



# JOSEF + ANNI ALBERS

## DESIGNS FOR LIVING

By Nicholas Fox Weber

Nicholas Fox Weber, Executive Director of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut, is guest curator of the exhibition *Josef + Anni Albers: Designs for Living* which runs at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York until February 27. (Cooper-Hewitt's Matilda McQuaid co-curated.) Josef, an influential teacher at the Bauhaus, then at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, is best known for his color field painting series, *Homage to the Square*, while Anni is celebrated as an innovative weaver and textile designer.

The exhibition presents the Alberses' work in the context of their unusually close, lifelong relationship, in which they focused on recreating the world according to strongly held ideals about the role of art and design in the well-lived life. Juxtaposed with Anni's fabrics in a wild mix of unorthodox materials such as paper, plastic or cellophane interwoven with silk or jute, are Josef's colorful glass, wire and metal abstractions; Anni's sophisticated jewelry of metal washers and hairpins reveals the same non-hierarchical approach towards materials as Josef's designs for walls, their powerful patterns deriving from the inventive placement of simple bricks.

Mr. Weber's essay, excerpted from the exhibition's catalogue, considers the emotional and philosophical forces that shaped their work. He first met the Alberses in 1971 when Josef was 83 years old and Anni 72, and he was an art history student at Yale. Soon he was writing a book about Anni, who began to produce prints at Mr. Weber's father's printing house. The three spent many afternoons talking and eating strudel at the Alberses' kitchen table in Connecticut. Mr. Weber's essay provides a rare insider's look at this creative couple — two of the most influential figures in modern art and design — and reminds us that modernism, at its most powerful, was not merely a style, but a principled approach to life made manifest in the objects, furniture and living spaces that we so admire today.

—Andrea Truppin

Shortly after Josef and Anni Albers moved into one of Walter Gropius's flat-roofed, planar Masters' Houses at the Dessau Bauhaus [in Germany], Josef, who was the first Bauhaus student appointed to the faculty, told the somewhat apprehensive Anni, his bride of three years, thirteen years his junior and a student in the weaving workshop, that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lily Reich, Mies's mistress, would be coming for dinner. Anni wanted to do everything right. The house was meticulously organized. Josef's sandblasted glass constructions — all pure abstractions, some of them lean and minimal exercises in black and white, others jazzy syncopations of vibrant color — were lined up in a row on the living room wall. The arrangement was noticeably strident, a brave declaration of hard work and serious purpose, and a deliberate eschewal of prettiness. Marcel Breuer's *Wassily* chairs — not the production numbers known worldwide today, but the first prototypes, made three years earlier, of this early foray into the use of tubular steel formerly consigned to bicycle handlebars — were positioned against the walls in a pose more sculptural than friendly, so that their users looked at space rather than at one another, a statement about strength and solitude in the world, in complete opposition to the look of coziness that was the norm in Germany at that time. Josef's own furniture designs, all spare and ornament-free, provided seating and surfaces with the straightforward, candid voice essential to these young *Bauhäusler*. Even the one potted plant looked restrained and understated. Anni wanted the details of the dinner to reflect the same degree of care and forethought, and to show respect for the great architect, older than her husband, who would soon be the third Bauhaus director, and hence her and Josef's boss.

Anni's mother had given her a butter curler. In the household in which Anni had grown up — a lavish and capacious apartment in a five-story nineteenth-century building on Meinekestrasse, just off the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin — family members never entered the kitchen, which

**Opposite** Josef Albers, *Upward*, c. 1926. Sandblasted flashed glass with black paint; Josef and Anni, c. 1935.



Munich, Der Neue Sammlung, Staatliches Museum für Angewandte Kunst.

was strictly reserved for staff. But when dinner was laid out on the heavy, carved Biedermeier table in the ornament-laden dining room, butter balls were part of the landscape, and Anni knew how they were made. Preparing for dinner that evening in Dessau, she carefully used the clever metal implement to scrape off paper-thin sheets of butter and form them into graceful, delicate forms resembling flower blossoms. It was the sort of process and manipulation of material she prized. Like weaving, the making of butter balls required the careful stretching and pulling of a supple substance with the correct tool, and achieved a transformation.

Mies and his notoriously imperious female companion arrived. They had not even removed their coats or uttered a word of greeting before Reich looked at the table and exclaimed, "Butter balls! Here at the Bauhaus! At the Bauhaus I should think you'd just have a good solid block of butter."

It was a sting Anni Albers remembered word for word sixty years later, and a story she told with relish as she sat in her raised ranch house in the Connecticut suburb of Orange and looked back on a lifetime devoted to making art a part of every aspect of human existence. She was inclined to describe herself as victim. She often recalled slights or insults, perhaps to accentuate the true victories of her life, her surmounting of formidable obstacles. But the significance of Lily Reich's remark was not just its

**Above left** Josef and Anni at Dessau, 1925.

**Above right** The Alberses' living room in the Masters' House at the Dessau Bauhaus, with furniture and glass constructions by Josef, as well as two of the original *Wassily* chairs (among the first ever made) by their friend and colleague Marcel Breuer.

**Left** Anni Albers, *Wall hanging*, 1925. Silk, cotton and acetate.

nastiness. The incident revolving around the form of butter on the dining room table exemplified the way that every detail of how we live, every aesthetic choice, affects the quality of daily human experience.

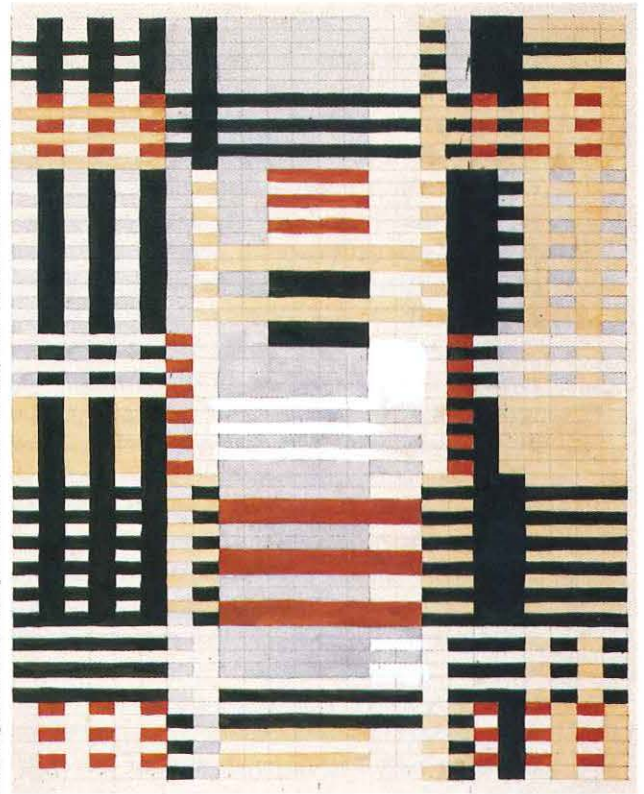
The difference between a block of butter and a butter ball is aesthetic: a hard form as opposed to a lacy, open one, a "this is what you get" event as opposed to a more slowly seductive moment. It also has sociological importance: the distinction between a sight that reflected the old world of upper-class Berlin, with its fancy and intricately nuanced way of life, and the new world embraced by the pioneering art school in Dessau that concerned itself with design for the masses.

"Art is everywhere!" Anni and Josef used to exclaim euphorically of the Mexican villages they discovered after the Nazis forced the closing of Mies's Berlin Bauhaus in 1933 and they

**Right** Anni Albers, *Design for a jacquard weaving*, 1926. Watercolor and gouache over graphite on heavy cream woven paper.

**Below** Josef Albers, *Set of four stacking tables*, c. 1927. Ash veneer, black lacquer, and painted glass.

Cambridge, MA, Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of Anni Albers.



Bethany CT, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Gift of John and Andrea Weil in memory of Fritz and Anna Moellenhoff.

had emigrated to America. At Black Mountain the Ionic columns of the all white Neo-classical Robert E. Lee Hall offered a major surprise to Anni, who could not understand how paper notices could be thumb-tacked into marble, but who learned quickly enough that in America columns could be made of wood. Josef set about teaching and soon overcame his language problems to inform adoring students, "I want to make open the eyes," which he quickly shortened into the words that would define his purpose in life forever after: his goal was "to open eyes."

His own eyes were perpetually being opened further, especially when, within a year of arriving at Black Mountain, he and Anni, in Ted and Bobbie Dreier's Model A Ford, made their way southwest and across the Texas border to those Mexican villages, where they were stunned by the way that the descendants of the great civilizations of Maya and Zapotec lived richer lives than they had ever seen before. The Alberses marveled at the designs of serapes and ponchos, the beauty of the ancient pottery, the charm of the hand-painted earthenware being produced in small villages, the architecture of even the simplest hut. This was the guiding principle: aesthetics are not confined to a single area of life, certainly not to painting or weaving alone (these being the Alberses' specialties), but count immeasurably in all choices in life and, moreover, affect the way we breathe, the way we feel at every waking moment, our sense that all is right in the world or that something is painfully wrong.

Art that is modest in intention, that does not refer to its maker but rather evokes his subject, that is competent and unpretentious, that serves its purpose, and that brings simple pleasure into everyday life: here was the Albersian ideal.

Craft, professionalism, and working the right way were what counted — as opposed to the self-revelations and what Albers

considered the ultimate narcissism of German Expressionism, most especially that practiced by Max Beckmann. Albers would show people the backs of his *Homages to the Square*, where he had neatly written out the name of each color, complete with the manufacturer of the paint, and would refer to this information as "the recipe." He would tell students to "schmier" their paint — delighting in the robust inelegance of that word, which sounds so much like what it is, and which applies as much to chicken fat, in particular the German specialty *Griebenschmaltz*, one of the most unrefined foods imaginable.

The implication, of course, was that to paint a good painting and cook a good dish are much the same. You take well-chosen ingredients, assemble them in correct quantities, and put them together systematically. Nothing fancy, please. Don't make grandiose claims. And understand that a simple domestic activity — the following of a recipe, the spreading of butter on a piece of honest black bread, redolent of the earth, full of character and nourishment — is noble.

That interaction between everyday living and artistic creativity, between the practical and the spiritual, permeated Josef's and Anni's life. From the making of high art to frequent reference to automobile designs and cooking recipes, from the ethereal and even religious spheres to the everyday: these transitions, these links, were natural and utterly essential to Anni's and Josef's life. Josef liked to tell people that his father had taught him that, when you paint a door, you start at the center and work your way out so as to catch the drips and keep from getting your cuffs dirty. This, therefore, was how he painted the *Homages*: always, without exception, making the center square first, putting the paint straight from the tube on the white background, as he did with each and every color. The results were astounding, full of an inexplicable glow, similar to stained glass

Josef Albers, *Desk*, c. 1940. Wood.



Bethony CT, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.



Bethany CT, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

Josef Albers, *Untitled*, 1921. Glass, wire and metal, in a metal frame.

and cathedral spaces, rich in their offerings, but the origins were simple and practical.

When Josef was painting those *Homages*, and Anni was making her extraordinary woven wall hangings and designing textiles for drapery and upholstery material and other areas of everyday life, they looked at every aspect of their daily existence with the same sense of careful measurement, the same process of evaluation, as they used in choosing paint color and thread.

Their appearance mattered greatly to them; there was a noticeable resemblance between them, and each was groomed with great care but always with an abiding simplicity. Josef was always clean-shaven, and used the term “those bearded ones” pejoratively; he hated the look of deliberate bohemianism. If the Bauhaus was like the Gothic cathedral, a place where craftspeople from every realm worked together in the service of God, the Alberses believed that artists were people in service of a religion, who should in their appearance embody order and diligence. Anni was obsessed with her hair, which had been unusually thick (in contrast to Josef’s fine strands) when she was young. What she mainly wanted from it was a look of tidiness as well as the best possible form. They both dressed, for the most part, in neutral colors — Anni more often than not in a white blouse and beige or khaki skirt (pants late in life), Josef in a gray or tan shirt and trousers of similar hue. The idea was that nothing should cry out for attention, or suggest a fad or trend; rather, the details of clothing should embody quiet good

taste. That choice was brave and unusual, especially once fashion designers prevailed in selling logos and convincing the public that it was good to advertise their wares with insignias that signify high price and approved status — none of which had any influence on the Alberses’ choices.

Anni cared not about brand names but about the nature of the weave, the cut of a jacket, the appropriateness of the form to the purpose, and the practicality. She derided the emphasis on “all natural” or “hand-woven,” which became buzz words of an ecology-conscious society. Rather, she loved uttering the term “drip-dry” — which, with her lilting Berlin cadences, became “dahrip-dahrie,” sounding as if little beads of water were gently falling downward. If “drip-dry” meant polyester, hence synthetic, that was perfectly fine. One of the last true thrills of her life was the discovery of “ultra-suede,” a material that, regardless of its name, was also man-made and synthetic. She was delighted with the way she could travel overseas wearing it and get off the plane without a wrinkle, and she thought the physical lightness and visual simplicity of the soft substance, as well as the way it was clearly a product of careful research in a laboratory rather than of the natural world, were all impressive.

What all of this reveals is a constant, unified aesthetic. Isaiah Berlin, in his essay on Tolstoy entitled *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, characterizes hedgehogs as those “who relate everything to a single, central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel — a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance.” By contrast, foxes, the other type of human being, are “those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and contradictory, ... related by no moral or aesthetic principle.” The Alberses were hedgehogs; more remarkably, they were the same hedgehog. In what they said, what they wore, what they drove, where they lived — and, most importantly in their personal hierarchies, the art they both produced, varied as it was — there was complete consistency. The intention was faithfulness to purpose as well as to the components, a respect for effective process, and a soothing, beneficent appearance. Everything was done with an eye for balance and rhythmic grace. Judgment was vital. Choices had to be made, and one had to choose what was effective and, in the true rather than the frivolous sense of the word, elegant.

Josef Albers, *Fruit bowl*, 1923. Silver-plated metal, glass and wood.



New York, Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Walter Gropius.



Anni Albers, *Sample of leno-weave yard material*, 1927. Rayon and synthetic fibers.

The values that Josef and Anni both cherished, that prevailed in the house where they ended their days in Connecticut as they had in that Masters' House in Dessau, were of a piece for more than half a century. The furniture that Josef designed at the Bauhaus was in the idiom of the time, closely resembling designs by Marcel Breuer and Eric Dieckmann, and other Bauhaus furniture makers, but it was simpler, leaner, and more minimal than anyone else's. Just as the *Homages to the Square* would, nearly a quarter of a century later, reduce painting to a new level of simplicity, so Josef's chairs and tables were a getting down to bare essentials, bold and spare like the virtually monosyllabic language of King Lear at the very end of Shakespeare's play, when he is grasping at the raw truth and nothing else.

Josef's chairs are also one step more graceful than those of other designers. Indeed, they are a painter's designs, conceived with a particularly sophisticated artistic eye. Josef constructed furniture with the flair of a subtle abstractionist laying out his forms and colors on the canvas. When we see his tables and other pieces from the mid-1920s we think that, yes, they are of the period, but they strike us with aesthetic nuances that their peers lack. Josef's furniture is the bridge between design and art, between a household object and a painting by Klee or

Kandinsky. It is boldly drawn, conceived, like his later *Structural Constellations* (a body of work that was realized as engravings on vinylite, prints and paintings), as drawings in space. The checks and balances and graceful progress into three-dimensionality make this furniture quite sublime. Moreover, Josef plays their wood tones against each other — dark timber against light — with the same eye that later in life created some of his most refined *Homages to the Square*. As a furniture maker, he was drawn by instinct to linear rhythm and angular play, to tonal harmony, to an understanding that everything in the visual world is about context and the relationship of one element to another. When you arrive at Josef's work after seeing Dieckmann's and Breuer's and that of the other leaders, you get, then, both a levity and a richness that distinguish it.

Josef's desk for Fritz Moellenhoff and his armoires for the Moellenhoffs' bedroom anticipate Donald Judd's Minimalism by some thirty years. They are noticeably bold, an enticing blend of simple shapes and complex visual results. These courageous objects mix austerity and luxury to an unprecedented degree. The proportions of each armoire are like a segment of one of Josef's *Homage to the Square* paintings. For the hedgehog who made them always valued the tension that can exist



Anni Albers, *Necklace*, c. 1940. Bobby pins on metal-plated chain.

when symmetry and asymmetry function in tandem, when a form moves in one direction two-dimensionally and another three-dimensionally.

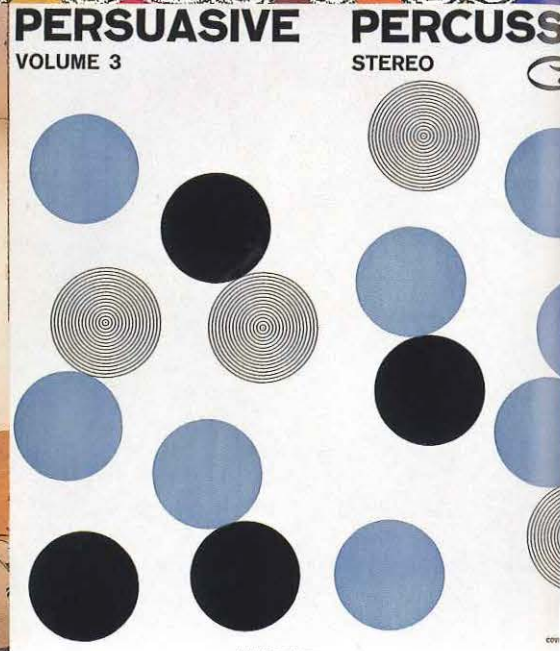
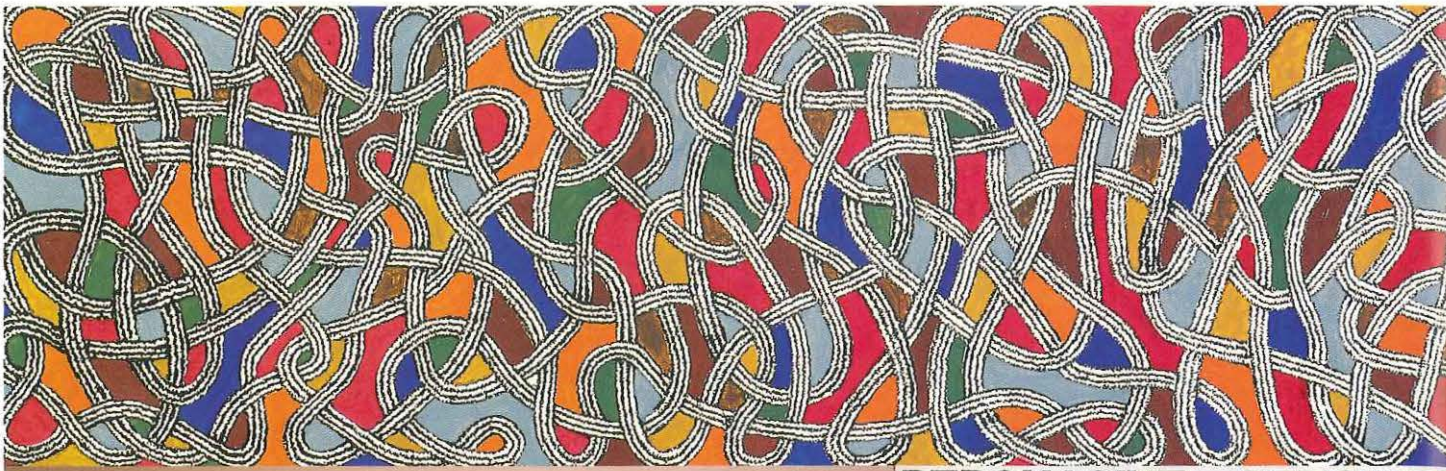
Nearly everyone who made furniture at the Bauhaus did stacking tables. All of them were simple and devoid of ornament. But Josef's have a crisper geometry, and a lighter spirit. In comparison, the work of his confrères had leaden feet, while his stand on tiptoes. The framing elements of his stacking tables are as light as can be, and the luminosity of their glass tops, in four contrasting colors, provides the infusion of life. Those tops are like the small and vibrant windows in Le Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp. The miracle of light passing through a solid material without breaking it becomes analogous to the Annunciation, and the sight is luxurious and celebratory.

Anni, too, transformed into an art form what in other hands was merely design work. She elevated textiles and the status of woven threads, and put the medium on equal footing with oil

on canvas and watercolor on paper. Buckminster Fuller, himself such an innovator and such a devotee of design for the larger population, affirmed, "Anni Albers, more than any other weaver, has succeeded in exciting mass realization of the complex structure of fabrics. She has brought the artist's intuitive sculpturing faculties and the age long weaver's arts into historical successful marriage."

She had taken up weaving reluctantly. Anni had wanted to be a painter, a fully fledged artist, just like the men who attended the Bauhaus around her. Then, when circumstances and the unalterable realities of her milieu got in the way, and she was told that the weaving workshop was the only one open for her at Weimar, she succumbed to one truth by transforming another. She redefined the possibilities of the medium and blazed a new trail in the territory into which she had been forced — so that the notion of the realm of textile designers was forever after expanded, and they could now be indisputably deemed to be





Bethany CT, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

**Clockwise from top** Anni Albers, *Drawing for Rug II*, 1959. Gouache on paper; Josef Albers, *Record Sleeve: Provocative Percussion, Volume 3*, Command Records; View from the living room into the area with the guest bed at the Alberses' home at 808 Birchwood Drive in Orange, Conn.

artists. If weavers of previous generations had replicated the flower patterns and decorative motifs that were prescribed for the form, Anni used her yarns to create "visual resting places" (a term she borrowed from one of her heroes, the writer and philosopher Wilhelm Worringer) that are as calming and diverting as they are infinitely rich and complex. Others of the Bauhaus weavers were working with unprecedented clarity as well, and, like Josef, she was initially of a place and time, but, also like Josef, she gave the breadth of art to her interlaced threads. The colors are truly sublime, the looping of threads magical. A great and responsive eye is present in every knot and every choice of fiber. Paul Klee, Anni's artistic hero and the form master of the weaving workshop, had counseled students to "take a line for a walk." "I let thread do what it could," Anni once reminisced to me. "Kandinsky said, 'There is always an *and*,'" she recalled on another occasion. This, too, nourished her work immeasurably: there are always further links and knots,

additional surprises and visual footnotes. A pioneer of abstract art when it was still a radical concept, in the 1920s Anni made wall hangings of incomparable power and flair and visual excitement. The direct effects and echoes of her daring search have been far-reaching. Abstract wall hangings have come to flourish as an art form. It has become completely acceptable for thread to be its own voice. At the same time as she put miracles of playfulness and intelligence on the walls, she did so in fabrics to hang as room dividers, in upholstery materials, in draperies, and in rugs that brought diversion and vitality to the floor. What she cherished in one arena she prized everywhere.

Life itself was rugged, with inflation and politics, prejudice, war, internecine strife, greed, even evil, often ascendant. But in art, and design, in what we make and use and wear, in the forms of bookshelves and the weave of scarves, the rugs underfoot or the tables next to our beds, we can have some respite, some calm. So Josef and Anni aspired to a

consciousness of a luminous, Zen-like beauty, a spirited inventiveness, the seriousness of playfulness, in each and every choice and creative act.

Speaking at a design conference in the 1950s, Josef declared (the layout of the phrases is from the typescript of his talk):

So I am looking forward  
To a new philosophy  
Addressed to all designers  
— in industry — in craft — in art —  
and showing anew  
that esthetics are ethics,  
that ethics are source and measure  
of esthetics.

It was the gospel, their mutual credo, the linchpin of their approach to life, and the intention of their work.

Anni and Josef at Black Mountain College, May 1949.

They were like a two-person religious sect, this couple who had been nurtured in such totally different worlds but who came together at the Bauhaus. In every aesthetic choice they were allies. They believed that the accoutrements of life embodied intelligence, even wisdom, and imparted fabulous charm in a world where so much else was uncertain, even treacherous. For Anni and Josef, whether they were at home at their kitchen table or divided by an ocean, were joined, wonderfully, by their faith that what was material could also be spiritual, that the tangible and the intangible were in many ways the same. ■

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Photo by Theodore Dreier, Jr.