

FOREWORD

When he taught at the Bauhaus, Josef Albers emphasized that the physical properties of the components of one's work should be the starting point. He would, nearly fifty years later, recall telling his students, "Let's try what we can do new with wire. Give it a new shape, what can we do with matches, . . . with matchboxes in a project. And then later, I introduced the study of paper, what [sic] was at the time considered a wrapping material."¹

Albers was, in this instance, referring to the way paper could be cut and folded. The characteristics he had in mind were both its thinness and its combination of flexibility with rigidity; these made it ideal for certain methods of construction. But, equally, when paper was the support for an artwork, the material on which the image was being painted and drawn—and therefore, the substance he hoped would be its essence for all time—dictated much about the making of the object.

Paper has miraculous qualities, and Albers, a great appreciator, responded to them. Its permanence in tandem with its lightness was the sort of surprising juxtaposition of traits that enchanted him throughout his life. The relative inexpensiveness appealed to him, both during his student days, when he could scarcely afford a beer, let alone decent art supplies, and later in life, when his success in the art world meant that he could have whatever materials he wanted; his personality, however, kept him frugal. The splendor of paper as a human invention satisfied his longing for ingenuity, thoughtfulness, understanding of substances, and mastery of technique. He adored tree bark—nature's invention—but he had even greater respect for the processing of wood pulp and water, the proportions right, the skillful manipulation that resulted in paper, a supreme human achievement that went back to ancient times, and remains of current value. Paper, universal and timeless, has the same traits Albers sought in his art; he felt a supreme respect for it.

Its tactile qualities—be they the onion-skin surface of certain tissues, the smoothness of stocks especially good for printing, the delicate striations of laid papers, or the coarse pebbly face of watercolor paper—invited very specific responses. Albers would choose the texture that suited his needs and, at the same time, make his needs correspond to the dictates of the paper with which he was working; the important thing was that the nature of the artistic effort and the quality of the material be in tandem. He drew lightly in pencil on the most suitable sheets, and rubbed his lithographic crayons along their sides, the subtle light and dark ridges richly reflecting the way the papers were made. When he required a surface that would absorb watercolor or gouache or allow a wash of brushed ink to stay thick and constant, he used the stock that fulfilled the task. When he wanted oil to saturate the material, and the material to be able to support the weight of broad expanses of pigment, he also chose what worked—most often simple blotting paper. Part of the making of art was the art of selection; knowledge of one's tools was indispensable.

In addition to the many practical aspects, the poetry of paper was vital to Albers. For paper has its own magic—as something that is nearly weightless, yet, if properly treated, is lasting. It fixes ideas forever, yet it does so with utmost informality, a certain insouciance. Paper, thus, invited Josef Albers to explore, to be experimental, to be spontaneous.

As a man, he was witty, warm, and totally engaged; making art on paper, he was much the same—and therefore, less formal than in his more intentionally finished works of art done on Masonite panels or vinylite, heavy and rigid materials. On paper, he could make forays and begin to work things out.

With this medium, he revealed himself in the midst of a process—a process of thinking about art, an active experience at its moment of occurring. When Albers was twenty-one years old, he spent an academic year—from November 1, 1909 to September 30, 1910—teaching at a *Bauernschaftsschule*. This is an old German term, no longer in use, and it is translated into English as either “school for farm children” or “peasant school.” The work helped define him as an educator and also as an artist. To deal with everyone in a one-room schoolhouse was demanding: “I had all age groups, ranging from six to fourteen years, boys and girls, together in one schoolroom. To do oral and written work in all elementary subjects—from religion to gymnastics—with those different age classes in groups of changing combination called for more than a carefully organized plan of study and curriculum. I acquired a new understanding: that learning by experience cannot be lost and therefore, outlasts book knowledge, that the experience of inner growth is the mainspring of human development.”²

More than in his other compositions, these are very much the qualities manifest in Albers's works on paper, in which “learning by experience” and “inner growth” are palpable. Experimenting with new abstract compositions, putting one color to another as never before, which is what he did on paper, he enjoyed a remarkable sense of liberty.



Rudolph Burchardt, Josef Albers, ca. 1950

Albers was someone who knew, from the time he was very young, how to make himself free. That freedom was vital to all of his art, from its earliest inception to its most finished form. In the work on paper, however, we get the “moment” of soaring ahead. We feel especially close to Albers’s inventiveness, to his effort, spectacularly successful, to achieve alchemy. For it is alchemy when the identical red appears one way in one setting and very different in another, when a perfectly flat expanse of color appears shaded from light and dark, when a straight line seems curved, when a three-dimensional object has real plastic qualities of which we are certain, and, at the same time, elements that are completely impossible, planes that flip-flop as we look at them, openings that face upward and then downward and then reverse themselves yet again. Motion, change, and transformation were vital to all of Albers’s work; when his support was paper, he made them particularly proximate.

For Albers, paper invited experimentation. The physicality that gives it, wonderfully, properties in between those of a block of wood and a bird’s feather, enabled him to pursue and capture his visual thinking at an early stage, the ideas totally fresh. It was the moment of experimentation, but, because of Josef’s courage and the surety with which he proceeded, it was also the moment of commitment. The resultant works, of all the periods of his art, are possessed with the artist’s marvelous confidence mixed with his fearless sense of adventure. That this vision has been organized in the present catalogue and exhibition is thanks to the equally original and courageous vision of two rare and wonderful art historians: Michael Sempf and Heinz Liesbrock. The former is an expert on drawings in general, the latter on the art of Josef Albers—in both cases, among many areas of

connoisseurship and knowledge. Their engagement in assembling these works of art, their eagerness to look and look and look again, is a true continuation of Albers's own approach to seeing. Both of these delightful individuals evince pleasure; they use their eyes; they support what they love. On behalf of Josef Albers, whom I had the pleasure of knowing as a marvelous friend, and of his brilliant and equally creative wife Anni, who supported her husband's work with infinite love and understanding, I express my deepest thanks to them.

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NOTES

1 George Baird, "Interview with Josef Albers," in Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Bauhaus Group* (New York, 2009), p. 303.

2 See Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Drawings of Josef Albers* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1983), p. 3.