

Albers Morandi

David Leiber,
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In Conversation

DAVID LEIBER I thought I could ask one question to start. While you both were not able to see the show in person, due to the global pandemic, I can say that you both knew Josef Albers. What do you think the artist would have made of this pairing?

HEINZ LIESBROCK Nick, you go ahead, please.

NICHOLAS FOX WEBER Unfortunately, Heinz never met Josef, but it feels as if he did. In Bottrop, Heinz engages so intimately with the work, especially through his role at the Josef Albers Museum.

Josef did not like pairings, period. Sidney Janis proposed a show of him with Mondrian and a show of him with Arp. He declined both. He did not like his work to be shown with Anni's either, although it did happen on one occasion. So my sense is that, in principle, he wouldn't have approved. If, for once, he had overcome his rather habitual stubbornness and been willing to see his work in the right companionship, he might have been pleasantly surprised.

HL I can't speak about Josef's feelings about such a pairing, but I once met a colleague of Josef's named William Bailey. Nick knew him personally, too. I met him at a typical tea opening at Yale, for an exhibition, and I approached him because I had read about him speaking about Edward Hopper. He said to me, "Since you are the director of the Josef Albers Museum, I can tell you that Josef, in my memory, referred to Edward Hopper and Morandi quite favorably, speaking about their work to his students. And, typically, he did not speak about Edward Hopper in terms of alienation or loneliness. He did not speak about Morandi and the things—the cans, the pots, and the boxes—in his works. But he spoke about the organization of light in the paintings." Structural items, and I think Josef Albers's and Morandi's work make very good sense together on a structural level, as I have personally experienced, and you too, Nick, as a curator of the show of their work in Bologna.

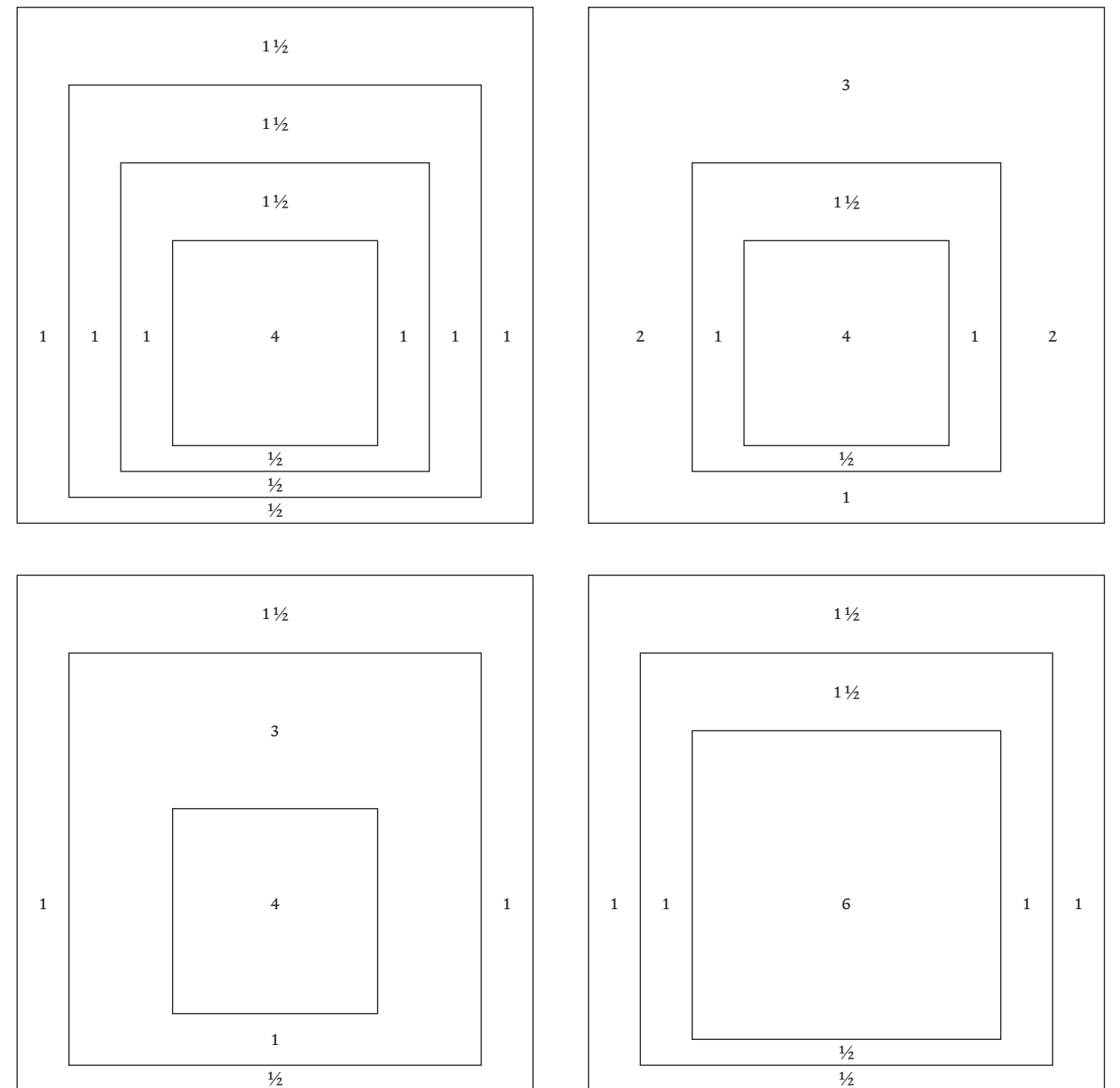
DL Right. I would add that Morandi resisted any comparison of his work to that of contemporary artists. In fact, he broke with one writer who wanted to see him as a proto-modernist and make comparisons between his work and twentieth-century Italian abstract artists, and he would have none of that.

He would have been much more intrigued by a pairing with, maybe, an artist such as Fra Angelico or Piero della Francesca. I don't think Albers or Morandi were interested in group shows. They both were outside the canon, in a way, although they were strangely connected to what was going on within it, sending signals and emanations to other artists and generations. I kind of knew the answer to the question, but I don't think they would have strongly rejected the concept, though I don't think they would have been particularly interested in the pairing.

Peter Schjeldahl writes in *The New Yorker* that, art historically, their work looks nothing alike, but then he starts to show all the connections. I, of course, think there are a lot of connections, and art historically there are many overlaps, such as the way they both had a great late period and worked until the very end of their lives. Albers made his *Homages* from 1950 until the year he died, in 1976. When comparing the life dates of the two artists, it is almost surprising to recognize that Albers was two years older than Morandi, perhaps because the still life seems as if it were a historical genre, whereas geometric abstraction seems so obviously twentieth century. And I find that there are many comparisons to be made in terms of the way they worked, the way they lived, their values.

One thing I was thinking about while going through the show is the idea that they both worked in small rooms. Their studios were, in a way, where they lived. They had no studio assistants. I think about both artists' use of the table, the importance of the table and hard-edged tools, whether it's the palette knife for Albers or the tools that Morandi used to make his etchings. The table becomes this sort of leitmotif.

NFW Well, the table is important, but I want to go back to the expression "the organization of light." I think that's the most wonderful expression. I've never heard it before. And it pertains exactly to Morandi and Josef and to the qualities that Josef cared about. Interestingly enough, the work of William Bailey, who was a student of Albers's, bears an unquestionable resemblance to Morandi's. I'm talking about Bailey's still lifes more than his nudes, in the quality of their calmness. Art historically, I think Josef and Morandi very much belong next to each other because neither of them went along with a trend or a movement, and that in itself was a very strong statement. Josef used to say how much he disliked the trends of the art world and the idea



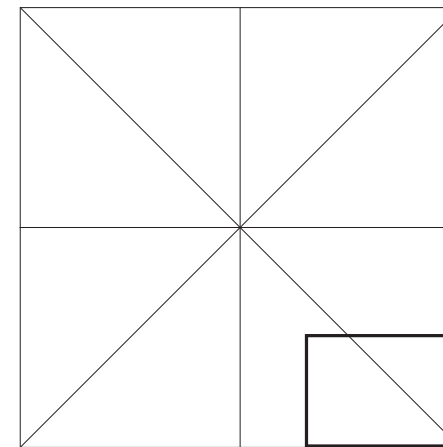
Proportional schemata of Josef Albers's four *Homage to the Square* compositions

that one went from abstract expressionism to pop art to op art, whatever movement was in vogue at the moment. And these are two artists who had, as you note, David, very similar values. They believed in living quietly and at a remove from the art world, at a remove from the scene. They didn't want to, in their opinions, waste their time socializing. They really just wanted to work in the most idyllic conditions, and their values were lasting values. They weren't something that went in and out of style, and, in itself, this is why we would put them together in a history of twentieth-century art.

DL Absolutely.

HL I would like to point out that both Morandi and Josef had very similar points of reference in art history. The strong appreciation they shared for Cezanne is one. Probably what Josef called "the honesty and modesty" he learned from Cezanne, as a model for an artist. Morandi must have shared this. For both artists, there is an economy of painterly means, a dislike of embellishment, and a personal reticence. And then there was their appreciation for the simpleness, monumentality, and quietness of early Italian Renaissance painting. To them, painting is not about showing things in the external world, even though Morandi seems to be a painter of still lifes and landscapes. What is more important is realizing something through the analysis of the visual world. You put the external world on a new level through the act of painting. The outside reality is only the starting point of a painting and is not of primary importance itself. What counts is the act of understanding the outside, and to give this understanding a painterly form. A successful painting shows the artist's inner excitement. As Morandi put it, in a 1957 interview aired on Voice of America, "a painting should tell about the images and emotions that the visible world ignites in us [the painters]."

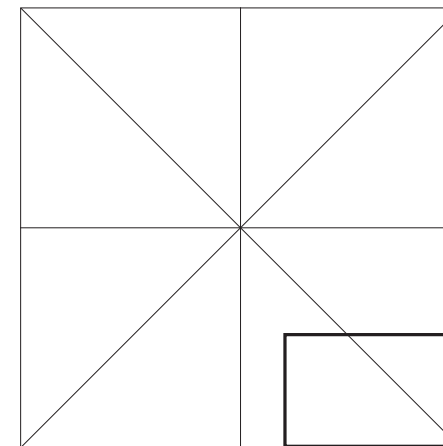
DL I think Nick has talked about this a little bit in relation to Albers, but I would say that of course they both embraced the past, and they fully digested it and worked within a certain tradition on the surface. They were both kind of masters of illusion, and I don't mean in terms of perspective or a sense of a particular space, although they were both very involved with that. I think Nick talked about looking at Albers's *Homages* almost as landscapes. There's a figural element, almost in a Vitruvian sense, too, within this



Proportional schematic of Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1957, from Lamberto Vitali's *L'opera grafica di Giorgio Morandi* (1964)



Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1957
Oil on canvas, 10 1/4 × 14 inches | 26 × 35.6 cm
Vitali NO. 1026



Proportional schematic of Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1959, from Lamberto Vitali's *L'opera grafica di Giorgio Morandi* (1964)



Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1959
Oil on canvas, 10 1/8 × 16 inches | 25.5 × 40.5 cm
Vitali NO. 1156

perfect sunken-square composition. In each *Homage*, there's a climate of color or a specific atmosphere. After all, the works are not really about squares. Albers had no more interest in squares than Morandi probably did in the particular objects he used over and over. And I don't see Morandi's works as traditional still lifes. Though Morandi would use the same objects again and again, often altering them, it's not so much about the objects themselves, as you note, Heinz, but their relationship. They're decoys for something else. They're almost like figures on a stage. There's a sense of a projected movement or motion. There's a stillness, but there's also an implied sense of motion. So they're very deceiving in a way that is quite magical. That is, to me, the most interesting comparison between the two, that they're masters of illusion.

NFW I like the words *deceiving* and *magical* because, in some ways, they're two very straightforward painters. We can say one painted bottles and landscapes, the other painted squares. But what's striking to me is how they were really in love with working, and I think you feel that in both of these artists' work. I think you feel their art as a complete celebration. We live in an era when a lot of art is about self-revelation, and some of our best-known artists at present, and in the last part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries, put their own biographies in their work. Not Josef, not Morandi. They were much more interested in the beauty that they could extract and present in their subjects, and in lasting values: the quality of light, the impact of one color on another, the statuesque nature of a form. Like Shakespeare in turning to the form of a sonnet time and again, they would use the restrictions which they decided to take upon themselves, whether it was the same objects in a still life or the format of the square. They could be freed by those restrictions, as they could go as far as possible with them and constantly discover new things and new values. So I think you see a remarkably similar approach. There is also a warmth to the work that is so apparent in the way you've installed the show, David. Even if I haven't seen the exhibition in the flesh, only because of the pandemic, just from the photographs one can see the intensity of both groups of work, the combination of gentleness and strength, the quiet force, if you will. Again we see the importance of this idea of the lack of autobiography, the lack of self-revelation.

DL Yes, and I love what you say. In this era of anything goes, anything can be art. If there's no restriction or limitation, then there's no problem. And if there's no problem, there can't really be any development or unique expression. You need these restrictions.

NFW You need them. Anni felt the same way in her work. People have talked about Anni Albers's relationship to thread: it created certain obligations for how she would work and what she could do, and she reveled in those obligations. She said they gave her discipline. The Alberses liked a defined vocabulary. There are only so many letters in the alphabet, and look at all that we can do with those twenty-six letters. We get that from Morandi's work as well. Maybe one of the reasons that these two artists are so vital to our current time—and now during the lockdown from the pandemic, where lots of restrictions and limitations are imposed—is that one has no choice, and many people have learned, for all the hardship, how to benefit by concentrating within, going inward, and not constantly running to the next thing.

DL And enjoying what's in your midst.

NFW Yes.

DL Being much more connected to your home and objects. Morandi was very modest. He was not a collector, but he surrounded himself with a few chosen objects. The Alberses collected small objects along the way, but it seems as if they never had more than a handful of things in their home. Their collecting was a passion related to their travels, and their imagination and curiosity, but they didn't really live with their collection. Most things were put in a box. But nonetheless, these small objects were in their midst. I think this sensibility is important, and that's one reason why, at this particular moment, as you note, Nick, people are really responding to these two artists.

HL I think for both Josef and Morandi, being an artist, being a painter even more so, was their form of existence. They made themselves invisible socially, I would say. And you are quite right, David, with your observation that they both had small items of art around them: the Alberses had a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, and in the old Museo Morandi, in the ancient Palazzo

d'Accursio, in the center of Bologna (the museum moved to a new building in 2012), there was a room with works that Morandi had collected. He owned small Greek artifacts, Italian paintings of the Cinquecento, scenes of the life of Christ, etchings by Rembrandt, drawings by Renoir and Seurat—works that he carefully selected and loved. By the way, I'm told that, during his lifetime, Morandi was an expensive painter. Yet people stood in line to get his works. But that's only an interesting aside. So he lived in this sphere of art, they both did, and probably nothing else counted outside of that.

DL That's fascinating. People don't realize the prices then were a fraction of today's, but Morandi was from a certain point—around 1950—very successful. He would make one painting at a time, and, at his peak, he would decide who would get what and advise his dealer accordingly. Albers was extremely successful, with many exhibitions of his work by the early 1960s. But apart from—anecdotally, Nick, you know this very well—upgrading to a Mercedes station wagon, or taking an extra trip here or there, the Alberses did not change the way they lived one iota.

NFW The way they lived was in service of artistic creation.

DL Totally.

NFW They were happy enough. The Alberses initially struggled financially, so after Josef was booted out of Yale they weren't sure that they could remain in Connecticut. But then, as you said, in the sixties he began to earn money. But the objective of his and Anni's life was just to be able to create. As much as we can tell, this was true of Morandi as well. Both men enjoyed various pleasures in life. They were not totally sequestered like monks.

If we go back to the artists they revered, in both cases, Piero della Francesca comes up. Josef once proudly referred to one of his Variant paintings as his "Piero," which isn't to say that he would have put himself in the same category as Piero, who was the most sacrosanct of artists for him. But when we think of the qualities of Piero's works, there is a degree of a wonderful stillness at the same time there is animation, and there is always mystery. There's always something we can't identify, call it poetry, magic. Morandi and Albers, for all of their straightforwardness, held that love of the inexplicable, which is part of their fascination with Piero.

HL Well said. A saying from Morandi, also from the Voice of America interview, fits what you say: "I believe that nothing can be more abstract than what we actually say."

DL Definitely. Josef and Anni went to Italy in 1925 on their honeymoon, and they may have made a few other trips to see these works in person. Morandi was more local to Emilia Romagna, as he lived in Bologna, and would have seen that work more regularly. In fact, Morandi famously left Italy only twice, in 1956, to attend the opening of his exhibition in Winterthur, Switzerland, and, a couple months later, to see a historical show in Zurich by Cezanne. There are still a number of paintings in Winterthur, I think related to that exhibition. And, still famously, he had never been on an airplane. The only time he was on a boat, apparently, was when he took the vaporetto from the train station to the Giardini for the Venice Biennale.

NFW Amazing. There are a couple of things that I find inconsistent or unexpected in both artists, primarily the element of a signature. Josef would say that he didn't want his own hand to show, and yet he painted in a way such that his own hand does show. He didn't use tape; he didn't use any mechanical means for painting. He said he held the point of view that the values of art were eternal and timeless and not linked to the self, yet he almost always included that A, his initial, in his paintings, so there is the presence of the person.

DL The monogram, almost like Dürer's.

NFW Very much like Dürer's. Same style, although Dürer's is two letters combined. With Morandi, there is the very surprising presence of his signature. Did anyone ever discuss that or address it with him?

DL It's a good question, because the signature on most of Morandi's paintings appears on the front, but it's also part of the image.

HL Yes.

DL With Albers's, the signature is always in the lower right corner. The placement of Morandi's signature shifts: sometimes it's at the top left or right,

usually in the corner, but not always. And it's big and not precise, almost cursive-like, very loose. It occupies a certain amount of real estate in the painting. It's an interesting concept, about artistic ego and sublimating the touch but then revealing the touch. Heinz, we talked about this over the summer, that there is a paradox in the case of both artists. Traditionally, people talk about Morandi in terms of an amazing gesture, amazing touch, but you noted how the paintings were actually executed surprisingly quickly. They're conceptual paintings.

HL Yes.

DL Morandi would spend time staging and rehearsing and placing the objects, finding the right light, inventing nonnaturalistic light, but then the execution is quick. Whereas in Albers's work, the execution is meant to be very workmanlike, very matter-of-fact, but there is a surprising sense—and maybe the work has taken on a patina over time—of facture and touch, and it's a paradox. You expressed it beautifully when we spoke.

HL Yes. Albers knew exactly what he wanted to do when he started to apply the first dot of color to the plate of Masonite. Though Morandi's execution was faster: after he had looked sometimes for days or even weeks at the scene on the table in front of him—the scene of the pots, the plates, the bottles—he suddenly understood what it was about and then worked quickly. But both of them, I would say, knew exactly when they began to execute a painting what they wanted it to be. Josef's work really contradicted the idea of painting that was in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s in America. He did not spontaneously create a painting by answering one brushstroke with the other, and that's why, I believe, many critics questioned his position. "Is this painting? Or is this just craftsmanship?" Because there's no development in the actual process of painting.

NFW Though Josef loved to be surprised in the process of painting.

HL Yes.

NFW So he'd start at the center and then have an idea for his next color. If the next color didn't have an impact on the first color, as he had imagined,

he would often replace it. For the third or fourth colors out, he would experiment. We have paintings where he tried ten or twelve different paint manufacturers and hues in order to come up with the color he wanted. And he was surprised when there would be shadows, when there wouldn't be shadows, when colors would interact.

DL When I read that Albers is a hard-edge painter, it strikes me as totally incorrect.

NFW Totally.

DL First of all, he didn't map out his paintings or trace in any way. There are not a lot of preparatory lines. Even though Albers may have rehearsed a composition or experimented with a drawing or a color relation on paper or a study, it's freehand. This is an understatement, but it's inconceivable that anyone else could have painted an *Homage*. Unlike with other types of geometric abstraction, one could imagine someone else making one of Frank Stella's black paintings. But I don't think of Albers at all as a hard-edge painter. In the show, there's a moment in the second room where the grays are put into juxtaposition. There are two gray *Homages* and an infinite range of grays in two Morandi paintings. In the sixties, as Albers's paintings approach a kind of monochromatic condition—even though you can see maybe two or three colors, so they're never purely monochromatic—the lines soften. The corners become rounded. Nick, you've spoken beautifully about how the corners of his paintings seem almost rounded. The paintings are very airy and atmospheric and surprisingly vaporous. But then, of course, they're all the same format.

NFW The idea of those rounded corners came to me from Josef, who, when he was working on his last painting, told me that he was having trouble finding the color he wanted, so the corners softened. Softened was his word. He said Cartier-Bresson had told him that he painted circular squares, and Josef grinned that wonderful smile of his and said that he loved this idea of circular squares. And, of course, having Cartier-Bresson be the person to point it out brought him enormous pleasure. That's what he wanted in his last painting when he very much saw the central color, he wanted that central square to embody the qualities of the cosmos. He said, "You know, Nick, the cosmos

should not have sharp edges or corners that will stab you. It needs to have round corners.”

DL Very nice. A well-known poet and lifelong Albers fan wrote us a note after seeing the show, in which she said she also loves Morandi and shared something to the effect of, “I wish I could write the way Morandi paints.” What do you think she meant by that?

HL I can try to give an answer here by remembering an observation I made when I curated an exhibition of paintings by Morandi and Albers in 2005. In placing their works side by side, a dialogue opened up between them, where Josef Albers now showed a painterly quality, and for Morandi—whom many people, such as Peter Schjeldahl, seem to understand as a romantic, painterly painter—his deep interiority and conceptual rigor were brought into sharper focus. This seeming contradiction, being on the one hand conceptual and intellectual, and then on the other hand very painterly, presents a flow that runs in both directions between the two artists. I am sure this observation can be made in this exhibition as well.

DL But they’re not dichotomies?

HL No. Not at all.

NFW For me, the poet who made that remark, and it’s a wonderful remark, was talking about the quality of mystery combined with the quality of resolution. Something that’s understandable but still keeps you spellbound, and a consistency of the elements—a rare combination of understatement and richness pervades. There’s a superb poet named Julie Agoos whose first book of poetry, which won a Yale Younger Poets prize when it came out, has a Morandi etching on its jacket, and it very much sets the tone of the work within the book.

DL Yes, and I would add that in this combination of what we’ve talked about—structure and mystery, what seem to be dichotomies—there is never more than there needs to be, such as in the way that Albers never paints one color over another. There’s never more paint than there needs to be on that

surface. And once you start looking at Morandi in that way, in some paintings you can see the way the light catches the surface and the way the artist raised the mark so there’s a certain facture. Light bounces off the brushstroke. And then other paintings are actually quite flat, where he denies the three-dimensionality of the brushstroke.

Morandi’s works can fall into three categories: landscapes, *natura morta*, and *fiori*. But the flower paintings are really still lifes for Morandi. To the artist, the still lifes and the flower paintings were equal, there was no hierarchy. The flower paintings have this distinctive symmetry, with the centrally placed object. And there’s much more concentration in the center of the painting and in the way he approached it, in terms of the paint on the surface, as he would let the sides sort of fade out. There’s an economy of means, knowing when to stop, knowing when you’re finished. For Albers, it was likely more obvious when a painting was completed, but with Morandi, a bit less so. And yet there is this discipline, and they got better at it, such that the later works are among the most refined in both cases. They knew exactly how far to go.

HL Yes. I agree totally.

NFW Did Morandi ever reject his own work? I ask because Josef occasionally considered a painting a failure, in which case he would draw a big X over the surface. He wouldn’t destroy the artwork necessarily, although on occasion he did. But he was capable of saying that something he’d done was a failure and not worth redoing.

DL My guess is that Morandi rejected very few paintings—perhaps more so early on than later—simply because he knew what he wanted and wouldn’t really begin the painting until after he had played with the objects and, as Heinz points out, really looked at the arrangement over a long period of time. Then he would size the painting and build the stretcher. Since he did not use store-bought stretchers, he had to commit to a work by building the stretcher. I’m not aware of too many cases where he painted over a picture, but perhaps, Heinz, you know?

HL No, I can’t say. David, you have so beautifully described the economy of the painterly process for both artists, and I think there also is an ethic of work

that relates them to craftsmanship. Morandi's father, who died early in the artist's life, was a merchant, but Albers came from a family of craftsmen. We find a similar work ethic in Rodin, in Rilke, in Cezanne, in which, basically, you don't stop working until you drop dead. And you do it every day, and no matter how it works, how you feel personally, you just go into the studio—or into the motif, in Cezanne's case—and you don't stop before the day ends. For Morandi, an observation made by friends who knew him well is telling, in this respect: "He loves to speak about practical questions of painting and avoids general aesthetic issues."

NFW Was Morandi, in the traditional sense of the word, religious?

DL If you visit the Morandi house, where he lived with his three sisters, you'll see a cross over his bed. He lived his whole life in a very ritualistic way, and I think he was religious if not spiritual, in a sense.

HL I know that he met his sisters on Sundays outside church, once mass had ended, to lead them home. He wouldn't let them go by themselves, unescorted. But, apparently, he did not go to mass himself.

NFW Albers, at the end of his life, did go to mass. Generally, Anni would drive him, and he also went to confessional, as he had as a young man but not in the intervening years. He definitely became religious again much later. And in his early years he had not insisted but made it very clear that he wanted a Catholic wedding, so he and Anni were married in a Catholic church.

DL I didn't know that. Interesting.

NFW It may be a point in common between them that none of us has sufficiently reflected on, because if they really were both devoutly religious in the traditional sense, that tells you a great deal.

DL When Morandi talked about his love for religious painting, specifically Italian religious painting, it was in spiritual and spatial terms at best, but not religious terms. You know, his religion was painting, and I think he saw everything in that way. For me, what's fascinating is how, if you look at Morandi's

work before World War II—he lived through both world wars, as did Josef—it is very hard to see any palpable difference in the imagery. You could say that during the war years, as he spent more time in a house in the country, he made more landscapes, humble scenes of unspectacular views from his window in the Apennine foothills above Bologna. But there's no obvious sense in his work that the war traumatized him in any way. That's fascinating to me, and that shows also a lifelong commitment to his work, to working, and to painting.

NFW It's interesting the grip Morandi could have on other painters as well. The painter Balthus had only one painting hanging in the main reception room of his house in Switzerland, and it was a Morandi watercolor. He was very proud of it and looked at it all the time, and loved discussing its merits. And if you look at some of Balthus's own work, you will see absolutely deliberate, candid quotations from Morandi's. In particular, he sometimes would take elements of a still life and put them on a mantle over a fireplace.

DL That's fascinating, because I would say within Morandi's work, his watercolors are less depictive than his paintings. They're suggestive, but blurred and faint. They hint at an image but they never quite arrive at the clarity of what you see in his paintings. It's interesting to hear that Balthus, who was known for such explicit, provocative images, loved his watercolors.

HL Max Bill, who was a friend and great supporter of Albers from the forties on, also had an outspoken appreciation for Morandi's work. Bill might not have been a first-rate painter but he had a great eye for quality. The collection in his home tells of it. He owned four *Homage* paintings of particular quality, and in 1961 he visited Morandi in Bologna three times. One of these occasions he purchased a still life.