

QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Josef Albers was a painter, poet, sculptor, art theorist, and an educator. Through his teachings he introduced a generation of American artists to the European modernist concepts of the Bauhaus. His experimentation with color interaction and geometric shapes transformed the modern art scene, offering an alternative to Abstract Expressionism and inspiring movements such as Geometric Abstraction, Color field painting, and Op Art.

Key Ideas

- Albers' artwork showed that ideas and emotions could be conveyed through simple geometric shapes and ordinary colors, paving the way for a new type of artistic abstraction.
- Sometimes known as "the square man," he made more than 1,000 paintings in his series, *Homage to the Square*, from 1950 until his death. The quasi-scientific series of paintings focused on optical effects of color within the confines of a uniform square shape.
- Albers' own art, books on art theory, and teachings at **The Bauhaus**, **Black Mountain College** and Yale University were instrumental in the development of progressive artistic styles during and after the age of Abstract Expressionism.
- Among his most successful students were **Robert Rauschenberg**, **Cy Twombly**, **Richard Anuszkiewicz**, **Eva Hesse**, and **John Chamberlain**.

DETAILED VIEW:



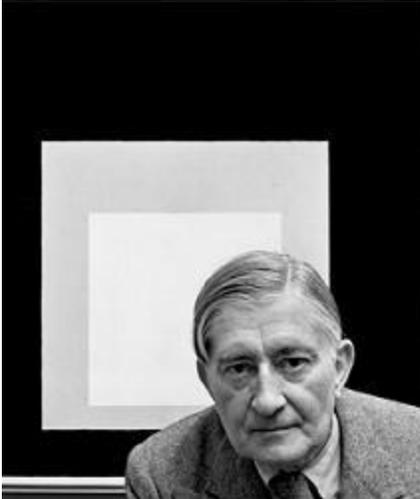
Early years

Josef Albers was born March 19, 1888, in Bottrop, Germany. From 1905 to 1908, he studied to become a teacher in Buren and then taught in Westphalian primary schools from 1908 to 1913. After attending the Konigliche Kunstschule in Berlin from 1913 to 1915, he was certified to teach art. Albers studied lithography in Essen and attended the Academy in Munich. In 1920 Albers entered the Bauhaus, a school in Weimar that focused on the modern integration of architecture, fine art, and craft, at the age of thirty-two.

Albers initially concentrated his studies on glass painting at the Bauhaus. In 1922, as a Bauhausgeselle (journeyman), he was in charge of the Bauhaus glass workshop. In 1923, he began to teach the Vorkurs, a basic design course. When the Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, he became Bauhausmeister (professor) teaching alongside fellow-artists Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. In addition to working in glass and metal, he designed furniture and typography at the school.

Mature Period

After the Nazis forced the Bauhaus to close in 1933, Albers and his wife **Anni Albers** moved to North Carolina where he served as head of the art department at Black Mountain College from 1933 until 1949.



Black Mountain College was a liberal arts college with a focus on the fine and decorative arts. It attracted artists from around the world through its reputation as a radical artistic community. Albers' experience in Germany with the Bauhaus, and their integration of architecture, fine art, and craft, influenced his teaching methods at Black Mountain College, and enlightened his students to the modern European artistic concepts.

While teaching some of the most influential artists of the twentieth century at Black Mountain College until 1949, Albers simultaneously continued to successfully develop his own art with more than twenty solo shows in American galleries, featuring his glass paintings from the Bauhaus period, as well as new graphic drawings and oil paintings.

In 1949, Albers left Black Mountain College, moving to Connecticut to serve as the chairman of the Design Department at Yale University from 1950 to 1958 where he taught Richard Anuszkiewicz and Eva Hesse. While lecturing at Yale, Albers began his most famous body of work, the series *Homage to the Square*, an exercise on the optical effects of color within the confines of a uniform square shape.

After retiring from Yale in 1958 at the age of seventy, his former teacher and colleague, Walter Gropius, invited Albers to design a mural for the interior of the new Graduate Center at Harvard University. This led to other important mural commissions, including *Two Portals* (1961) at the Time and Life Building and *Manhattan* (1963) at the Pan Am Building, both in New York.

In addition to painting, printmaking, and executing murals and architectural commissions, Albers published poetry, articles, and books on art theory. His best-known book, published in 1963 was *Interaction of Color*, which presented his theory that colors were governed by an internal and deceptive logic.



Late years and death

After leaving Yale University in 1958, Albers continued to teach, giving guest lectures at colleges and universities throughout the country. An exhibition of *Homage to the Square*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, traveled from 1965 to 1967, to parts of South America, Mexico, and the United States. In 1971 Albers was the first living artist to be honored with a solo retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Albers would live and work in New Haven, Connecticut, alongside his wife and fellow-artist Anni Albers, until his death on March 25, 1976.

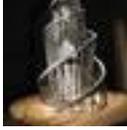
Legacy

As both artist and teacher, Josef Albers played a substantial role in the history of 20th-century art. His theories about art and color powerfully influenced a whole generation of American minimalists, creating a different way of perceiving art and, ultimately, life. He viewed art as process rather than a product with the ultimate goal being "to open eyes."

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Josef Albers's main influencers, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p>Piet Mondrian</p>  <p>Ludwig Mies van der Rohe</p>	 <p>Walter Gropius</p>  <p>Anni Albers</p>	 <p>Suprematism</p>  <p>Futurism</p>

 Wassily Kandinsky	 Paul Klee	 Bauhaus
 Kazimir Malevich		 Constructivism
 Johannes Itten		 Expressionism

INFLUENCES ON ARTIST



Josef Albers

Years Worked: 1915 – 1976

INFLUENCED BY ARTIST

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 Robert Rauschenberg	 Anni Albers	 Pop Art
		 Color Field Painting

 <p>Cy Twombly</p>  <p>Richard Anuszkiewicz</p>  <p>Eva Hesse</p>  <p>John Chamberlain</p>		 <p>Geometric Abstraction</p>
--	--	---

Quotes

"Art is revelation instead of information, expression instead of description, creation instead of imitation or repetition. Art is concerned with the HOW, not the WHAT; not with literal content, but with the performance of the factual content. The performance - how it is done - that is the content of art."

"Any ground subtracts its own hue from the colors which it carries and therefore influences."

"In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is - as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art."

"Instead of art I have taught philosophy. Though technique for me is a big word, I never have taught how to paint. All my doing was to make people to see."

"Simultaneous contrast is not just a curious optical phenomenon - it is the very heart of painting."

"Albers was a beautiful teacher and an impossible person ... what he taught had to do with the entire visual world ... I consider Albers the most important teacher I've ever had, and I'm sure he considered me one of his poorest students."

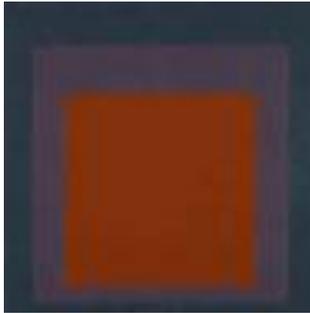
- Robert Rauschenberg



Content written by:

Erika Oman

Major Works:



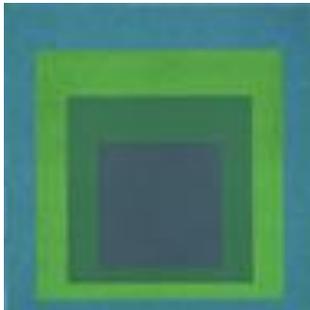
Title: Homage to the Square: Dissolving/vanishing

Description: Josef Albers described his most famous series, *Homage to the Square*, as "platters to serve color." He began the series in 1949 and worked on it until his death in 1976. This earlier version depicts his systematic approach in investigating optical effects of colors when placed in a static square shape. With this series, Albers explored how colors change depending on their placement within the composition.

Year: 1951

Materials: Oil on Masonite

Collection: Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Title: Homage to the Square: Soft Spoken

Description: Albers began his *Homage to the Square* series in 1950. When he completed this variation in 1969, almost twenty years later, very little had changed in the series. He donated this painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1972, a year after they honored Albers with the museum's first ever solo exhibition of a living artist.

Year: 1969

Materials: Oil on masonite

Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art



Title: Graphic Tectonic: Shrine

Description: In 1942 Josef Albers embarked on a series of zinc plate lithographs entitled *Graphic Tectonics*. While he is best known for his color studies, here Albers took an interest in the absence of color in his studies of lines, where he worked to create "maximum effect from minimum means." This series of works was completed while he taught at Black Mountain College and continued his exploration of optical illusions.

Year: 1942

Materials: Zinc Lithograph

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York City, New York



Title: Two Portals

Description: After retiring from Yale in 1958 at the age of seventy, Albers' former teacher and colleague, Walter Gropius, invited Albers to design a mural for the interior of the new Graduate Center at Harvard University, leading to other important mural commissions including *Two Portals* at the Time and Life Building, pictured here.

Year: 1961

Materials: Bronze and glass

Collection: Time-Life Building, New York City, USA



Title: Manhattan

Description: Albers created this mural for the lobby of the Pan Am (now MetLife) Building in 1963 at the request of the building's architect, his friend and mentor, Walter Gropius. Tens of thousands of people passed by this mural during their daily commute to

Grand Central Station until it was removed when the lobby was renovated in 2000. Albers created the mural as an homage to New York City, based on a glass design he created in 1929 while at the Bauhaus named *City*. At the current time, this mural is in storage and cannot be seen by the public.

Year: 1963

Materials: Formica

Collection: Lobby of the Pan-Am Building (now called the MetLife Building), New York City (Removed 2000)



Title: Repeat and Reverse

Description: Albers created this two-dimensional exterior sculpture at the request of Paul Rudolph, the architect of the then new Art and Architecture Building . Like Albers' *Homage to the Square* series which dealt with the optical illusions of colors, Albers uses *Repeat and Reverse* to show how even simple lines can create optical illusions.

Year: 1963

Materials: Stainless steel on concrete

Collection: Art and Architecture Building, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut