



Josef & Anni Albers Foundation

JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS: ICONIC COUPLE OF MODERNISM



(Josef and Anni Albers in Dessau, circa 1925)

Boghossian Foundation – Villa Empain

10 April to 8 September 2024

The Villa Empain is proud to host the first exhibition in Belgium of the work of Josef and Anni Albers, two pioneers of modernism who created pivotal artworks that marked the history of 20th century art. Featuring some 100 artworks including paintings, assemblages, photographs, graphic works, textiles, films, and furniture – most of which were donated by the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation to the Musée d'Art moderne de Paris in 2022 – the exhibition retraces the Alberses respective artistic career and sheds light on their close and intimate relationship that allowed them to mutually enrich and empower one another throughout their lives.

Indeed, where better to exhibit the creations of Josef and Anni Albers than in an iconic modernist villa initially conceived as a couple's home? Each in their own way, both the Empains and the Alberses devoted their lives to beauty and craftsmanship. By bringing them together, we shall reveal the international, eminently modern vision of each couple, particularly the aesthetic and educative values embodied by the Alberses to this day.

In 1930, when the Baron Louis Empain commissioned Swiss architect Michel Polak to design his villa along Brussels' prestigious Avenue Franklin Roosevelt – formerly the Avenue des Nations – he envisioned an edifice that would reflect his position – having inherited his father's aristocratic status – and his need for a private residence. Here, these two completely different functions, i.e., representation and privacy, are majestically reconciled.

Louis Empain was fascinated by the architecture of his day. He held high regard for modernism and its innovative approach founded on a combination of fine arts, craftsmanship, and industrial production. Polak's project perfectly embodied these new trends: on the one hand, the refined materials and details associated with the Art Deco movement that then flourished in Brussels, and on the other, the simple, symmetric lines of Modernist architecture as it was being taught and propagated by the Bauhaus in Germany at the same time.

Josef and Anni Albers spent more than ten years teaching at the Bauhaus until its closure by the authorities in 1933. In 1934, when the Villa Empain was inaugurated, the Alberses had already left Nazi Germany for the United States. Although they never had the opportunity to visit the Villa Empain, they would have been enthralled by its architecture, dictated by harmonious proportions, square shapes, pure lines and meticulous attention to the most trivial detail, and also by its connection with nature.



Villa Empain, 2023



Villa Empain, 1934



Villa Empain, Entrance hall, 1934

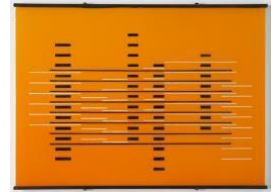


Villa Empain, the Baron's private bedroom, 1934

Bauhaus: Laboratory of Modernism

Founded on 26 March 1919 in the city of Weimar by architect Walter Gropius, the Bauhaus played a crucial role in the artistic, architectural, and design community up until 1933. The school sought to redefine contemporary lifestyles around a set of fundamental principles: a unification of the arts through craft, a smart use of resources, the reduction of forms to their simplest expression, multidisciplinary, experimentation, and the democratisation of art. With their simple, streamlined forms, the Bauhaus designs strongly echoed the desire for symmetry and sobriety prevalent throughout post-war Europe, especially in the Art Deco movement.

Completely aligned with these principles, Josef Albers joined the Bauhaus in 1920 at the age of 32, in search of a creative environment for his own artistic activities. In 1922, Anni Albers – who was eleven years younger than Josef – joined the weaving workshop, which at that time was the only studio opened to women. That same year, Josef opened the stained-glass workshop and designed a range of contemporary furniture. In 1925, the couple married. Soon after, Josef became a member of the prestigious circle of the Bauhaus masters alongside their friends Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. Combining copper wire and epoxy putty with glass, Josef's early works demonstrate his keen interest and fascination with materials and represent the first signs of a new language of architectonic forms. In 1928, he started making photographs. The contrast between black and white was to wield a powerful influence on his work. For her part, Anni experimented with weaving for decorative and functional purposes and, in 1931, she took charge of the Bauhaus weaving workshop and turned to a distinctly abstract approach in both her weaving and her drawings.



Josef Albers
Frontal, ca. 1927
Sandblasted flashed glass with
black paint
Musée d'Art moderne de Paris



Anni Albers
Wallhanging, 1925
(replica by Katharina Jebsen,
2021)
Wool and silk
Musée d'Art moderne de Paris



Josef Albers
Biarritz VIII '29/'
Ascona VIII '30, 1929-30
Gelatin silver prints mounted
to board
Musée d'Art moderne de Paris



Josef Albers
Nesting Tables, ca. 1927
(replica by MoMA design,
2021)
Ash veneer, black lacquer, and
painted glass
Private collection

A Fresh Start in America

In 1933, the Bauhaus school was forced to close its doors under pressure from Nazi Germany. At the recommendation of architect Philip Johnson, Josef and Anni Albers fled into exile in the United States. Josef was appointed head of the art department at Black Mountain College while Anni opened an experimental weaving workshop that would become a fundamental pillar of the school's teaching. Set in a rural environment deep in the North Carolina mountains, the Black Mountain College was born out of a desire to create a new type of college built on progressive educational principles that were coined by renowned American philosopher John Dewey as "Learning by doing", involving experimental teaching methods and community living. Artists, dancers, mathematicians, sociologists, and architects form an unusual creative and intellectual community.

The United States provided more than just a haven from the rising tide of Nazism; it also gave the couple a gateway to a new part of the world, Latin America, which fascinated them. Drawn by the remnants of ancient pre-Columbian civilisations and riveted by their architectural forms, bright colours, and weaving techniques, the couple undertook numerous trips to Latin America, most notably to Mexico, but also to Peru and Chile. In 1947, Josef embarked on the *Variants* – or *Adobes* – series, inspired by the painted walls of the flat-roofed adobe dwellings that the couple had visited in Mexico. From 1950 onwards, he started producing his *Structural Constellations*, a series of works embodying his experimentations with perceptual ambiguity. Simultaneously, Anni began working on smaller, hand-woven pieces that no longer had any utilitarian function, as they had at the Bauhaus, but were simply intended as visual objects.



Josef Albers
Untitled Abstraction, 1945
Oil on masonite
Musée d'Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
Oscillating (C), 1940-45
Oil on masonite
Musée d'Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
*2 Yellow, 2 Red, Cadmiums
and Blue around Violet
Center*, 1947
Oil on wood fibre board
Musée d'Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
*Structural constellation
M-9*, 1954
Machine-engraved laminated
plastic mounted on wood
Musée d'Art moderne de
Paris

These “*pictorial weavings*”, as she dubbed them, provided her with the opportunity to explore forms of unique weavings, as opposed to those with a repetitive motif.

The Connecticut Years

In 1949, when the Alberses left Black Mountain College, their artistic path took a new turn. Anni became the first contemporary textile artist to be exhibited at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) while Josef was appointed chair of the Department of Design at Yale University of Connecticut. This marked the starting point for his *Homage to the Square* series, which he would continue producing until the end of his life, and which spawned more than two thousand paintings. By simplifying the composition to the simplest geometric form, i.e., the square, Albers emphasised the perception of colour. As documented in his seminal 1963 book *Interaction of Color*, he said, “In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is – as it physically is.” “Experience teaches that in visual perception there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.” Consequently, each painting in the series is simultaneously a practical application of the interaction between colours, a pedagogical lesson, and a piece of pure aesthetic contemplation.

Anni contributed to the history of weaving with the publication of the ground-breaking 1965 book *On Weaving*. Much like a visual atlas, this book explores the history of the last four thousand years of weaving throughout the world and examines the technical aspects of the craft and development of the loom. She also designed wall hangings, carpets, unique textures and combinations of jute, metal threads, and horsehair, and prototypes of fabric for leading American furniture manufacturer Knoll.



Anni Albers
La Luz I, 1947
Cotton, linen and metal thread
Musée d’Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
*Homage to the Square:
Guarded*, 1952
Oil on Masonite
Musée d’Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
*Study for Homage to the
Square: Lone Light*, 1962
Oil on masonite,
Musée d’Art moderne de
Paris



Josef Albers
*Homage to the Square
(Against air)*, 1967
Oil on masonite
Musée d’Art moderne de
Paris



Anni Albers
Haiku, 1961
Cotton, hemp,
metal wire, wool
Musée d’Art moderne de
Paris

Anni Albers’

Graphic Artworks

In 1963, Josef Albers was among the first artists invited to conduct lithography classes at Los Angeles' Tamarind Institute lithography workshop. Anni accompanied him and was immediately impressed by the world of lithography. She progressively moved away from weaving to concentrate on printmaking, exploring a variety of techniques ranging from lithography, silkscreen, and offset printing to etching and engraving. In the same spirit as in her weaving, she allowed herself to be guided by the printing process. Etching considerably expanded her research into texture, pattern, colour, surface qualities and other facets of the "language of textiles". Using simple grids and rows of triangles, Anni produced a broad and diverse array of graphic effects reflecting the influence of pre-Columbian textiles and artefacts.

Josef and Anni Albers, Teachers

As they moved from the Bauhaus to Black Mountain College and Yale University, the Alberses constantly adapted their teaching methods. Educating their students about a new way of perceiving things (To Open Eyes), teaching them to see and feel life, and encouraging them to follow an open exploration methodology (Learning by Doing) remained at the core of their teaching approach. By inspiring their students to prioritise direct observation through practical exercises, developing their self-confidence, and following their intuition (To follow me, follow yourself), the couple gave every student a voice, placing the individual and their practice (rather than the assimilation of acquired theories) at the very heart of their approach. In this vein, Anni used to say: "We have to go where no one was before us."



Anni Albers
Wall XII, 1984
Watercolour on silkscreen
print
Musée d'Art moderne de Paris



Anni Albers
Orchestra, 1979
Offset photography
Musée d'Art moderne de
Paris



*Anni Albers in the weaving
workshop at Black Mountain
College*, 1944
Photo: Josef Breitenbach



*Josef Albers teaching at Black
Mountain College*, 1944
Photo: Josef Breitenbach

The Albers not only succeeded in producing a body of work that is now considered the cornerstone of Modernism, but they also instilled their artistic and educational values to a whole new generation of artists. This is why, at the end of the exhibition, visitors are invited to look at the work of other artists whose inspiration stems directly or indirectly from the Alberses, as a tribute to two prominent 20th century pioneers who have achieved an iconic status. The invited artists are: Olivier Gourvil, Linda Karshan, Mehdi Moutashar, Vico Persson, Leila Pile, Damien Poulain, Chloé Vanderstraeten, Bernard Villers and Charlotte Von Poehl.

Curators:

Edouard Detaille, European Advisor to the Executive Director of the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation

Julia Garimorth, Chief Curator – Musée d'Art moderne de Paris

Assisted by Emma Nordberg