

# JOSEF ALBERS IN AMERICA: PAINTINGS ON PAPER

8 FEBRUARY – 30 APRIL 2012

‘Juxtaposing two colours puts me in a state of intense excitement,’ said Josef Albers (1888-1976). Each of his works attests to this immediately palpable stimulation, but also reveals a conceptually demanding creative method. This exhibition is devoted to Josef Albers’s studies painted in oil on paper, and explores part of the artist’s intense relationship with colour. These sketches preceded the paintings on masonite made by the artist during his American years (1933-1976), including the famous series *Homage to the Square*, begun in 1950.

Organised initially by the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat, in Bottrop, and the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, in Munich, the exhibition ‘Josef Albers in America’ presents, for the first time in Europe, nearly 80 works on paper. Some are essentially colour tests,

from monochrome to colour gradations, on small pieces of paper. Others are large compositions, highly accomplished and close to the finished work. Some of them are marked with inscriptions that shed light on the experimental nature of Albers’s work. He was one of the great masters of the second half of the twentieth century, and was particularly influential on a generation of American artists. In 1991, the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd wrote of him: ‘There is a very simple totality in Albers’ paintings [...]. We are stunned by the way brilliance is born so discreetly.’

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## TEACHING IN THE UNITED STATES

In 1920, Albers registered for Johannes Itten's 'preliminary course' at the Weimar Bauhaus. This course was based on the general teaching of the fundamentals of creative expression: ideas about colour and space, graphic and pictorial logic, experiments with materials. In 1923, the school's founder, Walter Gropius, put Albers in charge of the glass workshop. Two years later, when the Bauhaus moved to Dessau, he became director of the 'preliminary course'. From this point, the idea – advocated by Gropius – of a 'new unity between art and technique, between individual creativity and the power of collective production' was at the centre of the Bauhaus's programme. Albers taught his students to explore the potentials of different materials, particularly paper and cardboard; using sheets of paper, they studied folds, curves and constructions, and discovered the specific limits and possibilities of this support. After the advent of the National Socialist government in 1933, the Bauhaus, considered a 'hotbed of subversion', was pressured into closing. Albers, with his wife Anni, who was also a teacher, accepted an invitation from the architect Philip Johnson to teach at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Albers found the vital spirit of the Bauhaus's early years reborn in this place, and he reintroduced the idea of the 'preliminary course', which became

a genuine model of artistic training, based on individual experimentation and creative freedom. In this experimental school, Albers would contribute to the education of some of the most eminent American creative artists of the second half of the twentieth century, among them Robert Rauschenberg.

In 1949, he was appointed head of the design department at Yale, in Connecticut: his students here included Eva Hesse. His book *Interaction of Color*, published in 1963, is considered an important work in the field of chromatic studies, and is still used by most fine arts schools today.

## DRAWINGS, PAINTINGS AND STUDIES ON PAPER

From his earliest works, around the time of the First World War, Josef Albers showed a preference for series and variations over the idea of the single, exemplary work. Among the hundreds of works he executed on paper – drawings, gouaches, oil paintings, linocuts, etchings, lithographies – most of them belong to groups of works. The artist never stopped exploring formal structures, through line, colour, surface and space. His prolific and varied production is represented here with studies for the series *Kinetics* and *Adobes* from the 1930s and 1940s. There is also an important group of preparatory works for the series of paintings *Homage to the Square*, which began in 1950.

It is, paradoxically, in his works on paper that we can best appreciate the scope of Albers' output, even more so than in his panel paintings. It is true that, in his works on paper, there are fewer examples of his signature style as a painter: the use of a knife to spread colour; nevertheless, the paper surfaces show an almost bodily expressiveness in their contours. This contributes to the vividness of these works and strengthens the colour's materiality, which asserts and reveals itself in this way. The thick blotting paper absorbs oil and gives the colours a silky, luminous quality.

## VARIANTS / ADOBES

The formal elegance and chromatic shimmer of the works in the series *Variants / Adobes* obscure the mathematical precision of their geometry. The infinitely varied organisation (no two works are exactly the same) of the positioning and proportions of the coloured fields on sheets of different sizes; the materials and textures that are sometimes fluid, sometimes thick; the variations on the theme of rectangles set within rectangles... all of this leads us to consider the *Variants* as the culmination of Albers' experiments with colour. But, despite their radical abstraction, the *Variants* do betray a certain attachment to the figurative: the two vertical rectangles, linked by this flattened U, reveal the influence of the architectonic structures of pre-Columbian villages, which had impressed the artist on his first trip to Mexico in 1935.

## HOMAGE TO THE SQUARE

After the *Variants* series, Albers liberated himself from the support in order to concentrate solely on colour. The preparatory papers for the series *Homage to the Square*, of a size commensurate with the eye and the hand, served as a framework for experimentation. Albers chose as his arena the 'zero point' of the square: to his eyes, the most basic vehicle for colour. This static form gives a paradoxical dynamism and intensity to the visual impact of the coloured areas. Through the 'interaction' – or even the interpenetration – of colours, through the superimposition and disappearance of one colour under another, the painter achieves a sort of dematerialisation of the borders between colours and tones. Some of the later sketches have an unfinished feel, appropriate for the genre of drawing. Notes written by the artist in the margins of the papers or even in the colour itself allow us to grasp even more fully the experimental nature of the *Homages*, which explore colour in all its variations and in its most subtle shadings.

## EXHIBITION

### CURATOR

Jonas Storsve

### PRODUCTION

Claire Blanchon

## CATALOGUE

*Paintings on Paper*

*Josef Albers in America*

Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern,  
2010 / ed. Centre Pompidou,  
2012

Texts by Nicholas Fox Weber,  
Isabelle Dervaux, Heinz  
Liesbrock, Michael Semff.  
Translated in French by Jean  
Torrent and Jean-François  
Cornu.

192 p. + 24 p.

€39,80€

## INFORMATIONS

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### EXHIBITION OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

From February 8 through  
May 7, 2012

Galerie d'art graphique, level 4

Daily, except Tuesday,

from 11 am until 9 pm

Ticket office closes at 8 pm

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Direction des publics, Service  
de l'information des publics et  
de la médiation, 2012.  
Presentation based on  
catalogue essays.