

Anni and Josef Albers  
*Art and Life*

ENGLISH TEXTS



# The Bauhaus

“The ultimate aim of all visual arts is the complete building! [...] Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the crafts! For art is not a “profession.” There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman.”

The Bauhaus Manifesto, published in April 1919 by its founder, the architect Walter Gropius, did not leave Josef Albers and Annelise Fleischmann indifferent, each feeling a growing dissatisfaction with their own artistic training. Josef, born into a Catholic working-class family, was attending the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. Annelise, who belonged to the German bourgeoisie of Jewish origin, was studying at the University of Applied Arts in Hamburg.

The aim of the Bauhaus, which was to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue and lead students towards a



creative individual autonomy, not only corresponded to the artistic research of the two young artists, but also responded to their view on teaching: favour learning through practical experience and increase the visual and tactile awareness of the materials and surrounding phenomena.



# Josef Albers and the glass workshop

It was in the autumn of 1920 that Josef Albers joined the Bauhaus in Weimar. At the age of 32, he was one of the oldest students. Like many of his fellow artists at the time, he experienced financial difficulties. The German economy in the 1920s was in the grip of the depression and a spiralling inflation.

Forced to use salvaged materials from the rubbish tip in Weimar, Josef created miscellaneous assemblages and works from various pieces of glass. This glass work raised mixed reactions among the masters of the Bauhaus, who then attempted to direct Josef towards the mural painting workshop. Despite the threat of dismissal made by Gropius, Josef Albers persevered in his research. And, against all odds, he was not only allowed to continue his training at the



Bauhaus but was also asked to open a glass workshop.

First taking up the position of craftsman (Geselle), Josef Albers was quickly appointed technical director of the workshop and joined by Paul Klee as artistic director. This organisation of the workshops, with a technical director (Werkmeister) working alongside an artistic director (Formmeister), aimed at helping students on the one hand acquire a specialized knowledge of the materials and working methods, on the other hand receive strong artistic stimulation.



# Anni Albers and the weaving workshop

Annelise Fleischmann applied to enroll at the Bauhaus school in 1922. After a first rejection, she was accepted in April of the same year. She discovered a cheerful atmosphere and rapidly befriended her colleagues, notably Josef Albers. The two artists began a relationship and got married three years later: Annelise Fleischmann thus became Anni Albers.

After following, like all students, the preliminary course of Johannes Itten, one of the first teachers at the Bauhaus, Anni joined the textile workshop in 1923. Weaving was probably not her first choice, but in the school, it was mandatory to sign up for a specific workshop. And, although the Bauhaus was theoretically built on the principle of equality, in accordance with Gropius's will to make "no distinction



between the fair sex and the strong sex”, the textile workshop was considered the “women’s class”. Nevertheless, once she had overcome her initial reservations, Anni fully invested herself into her chosen field and found her inspiration in this new environment. She enjoyed, in fact, a total freedom to experiment.



# Josef Albers, designer and photography

From 1926, Josef Albers started designing and making furniture and other objects from everyday life and participated in the creation of a typeface specific to the Bauhaus, called *Universal*. Whether he worked with wood, glass or metal, the artist always attached great importance to the properties of the materials. According to him, the design must be reduced to its simplest and most functional expression, while including the essential elements of balance, harmony and accuracy of proportion.

His glass works moved gradually towards shades of black, white, and grey, while the vertical and horizontal constructions gave way to curves and undulating shapes. This new direction without doubt arose from his recent interest in photography, which he began to practise in 1928. His collages



and photomontages offered a radically new interpretation of the space of representation. Albers captured the subject in a series of close-ups, similar to a cinematographic process and displayed a pattern in a variety of forms by modifying its framing.



# A new start in the United States

When in 1933, under the pressure of the Nazi regime, members of the Bauhaus unanimously decided to dissolve the school, the reputation of Anni and Josef Albers was already established. On the recommendation of Philip Johnson, then curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, the couple was invited to teach at Black Mountain College, an experimental school that largely took up the pedagogical principles of the Bauhaus. Situated in a rural environment in the mountains of North Carolina, this school of progressive art was based on the educational principles of the American philosopher John Dewey (“Learning by doing”), involving experimental teaching methods and communal life. This place attracted artists, dancers,



mathematicians, sociologists, and architects, such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller or Robert Rauschenberg. Anni set up an experimental weaving workshop that became central to the teaching at the school and Josef became the head of the art department. Both sought to extend the educational values of the Bauhaus: an increase of the importance of experimentation, the total lack of prejudice against materials and techniques as well as an enhanced interdisciplinary dialogue. The strong presence of nature surrounding Black Mountain College also helped breathe new life into the teaching.



# Discovery of pre-Columbian arts

The growing interest of the Alberses in Latin America and their in-depth knowledge of pre-Columbian traditions had a great impact on their teaching, but also on the production of their own works. Thus, Anni introduced into the workshop Peruvian weaving looms and encouraged her students to employ traditional techniques using the found materials. Between 1935 and 1967, the two artists visited Mexico and Latin American countries close to a dozen times. They went to many archaeological sites in Mexico and Peru. Josef took hundreds of photographs of pyramids and shrines. They began to put together a collection of ancient objects and fabrics. Fascinated by the fact that certain weavings, especially Peruvian ones, were used in their time—that is



to say before the invention of writing—  
to pass on knowledge, the two artists  
created works explicitly referring to  
these messages in coded characters.



# Knots and Jewellery

At the end of the 1930s, the Alberses discovered the treasure of Monte Albán, excavated some years before from a tomb in Oaxaca, Mexico. Anni was impressed by the unusual combination of materials (gold and silver with crystal rock, pearls or shells) of the jewels from pre-Columbian civilizations. She then started to create jewels that represented a new field of free experimentation. From the chosen materials, without prejudging their aesthetic or utilitarian value, the artist designed clear and simple shapes, while making visible the making process. She thus created a series of prototypes accessible to “everyone who cared to look about and was open to the beauty of the simple things around us”.

In the mid-1940s, Anni and Josef Albers began to explore knots. They were



probably influenced by the German mathematician Max Wilhelm Dehn, a pioneer in the development of knot theory. Dehn indeed joined Black Mountain College in 1945 and became a close friend of the Alberses.



# *Variants and Structural Constellations*

In 1947, Josef Albers undertook the series *Variants*, or *Adobes*. The palette of bright colours and the abstract geometric compositions evoked the painted walls of the adobe houses with flat roofs that the couple had seen in Mexico. In a text from 1948, Josef expounded the method that underpinned this project: “All *Variants* are built on an underlying checkerboard-like structure. This provides a definite relationship of all parts and therefore unification of form [...] In each painting the areas of the various colors are in most cases equal, sometimes of a quantity two or three times as large.”

From 1949, Josef made the *Structural Constellations*, a series of works that embodied his experiments on



visual ambiguity. The central idea consisted in showing that one could easily deceive the eye by creating an imaginary depth on a flat surface when viewed from a certain angle. Thus, by playing with angles or the effects of perspective, the representation of a simple geometric shape could generate multiple interpretations and produce optical illusions.



# Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square*

Undertaken in 1950, shortly before Josef Albers accepted the position of head of the Design Department at Yale University, and continued until his death in 1976, the series *Homage to the Square* is comprised of more than two thousand paintings that explore the interaction of colours between each other and with their environment. Josef chose to limit himself to four elementary formats of squares set inside each other. He abandoned the idea of compositional invention to concentrate on a sole pictorial element: colour. As he demonstrated first in a lesson devoted to the magic and logic of colour, then in his essential book *Interaction of Color*



published in 1963, a colour can never be seen as it actually is, but always in relation to its environment.

For instance, it appears darker on a light background and, conversely, brighter on a dark background. According to Josef, this discrepancy corresponds to the difference between the factual fact and the actual fact, between the physiological perception of a phenomenon and the way in which our mind interprets it. Each painting in the series *Homage to the Square* is therefore both a demonstration of the interaction of colours, an educational lesson, and an object of pure aesthetic contemplation.



# On Weaving

Anni Albers published two influential books: in 1959, a short anthology of essays entitled *On Designing* and, in 1965, the founding book *On Weaving*. Presented as a kind of visual atlas, it explores the history of the last four thousand years of weaving across the world, while examining the technical aspects of the craft and the development of the loom.

Although Anni kept very few sketchbooks, she produced throughout her career hundreds of textile samples that she carefully labelled and archived. Gathered together, they could be considered as a miniature retrospective of her woven works.



# Religious commissions

In the mid-1950s, Anni Albers began a series of religious commissions. After designing an ark covering a Jewish temple in Dallas, Texas, she created in 1961 an artwork for the B'nai Israel congregation, at Woonsocket, Rhode Island. The six panels, hand-woven in simple shades, are displayed here for the first time.

For a long time, Anni Albers was interested in the relationship between texts and textiles, the latter having been used as a means of communication in ancient Peru. The works *Haiku* and *Code*, whose titles refer explicitly to texts and languages with encoded or encrypted characters, testify to it.



# Pictorial Weavings

In the 1950s, Anni Albers began creating hand-woven works of a smaller format, whose sole function was to be looked at. Devoid of any utilitarian or architectural purpose, these *pictorial weavings* allowed her the opportunity to explore unique weaving forms, distinct from repeated woven patterns. For this purpose, she used small handlooms, with which she employed techniques called *leno* or *gaze*—two warp threads are twisted around a weft thread, which makes the fabric strong but transparent. This approach also enabled her to bring out the format of the final work, through the structure of the weaving and the pattern resulting from it. “To let threads be articulate again and find a form for themselves to no other end than their own orchestration, not to be sat on, walked on, only to be looked at.” (Anni Albers)



# Drawings and prints of Anni Albers

In 1962, Josef Albers was one of the first artists to be invited to collaborate at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. Anni accompanied him in 1963 and, surprisingly, was at once seduced by this world. She gradually abandoned weaving to devote herself to printmaking, experimenting in diverse techniques such as lithography, silkscreen printing, offset printing, printing or etching.

In the same way as she did with weaving, she let herself be guided by the printing process: “What I am trying to get across is that the material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active, that is to be active, be passive.” Printing enabled her to pursue her interest in texture, patterns, colour, the qualities of the surface and other aspects of



“textile language”. Anni used simple grids and rows of triangles to create a great variety of effects revealing the influence of pre-Columbian textiles and artefacts. “Threads were no longer as before three-dimensional; only their resemblance appeared drawn or printed on paper. What I learned in handling threads, I now used in the printing process.” (Anni Albers)





GENERALITAT  
VALENCIANA

TOTS  
A UNA  
*veu*

IVAM



GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
DE CULTURA  
Y DEPORTE

**MAM** MUSÉE  
D'ART MODERNE  
DE PARIS

**albers**

Colabora

**B Sabadell**  
Fundación



WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK  
OF WORLD DESIGN CAPITAL  
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