

# People are talking about

**T**he notion of abstraction, the masters of the Bauhaus believed, provided a rare chance to achieve balance and clarity in life.

At the Centre Pompidou this summer, you can retreat to the visual serenity of the streamlined forms and pure colors with which these great artists revolutionized how we see. Two adjoining exhibitions reveal how they worked toward common goals of order and lucidity. One offers a glimpse of the intensely personal correspondence between two Bauhaus luminaries—Wassily Kandinsky and Josef Albers. The other is the first retrospective ever devoted to Albers in France—some 80 works, including seventeen red *Homages to the Square* (all either given or lent by the Albers Foundation, of which I am the director). As intended, the art of these two modernists deliberately reveals almost nothing about their daily lives. Yet the show evokes, rather than conceals, some surprising mysteries.

While Albers's red is simply paint out of a tube, it might also suggest passion and blood; the letters between the two men certainly do. Kandinsky, the fiery Russian intellectual who created incendiary abstractions, and Albers, the straight shooter whose training at the hand of his carpenter father is evident in the impeccable craftsmanship of his art, had much in common when they taught at the Bauhaus. But they had married very different women. Albers's wife, Anni, the pioneering textile artist, dressed in austere white and beige, and was careful to conceal her background as a publishing heiress from Berlin. She once told me that when her uncles arrived at the Dessau Bauhaus in a Hispano Suiza, she quickly sent the chauffeur to a side street before her no-glitz image was tarnished. Kandinsky was on his second marriage, this time to the much younger Russian beauty Nina—a bauble who was more interested in donning the latest fashions than in discussing the transformation of humankind through the mass production of the teacup.

In 1933, when the Nazis forced the Bauhaus closed, the Alberses went to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Josef began to transform the teaching of art in America, and the Kandinskys moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine, outside Paris. Until Kandinsky's death, twelve years later, the two men carried on a correspondence



NINA KANDINSKY PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALEXANDER LIBERMAN AMONG HER LATE HUSBAND'S PAINTINGS IN 1953.

## wives of the artists

A murder mystery that still haunts the Bauhaus.



JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS IN EUROPE BEFORE THE NAZIS CLOSED THE BAUHAUS AND, ABOVE, ALBERS'S 1970 HOMAGE TO THE SQUARE.

that chronicled their post-Bauhaus private lives. In a notable letter from 1935, Kandinsky described his despair over a world where "neither the public at large nor the beautiful people show the least interest in art." At the bottom, Nina scrawled an ecstatic addendum. At a ball given by a Russian grand duke, she had worn a magnificent gold lamé gown and danced a Viennese waltz with a prince: "I would have loved, dear Albers, to have danced with you." If Kandinsky had trouble understanding the artistic tastes of the French, it is hard to imagine what he would have made of his wife's extravagant fate after he died. Nina's appetite for looking swell only grew after a boom in the art market sent the price of a single Kandinsky canvas above what the artist had earned in his entire lifetime. With her new fortune, Nina began collecting jewelry and soon was so well known for her million-dollar habit that Van Cleef & Arpels and Cartier vied for her patronage.

In September 1980, I happened to be with Anni when she got an astonishing phone call—Nina, she was told, had been murdered. Tut Schlemmer—the widow of Oskar Schlemmer—had gone to Nina's Gstaad chalet, the Esmeralda, for a dinner date, and when no one answered, summoned the police, who discovered that Nina had been strangled. No paintings were missing, and most of her rocks were still in the bank vault,

but her latest diamond necklace—valued at almost \$1 million—was never seen again. Anni, who favored Mexican clay beads, was preoccupied at the time with retrospectives of her own work and of her husband's. News of Nina's death was utterly flabbergasting.

Though the Bauhaus is given new scrutiny at the Pompidou, the murder of the 84-year-old Nina, which has never been solved, seems all but forgotten. Mention of the crime may not have made it into the catalog, but speculation about who did it has not ceased among the cognoscenti. Even the museum, which was the sole inheritor of Kandinsky's estate, has never been able to get information from the Swiss authorities. When I recently talked with the exhibition's curator, a man who had often collaborated with Nina, he allowed, with a sardonic laugh, that when the scandal was still swirling a German newspaper had gone so far as "to assign me a villainous role." It seems unfathomable—but so is a lot about the lives of these painters of abstraction and dreams. Form may follow function, but the pattern of life is never quite as orderly.—NICHOLAS FOX WEBER *pata* ▶ 152