Ise Gropius. Gropius particularly admired Berger's work in the area of teaching and was extremely interested in adding related documents from her estate into his private archive. He successfully negotiated with Charles L. Kuhn, Director of the Busch-Reisinger Museum, to have them turned over to him. Gropius writes to Hanna Lindemann: »I have not yet got the written parts of the Otti Berger consignment, but I will get in touch with Professor Kuhn today to secure this for myself.«³ Lindemann and Otten even sent a few documents directly to the Gropiuses: as a result, when Walter Gropius died, Berger manuscripts that were among her possessions in London also found their way into the Bauhaus-Archiv through his estate (see Table, Group II).

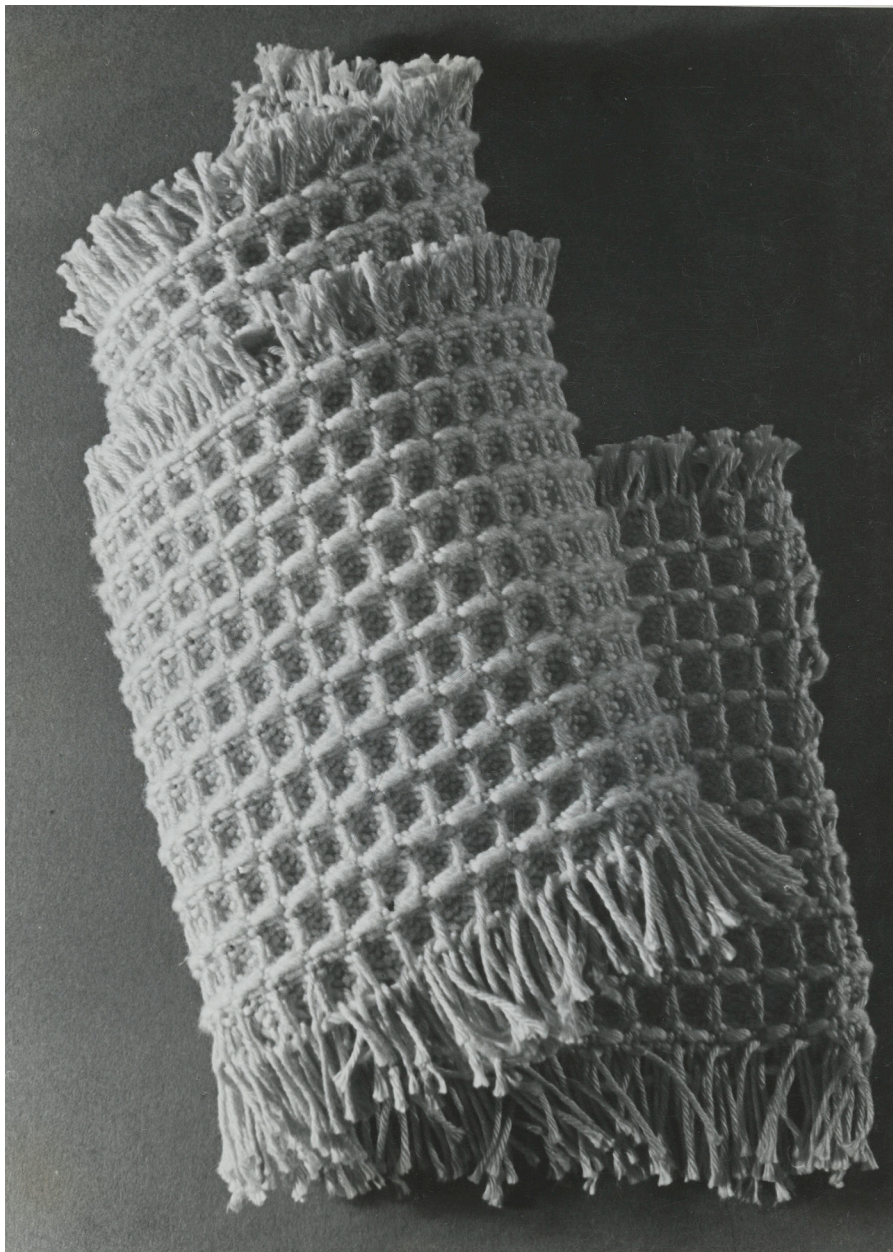
³ Walter Gropius, Walter Gropius, Letter to Hanna Lindemann, 17 March 1952, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, inv. no. 2397/27.



Otti Berger's documents from Walter Gropius's estate can still be identified today through the notes in Lindemann's handwriting.

Otti Berger, Weaving Techniques, bound copy, endpaper with Gropius's address, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, inv. no. 2001/49

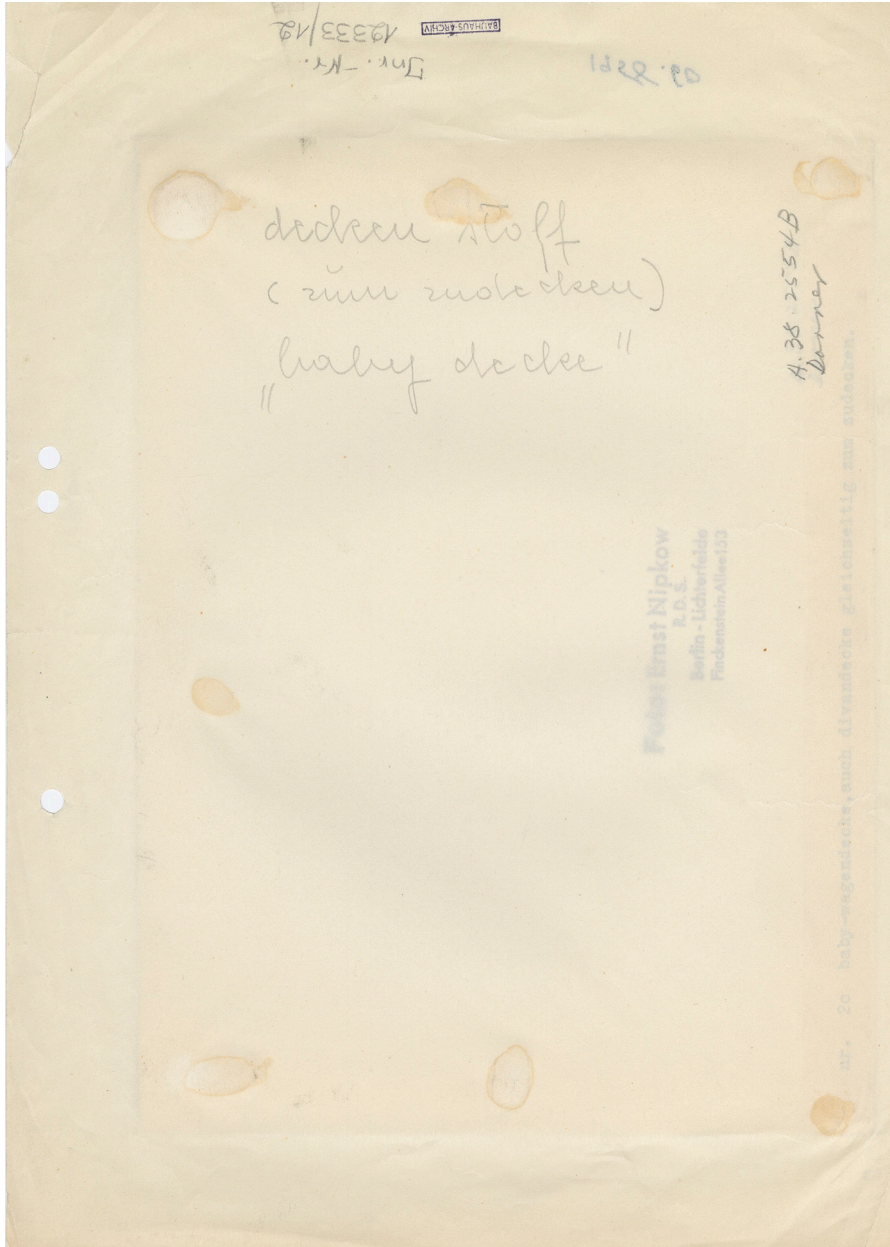
The MoMA Loans



13 Photographs by Ernst Nipkow, who was able to present Otti Berger's textile creations in a very effective manner, were exhibited at MoMA in 1938. They found their way into the Bauhaus-Archiv as gifts from George E. Danforth.

Ernst Nipkow, Blanket fabric by Otti Berger, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, inv. no. 12333/12

Otti Berger was still in London when she received news that New York's Museum of Modern Art was planning a Bauhaus exhibition for the end of 1938. Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, his wife Ise and graphic designer Herbert Bayer (1900–1985) were in charge of the show and asked Berger to loan works to them. Berger then sent a total of 16 items, primarily her own works, but also gifts that fellow students had given her while they were at the Bauhaus. She also made sure that others sent relevant loans to MoMA: photographs of her work as well as fabric samples she had designed for the collection of the Dutch textile manufacturer De Ploeg in the early 1930s. The 700 objects exhibited to present what the Bauhaus had produced in Weimar and Dessau included over 20 works by Berger.



The reverse side of this photo by Ernst Nipkow contains not only his stamp but also other indications of its provenance, such as Otti Berger's handwriting («blanket fabric / (to cover up) / »baby blanket«) and the number assigned to it by MoMA («A.38.2554.B / Dorner») with its reference to Alexander Dorner (1893–1957) as lender. Berger had contacted the art historian Dorner, who was head of the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, to see if a position might be available for her. She had sent the photos as evidence of her abilities.

Reverse side of inv. no. 12333/12, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin

MoMA turned over the loans from its exhibition to Berger's fiancé Hilberseimer in 1939. Hilberseimer preserved the former MoMA objects for the rest of his life. Several pieces from this group of works entered the collection of the Bauhaus-Archiv through George E. Danforth (1916–2007), who was Hilberseimer's heir and the executor of his estate (see Table, Group III).

Summary

This case differs from others related to losses resulting from Nazi persecution because everyone involved was actively committed to preserving Otti Berger's estate and oeuvre and preventing her from being erased from historical memory. Neither the Ottens, Gropius nor Hilberseimer wished to enrich themselves or profit in some other form. Nonetheless, her brother Otto Berger was ignored as her lawful heir. He was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. Because he died childless in 1960, the Berger family disappeared with him. He left his parents' former home in Zmajevac to a neighbour's family, and their descendants still live there today. It is not known whether any other bequests were made to this family. To date, the search for any formal will created by Otto Berger has remained unsuccessful.

Works and Documents from the Estate of Otti Berger at the Bauhaus-Archiv

Group	Inv. no.	Type of Object	Origin
I.	645/1–690	Two binders with documents related to patents, correspondence and fabric samples (Binder I: Sheets 1–504, II: Sheets 505–690)	Gift of Ellen Otten from the property Otti Berger placed in storage in London in 1938
	9195	Small table cloth, 1930s	
II. a	2630	Weaving Techniques	Gift of Walter Gropius from the documents Otti Berger sent to him for the 1938 MoMA exhibition
	8040/149–165	Curriculum, organisation of content and planning	
II. b	2001/49	Weaving Techniques, bound copy	Gift from the Estate of Walter Gropius, received by him in 1952 from the property Otti Berger had placed in storage in London
	3848/1–61	Notes and sketches from the classes of Paul Klee (1–57) and Wassily Kandinsky (58–61)	
	8040/1–73	Weaving Techniques, 3 copies, 23 sheets	
	8040/74–80	The Loom, 8 sheets	
	8040/81–107	Handweaving, 28 sheets	
	8040/209–216	Swedish Weave, 3 copies, 9 sheets	
	8040/217–232	Notes on Textile Calculation, 16 sheets	
	8040/233–289	File folder with pages cut out of books on weaving techniques, 53 sheets	

Group	Inv. no.	Type of Object	Origin
III. a	3831	Knotted rug, c.1929	Gift of George E. Danforth from the Estate of Ludwig Hilberseimer, returned to Hilberseimer from MoMA's 1938 Bauhaus exhibition
	6438	Tactile panel, 1928	
	6439	Collage by Lis Beyer for Otti Berger's 31 st birthday, 1929	
	6441	Collage by various artists for Otti Berger's 32 nd birthday, 1930	
	6442	Textile sample, cambric fabric, 1931	
III. b	12333/1-13	Photos of upholstery fabrics, blanket fabrics, opaque and translucent curtain fabrics, acoustic wall fabrics, etc.	Gift of George E. Danforth from the Estate of Ludwig Hilberseimer, loaned by Alexander Dörner for MoMA's Bauhaus exhibition in 1938 and returned to Hilberseimer
III. c	10115	Woven rug, c.1930	Purchased from Barry Friedman Ltd., New York, with funds from the Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie; consigned there by George E. Danforth from the Estate of Ludwig Hilberseimer; the woven rug had been returned to Hilberseimer from MoMA's 1938 Bauhaus exhibition