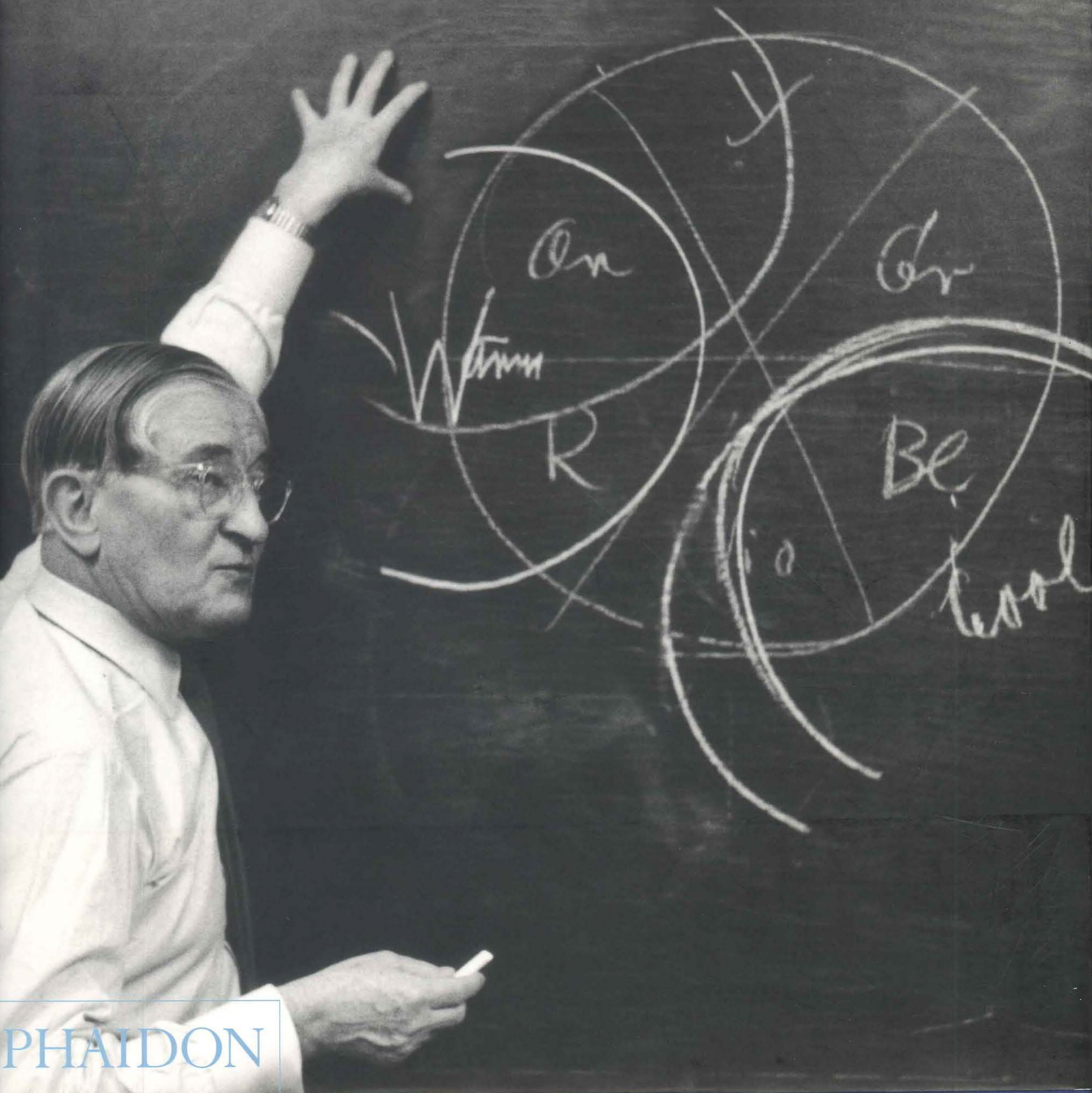


# JOSEF ALBERS: TO OPEN EYES

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PHAIDON

## FOREWORD

“We as teachers have no right to demand from our students what we are unable or unwilling to do ourselves.” This straightforward dictum that Josef Albers announced in a speech he gave in 1939 as an art professor at Black Mountain College summed up his belief system and simultaneously explained the relationship between being a passionate painter and an equally devoted teacher.

The demands and expectations Albers had of himself and his students were clearly defined. The essentials to making art as well as to instructing about its creation are observation and experimentation. One should look with eyes wide open, and never stop being receptive to the miracles of vision. One should study color and line, and marvel at the infinity of possibilities they offer. The intentional expression of the self matters far less; in fact, it should be eschewed. What counts is what is timeless and universal—in nature, in abstraction, in all the miraculous possibilities of vision. Technical proficiency in one’s craft is an imperative; a sure knowledge of materials and methods is the sine qua non of making art. All of this was what Albers expected of himself, relentlessly, and what he taught his students.

There was no compromise. One could paint or sculpt in a myriad of ways, but the underlying standards and values were constant for student and teacher alike. A quarter of a century after declaring his credo at Black Mountain, Albers reiterated its sentiments at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, when he declared, “The teacher is justified to lead students only if he is and remains a student.” And the requisites were always the same: independence, responsiveness, discipline, and know-how accompanied by a passion for the mysteries they might reveal.

The teaching went back to his early days, when, as soon as he completed his own studies, he became an elementary school teacher—in all subjects—in Bottrop, his hometown in Westphalia. From that modest beginning he became a specialist in art and, eventually, one of the most influential and sought-after art professors and lecturers in colleges and universities on three continents, firing the lives of thousands of painters and designers and architects, many of whom would themselves become world-famous. “Sit on your own behinds,” was what he told them all—deliberately using blunt language to emphasize the need not to follow someone else, but to look within yourself with the recognition that “genius is the power to light your own fire.”

The way to do this was not through spontaneity. Albers disdained the values he associated with Marcel Duchamp. There was little acceptance of the haphazard, no room for theoretical rigmarole or sloppy execution, no interest in art as autobiography. Rather, as he taught at the Bauhaus, “Practical thrift is realized by the planning which is prior to every construction.” With mastery of the medium, accuracy, and clarity of thought and method, one could achieve great things: “A painter should have a clear mind and a

straight eye.” He would demonstrate that belief in all of his work—in the realms of metalwork, furniture design, photography, glass construction, printmaking, and painting—just as he insisted on it in those who studied with him. With correct skills and tidy organization, he expected his students then to move into the realm of the unprecedented, just as he did with his own forays into abstract form: “Tradition in art is to create, not to revive; if we were to revive, we would still be in caves.”

In his own *Homages to the Square*—the series of paintings Albers began at age sixty-two and with which he continued until his death twenty-six years later—he never considered expression or fashion, but competed only with himself, ever restrained and controlled and economical in his obeisance to color and spatial play. The results are spiritual presences: living, breathing, full of poetry. The work exemplifies his mandate that artists, whether himself or his students, be “honest and modest”—that they never declare their own needs or put their private personas forward—with the end result being creations of sheer beauty as well as marvelous evocations of “the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.”

Brenda Danilowitz and Frederick A. Horowitz, with their cognizance of these values, have a keen understanding of Albers’s truths. With energy as well as flair, they have, in the book that follows, charted Albers’s world-changing role as a teacher. Having interviewed a range of students, they reveal the way Albers’s ideas on education and his complex personality—difficult and beguiling, a unique mix of domineering and humble—have made an indelible imprint on the lives and work of artists all over the world.

Albers’s influence will be forever, as long as people make art. Danilowitz and Horowitz present the effects of that influence at their most immediate, in the generations that had the benefits of working with Albers firsthand. And Phaidon, with its eye for what really matters in art of every epoch and every culture, have supported this endeavor with true understanding. Exciting material—and a wonderful blend of honesty, humor, order, and exuberance—lie ahead.

*Nicholas Fox Weber*



Josef Albers, *Self-Portrait "Mephisto,"* 1916.