

A Flame Revealed

Looking closely at a weaving by Anni Albers, a friend of the dour artist glimpses for the first time the Mae West within

BY
NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

My eyes were about ten inches from a small section of interwoven thread in Anni Albers's *Untitled Wall Hanging* of 1925 when I felt that in a certain way I had never really known her.

Was it possible that I was on some level so clueless about a person I had seen day in, day out, for 20 years—someone as close as an immediate family member, to whom I would talk for hours on end, an artist whose relatively small body of work I knew in depth, and about whom I had written numerous catalogues and essays?

Yet in the shimmering metallic filament, in the spirited twists and turns with which threads embraced one another and then let go only to cling again, I saw a liveliness, a warmth, an exuberance I had never been aware of before. I had known her to be the most diligent crafts-person. Now I saw her as an enchantress.

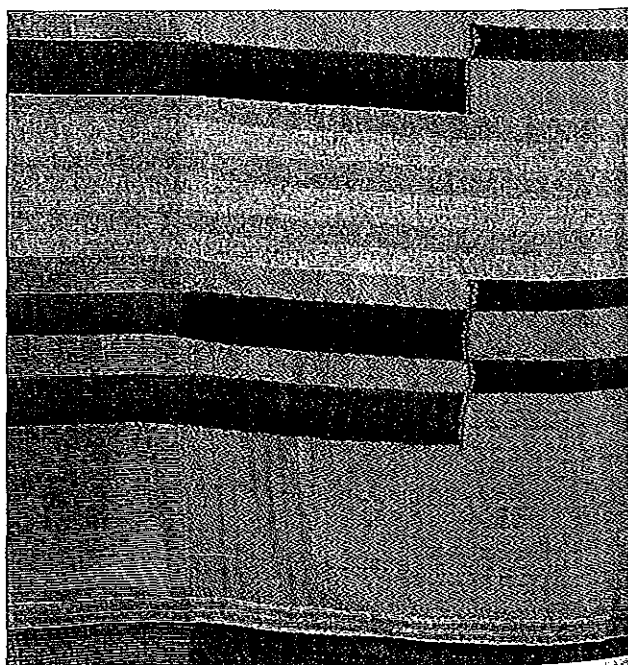
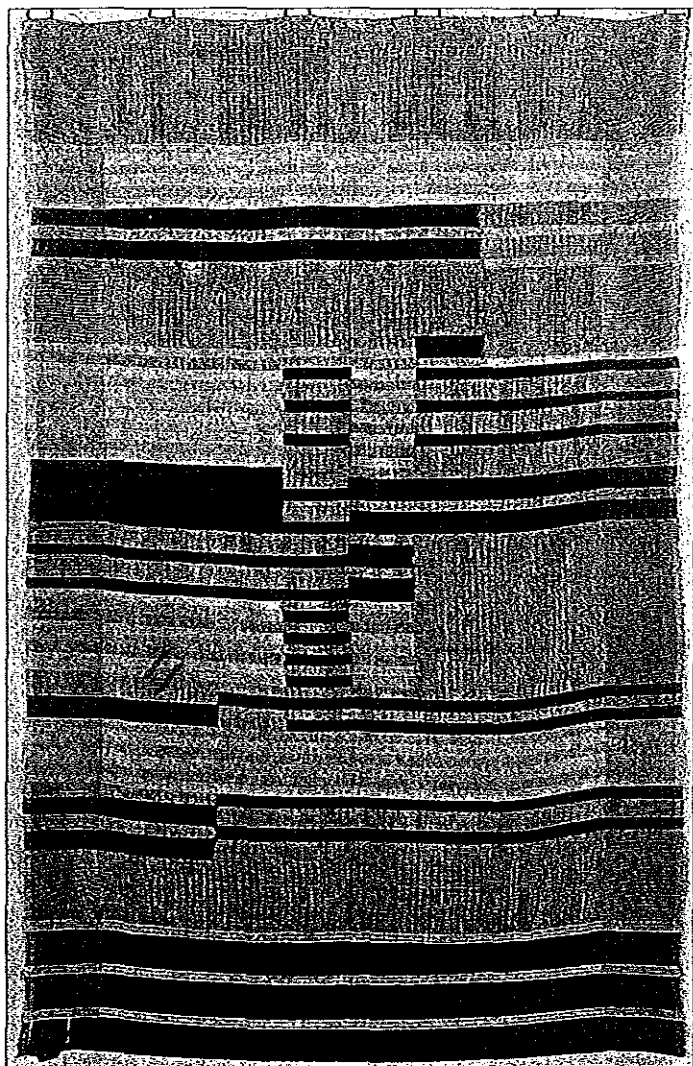
She was a poet of silk, cotton, and acetate. She used that exotic combination of materials to create dissonance and harmony at the same time. This abstract wall hanging struck me with its rising crescendos, its regular beat, and then its visual melodies. I could see an underlying system, but beyond that there were all the playful surprises.

As a young woman, Anni was deeply influenced by Goethe's *Metamorphosis of the Plants*. She valued its revelation of the repetition of certain numbers within botanical growth—the way that if three units exist in the root system of a tree then there will be three equivalent branches and a further echo of the tripartite division in the leaves. In her

Anni Albers, *Untitled Wall Hanging*, 1925, silk, cotton, and acetate, 47½ by 36½ inches. In the detail below, the author saw "blood raging, passion soaring, life brimming over."



Anni Albers at her loom, Black Mountain College, ca. 1944. For the most part, her weavings express restraint and order above all.



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own work, having started with the grid and the requirements of warp and weft—the inviolate system—she had created her particular form of flower: an image so aglow and exotic as to make viewers' hearts leap.

The Anni Albers I knew was dour to a fault. She dressed almost entirely in whites and beiges; her hair went from darkest brown to plain gray. When she wore makeup, it only seemed to make her paler. Her sister Lotte was an active Quaker—Anni very much admired the religious sect as well—and you could have thought the two of them were spinsters dressed for Sunday meeting.

And to most of the world, she emanated little joy. Josef Albers, the renowned painter, teacher, and color theorist who was her husband of 50 years, had a twinkle in his eye. You could believe the stories about his stopping on his way to a meeting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the old German neighborhood in the East 80s, to drink a schnapps and pinch a buxom barmaid. The tales of his flirtations with female students at Yale in the 1950s rang true. But Anni was like Olive Oyl to his Popeye: awkward, ill at ease, disproportioned, with her large shoes (necessary because of a genetic illness from which she had suffered since childhood) like weights anchoring her thin legs.

And the artwork, for the most part, reflected the woman: white-on-white screenprints, elegant but oh so understated; open-weave monochrome fabrics that bespoke, above all else, restraint and order; wall hangings with names like *Black, White, and Gray*, early exemplars of reductionism and of making the most out of a few precise and simple elements.

But not so *Untitled*. Suddenly I could see Anni not just as the pioneer, not just as the brave soul who had given up her comfortable bourgeois background to go to the Bauhaus, but as the enthusiast. Passion was her mainstay; here was an artwork of unbridled verve.

Born in 1899, she grew up in the Berlin of governesses and dressmakers. When she told her father, a furniture manufacturer, that she wanted to attend Walter Gropius's new art school in Weimar, and she described its program, he replied, "What do you mean, a new style? We have had the Renaissance. We have had the Baroque. There are no new styles."

Anni needed tenacity and grit to live on the outskirts of Weimar in simple digs where she could take a bath only once a week. It required courage and staying power, as well, to get into the recently founded Bauhaus. She was turned down the first

time she applied for admission but persisted, she told me, only because she had laid eyes on "a lean, half-starved, ascetic-looking Westphalian with irresistible blond bangs"—Josef Albers, a poor schoolteacher from the industrial region of the Ruhr—who helped her prepare for a second round of admissions tests. Looking at *Untitled*, I suddenly understood her as a romantic.

Yet when Anni talked about her life, she always made herself sound slightly downtrodden, even victimized. At her first Bauhaus Christmas, she was convinced that Santa would have

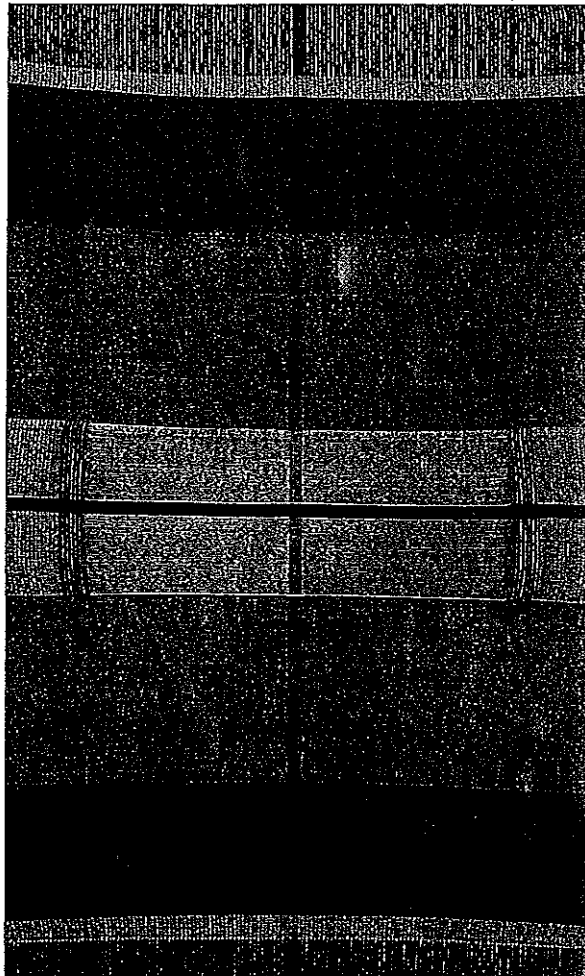
nothing for her. Then her name was called, and she was handed a print of Giotto's *Flight into Egypt*—from Josef. Some people would have remembered it as a wonderful moment, but what rang loudest in Anni's account was her sense of being an outsider.

At Bauhaus festivals, when Josef would dance, she was a wallflower. Once they were married and living in one of the streamlined master's houses in Dessau, she was still ill at ease. One evening Josef told her that Mies van der Rohe and his mistress, Lily Reich, were coming to dinner. Trying to be a dutiful wife and a good hostess, she used the butter curler her mother had given her to make perfect butter balls. Reich took one look at the table and instantly declared, "Butter balls! Here at the Bauhaus! At the Bauhaus I should think you'd have a good solid block of butter!" Anni didn't recover from the smart—either that evening or in the 60 years that had passed before she told it to me.

Yet looking at *Untitled*, I realized that there was a flip side to her sense of woe. The yellow is vibrant. The faith in abstraction soars. Anni used to say that she had been deeply influenced by Wilhelm Worringer's book *Abstraction and*

Empathy and by his notion of art as a visual resting place. Art could offer what nature, and life, might not: clarity, balance, a degree of control. Anni, in this brave abstract wall hanging, so original for the 1920s, had achieved a quality of sheer vivacity, a Matissean joie de vivre, that seemed not to exist in her life. The crisp interlocking of forms, the juxtaposition of strong and vibrant colors, had a warmth, a flare that were there in her soul if not in her quotidian experience or her presentation of herself.

You can, at a glance, take in everything the weaving says. But then it soars beyond its underlying system. As with the woman herself, there is more there than meets the eye. I had seen this hanging only in reproduction when it arrived at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice for the retrospective exhibition I organized this past spring in honor of the 100th anniversary of Anni's birth. When I saw it in the flesh, I was



Anni Albers, *Wall Hanging*, 1926, silk, 72 by 48 inches.
Paul Klee inspired her to take a thread for a walk.

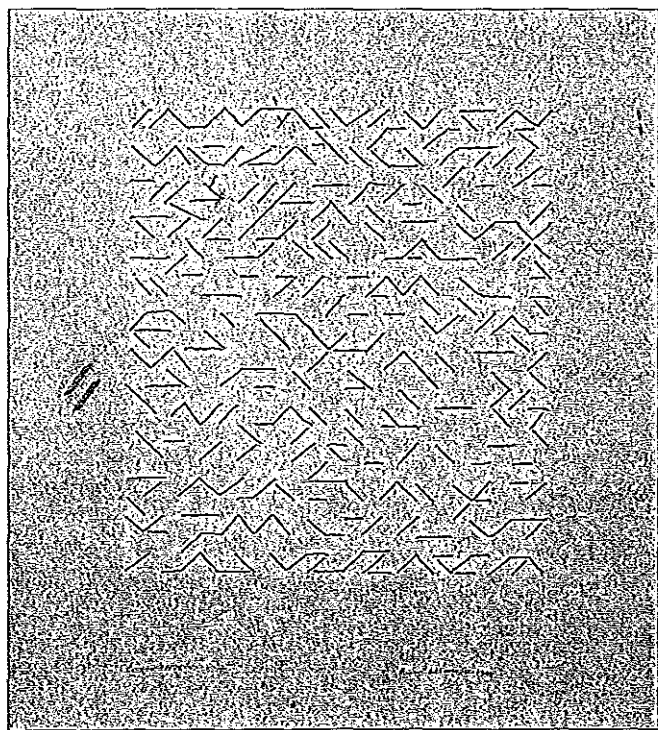
DEBEE SARKIS/ARTS



Anni and Josef Albers at the Bauhaus in the late 1920s.

stunned. Anni had told me that she hadn't wanted to become a weaver but that the weaving workshop was the only one open to her at the Bauhaus. Then Paul Klee, the form master, had proposed the idea that one should "take a line for a walk." "And so I let thread do what it could," she said in her soft, measured voice. She made it sing a triumphant "Hallelujah."

Returning to the patch that made me feel I hadn't really known Anni—that area to which no reproduction can do justice—I felt that in some way it was like part of the body: something we take for granted, say an elbow. At one moment, an elbow is just there. But then you recognize its structure—the



Making the most of a few simple elements: Anni Albers, *Letter*, 1980, serigraph, 16½ by 15½ inches.

bones, the joints, the circulatory path, the chemicals and substances that make work. Anni Albers's textile work has the power to lead us to see and appreciate these things.

Looking at *Untitled*, I couldn't believe what she and thread could do in combination. Euphoria. Sparkle. The glitter that existed within her if not in her persona.

My wife recently reminded me of a conversation between Anni and Louise Nevelson. It was the only time they met, a panel discussion at a College Art Association conference. Whatever the age was—inevitably a quasi-political, serious program about women in the arts—Anni and Louise had other matters on their mind when they chatted before going to the front of their audience. Anni was fascinated by Nevelson's false eyelashes. Nevelson, laughing, said to her, "Listen, darling, sometimes you have to give to your what nature hasn't provided." And a

said it she cupped her breasts—making it seem that she was wearing falsies (or at least a padded bra). They both laughed. Anni, in return, told Nevelson about the great Blue Rider color Galka Scheyer and Scheyer's visit to the Bauhaus in the 1920s. "What I remember," Anni said, "is that she was the person who told me to wear lipstick. Before then, I thought lipstick was only for prostitutes."

Is it too much of a leap from there to my awareness of Anni's favorite *Homages to the Square*—the works of Josef Albers most cherished—were the red ones? That for her the color was associated with passion, that on one level she considered these paintings his valentines to her?

Or to remember that once, when Anni was at Black Mountain College—where she was considered by her students among the most puritanical, straitlaced people they had met—a student asked her who she would be if she could become someone else, and she replied "Mae West"?

All of this came to mind as I looked at *Untitled*—and an extraordinary small section as I studied it from the distance of a few inches. There was blood raging, passion soaring, life mingling over. I stepped back. The entire piece was such a celebration: of the possibilities of art, of what could happen when worked in tandem with materials and techniques, of the wisdom of Anni's counsel that one should listen to the substance and immerse oneself in the process of art—that in life, according to her favorite maxim, "one can go anywhere from anywhere." Before, I had known the various parts of the woman; now, some five years after her death, I put them together. How warm, how hopeful, and most surprisingly, how capable of happiness she really was.

Nicholas Fox Weber, director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, is a cultural historian whose books include *Saints, Balthus: A Biography*, and the catalogue for the Albers retrospective he organized. The exhibition is *Musée des Arts Decoratifs* at the Louvre through January 2000. It will appear at the Jewish Museum in New York from May 28 through August 20, 2000.