

The New York Times

By RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS
OCT. 21, 2011

MODENA, ITALY — For the artist, designer and teacher Josef Albers, 1925 was a decisive year.

The avant-garde Bauhaus art school, where he had been a student since 1920, moved to Dessau, Germany, from Weimar as a result of political pressures. In May he married his fellow student Annelise Fleischmann, thereafter to be known as Anni Albers. In July the couple went on their honeymoon to Florence, a trip that had a major impact on both his and her art. And later that year Albers became the first student to become a Bauhaus Master, initiating a teaching career that would influence generations of students in Germany, America and beyond.

“Josef Albers” is the first large-scale exhibition devoted to his life and legacy ever to be held in Italy. For his lucid and enlightening survey of Albers’s career from the early Bauhaus days to his death in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1976, the director of Galleria Civica Marco Pierini in Modena, Italy, has made an exceptionally sure-footed selection of more than 170 works from the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation at Bethany, Connecticut.

On show are the first (from a private collection) and last paintings in Albers’s most celebrated series of paintings “Homage to the Square.” There is a selection of Albers’s photographs, and some LP record covers, devised with the musician and sound engineer Enoch Light, which ushered in the era of the “gatefold sleeve.”

Marco Pierini is the contributing editor of the show’s bilingual catalog, which also contains texts setting out Albers’s ideas on art and teaching that could still be read with profit by educationalists in many fields.

Josef Albers was born into a Catholic family of craftsmen in Bottrop in northern Germany in 1888. His house painter father taught him additional skills such as engraving glass, plumbing and wiring, giving him a lifelong

Making of a Bauhaus Master



A photo collage of Josef Albers by Otto Umbehr, 1928. Credit Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany (CT)

confidence in handling materials. His first public commission, in 1918, was for a stained-glass window for a church in his home town, and he remained a practicing Catholic to the end. His art education took him to Berlin and later Munich, where he studied under the symbolist Franz von Stuck.

Albers was soon to join two other former pupils of von Stuck, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, at the Bauhaus at Weimar. In the spring of 1920, Albers came upon a leaflet advertising the curriculum at the new school: “Art is something that cannot be taught: what can be taught is craft,” it declared, and the crafts are “the indispensable basis for all artistic production.” This chimed in perfectly with his own practical experience and thinking. Nearly half a century later he described his move to the Bauhaus, where he began again almost from scratch at the age of 32, as “the best step I made in my life.”

The Modena exhibition, arranged more or less chronologically, opens at the Palazzina dei Giardini with some of Albers’s early glass pictures, composed of broken bottles and other detritus retrieved from a local dump in Weimar, held together with hammered lead and wire, strikingly back-lit here during the day by the abundant natural light in this baroque garden pavilion. The found materials of these first abstract works, an imaginative modernist interpretation of traditional stained-glass windows, were as much as anything the result of Albers’s penury and thought of as outré even by the standards of the Bauhaus. But they led to his appointment as an apprentice head of the glass workshop and to commissions for stained glass in architectural settings.

A radical shift in Albers’s designs can be seen here in the works following Josef and Anni’s trip to Italy. Albers had a particular passion for Duccio and his first gift to Anni was a print of one of Giotto’s frescoes. But it was

the white-striped architecture of Florence's duomo and other church facades that was most immediately translated into a new series of sand-blasted glass pictures, with their horizontal and vertical geometric lines. These pictures also mark the beginning of his investigations into the perception of color by the human eye, as illustrated here by such works as "Bundled" (1925) and "Factory A" (1925-26).

In the second half of the 1920s Albers also applied his many skills to designing furniture, represented here by some of his classic armchairs and tables, in which he pioneered the concept of flat-packing.

On the definitive closing-down of the Bauhaus movement, which had moved to Berlin the year before, in 1933 the Albers were the first of their group to migrate to the United States, where Josef took up an invitation to teach at the unorthodox new Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

Albers's career as a painter began after his arrival in the New World, the first phase of which is covered by the last rooms of the Palazzina dei Giardini, culminating with examples of his series of panels in standard formats but employing different color combinations, entitled "Variants" or "Adobes."

In 1950 Albers began his "Homage to the Square," which was to occupy much of his time until the end of his life. The main hall of the nearby Palazzo Santa Margherita is entirely given over to 36 of these (including preliminary sketches) spanning two and a half decades. The final sections of the exhibition, of the artist's prints and photographs, are displayed in rooms above.

As with his earlier geometrical paintings, the "Homages" were rigorously structured on "actual, mathematical relationships," the choice of their particular form being chosen, according to Albers, because "squares do not normally appear in nature." To create them the artist used unmixed paints straight from the tube applied with a palette knife. Such was the artist's precision that Elaine de Kooning noted that he "can keep a white linen suit immaculate throughout a painting session."

Marco Pierino has tellingly juxtaposed pairs of some canvases to demonstrate how our perception of sets of identical colors varies in intensity and tonality according to their arrangement. In her lively and amusing article about the artist, published in 1950 and reprinted in the show's catalog, Elaine de Kooning concluded that however impersonal his paintings might at first appear, not one of them "could have been painted by any one but Josef Albers himself."

Italy has the dubious distinction of being the main source of Albers fakes that began to appear after his death. Nicholas Fox Weber, the executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, has been instrumental in having four of these, on sale in auction houses and galleries in France and Germany, seized by the police.

On the day after the inauguration of the Modena exhibition, Mr. Fox Weber invited owners of Albers paintings to bring them to him for authentication. Of the 11 paintings presented for scrutiny, three turned out to be fakes. In an interview by telephone, Mr. Fox Weber said that one was a crude copy that its owner already suspected of not being genuine, but the other two were carefully concocted frauds that included imitations of the characteristic notes that Albers made on the backs of his paintings. "One of them had been certified by a gallery and the other by a self-appointed Albers aficionado, who was in no position to issue such an authentication," Mr. Fox Weber said.

Josef Albers. Galleria Civica di Modena, Palazzo Santa Margherita and Palazzina dei Giardini, Modena. Through Jan. 8. A version of this article appears in print on October 22, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune.