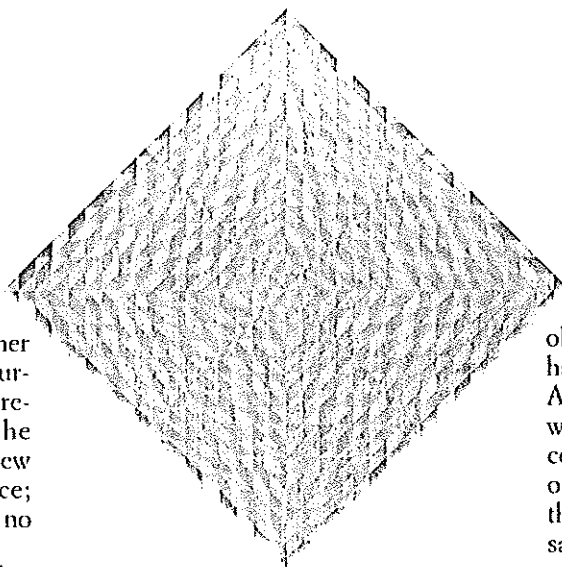


WEAVING WONDERS

One of the last great Bauhaus teachers, Anni Albers has brought color and texture to the Modern Movement

By Nicholas Fox Weber



When Anni Albers at age 22 told her father, a Berlin furniture manufacturer, that she wanted to attend the recently formed Bauhaus school, he scowled. "What do you mean 'a new style'? We've had the Renaissance; we've had the Baroque; there are no new styles."

It was at the Bauhaus, however, that Anni developed the pioneering approach to abstract art and textile technique that has led her through over sixty years of creativity and quiet yet radiant influence as a weaver, writer, teacher, and printmaker. And it was the new style that eventually proved to be Anni's ticket to America, and hence her parents' salvation.

An American architecture student named Philip Johnson had admired samples of Anni's textiles on a visit to the Dessau Bauhaus. One day in the summer of 1933, shortly after the Gestapo forced the closing of the school, he ran into her on a street in Berlin and accepted an invitation for tea. Knowing that her husband, Josef, a Bauhaus teacher, was out of a job, and that Anni had a Jewish background (from the Nazi viewpoint, although she had been confirmed in the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche), Johnson asked if they would like to go to America. Anni said yes but gave it little more thought until a cable arrived asking Josef to head the art faculty at the new and progressive Black Mountain College in North Car-



olina. The founders of Black Mountain had gone to The Museum of Modern Art and asked Johnson (then affiliated with MOMA) for the name of an exceptional art teacher, and he had recommended Josef Albers, suggesting that Anni could teach weaving. Anni said that they thought North Carolina might be in the Philippines, but after hearing a bit more, they cabled back their acceptance, with the warning that Josef spoke no English. The Black Mountain founders urged them to come anyway, and in November of 1933 they sailed, visa and immigration formalities having gone surprisingly smoothly because of the intervention (unknown to the Alberses) of several influential Americans who had formed a committee to rescue German artists.

It wasn't the first time that Anni had plunged from one world into another. For a woman whose grandfather, an Ullstein of publishing fame, owned one of the first telephones in Berlin but wouldn't answer it "because bells were only for domestics," the Weimar Bauhaus had been quite a change. She had rented an inexpensive room, with baths available only once a week, near the school. Having failed on her first attempt at admission, she was kept from heading home by the sight of the

Top: Anni Albers's *DO V*, screenprint, 1973; *Center:* *Black, White, Yellow*, wall hanging, 1927; *Bottom:* Anni Albers in 1929.

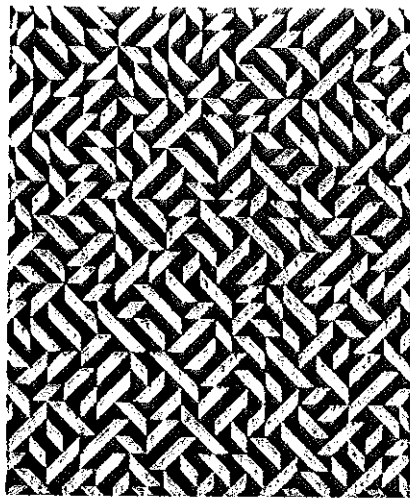
DESIGN

hint of ornament and refer to no subject matter or historical style. These are intricately balanced, rhythmic abstract compositions, simultaneously serene and playful. With the pure visual power of the late abstractions of Mondrian, the hangings make a claim for textiles as a high form of art. They were every bit as serious in intention as the oils and watercolors of Klee and Kandinsky, two of Anni's older heroes at the Bauhaus. And even the smallest samples of Anni's drapery and upholstery fabrics reveal tremendous imagination and have a strong, sure voice. Metallic threads take on a worldly, nocturnal elegance; jute and unbleached cotton seem to extol their rugged, handsome functionalism. The beauty of simple weaving techniques, of the way that warp and weft can make something that covers, clothes, or shelters, is evoked in all its power.

Practicality and aesthetics were inseparable for Anni. In 1930, by which time she had been married to Josef for five years and had briefly headed the weaving workshop in the absence of its usual director, she received her Bauhaus diploma for a sound-absorbing, light-reflecting material for an auditorium in Bernau designed by Hannes Meyer, the second Bauhaus director. The principle of this fabric was based in part on the properties of velvet (concealed on the side that did not show). But its simple, unfussy appearance was a long way from the velvets of Anni's childhood.

She had not dropped her past completely, however. There was the time, for example, when Josef told her that Mies van der Rohe and his "lady friend," Lily Reich, were coming for dinner; a recent bride determined to do her best, Anni decided to make butter balls with the butter curler her mother had given her at the time of her wedding. Lily Reich's first words on entering the Alberses' house were, "Butter balls! Here, at the Bauhaus? At the Bauhaus I should think you'd have a good, solid block of butter!"

It wasn't the only time that Anni was made to feel unsure of herself socially, skeptical about the world around her. The realities of life—arranging for



PO I, screenprint and offset, 1973

family and friends to leave Germany in the late thirties, coping with infirmity and loneliness since Josef's death in 1976—have often been taxing. But the different aspects of her art—her "pictorial weavings," as she grew to call her wall hangings in America; the textiles she has designed for Knoll and Sunar and other firms; her writing (published in two anthologies, *On Weaving* and *On Designing*); and more recently her printmaking, which she began in 1963—have long given her an emotional stability that has effectively countered life's vagaries.

The pictorial weavings indicate the visual depth and jewel-like richness possible with linked threads and are testimony to Anni's statement that after Paul Klee recommended that she "take a line for a walk" she let thread do all it could. Some pieces, like *Untitled* and *City*, are exuberant evocations of urban life, grids superimposed with endless dynamic motion and linking. These small pieces of art are vast in scope, full of visual interplay, of infinite simultaneous conversations. Her openwork fabrics, first manufactured by Knoll in the late fifties, are paeans to the moving simplicity of undyed fibers and simple, competent knotting. The first of the drapery type that dominates numerous bank lobbies and corporate headquarters today, they are viewed by experts as part of Anni's introduction of the openweave into twentieth-century textile design (the artist herself

points out that it is at most a reintroduction, taking an idea developed by her much-beloved Peruvian predecessors).

The woven work has been in several exhibitions, including the first one-person show for a textile artist at The Museum of Modern Art (Philip Johnson installed it); there have been major graphics exhibitions at, among other places, the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin and The Brooklyn Museum. The traveling exhibition that opened at the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art in Washington on Anni Albers's 86th birthday shows the various aspects of her work.

The prints give evidence of her ceaseless ability to immerse herself in machinery and technique, in the components of art. They utilize the particular capabilities of etching acids, screenprint overlays, the enlargements and reversals possible in photo offset, deliberate off-registration in lithography. Like all her art, they make no attempt to disguise reality—of materials, of structure, of how they are made—and at the same time they celebrate the power of visual themes to provide refreshment and diversion of the highest order. The *Wall* series she was working on at the time of her 85th birthday, which gloriously filled a gallery on the boulevard St.-Germain this past winter, does not deny the harsh truths of life—in fact the works *depend* on the tremulousness of her hand—and yet they rejuvenate and invigorate us in their subtle motion, their asymmetrical balance, their careful revelry. The values Anni Albers discovered and began to explore as a rebellious, committed young woman have served her well and given to the world a body of work that is both calm and lively, practical and spiritual. □

Editor's Note: "The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers" will be at the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, through Jan. 5, 1986, then travel to the Yale University Art Gallery, Jan. 30–Mar. 26; The Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Apr. 19–June 2; The Portland Art Museum (graphics only) and the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts (textiles only), June 29–Aug. 25; and the Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery at UCLA, Sept. 28–Nov. 17.