



Herbert Matter, Josef Albers at Yale University, ca. 1955

## Honesty and Modesty Josef Albers and Heinz Liesbrock, Director of the Albers Museum

To understand the meaning of form is the indispensable preliminary condition for culture. Culture is the ability to select or distinguish the better, that is the more meaningful form, the better appearance, the better behavior. Therefore culture is a concern with quality. Culture can be manifested in two ways: through recognition of better form and through producing of better form. The latter direction is the way of art. Art is the acting part of culture and therefore its proof and measurement.

Josef Albers<sup>1</sup>

Heinz Liesbrock is the exemplar of culture as defined by Josef Albers. And what he has done in creating this exhibition, an unprecedented presentation of Josef's Homages to the Square, is exactly the distinguishing of meaningful form that brings us face-to-face with Josef's Platonic ideal. It is a triumph.

Embodying so many of Josef's own traits, Heinz is uniquely qualified to have achieved this. Like Josef, he is independent, focused, passionate, generous of heart, headstrong, and devoted to the wonders of looking at art. What he has done in organizing the current exhibition and in running the Josef Albers Museum for his twenty-year tenure represents a more than fortuitous pairing; it is a case of perfect synchrony.

You may wonder about the word "headstrong." But the stubbornness it suggests is one born of passion. When Anni Albers would, with a warm smile, affectionately refer to Josef as "ein echter westfälischer Dickkopf," and Josef would grin in agreement, it is because to both of them this was a compliment. It suggested conviction and integrity and true devotion to work with the wish to make it glorious for its audience. In this way, "headstrong" is just fine for Josef and Heinz, because both men evince a glorious and unwavering dedication to their beliefs. And the steadfastness has always been accompanied by utmost graciousness.

You ask how I can be so certain that Heinz has a great deal in common with Josef. But, first, you want to know, understandably, why I am using first names, particularly in a text that, while written in English, is being translated into German: the language of formal titles and salutations where “Herr Doktor” is more the norm. It is because I was fortunate enough to know Josef in the early seventies when, in spite of our sixty-year age difference, he invited me to call him “Josef” (although not the “Juppi” that was reserved for Anni and for others who had known him for decades). He loved American informality, and he prized human warmth as much as he distrusted hierarchies. And Heinz, an aficionado of American culture if ever there was one, was happy with first names from the moment we first met, which was almost as soon as he had taken his position as museum director. I have had the rare good fortune to know both as personal friends, which means having experienced their rare connectedness and generosity. Yes, the two have much in common.

The reference to Plato is both because a book of his aphorisms was at Josef’s bedside, and because he codified the idea of meaningful form. Consider Plato’s pithy statement: “Thinking—the talking of the soul with itself.” Reading it, one has insight into both Josef Albers and Heinz Liesbrock, each so rational and spiritual at the same time. And then there is Plato’s “Writing is the geometry of the soul.” That applies so perfectly to what occurs with their splendid use of words in linear form to express deeply felt passion.

Plato wrote, “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of light.” How profoundly both Josef and Heinz have embraced light: the glow that emanates from many of the paintings in this exhibition; the power of natural light and artificial light, each in its own way, to illuminate artworks; the light of perception, of open-mindedness, of sight in its essence.

And then there is Plato’s simple “There is no harm in repeating a good thing.” Are not the Homages to the Square one of the greatest exemplars of the point in all of time?

We are talking about timeless and universal art. All the major exhibitions that Heinz has conceived for the Albers Museum are just that. The presentations of work by Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, Ad Reinhardt, Giorgio Morandi, and Alexis Jawlensky—each of these exhibitions gave a new perspective to the understanding of Josef’s art. For, beyond the visual parallels, there is the subjugation of the self in deference to truths that surpass individualism, qualities that go far beyond particular epochs or locales and that offer uplift to all people. And there is the element of craft, of clear thinking, of logic and rationalism linked to emotional depth.

Josef Albers was very proud of his American citizenship; he and Anni both obtained it in 1939, six years after they had arrived in the United States. It is perfect that the elegant person who has done so much for the consideration of Josef’s art is himself so deeply immersed in American culture: the

America of Raymond Chandler’s and William Faulkner’s novels, of hamburgers at roadside diners, of cross-country road trips. That is to say, we have returned to informality, so dear to both Heinz and Josef, who were, concomitantly, so deeply devoted to form.

All of this is, in the truest and richest sense, Culture—with a capital C. Heart, kindness, measurement, a passion for visual beauty: With the art of Josef Albers, Heinz Liesbrock has achieved nirvana.