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How Anni and Josef Albers Became 21st Century Art Stars

A crop of major shows celebrating the modernist pioneers is coming to Europe and New York

1964 study for Josef's Homage to the Square series (left) and his newly rediscovered 1942 work Tenayuca I. PHOTO: FROM LEFT: JOSEF ALBERS, STUDY FOR HOMAGE TO THE SQUARE, 1964, © THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK; JOSEF ALBERS, TENAYUCA I, 1942, © THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

ByCarol Kino

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HOW DO YOU MAKE an artist into a key figure of art history? Take the case of Josef and Anni Albers, today considered leading lights of 20th-century modernism. The couple emerged from Germany's innovative Bauhaus school, where he was a teacher and she a student. After the Nazis forced the school's closure in 1933, the Alberses fled to the United States and joined the founding faculty of Black Mountain College, in North Carolina. Josef oversaw the art department, and Anni taught weaving. Both left their mark on a student body that included future masters such as Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly.

Anni's first wall hanging, from 1924, at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut. PHOTO: ANNI ALBERS, WALLHANGING, 1924, © 2017 THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK.

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Yet these days the couple suddenly seems to be everywhere: The coming year brings a crop of major Albers shows in Europe and New York, including *Anni Albers: Touching Vision*, opening October 6 at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao—the artist's first retrospective since 1999—and *Josef Albers in Mexico*, opening November 3 at New York's Guggenheim. *Josef's Homage to the Square* works, paintings and prints of nested squares that served as visualizations of his color theories, are no longer seen as dry academic studies but coveted as glorious pieces in themselves. And as museums intensify their focus on underrecognized women artists, as well as on neglected media like textiles and prints, Anni's boldly unconventional weavings, which incorporated material like cellophane even in the 1920s, have made her the darling of curators, theorists and artists alike.

By midcentury, when modernist abstraction still ruled, both artists were in their heydays: In 1949, Anni, having already influenced a generation of designers, became the first textile artist to have a solo show at New York's Museum of Modern Art; a year later, Josef became the first director of Yale University's graduate design department, where he shaped the thinking of still more American artists, including Richard Serra and Eva Hesse. But from the 1970s on, as conceptualism, expressionist painting and other postmodernist

movements came to the fore, the Alberses' brand of geometric abstraction and formal experimentation fell out of fashion.

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Anni and Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in 1938. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION (ARCHIVAL)

Perhaps it's just the zeitgeist, but many in the art world also credit this resurgence to the diligent work of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut, about 20 minutes away from the cemetery where the couple are buried under matching rectangular headstones. "The foundation is a think tank not only for the Alberses' work but also for modernism, both European and American," says David Leiber, a partner at New York's David Zwirner gallery, which began representing the foundation last year. According to Leiber, prices for certain Homage paintings have doubled in the past five years and tripled in the past 10; the gallery has sold them at prices ranging from \$300,000 to over \$2 million. (Zwirner is doing its part too, with a show opening September 20 called *Josef and Anni and Ruth and Ray*, pairing the Alberses with Ruth Asawa and Ray Johnson, two of their students at Black Mountain.)

Established by Josef five years before his 1976 death, the foundation has been helmed since 1979 by the art historian Nicholas Fox Weber, who met and became close to the Alberses in the early '70s as a graduate student at Yale. From a modest complex of buildings in a woody grove, a team of curators, researchers, visiting artists, archivists and restorers works to maintain the couple's legacy. (There is also an informal furniture gallery, called Trunk, open to scholars and students by appointment.) The chief curator, Brenda Danilowitz, began working there before Anni's death in 1994 and, like Fox Weber, knew her personally. Among other projects, the foundation staff track down the Alberses' work, aggressively weeding out fakes and buying back select pieces when possible, and pursue their own scholarship, opening up new avenues of exploration.

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"I have never had a partner in any project as helpful as the foundation," says Maria Müller-Schareck, chief curator of modern and contemporary art at Düsseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen museum, which together with London's Tate Modern is presenting *Anni Albers*, a major retrospective that opens next June in Düsseldorf and travels to London that October. "Altogether they seem to know everything about these artists. And Nick Weber, he tells his wonderful stories from dusk to dawn." Indeed, Fox Weber is a raconteur full of colorful anecdotes: the time he first met the Alberses at their house and Anni served him extra-crispy KFC on Rosenthal china because, she said, it was a ringer for classic Viennese fried chicken, or when Jacqueline Onassis told Anni that looking at Josef's work was like being in Matisse's Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence, France. More than one curator mentions the importance of his deep personal connection to the couple.

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Bethany, Connecticut. PHOTO: DANILO SCARPATI

The fruits of the foundation's labors can be seen clearly in the two Guggenheim shows. *Albers in Mexico* radically repositions Josef with many works predating his *Homage* series, some of which will also appear. The exhibition includes his photographs and photo collages of Zapotec, Aztec and Mixtec pyramids and ruins; selections from his so-called *Variant/Adobe* paintings—hotly colored squares nested inside horizontal rectangles—and his *Tenayuca* series, which are geometric compositions that seem to balance flatness with three-dimensional space.

Among them is *Tenayuca I*, lost since it was purchased in 1947 and known only from a small black-and-white photograph. When the foundation began working with Zwirner, a relative of the original owner suddenly contacted the gallery about the work. "I got one look at it and said, 'We will buy it,'" Fox Weber says. "It's an extraordinary painting, in mint condition. And it's beautiful."

For Lauren Hinkson, the Guggenheim curator organizing the New York show, the painting was "a revelation," she says. "I've seen all the *Tenayucas*, and when I saw it hanging at the foundation, I almost got down on my knees to pray."

Hinkson hit upon the show's concept after discovering Josef's Mexican photographs in the Guggenheim's collection nine years ago. They struck her as an anticipation of the 1960s photographs of land artists like Robert Smithson and conceptual artists like Donald Judd. The foundation staff helped her expand on that idea, linking Josef's abstraction to the couple's fascination with Latin American archaeology. "When you think of Albers, you think of those squares," Hinkson says. "But the foundation helped me uncover a story that hasn't been told in this level of depth."

One of Anni's looms. PHOTO: © 2017 THE JOSEF AND ANNI ALBERS FOUNDATION/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK

Meanwhile, in *Touching Vision*, curator Manuel Cirauqui intends to position Anni more broadly, as "an important artist," one whose work addresses, he says, "key issues for modernist painting from the perspective and materiality of so-called minor art forms." The show comprises wall hangings, pictorial weavings (as she began calling them in the U.S.) and prints, as well as her jewelry, inspired by pre-Columbian adornments but made with dime-store finds like washers, safety pins and ribbon.

The Bilbao exhibition presents Anni as a thinker and educator, too, using previously unseen material from the foundation's archives, including the original notes from her 1965 book, *On Weaving*, which is being reissued in an expanded edition this fall. Also on view will be one of her notebooks, filled with drawings of knots, curving lines and intricate patterns built with triangles. Discovered in the archives after Anni's death, the full journal will be published by Zwirner Books in October.

A video accompanying the show will feature a textile artist from the foundation's artist residency program weaving on the loom Anni brought to the U.S. from the Bauhaus. Although she sold it in the early '60s, the foundation kept tabs on it, reacquired it as a gift in 2015 and reassembled it with the help of three weavers, including the foundation's associate curator, Karis Medina.

Fox Weber feels certain that with increased recognition, more Albers discoveries may emerge. "I know that there is a tapestry by Anni that disappeared in Japan in the late 1920s. The assumption is that it was destroyed, but I don't know for sure." He's on the hunt for Easter eggs, and not just metaphorical ones. "Anni told me that she and Josef painted them every year. What wouldn't I do to find Anni and Josef's Easter eggs?"

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