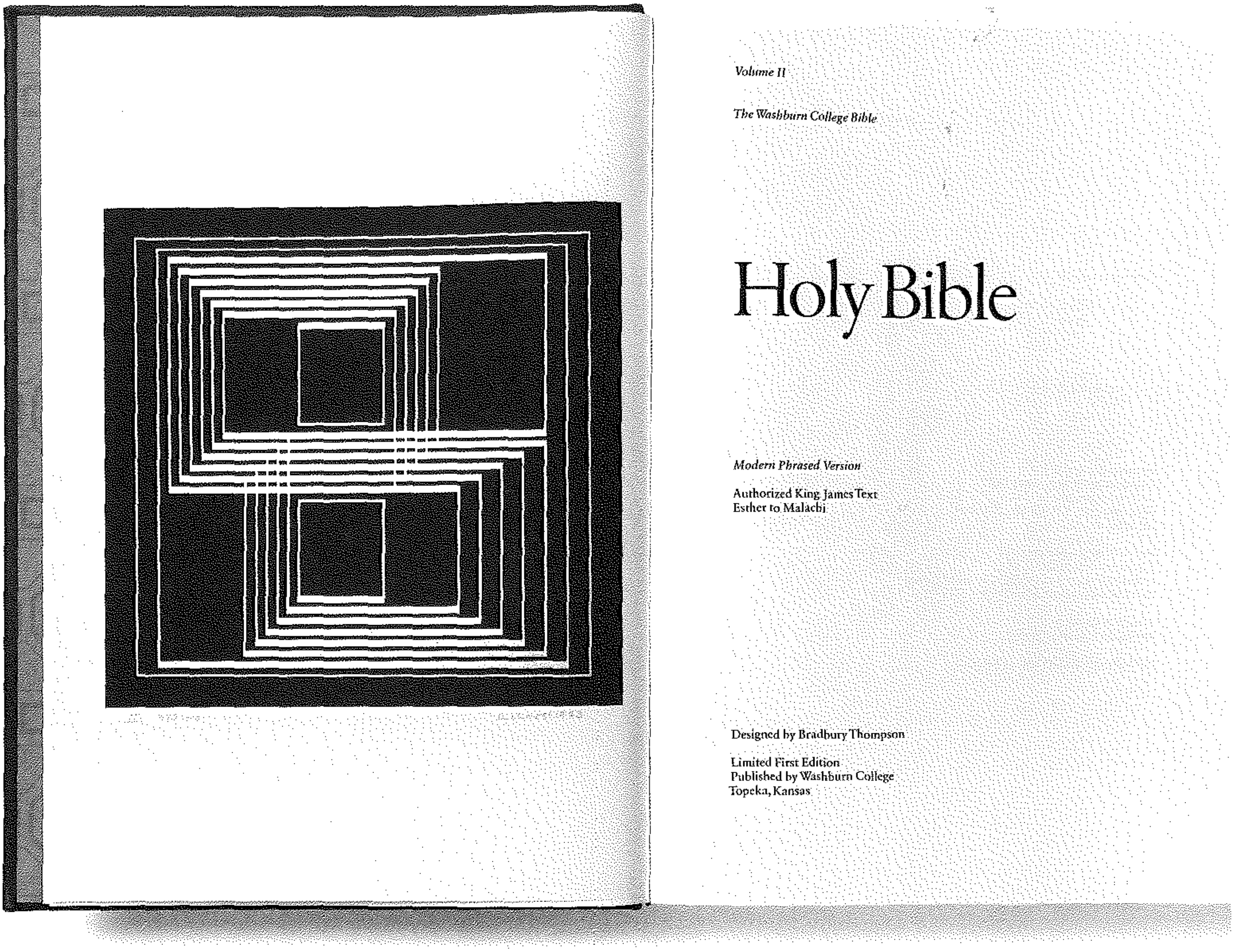

Volume II

The Washburn College Bible

Holy Bible

Modern Phrased Version

Authorized King James Text
Esther to Malachi

Designed by Bradbury Thompson

Limited First Edition
Published by Washburn College
Topeka, Kansas

The Washburn College Bible, 1979
Designed by Bradbury Thompson
Published by Washburn College, Topeka, Kansas
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The Sacred Modernist: Josef Albers as a Catholic Artist

Nicholas Fox Weber

> "Distilling is beautiful. First of all, because it is a slow, philosophic, and silent occupation, which keeps you busy but gives you time to think of other things, somewhat like riding a bike. Then, because it involves a metamorphosis from liquid to vapor (invisible), and from this once again to liquid; but in this double journey, up and down, purity is attained, an ambiguous and fascinating condition... And finally, when you set about distilling, you acquire the consciousness of repeating a ritual consecrated by the centuries." Primo Levi [1]

Why start out with Primo Levi, a Jewish Italian writer, when considering Josef Albers, a Catholic German painter? It is because Josef's sense of the sacred, his redolent spirituality, was "universal and timeless"—his wife Anni's favourite two words—and had less to do with a specific place, epoch, creed, or profession than with a general quality of reverence.

Yet his strong faith in forces he worshipped but did not fully understand, his profound sense of appreciation, was rooted in Catholicism. Late in his life, when Josef was best known for the *Homages to the Square* he had started in 1950 at age sixty-two, and was asked how he finally selected his colours — he had thousands of tubes of paint, sometimes as many as eight with the same precise name, like "Mars Yellow", but each made by a different manufacturer, which he would apply straight to the panel with a painter's knife— he would answer, "I work, and I work, and I try this one, and that one, and then I just use one and look up and praise God." The God he worshipped was in some way the same one to whom he had prayed ever since he was a little boy, attending the Catholic church in his home town, Bottrop, in the region of Germany which is, as is much of Westphalia, more Catholic than Protestant. He was brought up in a devoutly religious family—first his father and mother, and then, following his mother's death when he was still a child, his father and stepmother—and he remained observant, to varying degrees, for his entire life.

And so we bring the Catholic Josef to Ireland—where the religious traditions would have been so familiar to him. This artist who devoted his life to revealing miracles with purely abstract art is at home here in many ways.

At the same time that we acknowledge the importance to him of Christianity, however, and the origins of his beliefs in the teachings of the church in which he was raised, we recognise Josef's faith as being beyond any one particular religion. His immersion in what Levi calls the "slow, philosophic, and silent", and the splendid visual events resultant of his diligence as well as his poetry, transcend different sets of beliefs. Fascinated by the gods of the ancient Incas, married to Anni who was raised as a Protestant but of Jewish origins, drawn to Chinese philosophy, devoted to Plato, he was ecumenical in his thinking while remaining formed by the catechism of his childhood.

What Levi celebrates—the process of astute observation, simplification, and the revelation of miraculous occurrences —is the essence of Josef's art. So is the sense of ritual. The metamorphosis of colour, the capacity of straight lines to appear curved, the wonder of transformation whereby a flat yellow acquires gradations of tone and glows with a luminosity emerging from its shadows: these were the sorts of wonders—understandable and, to Josef, realisable, but nonetheless extraordinary—that constituted the goals, and the splendid results, of his lifelong journey. Distillation was fundamental to Josef's method. But, like Primo Levi, methodical as he was, meticulous in his measuring of quantities and his choice of elements, masterful as he was in his handling of his tools and the technique with which he executed his craft, he used that simplification and refinement to evoke splendors beyond his comprehension. By entering the territory where religion and science overlap, he realised his goals of visual alchemy and fervent celebration. As with Primo Levi, the worship of the inexplicable, the immersion in "ambiguous and fascinating" processes, is the core of his art.

I use the Alberses' first names because I was lucky enough to know them both. With "Josef", the Christian name not only links him to the sacred carpenter, the saint for whom he was named, but also evokes his young boy simplicity—not the professional, Teutonic, side that comes out when one says

"Albers". With "Anni", there is the soft and elegant sound so suitable to her wonderfully modulated persona.

I first met them both a bit over forty years ago, when Josef was in his eighties, Anni in her seventies, and I in my twenties. They were a fantastic couple, at that time the last two living members of the Bauhaus faculty. But what made them so particularly appealing was that they were devoted to their current work with a zeal and seriousness I had never seen before. They lived quietly, at a remove from the art world or anything else that might intrude on the way of life they had carefully constructed so that each could engage with maximum energy and effectiveness in printmaking, architectural commissions, writing about art and aesthetics, and, quite simply, calm and silent reflection.

I soon became aware that on Sunday mornings Josef drove himself the short distance from the raised ranch suburban house where he and Anni lived with bare-bones simplicity to the Holy Infant Church: a nondescript modern brick Catholic sanctuary five minutes by car from his house. There are still—in Orange, Connecticut, where the house and church are—people who remember the man with his shock of smooth white hair walking in, on his own, to mass. Some of them realised that he was famous, important in the eyes of the world—he was the subject of television programs and feature newspaper articles, and in 1970 was the first living artist to have a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—but few knew more about him, except that he was courteous and polite, yet reticent to socialise. He said hello and smiled, but kept to himself, on those Sunday mornings when he was alone and most everyone else was with family members or friends. He knelt, he prayed, he sang the hymns, he offered brief and pleasant greetings to anyone who greeted him, and he left as quietly as he entered.

Among a few of the other people worshipping at Holy Infant, he was said to be some sort of artist. It was rumoured that he made paintings of coloured squares, lots of them, all of the same format, and that to some people these were considered serious art, but few of his fellow churchgoers understood what these pictures without subject matter were all about. However, at least the solitary old man appeared like a regular guy, with his sombre gray or tan shirts buttoned to the top of his neck, his khaki trousers and tweed jackets, and the shock of white hair and honest handsome face that made him resemble Spencer Tracy.

His fellow congregants might have been fascinated that when he and Anni were told that a television documentary about him, emphasizing those paintings Josef told me were "platters to serve colour" but which were officially called the *Homages to the Square*, would be broadcast in colour nationwide on a major network, and therefore looked forward to seeing his brilliant reds and yellows when they turned on their small portable Sony t.v. to watch it, they quickly telephoned the producer to complain that the program was not as promised, but was only in black and white. The producer asked if they had a colour television. They had no idea what one was.

Not only did the Alberses' house lack most of the recent appurtenances to modern living, but Josef's bedroom, although it had electricity, in most other ways could have been a monk's cell in keeping with the first Christian monasteries. Nothing whatsoever hung on the plain white walls (sheetrock resembling plaster). The single bed was like a cot, a box spring and mattress on simple short wooden legs. There was no headboard; the covering was a simple synthetic bedspread, also white, from Sears Roebuck, at that time America's best-known discount department store. The only other large piece of furniture in the room was a plain cherry wood desk, which Josef had designed himself and which was made in a workshop at Black Mountain College. Other than that, there was a simple bookshelf next to the bed—with a well-worn volume of nineteenth century German poetry lying alone on the top shelf. All clothing was concealed behind the plain closet doors. This was a space for retreat and contemplation. Nothing would intrude on Josef's process of reflection, and the whiteness and view out of the two windows made him feel close to the larger cosmos, which is where he often was in his thoughts.

Every few weeks, when he and Anni were on their way to the post office or the grocery store together, he would ask her to stop at the church so he could go in and take confession. After "Juppi"—the name she and his close friends used for him—died, in March of 1976, Anni became guilt-ridden about the way she invariably said to him, on these occasions, "Be sure to stay in there a long time! You have a lot you ought to confess." What he said, the acts of which he hoped to unburden himself, no one will ever know. But what is certain is that the rites and traditions of his childhood were important to him at the end of his life.

He had, for the most part, deliberately put that childhood behind him. Once he went to the Bauhaus, in 1920, there was only a single occasion of his returning to the industrial and mining city of Bottrop, where he was born, and where, he told me, "even your spit was black" because of the coal smoke. He embraced modernism; he befriended Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky; he discovered Anni's fancy Berlin and then the U.S. and Mexico. But as he knew he was approaching death, he emphasised his roots, and became nostalgic. When art historians would try to pin this or that artistic influence on him, he would say, "I come from Adam and my father, that's all." His father was a builder, carpenter, plumber, housepainter, electrician who had taught Josef the crafts of his trade, and he was proud to have learned them. (He told me, in front of one of his *Homages to the Square*, that when he applied each paint straight from the tube to the panel, never putting one paint on top of the other, he always started at the center, because his father had taught him "that when you paint a door you begin in the middle, and that way you catch all the drips and don't get your cuffs dirty."

Apprising me of this, Josef used his hand to indicate the motions with which he worked and kept those shirt cuffs clean.) He craved certain foods: the particular type of apple butter indigenous to the region (Rheinischeapfelkraut), Westphalian ham, volkornbrot—the dark grainy pumpernickel he preferred to the standard American bread "which is like Kleenex". And he returned to Catholic ritual.

One of the first tasks Josef's father ever gave him when he was growing up was to paint grave markers in the local Catholic cemetery. They were simple wooden crosses, and all he had to do was apply the paint neatly and evenly. We need to picture him as a boy, perhaps twelve years old, on his knees in the graveyard, thinking of the dead body in its coffin buried underneath him, contemplating the meaning of the cross which he was putting back into shape.

A few years later, he became a schoolteacher—of all subjects, to small children, in a one-room school house. The school was for what was then called "the peasant population" —children growing up on farms—in the village of Stadtlohn. In 1911, at age 23, Josef made a drawing there which is his earliest extant work. [catalogue pp. 63] The view from the window of his modest flat in the Münsterland town, it is a carefully rendered pen and ink close-up of part of the steeple of the local church.

Josef absorbed every possibility of the sight. He enlivened the angles of the steeple and gave it a rich complexity, and he made a delicate horizontal and vertical mesh-like background which pulsates. Reacting viscerally to the noble reach of the church tower and its Gothic windows, as well as to the evening sky behind it, Josef has imbued them with energy and the sheer loveliness of a nocturne.

As in the *Homages to the Square* he would begin to produce thirty-nine years later, the artist has animated two-dimensional and three-dimensional space simultaneously. He moves the viewer sideways and up and down as well as into and out of the background. He evokes the massing of the steeple, while investing it with visual rhythm.

Clearly what excited Josef was not just the object of worship, but the *act* of worship. To build, to put heavy stones one on top of the other, to create a space for prayer, to assemble this steeple reaching heavenward: what testimony this is to human reverence, to ingenuity in the achievement of the means to approach God.

Art, like architecture, was Josef's sacred territory. In the drawing of the Stadtlohn steeple, he succumbed to, and extolled, the enchantment of black and white. Using unmodulated black lines and white paper, he created a range of gray tones, demonstrating a point he would later reiterate to students at Black Mountain College and Yale, that in art one plus one can equal more than two. Some of the church windows have black panes and white mullions; another is equally convincing with the glass shown as white and the mullions black. The tower is white with black detail, while the wall of a house in front of it is black with white detail; the crisp reversals are playful.

That massive church towering over the village embodied stability and power to the young teacher in the more modest local school. The subject with which Josef took such care had qualities he sought in his work: significance in the world, the ability to soothe people, a chance of survival into the future. The organised worship of God and the systematic pursuit of greater artistry were not far apart in the myriad of ways they give meaning to existence while exalting in what is given.

In the following years, Josef would often make images of churches in this part of Germany that was predominantly Catholic. After two years of training in Berlin in the teaching of art, he returned to the region where he grew up, and focused periodically on the interiors of large Gothic edifices, which he rendered in various graphic media. In *Church Interior* (it could be any number of actual buildings, or a hybrid of his own invention), he first made a light pencil line and then carefully apportioned ink lines to define further the essential shapes of this complicated configuration. [catalogue pp. 79] Next he accentuated chosen architectural details by filling them in with a delicate ink wash. Having set himself a rugged task in choosing or creating this particular view, he achieved it meticulously with a classical technique which enabled him to simplify the complex set of architectural images and let them breathe easily. In so doing, he conveys a sense of exalted space, a fantastic airiness and sense of light, as well as the majesty of the building that contains what feels like a portion of the greater cosmos, while at the same time facilitating the flow intrinsic to light and air. Almost concurrently, with quite a different approach, Josef used jagged lines in linoleum cut prints of the interior of the Münster Cathedral—now achieving, rather than the grace of that church interior drawn in muted tones, an intense drama in the vaulted nave. [catalogue pp. 73–77] The sense of mystery, even of supernatural powers, was well served by the sharp wood-cutting gouge and thick ink coverage Josef used to render it.

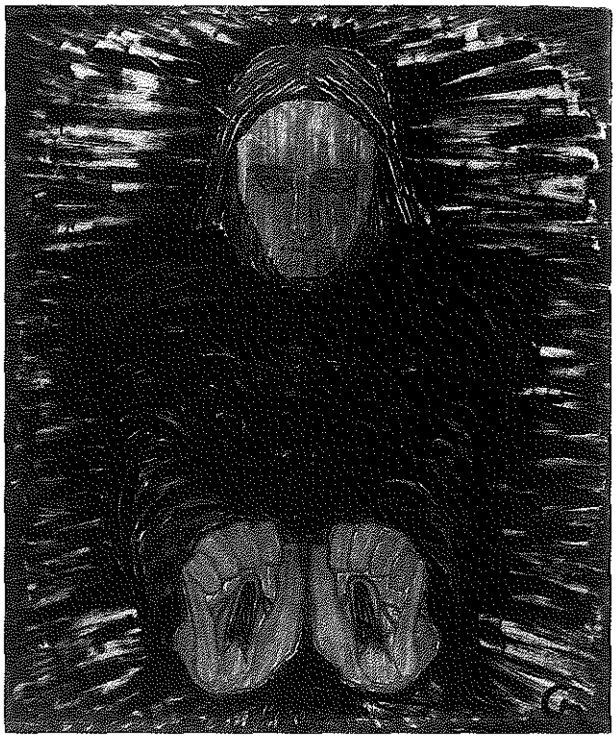
Sometimes he takes you inside the holy edifice; sometimes you gaze at it in all its monumentality. When he did a pencil drawing of the splendid Gothic cathedral in Cologne, he made its spires truly reach heavenward, combining quickness and accuracy to emphasise those soaring structures to which he calls attention with broader, tighter pencil strokes, his drawing tool applied with more force, than any other aspect of the building. [catalogue pp. 83] By focusing on the highest parts of the cathedral—the elements closest to God—Josef intensifies the religiosity. He drew houses and civic monuments as well, but it was only when the subject was a church that he went beyond making it merely architecture, but, rather, in full magnitude a place to worship the faith in which he believed.

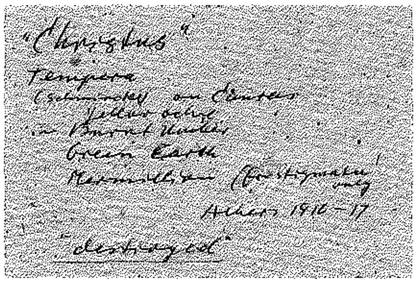
Josef's most overtly religious painting, an image of Christ emphasising the stigmata on the palms of his hands, has been destroyed, but Josef saved a photograph of it, on the back of which he wrote down details about the haunting tempera on canvas. [figures 1 and 2] With his boldest brushwork, the paint having been thrust down with palpable ardour, this fervent image conveys the essence of martyrdom. It lacks the finesse of Josef's later work — the articulation of the hands is practically clumsy — but it abounds in a sense of belief.

What is most astounding about the work is that Josef has used his own face for Christ. I write this both because of the unquestionable likeness of all of the features to the way Josef painted and drew them in numerous self-portraits of the same time period, and also because it is the face of the man as I knew him sixty years later. One could say that he used his own face for that of the Saviour because it was readily available to him, requiring only a look into the mirror, but, surely, if a man does a painting of the most sombre Jesus Christ brandishing the wounds of the nails to which he was attached to the Cross, and presents the subject as himself, it is a statement of his sense of mission for humanity.

Remarkably, later in life — based on the handwriting, and the use of English, it was probably in the 1950s — Josef wrote down the colours that he used on the painting. The stigmata, we learn, were painted in vermillion. Even then, he used colour to convey passion: the life force of blood.

fig. 1





"Christus"
Tempera
([illegible] on Canvas
Yellow ochre
in Burnt Umber
Green Earth
Vermillion (for stigmata only
Albers 1916–17
"destroyed"

fig. 2

In the last year of World War I, one of the worst blood baths in human history, Josef did a pencil, pen, and ink drawing of grave markers. [catalogue pp. 85] They are wooden crosses in rows: identical and without names on them, they have, we presume, been used to indicate where unknown soldiers were buried. These crosses are the sort Josef helped his father paint as a boy. But here he is a mature artist, and in this simple work the meaning of those soldiers' deaths becomes ineffably moving. The straightforward markers, rising from long grass, are both sombre and poignant; their sameness and closeness makes bare the tragedy of unidentified bodies below the soil, yet, as crosses, invite thoughts of the future resurrection of the soul.

Then, when the world came back to its senses and peace was declared, toward the end of 1918, Josef had, at age thirty, his first major artistic commission. It was to make a stained glass *Rosa Mystica* window for the local church in Bottrop. That work is the subject of another, well-warranted essay in this catalogue, for which reason we leave it except to acknowledge it as Josef's first exploration of the miracle of light passing through glass. Glass was the symbol of one of the fundaments of Catholicism: the process declared in the Annunciation, whereby Mary will be impregnated with the child of the Holy Ghost, becoming the future mother of Jesus while remaining a virgin. A medieval hymn made clear the metaphoric role of the material:

As the sunbeam though the glass
Passeth but not breaketh,
So the Virgin, as she was,
Virgin still remaineth.[2]

In Northern Renaissance art, glass—in the windows of the church interiors where the Annunciation is depicted, and in the glistening, womblike carafes near the Virgin—signifies Jesus's lineage as the son of God. In the broadest, most general way, it evokes the light and brightness born of Christianity; at the same time, specifically and literally, it symbolises the miracle of the birth of Christ. The devout and erudite Josef Albers knew this as he began to work with the new material that would preoccupy him for the next fifteen years. It represented thinking on another sphere, an acceptance of the inexplicable, and the wonder of faith. It also afforded Josef the chance to explore colour, and luminosity, as never before. "Vision is a miracle!" the window seems to declare. *Rosa Mystica* is a visual Hallelujah.

* * *

In 1920, Josef, at age thirty-two, went to the Bauhaus, a pioneering art school that had been founded the previous year. "I threw my old things out the window, started once more from the bottom. That was the best step I made in my life," he later said of this move to the experimental institution where carpentry and textile work and graphic design and other "practical" subjects were afforded an equal importance to the art of painting. At this institution in Weimar—a small German city where Bach and Goethe and Schiller had lived and left their remarkable culture—Josef continued to explore the medium of glass, the way that, with the flow of light through it, it glows in splendour.

It was the image of a Gothic cathedral, abstracted in a woodcut by Lyonel Feininger on the cover of a simple four-page pamphlet, which had initially drawn Josef to the new school. Feininger's image was a symbol of the integration of the arts. Walter Gropius, the founding director of the Bauhaus, reiterated that goal in a statement inside the pamphlet, which stressed proficiency in craft. But the cathedral also implied a certain spiritualism. With its towers soaring heavenward and its wondrous windows, the very idea of such a structure signified a new light.

Having made a church window before turning to a new art form, Josef was already at home with coloured glass. He was instinctively drawn to the capacity of windows to bring light into darkness. In what he had already done at St Michael's Church, as in the sort of Gothic cathedral drawn in a generalised way by Feininger, he had come to see the way these brilliantly coloured openings to the outdoors represented the *lux nova* (new light) of Christian faith, to which in Josef's eyes the Bauhaus's openness and belief in design was akin. In old churches, without windows one would barely have been able to see beyond the haze of candlelight and oil lamps. Window light overcame the darkness or blindness of all that had preceded. Where previously there had been confusion, and vision had been obscured, once the sun's rays passed through glass there was enlightenment. So Josef continued with these miraculous means of joining indoors to outdoors, albeit in a very new way.

First, too broke to buy art supplies, he went to the Weimar town dump, his backpack on his shoulders and pick axe in hand, and chopped up bottle fragments and shards which he then assembled into a vibrant art work. [catalogue pp. 93] Using other people's detritus, he experimented freely, giving the discarded glass unique and unprecedented possibilities. Through Josef's energy and jubilant immersion in the material and his astonishing freedom as he easily and unquestioningly accepted and moved ahead with abstraction, he realised the vast potential and vigour of his medium and turned garbage into a jewel.

That ability to take what is humble, worthless in the eyes of many, and recognise and extol its intrinsic worth, was, in the best way, a Christian act.

Then, when he had access to glassmakers' samples, small mosaics of crystalline colour, Josef made *Park*. [catalogue pp. 95] If one looks nine squares up or eleven down, and four from the right hand edge, there is a crucifix, set against a background which is a pink that appears nowhere else in the composition. At the top, in white, two vertical rectangles, each four units in height, with six rectangles, three units high, to the right of them, appears like an abstracted cathedral.

In 1994, at the time of an exhibition of the glass work at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the art historian Fred Licht wrote brilliantly about the cross in *Park*:

> One small area of *Park* stands out in serene but insistent contradiction to the work's severe economy in colour range [Licht had already written about the "narrow range of green and blue hues, highlighted by sparse, small areas of white"] and the basic form of the square: the two rectangles and squares of mildly glowing pink to the right and below the center of the panel. Within the context of the repetitive web of squares surrounding it, the black lines within the pink area declare themselves very eloquently to be a cross, which we can perceive as a purely formal device or a mystic symbol. In either case, the area's effect of warmth and stable tranquility within the overall syncopation of cool colours is deeply moving. Isolated and diminutive, the area asserts itself as the heart of the entire composition and sets the tone to which all other hues are attuned.[3]

Licht, who proceeds to discuss Josef's "ardent glow" as a "reference to the religious/visual strategies" of certain German Romantic artists, has captured the essential factor, which is the quality of the area with the cross as much as the specific iconographic intention. "Warmth and stable tranquility" are the perfect words to describe the true essence of Josef's religiosity. A precise narrative was never his point; a tone, and peacefulness, and the sense of solid and dependable forces, were.

Spiritual qualities were on Josef's mind, even in that most secular of schools, where the emphasis was on utilitarianism and good design for industry. Yet he distanced himself from the Mazdaznan movement, the main organised religious order movement at the school, led by the followers of Zoroaster. Its emphasis on ritual (shocking to the townspeople of Weimar when it included public bathing) and a rigorous vegetarian diet (half a century after the fact, Josef and Anni were still joking about the smell of garlic in the Bauhaus dining room) struck him as beside the point. His religious interests were less tied to specific rules of behaviour. The qualities that struck him as holy—and there were many—could not be codified, and did not bring with them a specific set of dos and don'ts. Rather, they were as subtle, and as resonant, as that cross on its softly luminous pink background in *Park*—as redolent of a soothing rightness.

Two years after Josef arrived at the Bauhaus, the intensely determined, strong-willed Annelise Fleischmann appeared at the new institution (it had been founded the year before Josef got there) in Weimar. She had opted to leave her parents' luxurious way of life, and their notion that she should settle down to a life of domestic ease like her mother's, in order to devote her life to making art.

There was a Bauhaus Christmas party at the end of 1922. Annelise attended dutifully, sat in the back of a room, and girded herself to get through an event where no one would notice her presence. Not only was she a newcomer, but she saw herself as a perpetual outsider. She was certain that Father Christmas—Walter Gropius, the founder and director of the Bauhaus, dressed as Santa Claus—would have nothing for her as he called out the names attached to the gifts piled up next to him. Annelise was so surprised to hear her own name that she thought it was a mistake. But people were staring in her direction, waiting for her to get up, and she realised she should step forward to receive her gift. It was a print, rolled up, with a gold ribbon around it, of Giotto's *Flight into Egypt*. Attached to that image from Giotto's fresco cycle in Padua was a card with Josef Albers's name on it.

The scene of the Virgin Mary on a donkey, the infant Jesus in her arms, with the triangulated mountain behind them perfectly echoing the form of the figures on the animal, embodied the harmony and beauty for which Annelise was longing. Josef knew how much the gift would please her. He was giving the woman with whom he had recently fallen in love, and with whom he would spend the rest of his life, the embodiment of what he most prized in art. The Giotto shows one of the sweetest of biblical scenes; it has charm; it conveys an intense peacefulness. That Annelise was Jewish made no difference. Tenderness, lack of artistic ego, an eye for colour and form, a sense that the visual and emotional realms were united, an abiding faith: these characteristics of the Giotto were for both of these young artists utterly vital.

In 1916, Josef had written his friend Franz Perdekamp about Giotto and the other Italian primitives. "Why do they give such an immediate impression of greatness? Because their techniques were so simple. They only had tempera and fresco and a few pigments.... They had great souls, but the limitations of their means certainly helped to prevent them dissipating themselves. ... They don't tie themselves in knots, and although they had no theory of composition they instinctively made their works harmonious. And they did not hold back their emotions. That is what I would like modern art to value: spatial distribution. It is so much better than composition and comes much closer to the ideals of the old masters, and for me it feels much less artificial (think of the idea of composing by the golden section), much more artistic, and much freer."[4]

The one work by Giotto that Josef knew firsthand when he wrote this was a single magnificent panel in Berlin: the large *Death of the Virgin*, a tempera from circa 1310. The tympanum in what was then the Kaiser Friedrich Museum is a complex and delicately balanced arrangement of a crowd of characters. What Josef calls the "spatial distribution" has been achieved with such eloquence that the scene perfectly accommodates the broad triangular form for which it was made. The subtle colours, and the precision and flair with which the facial expressions and postures have been rendered, give great poignancy to the scene. The end of the life of the Holy Mother is both suitably sad and exquisite.

The overlapping in a graceful sequence of golden halos testifies to the supreme artistry of the Italian master who, by the standards of the early twentieth century, was still considered a "primitive" rather than an artist of the Renaissance. The Berlin tympanum had given Josef the chance to observe the colour orchestration the Italian had managed with his restricted palette. The young artist from Bottrop marveled at the way that adjustment to certain limitations—the obtuse angle at the top of the panel, the dictates of the medium—enhance rather than diminish the result.

In the service of religion, Giotto had acted with a religious sensibility. He had followed the dictates of the situation, remained unassuming, and made his own needs and demands secondary to his wish to show the end of the Virgin's life in its full tragic beauty. What Josef admired—the small number of hues, and Giotto's great visual reach and emotional depth in spite of shortcomings inherent in tempera and fresco, the only media available to him—would become vital to his own work. He, too, wanted to illustrate the sacred. Like Giotto, he would keep himself in the background, work within the dictates and limitations of his craft, in order to make artwork that showed what was of far greater importance than the individual who made it.

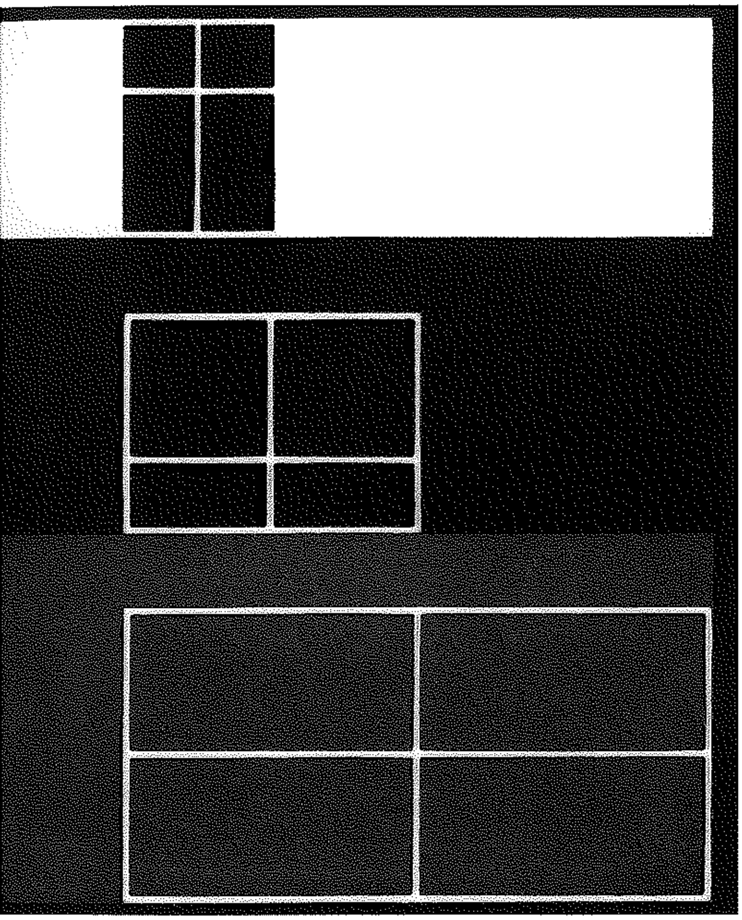
At the moment when Josef was looking at the Giotto in Berlin, Walter Gropius was beginning to conceive of the Bauhaus. Neither, of course, knew of one another as of yet. But each had strong ideas of service to humankind and of self-denial as being essential to artistic creation. They were Believers.

Josef married Anni in May of 1925. The ceremony was held in a Catholic church in Berlin. The location and ritual were so distressing to Anni's younger brother, because of his devotion to Protestantism, that he would not attend, but only joined the assemblage of ten or so family members afterwards for the small lunch celebration at the fashionable Adlon Hotel. Josef and Anni went to Italy, primarily Florence, for a wedding trip (the word "honeymoon" is, Anni would say, "not our style"), and when they were there they both felt a deep influence of the geometric patterns on the Duomo and the facades of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Maggiore.

The Bauhaus moved to new headquarters in Dessau, and Josef invented a technique for sandblasting layers of opaque glass that were fused, or flashed, together. He started with a sheet of opaque, pure white milk-glass coated with a hair-thin layer of glass in a second colour: red, yellow, black, blue, or gray. The front layer was melted on by blowing the glass a second time. On top of it Josef placed a stencil cut from blotting paper; then he sandblasted with a compressed-air blower to remove all the areas of the surface that the stencil allowed to remain exposed. Sandblasting enabled him to obtain sharp contours and make flawless geometric forms.

After removing the stencil, Josef generally added another colour with paint (often a glass-blower's black iron oxide); finally, he baked the entire piece in a kiln to make the paint permanent. The colours were a counterfoil to the white milk-glass, which had a striking quality of light. It is, in fact, a light reflected off of an opaque surface that gives the illusion of light showing through a translucent medium. We feel as if the main light source is behind the object, whereas in reality it comes from the side that we are on and from which we see it—although back lighting can be an important secondary source.

Josef outdid himself in these flashed-glass pieces. [catalogues pp. 97–115] Using opaque glass to create an apparent translucency more powerful than actual translucency, making reflected light appear to be light coming from a direct source, he achieved the splendid sort of deception that was one of his artistic goals. The presence of the unexpected, the feast of surprises, was religious in nature.



Interior b, 1929
Sandblasted opaque flashed glass
Catalogue pp.109

He also revealed the astonishing attributes of colour. *Goldrosa* and *Upward* are created from the same stencil, and are plastically identical, yet because of the red in the first where there is blue in the second, they have completely different appearances. Their moods and spirits are in no ways the same—because of the personalities of their dominant hues. But, beyond that, with the change in colour, a lot else differs as well. Seen side by side, the two works have totally different rhythms. The square that is blue on the upper left of *Upward* appears smaller than in *Goldrosa*, entirely as a by-product of its light intensity. What is in the foreground in one work is in the background of the other, and vice versa. The movement is not the same; the placement of forms appears not to be the same. This was the power of colour: a force that Josef deified.

There was, at the Bauhaus, a woman who claimed to be pregnant with Josef's child, while she maintained that she had never had sex with him. The woman never showed any signs of the pregnancy, and certainly did not give birth to the baby, but the knowledge of her insistence on the fact was widespread. Anni told me about it, more than once, always with a laugh. "He was not *that* holy, you know, or that innocent!" she added.

Cruciform imagery continued to appear in his glass work through the 1920s. The form, appealing both for its visual purity and its narrative quality, looms over *Interior a* and *Interior b* almost as if being carried high above the rest of the scenario. [catalogue pp.107 and pp.109]

In both instances, the cross loses physical weight and becomes vaporous because it is rendered in the white of that soft, subtle milk-glass, against a powerful black background. The black gives it its appropriate solemnity.

The only difference between these two remarkable abstract compositions—which, as works of 1929, seemed to presage a lot of Minimal Art of the 1960s and afterwards—is that in *Interior a* the large horizontal rectangle, subdivided by vertical and horizontal lines which section it into four equal units, is rendered in gray, whereas in *Interior b* those same lines are white. Otherwise, everything is identical. The changes that occur because of the single difference are both physical and emotional; *a* is almost sad in tone, redolent of grief, whereas *b* has a true spirit of resurrection.

Yet to what degree Josef thought of those crosses in the sandblasted glass constructions as the instrument of Christ's death—or, rather, simply as abstract form, juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical lines at precise right angles, the horizontal cross piece positioned at the right height to create squares above and vertical rectangles below—is unknowable. Was he conscious of the Holy Cross as he made his stencil for the glass to be sandblasted, or unawares? Is there a process of osmosis at play from all the occasions in church as a child, and from the art he probably saw at home? Possibly the matter is of negligible importance; what counts is that in Josef there was a sense of justice, of procession, of ritual, of rightness—a voice that came through no matter what. Symbolism and iconography were never Josef's issue; a moral tone was. And that is what is offered by his crosses of the 1920s: a sanctity, a feeling for justice, a pervasive sense of balance. The qualities offered by religion in its purest, truest sense were essential to him.

And he did offer one general statement, a text he entitled "A New Type of Glass Picture", which gives us insight into his own views on the spiritual as well as the technical aspect of his achievement. After explaining the sandblasting method, and pointing out that "sandblasting is used the way the tombstone carver applies it for engraving of names which, nowadays, is rarely done by chiseling" (Josef had a lifelong fascination with tombstone workmanship; he once explained to me that the origin of serifs on Roman-style letters was that these letters were first carved into tombstones, the serif being what slight indentation remained when the carver removed his chisel), he writes:

> The colour and form possibilities are very limited. But the unusual colour intensity, the purest white and deepest black and the necessary preciseness as well as the flatness of the design elements, offer an unusual and particular material form and effect.

Then, referring to a later commission [catalogue pp.212–215 and pp.220–221], he makes an observation which is equally pertinent to *Interior a* and *Interior b*:

> Particularly "White Cross" should speak for itself, through its simplicity in compression and colour … . Though almost mathematical in form and measurement, its radial and static symmetry, I believe, improves its mystic atmosphere and vibration.[5]

Those last words would apply equally to his later *Homages to the Square*. They also encapsulate Primo Levi's idea of distillation. How many artists have so reduced their language, visual and verbal, to as wonderfully far-reaching an idea, such a spectacular blend of tidy and refined and grand, as "radial and static symmetry"? And then, who else but Josef, with his modest, "I believe", his way of not making too assertive or possibly boastful a statement about his own work, would have used the equally modest "improves"—rather than something thunderous like "achieves"—before "mystic atmosphere and vibration"?

That is, however, what his work realises to a glorious extent. The early glass constructions, the late colour paintings, all create "mystic atmosphere and vibration"—that general feeling of inexplicable happenings, and holiness, which radiates into the world.

When the Alberses fled Germany in November of 1933, they could take only a very limited number of their possessions with them. Unknown to them, an "angel in the background"—as Anni later described Edward M.M. Warburg—had paid for their first-class steamship tickets, organised after Josef accepted the invitation to teach and to make art the focal point of the curriculum at the newly founded Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and so they had a generous baggage allowance, but they were able to take only a few books. (The following year, they succeeded in having Anni's father ship most of Josef's glass constructions. U.S. Customs officials broke a number of them when opening the packing crates at the official point of entry in North Carolina, upsetting the artist greatly since the work had traveled undamaged until that last stage, but whatever personal possessions the Alberses kept, other than those art works, were what they carried onto the ship in which they crossed to the U.S.)

One of those books was a large and heavy hardcover book titled *Die Kunst der Gotik*. The publisher had had it printed in 1926 at Ullsteinhaus—Anni's mother's family's business—and it was full of spectacular illustrations, including high quality colour plates, tipped onto black paper, each with a sheet of tissue paper to protect it.

The wonderful black and white photos included marvelous images of the cathedrals of Paris, Chartres, Reims, Amiens, Rouen, Canterbury, Lincoln, Salisbury, Exeter, Cologne, Siena, Milan, Barcelona, and Toledo, inside out, with vivid views of their portals and the steeples and their vast interiors. The Bauhaus had used the gothic cathedral as the image of what the school was meant to be: a place where artisans of every field, whether glassmakers or stonecutters or painters or architects, worked together, anonymously, to serve a purpose higher than themselves. Josef loved the idea of those communal achievements; he also often feasted on the pages of the book he selected as one of the few treasures to take to America.

In fact, Josef told me that he preferred Romanesque architecture to Gothic. The clarity and simplicity of Romanesque facades, the quietude and geometric grace, had immense appeal for him. But that large book on Gothic art afforded him immense pleasure because, in addition to the illustrations of the cathedrals and other great churches, there were plates of marvelously executed sculptures of saints lined up side by side; of Jesus with his hand raised, and of the Virgin and Child, at Amiens, each work so touching and reverent; of the haunting Madonna in Notre Dame in Paris; of Claus Sluter's animated and passionate Madonna from the charterhouse at Dijon; of the serious looking Apostles in the Cologne Cathedral which Josef had sketched as a younger man. There were colour plates of polychromed Gothic statuary, and a fold out of Hubert and Jan Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece. This was art work that was executed with spectacular skill and feeling, devoted to the expression of faith. The book had images printed in the highest quality imaginable for the era of Annunciations and Depositions by Roger van der Weyden, and a colour plate of the lamentation by Hugo Van der Goes that is in the main museum in Vienna: for Josef, these were the masterpieces of world art.

Modernism interested him less. He was a man of his time, a master at the Bauhaus, a professor at the most progressive new art school of the era, but as an artist he was most at home with Northern Renaissance Masters, with Piero della Francesca and Giotto, with the artists who painted in devotion and humility, for whom self-expression was not an issue, who conveyed visual and spiritual perfection with the urgency and care they deserved.

* * *

Josef began to paint in oil on panel after his move to the United States in 1933. He was soon making crosses in new ways. Now there was texture and impasto, and at times the impression of something cloud-like, and therefore celestial. [catalogue pp.137] As in his glass work, however, he kept the crosses white—making them look like apparitions, spiritual visions as much as solid matter, which augments their enchanting mysteriousness. His engagement with Christian tradition was equally apparent in the photographs and photo-collages he made of churches, interiors and exteriors, Baroque and Colonial, on the trips he and Anni began taking to Mexico.

* * *

What was apparent in *all* of his work, however, whether it was printmaking that revealed a strong wood grain, or collages made from dead leaves he picked up on the ground during the autumns he loved so much in the United States, or his experiments with various surface treatments, or the forays into new domains of abstraction, was that "mystic atmosphere and vibration" which he identified as one of the possible achievements of his sandblasted black and white glass pieces. In one leaf collage, unknown during his lifetime but important enough to him so that he preserved it carefully (in a storage room where, at Anni's beckoning, I unearthed it after Josef's death), two inert oak leaves, alongside which Josef painted forms that add dimension and depth, float in front of coloured paper that assumes the role of sea and sky, so that the two leaves are like fabulous other-worldly presences. [catalogue pp.119]

It is for each of us to see, in our own way, throughout the corpus of everything Josef did, that "mystic atmosphere and vibration."

* * *

In *The Guermantes Way*, Marcel Proust writes of the paintings of his invented artist Elstir, "I had asked of his painting that it would lead me to the understanding and love of things better than itself ... not so much that it might perpetuate their beauty for me as that it might reveal that beauty to me."[6] Josef's work indeed introduces its viewer to territory beyond itself, to a general sense of the miraculous, and of a spectacular combination of excitement and extreme calm. It is rare for an amusement-park level of visual surprises to coexist with a beatific quietude, but this is precisely what happens in the art of Josef Albers in all its aspects: from linear black and white prints to compositions of pure and brilliant colour.

Josef told me that his *Variant* paintings, his first large series of paintings in which carefully selected colours are placed side by side, each applied directly to the white background, were based on systems that demonstrated "my madness, my insanity." He smiled after explaining to me why this was so. Most of these paintings are based on systems where there are virtually equal quantities of each colour, or, in some cases, equal amounts of three colours and precisely half as much of two others. He did not want his viewers to recognise these formulas, however. Rather, we are to think we see more yellow than gray, or more pink than brown, even if this is not true.

Josef made me his guinea pig for one of these paintings, asking me of which colour I saw the most, only to explain to me after I had answered "orange" that he had applied ninety square centimeters of each of the five colours in the painting, but that if other people had been present with us in his studio that day, one might have said the bright yellow and another the burnt sienna, because "people don't see colour in the same way," and vision depends on the viewer, not on facts.

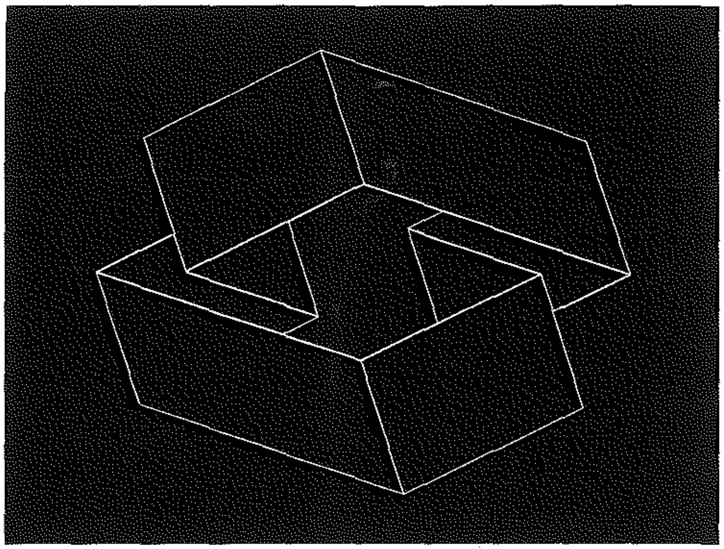
He then went on to laugh and tell me how much he loved a highway sign on the Merritt Parkway as one crossed the border of his hometown. The sign has the words "This is Orange." In keeping with Connecticut regulations, it is painted a grassy green, with the lettering in white. "Words don't identify colours, anyway," he continued. "When I say 'red' it does not create in my mind the same thing it creates in yours."

Perception and truth are not the same, Josef explained. A devout missionary of the power of colour, he devoted his life to studying its possibilities and giving it as effective a voice as he could develop. He had learned that colour could deceive—it has qualities that enable it to give the impression that there is more or less of it than is actually present—and he treated that trickery as a beautiful, virtually spiritual, attribute.

Sometimes in the *Variants* beacons of light shine out at us. Pinks and yellows, played against darker hues, radiate luminosity like that of those opaque glass constructions where reflected light illusorily seems to come from behind. Josef recognised and presented light as an uplifting force—invigorating in part because we associate it with the sun: the source of earthly growth, the parent of our world.

This luminosity is central to the spiritual force of Josef's paintings. It elevates them from the mundane to the celestial plane. The apparent (but not actual) translucency and transparency also enhance their other-worldly aspect. In a century when many artistic movements and trends in thought stressed a probing of the self, and highly personalised autobiography, Josef's work was invariably geared toward transcendence.

The appearance of colours changes according to their surroundings. This, too, was made wonderfully apparent in the *Variants*, where the central vertical rectangles and the horizontal bands at the top and bottom of the composition may be made with the identical paint, yet seem so much lighter or darker depending on their neighbouring hues. Not only does the hue seem to change, but so does the spatial position; it can seem closer to the picture plane in the vertical



***Structural Constellation*, ca. 1950**
Machine-engraved vinylite mounted on board
Catalogue pp. 203

Josef Albers, ca. 1919
Courtesy of the Kuhlmann family and the estate of Hubert Henze, Bottrop, Germany

rectangles, while it reads as distant background in the broader horizontal expanses. These are the miracles of vision, Josef's treasure chest.

Art was to accomplish what nature could not do. At the same time that he explored the world of colour with exceptional devotion and imagination, Josef used straight lines to unprecedented effect in a body of work he called *Structural Constellations*. [catalogue pp.196–211] Having done numerous sketches for these, he executed them in large drawings, embossed prints, white-line engravings on black vinylite, and large architectural commissions.

He told an interviewer: "Though my paintings and linear constructions are not connected, they stem from the same attitude, the same urge to achieve from a minimum of effort a quantum of effect. Do less in order to do more."[7]

That economy of means also required a subjugation of the self, a wish to reveal what was miraculous, not what was personal.

In these *Structural Constellations*, shapes that appear open, as if we can walk into them, suddenly appear to be impenetrable blocks. Paper-thin planes show their tops and bottoms in rapid succession. Flat surfaces bend. Parallel lines appear to be at oblique angles; lines that are not parallel seem to be.

The action diverts us and takes us out of ourselves. We feel secure, on a course that has been carefully and precisely premeditated—and at the same time we are on an adventure, being led to unimagined occurrences. We learn to maintain our faith in the face of ever-changing situations. Josef's work provides solutions; it extols the value of selectivity and careful study. Anything extraneous is cleared away. The artist's diligence exemplifies the merit of taking a direction and adhering to it. Revealing mysteries, he personified stability.

In 1950, when he was sixty-two years old, Josef, having left Black Mountain College and then become dean of the Yale Art School, came up with his idea of nested squares to further his presentation of colour.

He derived a system, whereby three or four squares are centered to the left and right, but arranged so that the measurements underneath the central square are doubled to the left and right of it and tripled above it. This facilitated the interaction of colour; it also created a certain tension by inducing the viewer to see the sequence of squares as flat and two dimensional while being simultaneously three dimensional.

Josef's goal was as it had been perpetually: to attain a purer place of being. He sought—and in his art was determined to create—spaces unencumbered by wasteful distraction. He craved simplicity and absolution: a climate of quietude that facilitated a particular mode of excitement, an atmosphere in which the rustlings are distinctly audible without being disruptive. In many ways, that search culminated in the *Homages to the Square*.

The Gothic cathedral remained for him, meanwhile, a space of great importance. The description of the Heavenly City from REVELATION: 21.[1] which helped formulate the layout for that cathedral also suggests the configuration of the *Homages to the Square*:

> And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.
>
> Having the glory of God: and her light *was* like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal;
>
> And he had a wall great and high, *and* had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:
>
> On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates.
>
> And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.
>
> And he talked with me and had a golden reed to measure the city, and the gates thereof, and the wall thereof.
>
> And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.
>
> And he measured the wall thereof, an hundred *and* forty *and* four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel.
>
> And the building of the wall of it was *of* jasper; and the city *was* pure gold, like unto clear glass. . . .
>
> And I saw no temple therein; for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.
>
> And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb *is* the light thereof.
>
> And the nation of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it.
>
> And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.
>
> And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. [8]

The ways in which the *Homages* honour that arrangment are multiple. There is the simple yet magnificent aspect of the equality of the sides. All four corners and all four boundaries are the same: the result is both an ambient order and a lack

Josef Albers, New Haven, CT, 1953
Photographer: Anni Albers

of questioning. The viewer of Josef's paintings feels as he does when walking into a cathedral, or entering the Heavenly City in his thoughts, the perfection of the system, the pleasing mathematical rectitude. The effect of this harmonious organisation is to make one feel comforted by the absence of doubt and of the need for additional calculation.

The underlying grid system augments those salubrious sensations. In the Heavenly City the numbers of most salient significance were three and twelve; for Josef, three and four (components of twelve) hold supreme. For there are always either three or four squares. The side aisles—the spaces to the left and right of the central square—are always twice as wide as the entrance below, while the kingdom above is three times the measurement of that entrance. A far reaching analogy, you might say, but precisely the sort of thing that intrigued Josef, whose thoughts were often in church, and on the proportions of Romanesque as well as Gothic architecture.

The precise formal organisation induces a pervading sense of harmony. Order pervades. But it is by no means static; rather, it is the playing field for infinite spirit and imagination.

"Clear as crystal": this was precisely how Josef wanted his colours. So he primed his panels with between six to ten coats of white gesso, applied according to a rigorous system. The matte whiteness afforded maximum clarity for the colour he then put on top of it. He wanted those hues undisturbed, their strength at its epitome; to achieve that intensity, he used pigment straight from the tube, undiluted, and moved it ("the way I spread butter on pumpernickel") with a painter's knife.

"And I saw no temple therein." This lack of imagery, the greater possibility of abstraction, was seminal to Josef's vision. Through colour—unadorned, non-representational—one enters a higher sphere.

"No need of the sun, neither of the moon." By 1950, he had been fairly buffeted around by life. There had been times of great financial privation, a struggle for survival, a need in art to achieve solace that might counteract the vagaries of life. Having been too often at the mercy of governments, school administrators, even forces as heinous as the Third Reich, he wanted a situation he could control. Rather than depend on unreliable daylight, he worked under a precise arrangement of fluorescent bulbs, studying each *Homage* on plywood worktables on sawhorses under two sets of conditions, one created by bulbs arranged warm-cold-cold-warm, the other under warm-cold-warm-cold.

The real light, however, comes from the paintings. He selected the right colours in relationship to one another to make the luminosity occur.

The miracle of light in these *Homages* is astonishing. While Josef painted flat, the surfaces seem shaded, and a glow appears. Colours proceed from darker to lighter or the reverse, but the progression is illusory—thanks to the arrangement of forms and the impeccable choice of hues that make such activity occur. One colour shows up inside another.

"And there shall be no night there." Josef had created something dependable, which we can count on perpetually.

And—indeed—"the glory and the honour of the nations has come to it." Universal in form, timeless in quality and intent, the *Homages* have captivated audiences all over the world. However elusive they may be at first, however much the first ones puzzled people—and even if Anni, as she told me, balked at Josef, "Now all you are painting are Easter eggs; we will never have enough to live on"—they fascinate people all over the world, and have become prized for qualities that go beyond all spoken and written language.

The Celestial City, as it appeared in Apocalypse manuscripts of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and as it was realised in cathedrals like Amiens, is based on a square within a square. Otto von Simson, a great scholar of Gothic cathedrals, informs us that at Chartres:

> The length of the two bays is equal to the width of the nave between the piers, each double bay thus forming a square. As we look upward, the same square occurs in the elevation, the lower stringcourse being placed at a height exactly equal to the width of the nave. ... The proportions of Chartres Cathedral reveal ... the artistic conviction that stands behind it. Medieval metaphysics conceived beauty ... as the radiant manifestation of objectively valid laws. The elevation of Chartres Cathedral is the supreme vindication of this philosophy of beauty. The perfection of this great architectural system is the perfection of its proportions, proportions that the master developed not according to his personal intuition but by exact geometrical determination.[9]

No modern artist better carried forward this message from medieval times than did Josef. Having done drawings of proportionate architectural elevations, having returned time and again to his German book on the Gothic, having often quoted Plato, he had an unquestionable preference for geometric determination, for programmed regularity, over personal intuition. "Max Beckmann," he told me, "is a swindle." He felt that Beckmann needed black lines between his colours because he did not know how to relate them otherwise, and he loathed the degree of story-telling and what he saw as "personal expression"—words he always used disparagingly—in Beckmann's work. "Jackson Pollock paints with his tail," he told a mutual friend of ours—in front of her beautiful late Pollock. The issue for Josef, with his acid opinions, was that he felt that Pollock revealed too much of what should be private, and did not opt, instead, for a sense of order outside of himself, and a higher purpose which had nothing to do with ordinary human life.

In the reduced forms of his squares, in the wonderful austerity of their pure platonic form, and the absence of intrusive elements of decoration or representation, Josef felt

he was serving the purpose of colour, and allowing light to exist without interruption for the viewer who might benefit from its glow. He achieved grace, harmony, and tranquility: goals he associated with both religion and morality.
By inducing the interaction of colour, and revealing the marvelous nature of hue, the magical possibilities of reds and yellows and grays, the alchemy of greens when juxtaposed to blacks, he captured something of the splendour of the world around him and made a wonderful, infinitely rich, and unprecedented form of heaven.

When the Alberses moved to their last house, they gave careful thought to where they wanted to be buried. Orange had a town cemetery, near the central green, and they liked it. Josef had, in the 1930s, been a good friend of the American playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder, who had been the first person ever to purchase one of his prints following the Alberses' flight to the U.S.—the woodcut cost thirty-five dollars—and the cemetery could have been the one in Wilder's *Our Town.*

They were very specific in their desires. They wanted their grave sites in the old part of the cemetery, where the slabs were simple and unadorned, not in the newer precincts with their ornate and shiny monuments. They wanted to be right next to the narrow road that circulated throughout the graveyards, because that way whichever of them died first, the other could drive to the post office, pick up the mail, drive to the cemetery, park without getting out of the car, roll down the window, and read the mail in the presence of the other. They explained this plan to me more than once, and compared it to their choice of a home that was only half a mile from an exit and entrance to the Merritt Parkway, which led to New York, about an hour and a half away; that location made it easy to give instructions to visitors, who, even if they had started their Albers-bound pilgrimage in Germany or Australia or Tokyo, would have had New York as a way-station.

But in order to qualify for the old part of the cemetery, one had to be Protestant. Anni said, with great pride, "At last, my background helped!" She explained that, while she was "in the Hitler sense Jewish", both on her father's side (the Fleischmanns) and her mother's (the Ullsteins), the Ullsteins, toward the end of the nineteenth century, had, on one Sunday, had a mass family conversion to Lutheranism, with some ninety-five of them baptised on the same day. Anni, born a few years after that communal event, had been baptised in Berlin's famous Kaiser Wilhelm Gedachtniskirche. She blamed herself for the way her Jewish origins ("that stone around my neck") had forced her and Josef to recognise the need to leave Germany when they did, and now, with a smile, said, "But here I have been helpful to him" —since being Catholic did not garner one entry to their preferred part of the cemetery, where at least one spouse had to be Protestant. When I argued with Anni that it was not her fault, but the Nazis', that her background had had such an impact on their lives, she did not agree; in this she was as headstrong, and independent, and unusual, as in her approach to weaving and printmaking. The Alberses were, quite simply, not like other people.

Because the spatial configurations in the *Structural Constellations* appear to change constantly, volumes become weightless. Similarly, in the *Homages*, Josef seems to have started out earthbound and then moved heavenward; having first given us implicitly three-dimensional bodies, he makes them float. The transformation through which masses are dematerialised, and the interjection of movement into static objects, lifts the viewer's spirits.

The *Homages* have their feet on the earth and their head in the cosmos thanks to their 1:2:3 formats. The gradual upward thrust achieves a spiritual element with a soft voice rather than a loud shout. Josef takes us into another realm in poignant, subtle tones rather than with evangelical ardour; even when his colours are the most vibrant, the choir the most celebrative, this is art within the confines of discipline.

Rudolph Arnheim, a great American teacher and writer on aesthetics, wrote about the *Homages* in his book *The Power of the Center*, analysing their format and pointing out that if we follow the four diagonals created by the corners of squares within squares they converge on a point precisely one quarter of the way up the painting. "A solid base is thereby provided on which the sequence of squares can rise with confidence from step to step—not so different from the coffin in Piero's *Resurrection*, from which the movement toward heaven takes off." [10]

Like the image of the cathedral which beckoned Josef to the Bauhaus, like the churches he drew and studied, the *Homages* have massive, sanctuary-like bodies and the attributes of steeples. They combine factuality and spirituality. They are paint on panel; they are a splendid world of colour on which we can meditate, and which can nourish our souls.

The words of George Eliot—"It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. ... They look like fragments of heaven"—pertain.

The world beyond our earthly individual existence was on Josef's thoughts when he was making a blue-green *Homage* at the start of 1976. [catalogue pp. 253]

As he approached his eighty-eighth birthday, he was happily preoccupied with this panel he was painting as a study for a large Aubusson tapestry commissioned for an important position in the lobby of a bank being designed by his devotee and former student, the architect Harry Seidler, in Sydney, Australia. One of his *Structural Constellations* was going to appear about four stories high on the exterior of the building, and both prospects delighted him.

He had not worked on a painting for a couple of years. Because his hand was quite unsteady, he focused more on printmaking, where he could be absorbed in colour without having to execute the pieces himself, but he was remarkably dexterous, still, and the studies he had made for the *Homage* revealed control that would have been impressive in someone of any age, let alone eighty-seven.

One day when I arrived at the Alberses' house, and asked Josef how he was, he allowed that he was struggling with a problem he could not solve. He had found a combination of colours that were just what he wanted for this painting, and that interacted perfectly in the *Homage* format when the central square was four (out of ten) units wide, but that did not work when the central square was larger—six out of ten units across.

He showed me half-paintings—imagine cutting an *Homage* vertically down the middle—he had made to experiment with the colours and formats. In the version with the larger middle, Josef explained, "Downstairs is fine, but upstairs is hell." He indicated the areas with his hand. He wanted both spatial flow and a colour intersection. That intersection, he told me, is the process whereby a correctly selected colour lying between two other colours takes on something of the appearance of those two other colours. When colours properly intersect in a three-square *Homage*, the colour of the innermost square will appear toward the outer boundary of the second square out. The colour of the outermost square will also appear within the second square, toward its inner boundary.

"The middle colour plays the role of both mixture parents, presenting them in reversed placement,"[11] Josef writes in *Interaction of Color*, the book he called a collaboration with his students, and which continues to this day to be sold worldwide, in nine different languages with further translations in the works. Josef considered this illusory occurrence to be simply wonderful. In reality, the middle square is simply paint straight from the tube, applied flatly, as is clear when we are very close to the work, but at a distance our perception tells us that it is modulated, and with some of the first and third colours visible within it. The sort of thing that happens in paradise!

Josef pointed to the version with the small central square. Here the intersection occurred, but he was not satisfied. Moving his right hand over the sky blue center, and then over the more terrestrial forest green and the sea-like aqua surrounding it, he explained that the central colour was the cosmos, with the earth next to it and then the vast oceans. In the version with the small middle, the cosmos was too distant.

Josef then explained another of his requirements for the colours in relation to one another. What he wanted—and what he had not achieved in the version with the large middle—is for the boundaries and edges to seem to disappear. He told me that Henri Cartier-Bresson, who had come to photograph him on two occasions, had told him he made "circular squares"; he loved that observation, which referred to the right-angled corners with appeared curved.

To achieve those desired effects in the version with the large middle, he needed to find colours with the identical light intensity. The cosmos should have neither sharp boundaries nor pointed corners.

Josef said that even JMW Turner, a supreme colourist, was unable to match light intensities exactly. Josef then showed me some small studies in which he had put blues next to greens on blotting paper, explaining that he had found precisely the paint he needed to the middle square—with the same light intensity as the green next to it—but that there was a problem. What worked was a Winsor & Newton Cobalt Green, of which he had only a small bit in an old tube which indicated that the batch number was 192. The only Winsor & Newton Cobalt Greens now available had the code number 205. Josef admired the paint company for changing the code number when they remade the pigment, but he was frustrated not to be able to duplicate a paint which had been discontinued several years earlier.

I phoned the American corporate headquarters of Winsor & Newton, a British company, in New Jersey. I managed to get the president on the phone, and told him why I was looking for some tubes of Cobalt Green from the old batch. He assured me that there was no difference whatsoever, that the former and current pigments were identical, made according to the same precise formula. I explained to him that I was phoning on behalf of Josef Albers, who perceived a difference.

"Josef Albers!" the savvy businessman replied. A box with five tubes of Cobalt Green #192 packed next to each other arrived two days later.

The intersection Josef achieved is like magic. Looking at the *Homage* he made with the large centre, once he had the correct paint, he interlocked all of his fingers—just the way that Cartier-Bresson photographed him. He praised the ability of the outer and inner squares to span the middle colour, as if it were a gift from God.

Again Josef spoke of the need of the cosmos to be immaterial and without boundaries. "And the cosmos is getting closer," he told me, "Which is why I had to paint it large." This was his last painting. NFW

End Notes

[1] as quoted in Siddhartha Mukherjee, "MY HERO Primo Levi", London: Saturday Guardian, December 12, 1911, p. 5 of Review.

[2] as quoted in Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 144. First edition, 1953.

[3] Fred Licht, "Albers: Glass, Color, and Light", in *Josef Albers: Glass, Color, and Light,* Venice: Guggenheim Museum, 1994, p. 19.

[4] letter from Josef Albers to Franz Perdekamp, March 1, 1916; copy in the archives of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Connecticut; translation by Oliver Pretzel.

[5] unpublished document in archives of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Connecticut.

[6] Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, vol. 2 of Remembrance of Things Past, C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, trans., New York, Random House, 1981, pp. 125–126.

[7] as quoted in Paul Overy, "'Calm Down, What Happens, Happens Mainly Without You'—Josef Albers," *Art and Artists* (London), October 1967, p. 33.

[8] *The New Testament: The Holy Bible: The King James Version*, American Bible Society, New York, p. 193.

[9] Otto von Simpson, *The Gothic Cathedral,* New York; Harper Torchbooks, 1956, p. 20.

[10] Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982, p. 146.

[11] Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, revised pocket edition, 1975, p. 38.