

Meditations

Josef Albers at Villa Panza

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Stop.

Catch your breath. Inhale deeply as you go inside the colors. Let them penetrate you as you immerse yourself in them.

Please, whatever you do, do not rush. Do not feel forced to do anything except for remaining open to whatever will happen. Stay with the single painting you are looking at; it is far too soon to move onto the next of these riveting compositions. Imbibe its pure and undistilled hues. This is the time to have a purely sensory experience, akin to listening to a Bach cello suite as you hear each note impact the next and feel the pace quicken and the beauty compound itself.

If you want to review the facts, you can do that later. The history that led to the creation of these works, an analysis of the technique and of the mechanics responsible for the enigma you are beholding: eventually there will be ample opportunity for that. But, first, just be alert to what this painting is causing you to feel.

Please have the kindness, to him and to yourself, to fulfil Josef's hopes. He wants you—yes, I speak in the present, because in his art he is still alive—to notice the alchemy. What is absolutely flat appears modulated. A pale grey may acquire a green tint. You become convinced that the center color was painted on top of the one that seems to be behind it, but actually they are adjacent to one another, each painted directly on the white background. The sequence of visual events will occur all by itself; you need to expend no energy to make it do so. Explanations are gratuitous as you absorb that sunny yellow moving back and forth, up and down, left and right as it confers (yes, they are in a dialogue) with the paler yellow surrounding it.

Allow yourself to be somewhere else than where you have ever been before, to go beyond your former boundaries, to cross the frontier into Josef's paradise, a haven he means for all of us to enjoy.

Enjoyment is in fact the point. The inexplicable pleasures that occur when we and color unite. The miraculous events that can take place when the ego disappears and we can relish something outside the self and timeless.

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After all, isn't this where current thinking is leading us: to take time once again, to let the stew simmer for hours, to auditory silence, to meditation? "Mindfulness" is an overused word but a necessity if we are to slow down in order to enter the flow and gradually move forward, happily transfixed.

When, some two decades ago, the marvelous novelist Colm Tóibín, whose circumspect vision is so large that he has made Thomas Mann and Henry James come alive in his own inventive fiction, and whose essay on Josef's work follows in this catalog, came to the Albers Foundation in Connecticut to look at the paintings firsthand, he went into our modest gallery that is basically a calm room with about ten of Josef's paintings in it. It has a single bench. He sat down in the noiseless space, and it was five hours before he came out, with a serene smile on his face. That is the sort of looking which I am referring to.



When I met Josef Albers over half a century ago, he made his mission clear from the beginning. There is no need for terminology, for historical positioning, for references to other artists. What counts is *seeing*. When he fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and started a new life in the United States, he stated his goal succinctly: "I want the eyes to open." Then he refined his verbal language as he did his forms and their arrangements, making everything simpler and leaner: "I want to open eyes." He uses "minimal means for maximum effect": his wording. Those three or four colors, in nested squares in mathematically precise proportions, are a path to infinity.

Josef disdained most critical writing about painting and the notion of "art history." The elaboration of factual information was a distraction, a violation of the wonder of direct experience. When people writing about him would talk about "Gestalt psychology" and "Constructivism" and, God forbid, "Expressionism," he shuddered. He made a point of saying how much he preferred a statement made by the six-year-old daughter of his and Anni's cleaning lady in the very simple house where they lived in spartan style so as to concentrate above all on work. The little girl was looking upwards at the air-conditioning vents, which were arrangements of squares centered to the left

and right but weighted toward the bottom. She pointed and said, “Look, just like what Juki does.” It was amazing to the Alberses that she had so carefully observed his way of arranging the squares. The child knew that Anni called Josef “Juppi,” which she made into “Juki”; he and Anni both relished her mistake about the name, which to them was far less significant than her observation of his trademark format. What are names, after all? On the highway crossing the border into their town, there is a large road sign that says, “This is Orange.” True enough—they lived in Orange, Connecticut, a modest and bucolic suburb where it was easy to function independently—but the sign was painted a strong green with the lettering in white. Words are always insufficient for identifying colors that we all perceive differently; when you say “red” and I say “red,” we are inevitably picturing different hues.

The name *Homage to the Square* is a bit of a misnomer and does not lead you down the right track. Were one to say “Homage to Color,” it would be more to the point. The square is simply the shape of the vehicle carefully chosen to allow color performance to occur. He called them “platters to serve color.” They are, and of this we have no doubt, even if the reasons elude us, ineffably beautiful, exuding a force as gentle as it is powerful. Just as, when we face the great pyramids of ancient Egypt, we feel a power and a majesty that defies explanation, a “thereness” that imprints itself on us with its simple splendor, and where we marvel at the use of every cubic inch as a component of greatness.

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He has now been dead for fifty years. Numbers and anniversaries were part of his personal music. Born in 1888, he lived at 808 Birchwood Drive and would have seen a certain balance in his dying after just reaching his eighty-eighth birthday. Eight, with its never-ending continuous form, is known to represent eternity.

He had been robust for much of his life. A spell of breathing difficulties had him in a hospital for several months during the First World War, but he managed to eradicate it from memory. Starting when he went to the Bauhaus in 1920, and from then onward, he claimed never to have been in a hospital. It was on March 19, his actual birthday,

in 1976, that he finally went to one. On March 25, the hospital telephoned to tell his wife that he was now healthy again and that she should pick him up to drive him home. Before she had gotten in the car, they had called again to say that he had died. Three days later, there were nine of us there for his funeral mass and then his burial in the local graveyard, where he and Anni had carefully chosen their plots. They had been married for precisely fifty years. Order prevailed, as it did in his art.



Josef has carefully worked out the organizational system which underlies all the paintings in the more than two thousand *Homages* he painted starting in 1950, when he turned sixty-two years old. Whatever their size, and whether they consist of three squares or four, they adhere to certain rules. The squares are nested in such a way that, while the center square is visible in its entirety, the widths of what we can see of the outer two or three squares surrounding that square in the middle, are doubled to the left and right of it and tripled above it. One can think of this as a 1-2-3 ratio. That proportional system is consistent whatever the overall size of the artwork itself, and whether the middle square is relatively small or large, and whichever of his chosen gradations of the squares Josef has used. The Masonite panels on which he worked, one side smooth and the other rough, could be cut to exact sizes. On Saturday afternoons, when Albert Powell, the Alberses' gardener, came to mow the lawn, he primed those panels with between six and ten coats of white Liquitex gesso. After applying each layer, he would sandpaper it lightly. The resultant surface suited Josef perfectly by providing a background for the colors that was constant and luminous.

Next Josef applied the paints directly from the tube, using a painter's knife. He would experiment on blotting paper to determine his colors. Sometimes he used hues of the same name but as produced by different manufacturers. A Winsor & Newton Mars Yellow was not the same as a Mars Yellow made by Grumbacher. Those from Blockx, Shiva, Rembrandt, and other producers were astonishingly different from one another. Josef applied the paint systematically (he used different widths of knives) so as to have the different degrees of opacity or translucency he sought. The method led to unexpected



and marvelous results. The elusiveness of these paintings, for which there is no scientific explanation, any more than there is for any other spiritual experience, is fundamental to their greatness.

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Forgive me, please. I have violated my own guidelines. But the reason for elucidating the facts is not simply to provide information, but to take us further into what it is that we have observed after looking and looking some more. This particular way of positioning the squares causes irreconcilable motions to coexist. We feel stretched across the picture plane, our arms pulled taut; at the same time we are taken upward. While we know rationally that we are looking at a two-dimensional object, its single flat plane carefully subdivided, we suddenly find ourselves pursuing a complicated course into a space that resembles a proscenium stage. As Josef said with joy in his voice, we go “inside and outside at the same time, left and right, forward and backwards, up and down, in and out of space, from two dimensionality to three dimensionality.” All of this was by intention, yet its occurrence remains a mystery. Yes, *mystery*.

Now, seeing these works at the Villa Panza, just let it all happen before your eyes: the changes in rhythm, the miracles of flat colors looking modulated. Relish the way that precise right angles can appear ever so slightly rounded. “Circular squares” was the term that the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, when visiting Josef to make portraits of him, used for these paintings, delighting Josef so much that he often quoted it.

Identical colors assume different personalities in different settings; Josef exulted in the compatibility of contradictory information. The exact same red, because of the impact of the colors adjacent to it, appears pinkish in one place, crimson in another. These different readings of a single color are similarly dichotomous to the constant shifts we have already observed between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. We have never seen anything quite like this before: relish the novelty.

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Josef always worked in the same way. First, he painted the middle square. Then he painted the second color out. It warrants repeating that he never put one paint on top of another; each color of paint was applied directly on the white background. There is no overlapping, no mixing of pigments. The same rule applies to the third square out, and, in the instances that there is a fourth square, to that one as well. He told me that his father taught him that to paint a door, “you start at the middle and then work your way out. That way you catch all the drips and don’t get your cuffs dirty.” He delighted in making the point about his shirt cuffs, a way of conjuring the quotidian, of saying that his method was straightforward.

“I paint the way I spread butter on bread,” he would say, before going on to extol the wonders of Westphalian *Pumpernickel* and decry American white bread, which he likened “to Kleenex.” For he relished commercial labels that had become generic; he often referenced “Coca-Cola Red.” There was a lot to be said for the precision of the machine-made, for formulas that are consistent.

While he was making each *Homage*, Josef would then lay it flat on one of two worktables made of a large piece of plywood supported by two sawhorses. Over the table there was an arrangement of four fluorescent lightbulbs ordered “warm, cold, warm, cold.” After he applied his paints, he moved the painting to a second worktable over which the arrangement of fluorescent bulbs was “warm, cold, cold, warm.” He wanted to make sure that the interaction of color, the impression of each flat paint that it was modelled with gradations moving from dark to light, occurred under both sets of lighting conditions.

His method was based on logic. The reality of materials and this straightforward technique were the basis of the wonders that then became visible.

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How much Josef preferred simple and logical explanations to anything more esoteric! When an art critic whose theories he considered highfalutin was visiting him, the poor fellow earnestly asked Josef some questions concerning the size of his paintings: “Mr. Albers, until 1962 you painted your *Homages* in sizes ranging from 16” to 16” to 40”

by 40". Then, in 1962, you began to make some that were 48" by 48". Was this a response to the size of the paintings that the Abstract Expressionists were producing at the same time?"

Josef's answer was a simple "no," but the look on his face was not just skepticism, but borderline disdain. The idea that he would do anything whatsoever to keep up with a group of painters he did not like was anathema to him.

The critic, unsatisfied, tried another angle. "Or was it your reaction, as a European used to the smaller scale of everything, to the vastness of the American landscape, which of course you had come to know when you drove cross-country to Mexico?"

Josef had never heard anything quite as ridiculous; he shook his head left and right as he uttered an even more ardent "No!"

Still, the critic persisted. "Or was it, sir, your reaction to the current space program, whereby we are trying to expand our world almost to infinity?"

"Young man," Josef responded with a look of contempt. "It was the year that we got a larger station wagon."

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Yet even as he embraced the practical and the ordinary, Josef achieved results that invite many different readings. He loathed gratuitous explanations of why certain developments had occurred but was delighted that the method he had devised so methodically yielded rich results. Because of the 1:2:3 formats, the *Homages* have their feet on the earth and their heads in the cosmos.

Rudolf Arnheim, the German-born perceptual psychologist and film historian, whose 1954 *Art and Visual Perception* was one of the most revered and influential art books of the last century, a major reference in the field, focused his sights particularly on Josef in 1982, six years after Josef's death, in his monumental *The Power of the Center*. Arnheim explores the way that the ratio shifts the normal balance of earthly (horizontal) and heavenly (vertical) elements of a single square in favor of the heavenly. "This asymmetry produces the dynamics of the theme, a squeezing below, an expansion above. It promotes a depth effect, which would be counteracted if all the squares were grouped

symmetrically around the same center.”¹ The asymmetry is subtle—the squares are *almost* centered—so consequently the upward thrust is gradual rather than pronounced. Thus, the spiritual element is achieved with a soft voice rather than a loud shout. Like all true spirituality, Josef’s is achieved subtly, rather than with evangelical ardor.

In analyzing the ascendant quality of the *Homages*, Arnheim points out that if we follow the four diagonals created by the corners of the squares within squares, they converge on a point precisely one quarter of the way up the painting. The diagonals created by drawing lines only through the two bottom sets of corners and carrying those lines all the way across the panel make an X that demarcates the rectangle that is the lower half of the composition. “A solid base is thereby provided on which the sequence of squares can rise with confidence from step to step”²—not so different from the coffin in Piero’s *Resurrection*, from which the movement toward heaven takes off.

Surely Josef, a practicing Catholic as well as a devotee of Piero della Francesca, about whose restrained but magnificent color sensibility and pictorial elegance he was passionate, would have been pleased. He never claimed such achievement—he would have considered that presumptuous—and became enraged when other artists of his generation claimed they achieved “eternity” in their art, but to learn that someone as visually perceptive as Arnheim recognized these qualities would have more than delighted him.



The two *Variants* in this exhibition, while they are emphatically horizontal in both their overall dimensions and in the narrow, rectangular bands that sweep across their broad surfaces, are given an upward lift by the two small vertical rectangles, not far from the center point, that resemble the doors that punctuate the walls of stucco architecture. Those “doors”—the word is in quotation marks because in Josef’s art there is no precise representation of knowable reality, only a sideways reference to the natural world—whether we read them as closed or open, put a springy bounce into the gentle overall sweep of the composition. They interject cheer into sobriety. While the overall impression of these pictures is pensive—they suggest furrowed eyebrows and a creased

form—they are full of laughter. While we experience an overwhelming calm looking at these works, the repose is especially effective because, rather than being ponderous, it is light-hearted. High spirits exist with solemnity. What is phlegmatic is also fiery; what is somber, playful. Shakespeare invariably introduced a fool to provide comic relief within the seriousness of his plays, a light touch to counteract the profundity; Josef did the same visually.

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His earliest memory from childhood, Josef told me, was of going to the post office with his mother and feeling the excitement of the black and white checkerboard pattern of the marble squares that composed the floor. He was eight years old at the time. She would die some two years later, leaving him and his brother and two sisters to be brought up by their father and then their stepmother, but whatever the vicissitudes and complications of all those happenings, the movement of those contrasting squares would remain with him forever after.

Would anyone have imagined that that child moving contentedly across the grid of that post office floor in a small Westphalian coal-mining city as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close would invent an unprecedented approach to squares that would, some sixty years later, enter the mainstream of American life? What he started in 1950, at age sixty-two, would, until his death twenty-six years later, become one of the monuments of twentieth-century culture. People did not know what to make of them at first, and they were mocked as much as they were praised, but then, as the public caught on, the world woke up. By the time Josef had finished his more than two thousand paintings of this type, and numerous prints as well, they became the subject of television specials, articles in mainstream magazines, the core of the first one-person retrospective ever given to a major living artist at New York's Metropolitan Museum. Two marvelous cartoons produced in *The New Yorker* magazine, that popular yet sophisticated magazine that came to epitomize worldliness and tastefulness, demonstrated the extent to which the cognoscenti had become familiar with them. One would be reproduced as a United States postage stamp embodying the motto of the now-extinct Department of

figs. 1–2

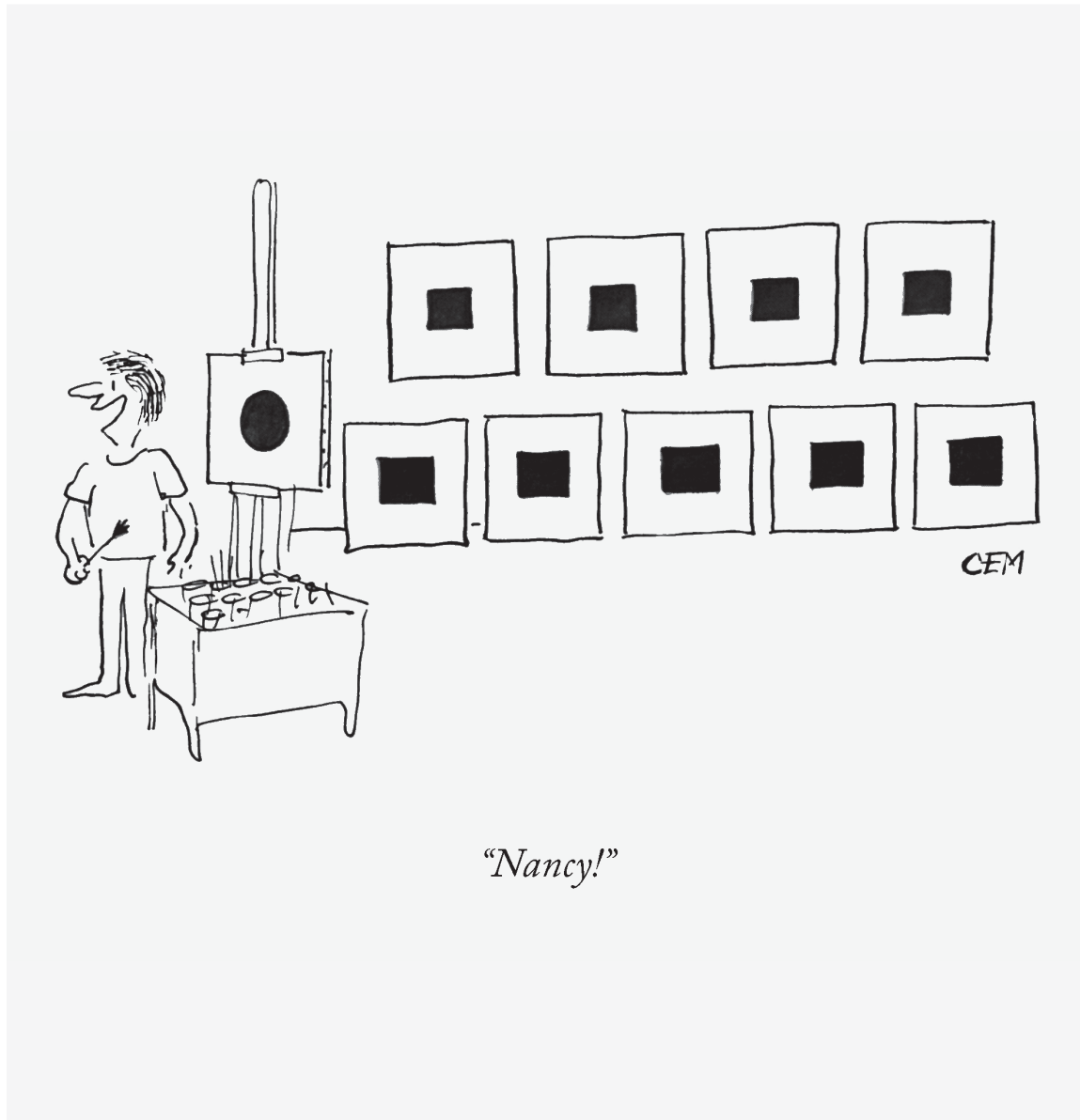


fig. 1 | C.E.M, in «The New Yorker» / *The New Yorker*, 1968

Education, “Learning Never Ends.” They had come to demonstrate that artistic modesty and diligence could create new worlds. Rarely had a secular painter so completely suppressed his ego and personal psychology to embark on such a rigorous course of repetition in service of a single cause. Aspects of color that had never before been seen so clearly now emerged not just visible but also poetic. And what Josef evoked through color is magical and intensely spiritual; yes, it demonstrates interesting phenomena, but at the same time it opens us to a new realm of beauty.



In an essay that the American novelist Gore Vidal wrote about Italo Calvino shortly following Calvino’s death in 1985, Vidal quotes from an Italian television interview that had been one of Calvino’s last public appearances, one of those occasions when a creative giant sums up his fundamental beliefs. Calvino asserted that “Only a certain prosaic solidity can give birth to creativity; fantasy is like jam; you have to spread it on a solid piece of bread. If not, it remains a shapeless thing, like jam, out of which you can’t make anything.”³ It was more than a coincidence that Calvino, like Josef, had referred to that viscerally satisfying act of spreading a malleable substance, be it butter or jam, on the most basic of foodstuffs, referring to “bread” in its generic form, whether what he had in mind was a crusty Tuscan loaf instead of the German or American equivalent. Like most great minds, Calvino and Josef got down to the basics, to what is knowable to everyone. Those unyielding Masonite panels on which Josef manipulated his paints were, invariably, whether he used the rough or the smooth side of that machine-made wood fiberboard, his “prosaic solidity.” The creativity then depended on his method, grounded in the unvarying reality not just of the hard support but also of many oil paints, unmixed, straight from the manufacturers’ tubes, systematically applied with a painter’s knife. This is what gave birth to fantasy, to imaginative combinations, way off the beaten track of “this color goes well with that one,” of considerable spirituality and philosophical complexity.

In one of his short novels, Calvino writes of his character Marcovaldo:



fig. 2 | William Hamilton, in «The New Yorker» / *The New Yorker*, 1973

He would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on a sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark or ponder over, discovering the changes of the season, the yearnings of his heart.⁴

There was no color tone, no shadow, no splash of light that escaped Josef's all-encompassing seeing. He was, in everything in his life, the quintessential observer: of the design of objects, of human posture, of the growth of flowers in his modest garden for which he employed used coffee grounds as mulch, of human faces (I will never forget Josef's likening the face of Gerald Ford, then President of the US, to "a knee"), of the way that serifs in lettering guide the eye, of the distinction between one small Chupícuaro figurine and another. (He had nearly a thousand of these objects, each measuring from five to ten centimeters in height; each, in his eyes, was ever so slightly different from the other.) Calmly and systematically receptive, like Morandi looking at bottles, he marveled at the impact of one color on another. It was what it was; it was also representative of miracles like the Immaculate Conception, the means of the passage of life not directly visible, but the results inimitable.



The color behavior we observe in these twenty-seven *Homages* and two *Variants* here at Villa Panza is akin to human behavior. Colors are like people. They have one appearance when they are alone, another when they are with a group of family members whom they resemble physically and to some extent in their personalities, and yet another when they are accompanied by people totally different from them. The presence of their relatives often mitigates their distinctiveness, while foreign presences intensify the dominance of certain characteristics by contrast. In a family group where everyone is tall, blond-haired, animated, and gregarious, with no outsiders present, we perceive only subtle contrasts as we do in *Homages* where every color is a form of green, whereas in an assemblage of three people where one is extroverted and boisterous but the other two more insular and reticent, we have a situation similar to that of one of Josef's paintings

where a vibrant green is surrounded by two muted greys. This is to say: juxtaposition is everything, and the same color impacts us differently according to the colors adjacent to it. X seems almost timid when he is with his outspoken cousins, but bold when he is alongside his quiet friends. It is all a matter of relativity.



The *Homages* descend more directly from Cézanne's example than from any other. Although he decried outside influences—and when asked about them would say, “I come from Adam and my father; that's all”—he told me proudly that Cézanne was the key figure in his development. Yes, Cézanne. The importance of voids, the emphasis on what we see more than on what is physically there, the sense of both mass and weightlessness in tandem, the creation of a mysterious beauty unlike what anyone else had ever done before. Josef told me that when he was twenty years old in 1908 and first saw paintings by Cézanne, the two that were in the Folkwang, a collection created by Karl Ernst Osthaus in the city of Hagen, an hour-long train journey from his hometown of Bottrop, “Everything changed forever.” What a poetic story: the builder's son, trained to paint meticulously and to do modest carpentry and carve stone, first discovering the possibilities of art as it had been made by local sixteenth-century masters like Stefan Lochner, then growing in his awareness of painting as a source of ineffable beauty through the work of a French artist who had died only two years earlier. Painting became his means to emotional paradise.

Cézanne in essence presented a small number of planes of color, parallel to the picture plane, and used the hue and light intensity to hold each plane in space. Josef would see how to foreshorten space, compressing it while at the same time suggesting depth, and establish planes that are frontal and recessive at the same time. Cézanne's skies move up and back and in and out—the way the sky, which is everywhere, does. Cézanne's work demonstrated to the twenty-year-old that the technique of painting can be used to invoke unfathomable mysteries, a sense of the infinite. The rich impasto of Cézanne's surfaces receives light in the way that, forty years later, Josef's well-worked panels would. Like the artists themselves, these colorful compositions do not hold forth so much as respond.



The year before Josef had made that life-changing journey to Hagen, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke saw the large Cézanne exhibition in Paris and subsequently visited it repeatedly. Rilke wrote, “As if these colors could heal one of indecision once and for all. The good conscience of these reds. These blues, their simple truthfulness, it educates you; and if you stand beneath them as acceptingly as possible, it’s as if they were doing something for you.”⁵ It is irresistible to transpose the scene and become convinced that by some feat of time-travel Rilke was looking at Josef’s *Homages*. The ardor and receptivity are comparable both to Josef’s own emotions when, from the age of sixty-two on, he returned daily to his square panels and tubes of paint, and to the feelings that we have as viewers when we proceed slowly through these rooms at Villa Panza:

You also notice, a little more clearly each time, how necessary it was to go beyond love, too; it’s natural, after all, to love each of these things as one makes it; but if one shows this, one makes it less well; one *judges* it instead of *saying* it. ... This labor which no longer knew any preferences or biases or fastidious predilections, whose minutest component has been tested to the scales of an infinitely responsive conscience, and which is so incorruptible reduced a reality of its color content that it resumes a new existence in a beyond of color, without any previous memories.⁶

A beyond of color! That is, of course, exactly where we go with these *Homages* and *Variants*. What Josef has given us is the same territory to which we are led through Rilke’s seeing and Cézanne’s diligence. Yes, the colors of these paintings we can now look at overlooking the gardens at Varese have a “simple truthfulness” and do “educate you.” Their quiet confidence and decisiveness penetrate us. Josef’s late-life work is the achievement of someone who overcame normal human ambivalence, who followed the advice he frequently gave to his students, whether at the Bauhaus, or Black Mountain College, or Yale University School of Art, or the great universities where he mesmerized his audiences in South America and Germany and Hawaii and all across continental

America. “Don’t jump on bandwagons. Sit on your own behinds.” By doing this, we can enter the universe of optical wonder.



The paintings in this exhibition at the Villa Panza realize in a new way the possibilities of carefully conceived squares so that they are munificent, mesmerizing, nourishing. With the space they need to breathe, adjacent to the wonders of flower gardens of the type so dear to Josef, each singing its own song, this is art that makes you realize some of the wonderful surprises of human perception at the same time as it fills you with optimism and courage: the pioneering spirit that enables Josef Albers to take you into rich new territory.

This is, as with Cézanne, art in which memories, even if remotely present, play a secondary role. Evoking timeless phenomena, it transcends individualism. Rather than opine about color, it reveals color. The *Homages to the Square* become living beings. Like much great work made late in the life of its creator—Beethoven’s final string quartets, Morandi’s most ethereal bottles, Shakespeare’s last sonnets—they grapple with ultimate, essential truths. Grounded solidly in their craft, they invoke sublime mysteries. Stripped bare, they dissolve all barriers between the communicator and the means of communication. They conquer the gap between speaker and statement, between writer and words, between painter and medium. Josef Albers and the *Homages* are one.

1. Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982), 146.

2. Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, 146.

3. Gore Vidal, “On Italo Calvino,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 21, 1985, 3.

4. Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo*, William Weaver, trans.,

A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), 1.

5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, Joel Agee, trans. (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985), 50.

6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, 65.



