

# Anni Albers to Date

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Anni Albers's first childhood memory is of awakening on the morning of an early birthday and seeing a wreath of flowers and greens tied around the top of her crib. She remembers the colors and the graceful intertwining of the leaves and blossoms. If our minds select memories according to the inclinations of our temperament, it makes sense that the earliest recollection of this woman, who has consistently embraced art as an anchor against doubts and difficulties wherever she encountered them, is of a visual event: pure, uplifting, celebrative.

She rarely thinks of her childhood today; nearing age eighty-six she is absorbed by her current work, anticipated visitors, and travel plans, and with projects relating to the art of Josef Albers, her husband of fifty years. But when she does think of her youth in Berlin, where she was born Annelise Fleischmann on June 12, 1899, she mainly considers appearances, not only in their finished form, but in a state of creation and transformation. She recalls the glow of candles in countless windows on snowy Christmas Eves, the way the light looked from the horse-drawn carriage that took her family from the house of one pair of grandparents to that of the other pair, the way that the heads of the bronze horses on top of the Brandenburg Gate seemed to turn in her direction as she went through it. She can still recollect what she ate and what she wore, all with the unerring sense of detail that has been consistent throughout her life. From the time of the Dessau Bauhaus, she recalls a dinner she gave as a nervous young bride for Mies van der Rohe and his companion Lilly Reich. Anni's mother had given her a butter curler, and Lilly Reich, upon seeing the butter balls, scowled, "Butter balls! Here, at the Bauhaus! At the Bauhaus I should think you'd have a good solid block of butter!"

Anni noticed everything, from special

Figure 5  
Anni in Berlin, 1920

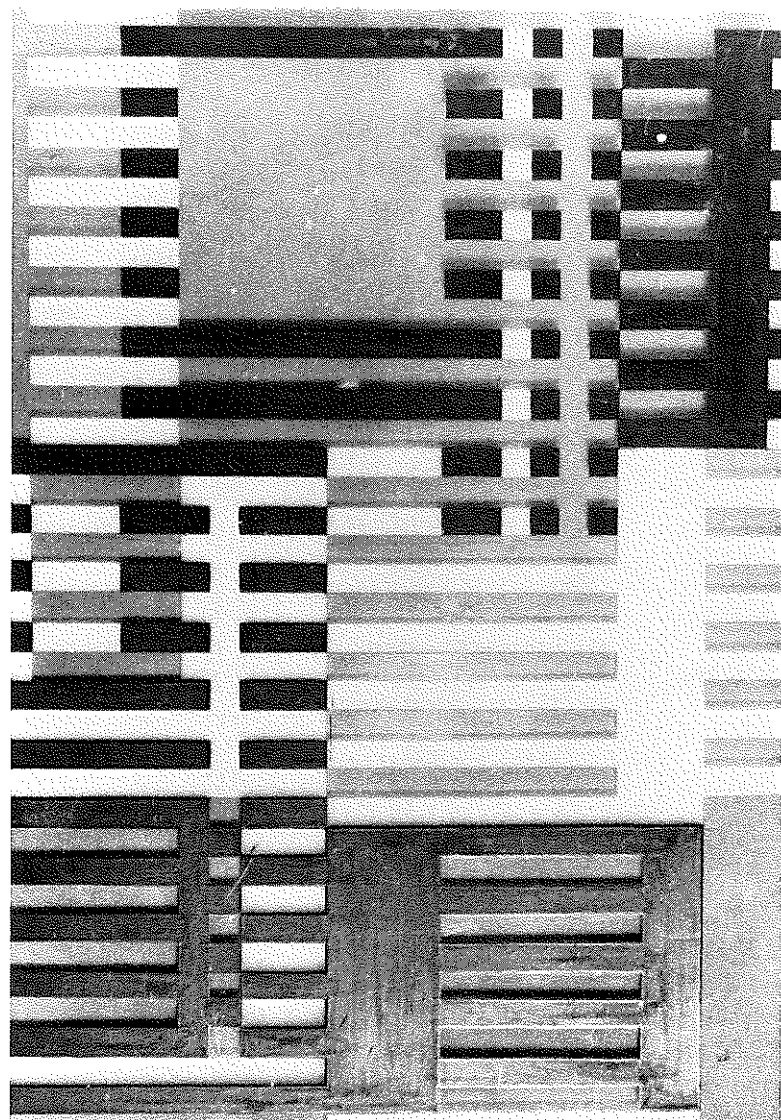


holiday foods to her uncle's handsome butler and the social nuances of the two families: her mother's family, the Ullsteins, of publishing fame, seemed slightly commercial to her, her father's more aristocratic. This sense of the significance of every detail and subtlety underlies her work as a weaver, writer, teacher, and graphic artist, and has made her deeply receptive to the textures and linking of threads, willing to labor for hours over the formation of succinct, telling sentences, eager to revise a print by shifting a single linear element or lightening an ink tone. In her inseparable living and working, what has arisen from such careful choosing and combining and from consistent originality is a special aura of lightness, a timeless grace, a rare combination of informality and precision.

Process and preparation intrigued her from the start. She liked watching her parents' apartment being turned into a train station or into a scene from the Grunewald, the woods near Berlin, for one of their costume parties. It was not the party itself she liked so much as the transformation of her surroundings. When she and her sister went to concerts, in memorable velvet dresses and lace collars, what she most liked was hearing the orchestra tune up. Her feeling for components to be manipulated led her to understand the properties of specific fibers and looms, to grasp the particular character and capabilities of etching or lithography, to listen to the voice of the technique before imposing her own.

As an adolescent she had an art tutor in her home, and then she went to study

Figure 6  
Josef Albers, *Upward*  
1927, sandblasted flashed glass  
17¾ × 12¾ inches  
The Josef Albers Foundation  
Orange, Connecticut



with Martin Brandenburg, an impressionist painter. Awed by the black background of a Lucas Cranach *Venus* that she had seen with her father in a Berlin museum, Anni tried to use black in Brandenburg's studio, but the color was forbidden. There were tears and confrontation at home, and Anni ended up agreeing not to use black. It was a rare instance of her letting someone dictate anything about her art; she was to choose her own course, and get her fill of rich solid blacks in the years to come.

After an unsuccessful attempt to have Oskar Kokoschka take her as a student, she went to the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Art) in Hamburg, but two months of doing flowered wallpaper designs were more than enough. A brochure for the Weimar Bauhaus, citing its emphasis on pioneering methods and the inseparability of art and craft, made the Bauhaus approach seem worthwhile. Anni's father, a furniture manufacturer, questioned the idea—"A new style? We've had the Renaissance. We've had the Baroque. There are no new styles"—but still she sought admission in 1922.

In a rented room, with a bath available only once a week, the young Berliner who was used to a seamstress and laundress applied to the experimental school. She was rejected at first, but was admitted on her second attempt. And she found added reason to stay. While pursuing admission, she had met "a lean, half-starved, ascetic-looking student," Josef Albers, a Westphalian schoolteacher eleven years older than she. She thought the assemblages he was making from fragments of broken bottles were brilliant, and found almost everything about him, including his blond bangs, irresistible. At Anni's first Bauhaus Christmas, when she was sure the Santa Claus in front of the room would have nothing for her, she was handed a print of Giotto's *Flight into Egypt*, from Albers. It seems a perfect symbol for the intense, all-consuming devotion to vision, the quest for quiet yet exuberant art, that was to characterize Anni and Josef's long life together. Three years after they met in Weimar, Josef was appointed a master at the school, and they were married. By that time both were producing strong geometric compositions, his in glass, hers in fabric (see figs. 6-7), and Anni's wall hangings were already resonating with a unique grace and sense of purpose.

Figure 7  
Untitled wall hanging  
1925, cotton jacquard weave  
82¾ × 61 inches  
Location unknown

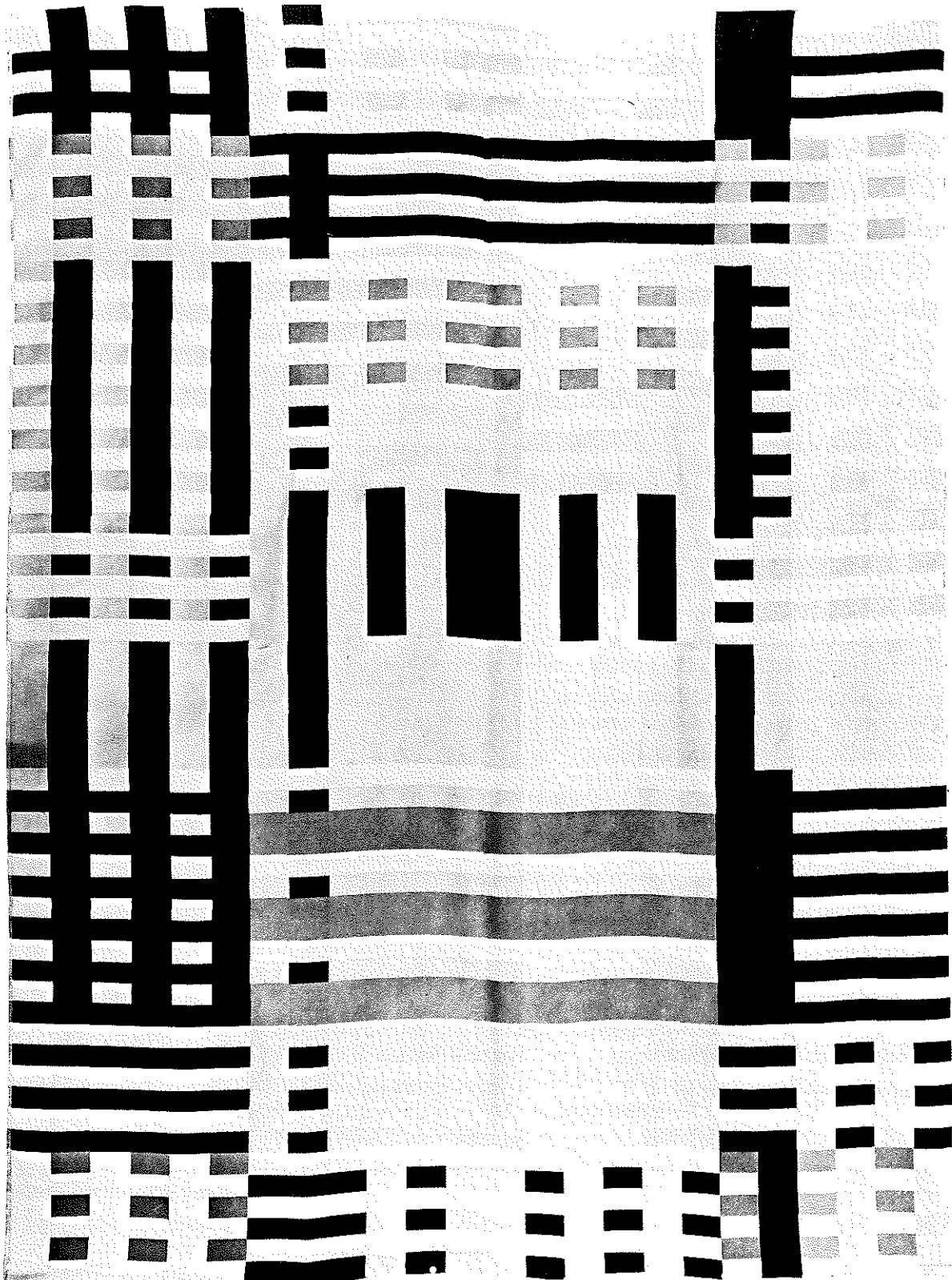


Figure 10  
Anni, summer 1928  
photographed by Josef



Hannes Meyer, the second Bauhaus director, was the architect. Anni served as head of the weaving workshop for a time while Gunta Stölzl was away from school, and she continued her association with the Bauhaus even after receiving her diploma, largely because her husband was on the faculty. In 1933, with Mies van der Rohe as its director, the Bauhaus moved to Berlin; it was closed shortly thereafter under pressure from the Nazis. The Alberses, at ages forty-five and thirty-four, were suddenly without jobs and had little hope of continuing their work in an atmosphere rapidly becoming hostile to abstract art. The American architect Philip Johnson, who admired Anni's textiles, encountered her one day on a street in Berlin. While having tea back at the Alberses' apartment, Johnson asked Anni if she and Josef would like to go to America. Without giving the idea much thought, she replied that they would. She knew that their art

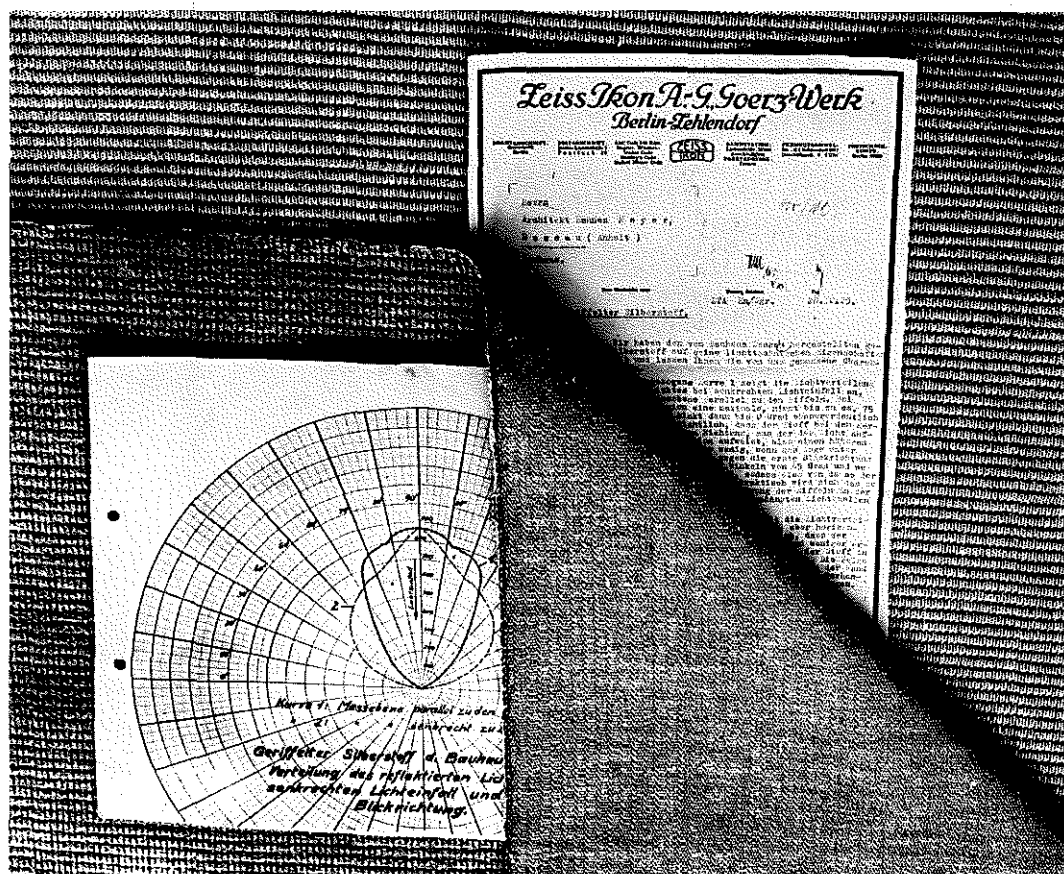
had little future in Nazi Germany and she recognized that her own background placed both of them in jeopardy. Although confirmed in an important Protestant church in Berlin, Anni realized that she was "in the Hitler sense, Jewish." Back in New York, Johnson learned that the newly formed, experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina was looking for an exceptional art teacher, and he suggested Josef Albers. Black Mountain offered teaching positions to both the Alberses, who at first thought that North Carolina might be in the Philippines. On learning more about the college, they decided to accept, with the warning that Josef spoke no English. The Black Mountain faculty urged the Alberses to come in spite of the language barrier, and they sailed to America in November of 1933.

Anni had felt a sense of guilt that her heritage was one of the factors forcing her and Josef (a Catholic) out of Germany.

Figure 11  
Fabric sample  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York City  
Gift of the artist

In 1930 Anni Albers received her Bauhaus degree based on her design for a fabric for use as a stage curtain in the Bundesschule, a new auditorium in Bernau, Germany, for which the

second Bauhaus director, Hannes Meyer, was the architect. Designed in 1929, the curtain is made of cotton, chenille, and cellophane, and is both sound absorbing and light reflecting.



The reporters who awaited them at the docks of New York, however, reassured her with a friendliness she quickly grew to value in America. They were snapping pictures of the refugee Bauhaus art professor when someone shouted, "The wife. Let's get the wife, too." It was a moment she loved. She and Josef immediately enjoyed the dynamism and energy of New York, the eagerness of crowds in museums, and the openness of people at Black Mountain. They approved of a world in which their closest new friends (fellow faculty members at Black Mountain) had spent their honeymoon backpacking. If Josef was to remain to some degree a nostalgic German, Anni has always felt totally at home in the United States, from those early years when President Roosevelt seemed like a friendly uncle until today.

The art Anni Albers produced shortly after arriving in America shows none of the stress of the move from one country to another, nor does it hint at any of the struggle of life at a new college with meager funding. Her untitled pictorial weaving of 1934 (fig. 12) is serene and soothing, its slightly rough texture warmer and earthier than the smooth finish of the Bauhaus pieces. The geometry of earlier work remains, but the edges are softer and more yielding, even organic. Created during a time of doubt and uncertainty, the work functioned as art would always function for Anni Albers, as a source of deep comfort.

Language was a problem. Anni, who as a child had been instructed in English by her Irish governess, tried to teach Josef, but it wasn't always easy. Once, when

Figure 12  
Untitled pictorial weaving  
1934, 21 × 46 inches  
Collection of Mrs. John Wilkie

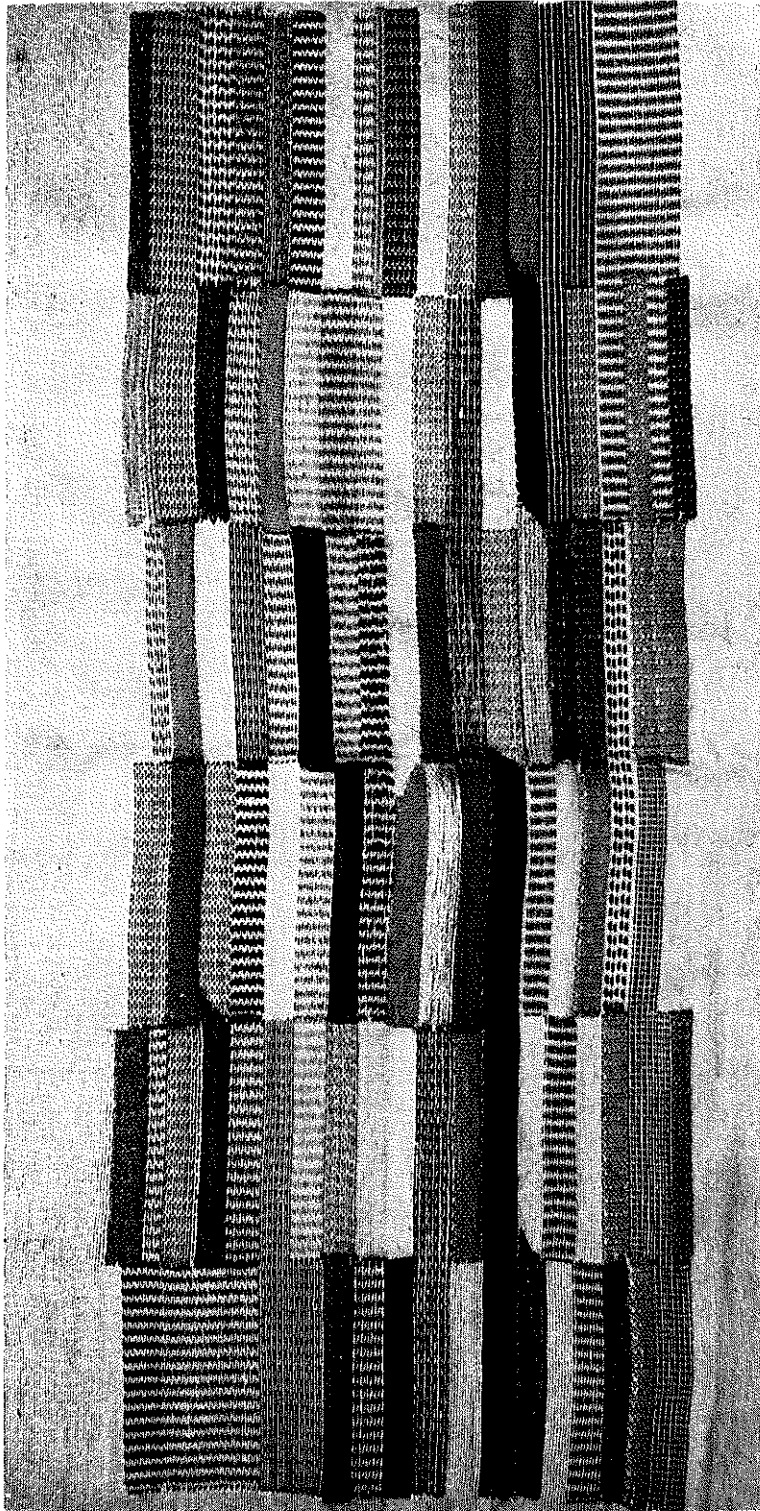


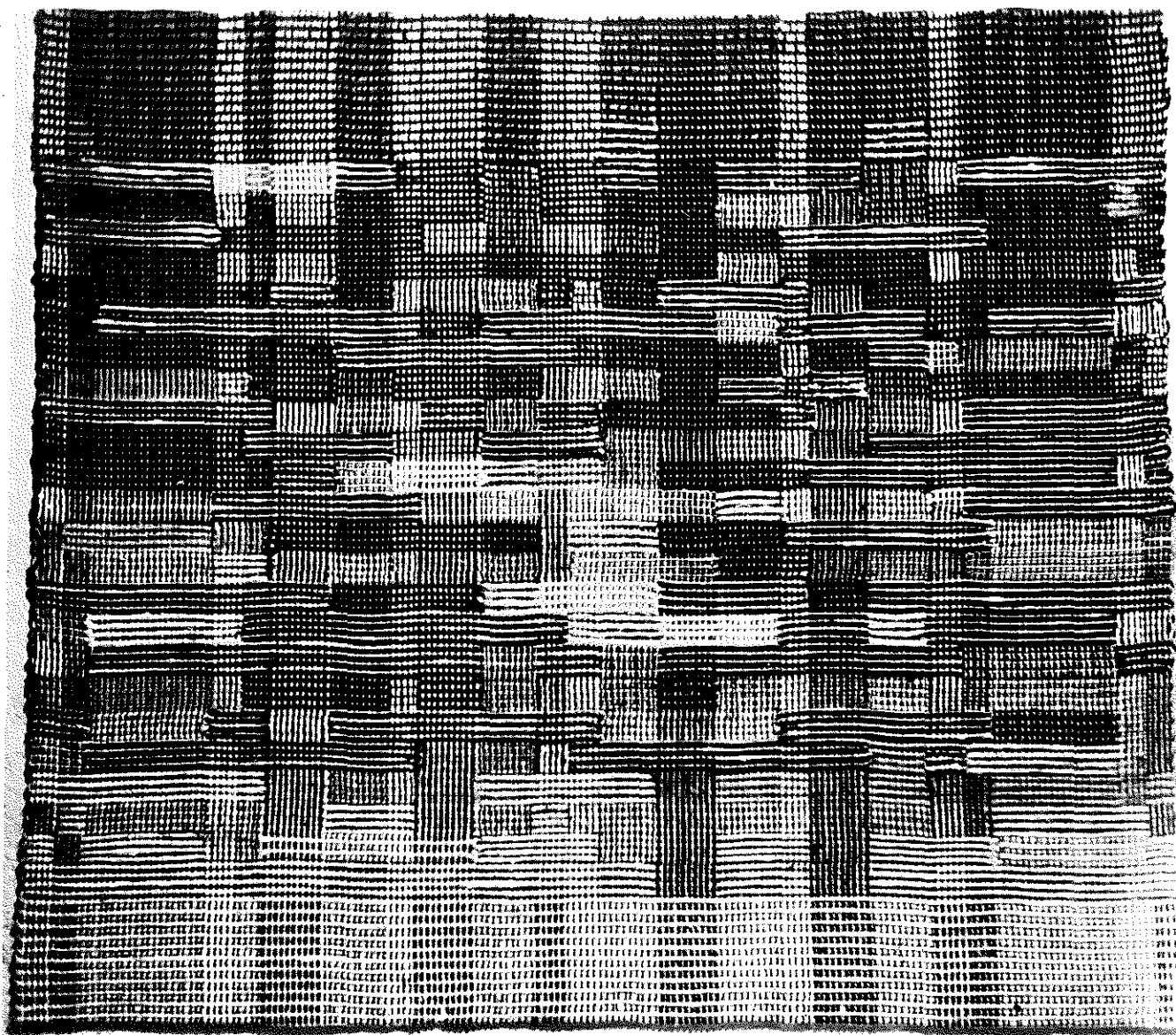
Figure 13  
With Josef at Black Mountain, May 1949



walking near Black Mountain, she jokingly told him that the word “pasture” on a signpost was clearly the opposite of “future.” But the language of art, especially her sort of art, without reference to time or place, was universal. It needed no translation, and it made assimilation into a new culture relatively easy.

The pictorial weavings and yard fabrics that Anni produced at Black Mountain are quiet and exuberant, complex yet graceful. Many of them were made during wartime, but rather than yield to the threatening world outside, they offer a glimpse of the endless possibilities of art and specifically of woven threads. One piece done after the war, a small untitled pictorial weaving of 1948 (fig. 14), now owned by the Museum of Modern Art, sums up the character of Anni Albers’s work of those years. Although it is small, each thread seems charged with uninterrupted energy; the underlying units twine and intertwine with nonstop vitality, as if to say that they exist singly but are also part of something greater. The piece evokes a statement that Anni herself had often quoted from Wassily Kandinsky (whom she knew at the Bauhaus): “There is always an ‘and.’” The artist herself would never claim such attributes for her work, but her achievement was the result of dedication to her subject

Figure 14  
Untitled pictorial weaving  
1948, hand-woven linen and cotton  
16½ × 19½ inches  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York City  
Edgar Kaufmann Purchase Fund



and singular concentration of her materials.

At Black Mountain, Anni taught what she was practicing, making her students respond to fibers as intensely as possible and giving them a feeling for what it meant to build something when starting from zero. It is not possible to summarize here all of the thinking that affected students, lecture audiences, and readers of Anni's essays, at Black Mountain and

later, but two collections of her short, written pieces, *Anni Albers: On Designing* and *Anni Albers: On Weaving*, convey the spare tone and independent philosophy that have, according to many readers and listeners, "changed our lives forever."

The years at Black Mountain had their difficulties, but Anni and Josef lived quite happily there, building close friendships with some of the other faculty members, students, and visitors, and pursuing their



Figure 15  
At Black Mountain College, 1949



own work. They also traveled frequently to Mexico, where they became passionate, adventurous collectors of pre-Columbian art. With schoolteachers' meager wages, they acquired more than a thousand museum-quality objects; Anni's advice to collectors today is still for them to collect what is not trendy or popular, and to use their own eyes.

In 1949 the Alberses moved to New York, where Anni was the first weaver to have a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art. She made several open-slat blinds for the exhibition that have the visual and actual lightness, textural contrasts, synonymous structure and design, and playful invention that more and more characterized all of her work. The show included wall hangings and fabric samples as well. Although it was well received, the show coincided with a newspaper strike, and so missed full public recognition.

In 1950 Josef Albers was appointed chairman of the Department of Design at Yale University and the Alberses moved to the New Haven area, where they lived to-

Figure 16  
At costume party at Black Mountain College



gether until Josef's death and where Anni has remained ever since. She continued to weave, lecture, write, and exhibit, playing the part of "faculty wife" as little as possible. She laughs when recalling the visit of a team of well-meaning, white-gloved New Haven ladies who were shocked to find Anni in blue jeans painting the walls of their first house, a small Cape Cod cottage on the outskirts of New Haven. As her husband attained more of an international reputation and began to show signs of aging, her responsibilities as his wife, and to some degree his protector, grew. Especially in the 1960s and until Josef's death in 1976, a constant stream of museum directors, publishers, photographers, and journalists came to visit the master of the "Homage to the Square," and it was Anni's job to make arrangements, meet trains, and plan meals. She never resented

Figure 17  
At Black Mountain College



Figure 18 (bottom)  
At Black Mountain College, late 1940s

the role, and often jauntily called herself "the dragon at the door."

Anni tells the story that when Albers did his first *Homage* in 1950, she complained to him that now they would never have enough to eat, that she felt that he had begun to paint Easter eggs. But she quickly became an astute connoisseur of the works and was pleasantly surprised after Josef's death to find that, without telling her, he had earmarked twenty-two choice *Homages* for a special collection he had long kept inviolate for her. Although some of the pieces had been in commercial exhibitions, they had for years been marked "Not for sale, property of AA."

A superlative artist's wife, Anni at the same time was one of two artists living together, working independently, meeting in the spare white kitchen to eat simple meals and exchange ideas. Before 1950, Anni had no occasion to cook; her parents had had domestic staff, and there were



Figure 19  
From left to right:  
Gerhardt Marcks, Anni, Josef, Lyonel  
Feininger, and Mrs. Feininger, at the  
Feiningers', 1950



dining halls at the Bauhaus and Black Mountain. But at age fifty-one, she learned to cook just as she had learned to run a house and handle the finances. Recognition of Anni's work continued to grow. Whereas in 1950 she had been thrilled to receive \$150 for a pictorial weaving, by the early 1960s she was receiving important architectural commissions and exhibiting with greater frequency.

In 1963, while she was "just the wife hanging around" at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles where Josef had a fellowship, Anni was invited to try her hand at printmaking; she had her own fellowship at Tamarind the following year. She enjoyed the freedom of her new medium, which allowed her to take threadlike forms further than ever before and to have multiple examples of her creations. Printmaking became more and more

fascinating to her, and she became intrigued by new graphic techniques. Some she invented with the help of the printers: using acid baths to modulate background tones; printing parallel lines off-register to give the impression of forms incised in stone; printing the same screen two or more times, first in one direction and then in another; printing hand-made forms in photo-offset with opaque, machined forms in screenprint; enlarging and reversing (by printing the negative) designs initially drawn on a small scale; and, most recently (as this book goes to press), hand-coloring in watercolor individual prints, all with the same screenprint background.

The 1960s were also a time when Anni worked on a number of significant textile commissions, many from prominent Jewish institutions. Although she had never been in a synagogue and had no sense of being Jewish, apart from feeling that

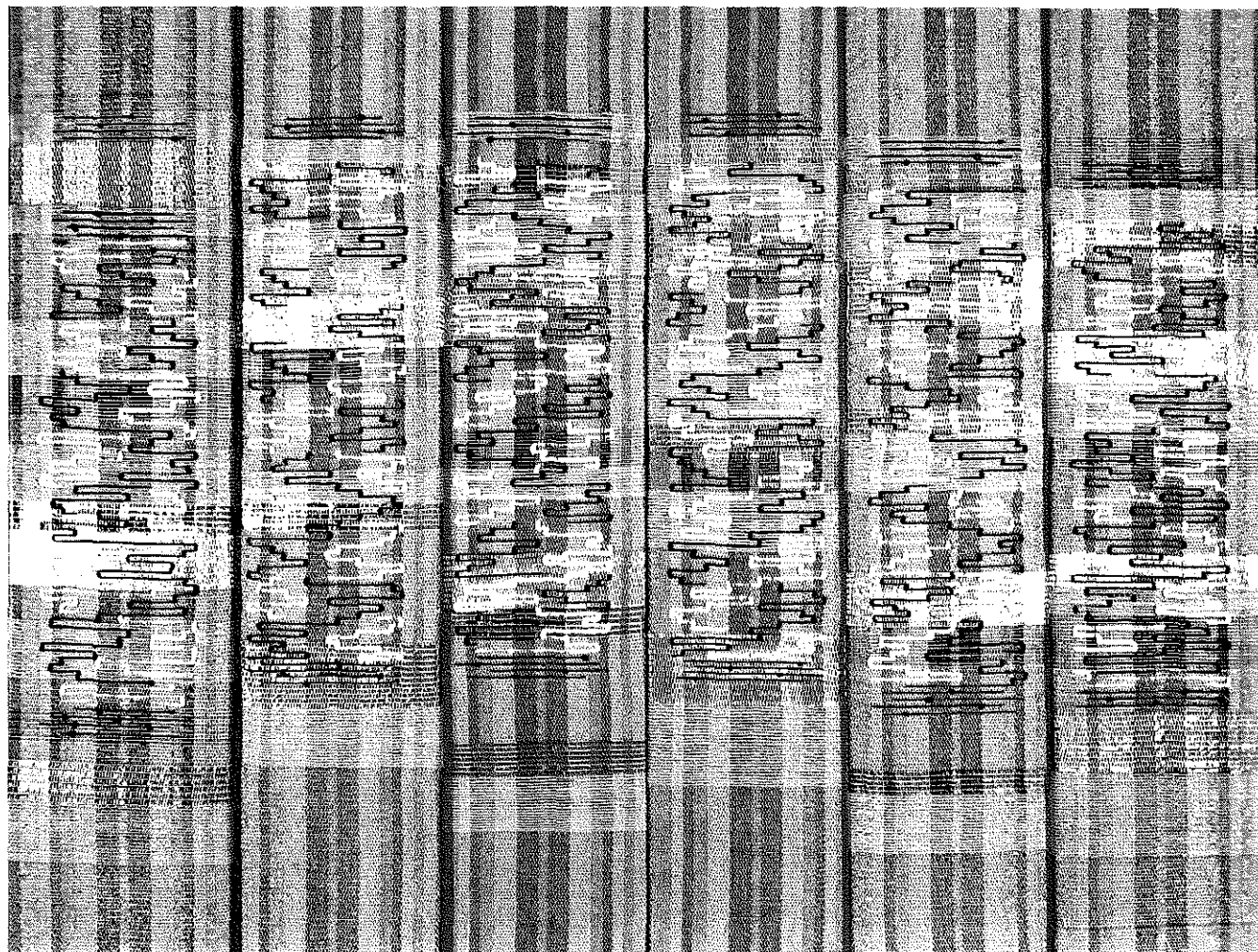
Figure 20  
At the loom, 1955



Figure 21  
*III* from the portfolio "Line Involvements"  
1964, lithograph, 19¾ × 14¾ inches  
Collection of the artist



Figure 22  
*Ark Panels*  
1962, cotton and Lurex, 64 × 84 inches overall  
Congregation B'nai Israel, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

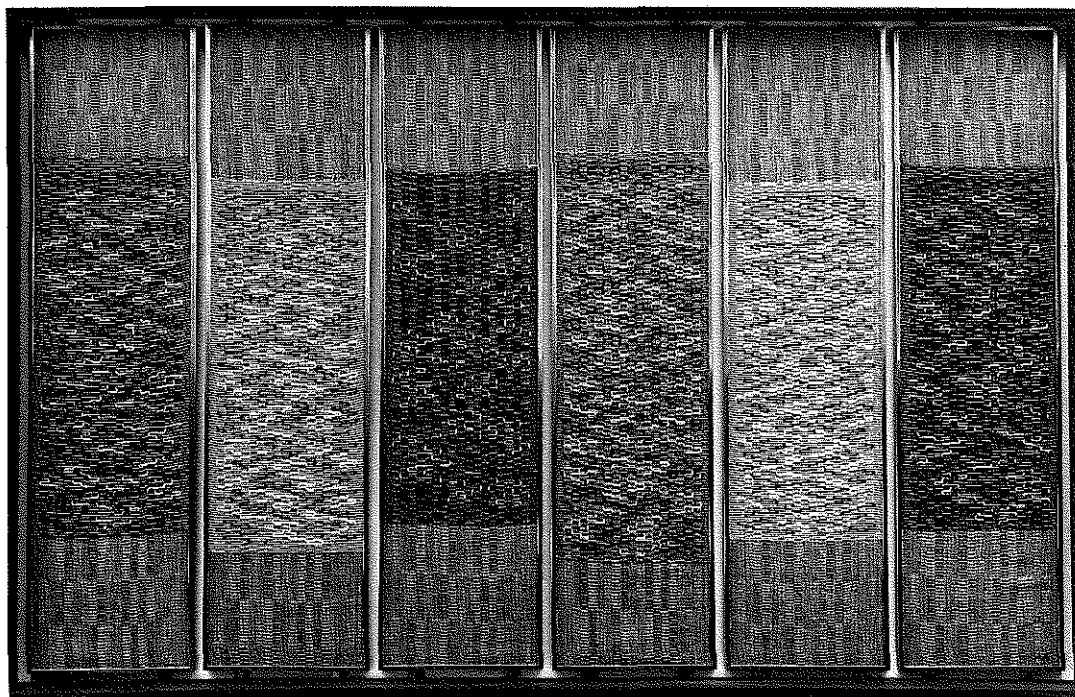


where there was anti-Semitism she would qualify as a victim, many American Jews clearly viewed her as a Jewish refugee from Nazism. She made ark curtains for synagogues in Dallas, Texas, and Silver Spring, Maryland; for a temple in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, she made six ark panels (fig. 22) that strongly evoke the liting quality of Hebrew characters and the lengthy text of the Torahs encased behind them. In 1965 Anni was commissioned to do a memorial for the victims of Nazi concentration camps for the Jewish Museum in New York. Ironically, she and Josef had been much affected by the sight of the Statue of Liberty and had commented that

in certain instances abstract art simply would not work, yet her nonrepresentational *Six Prayers* (fig. 23) for the Jewish Museum is an extraordinarily moving, even wrenching, memorial. Its threads contain feelings that Anni would never verbalize. To deal with crime and tragedy as mammoth as Nazi death camps seems practically impossible, but when we look at the muted fibers of *Six Prayers* we feel not only a somberness, but also an awesome sense of distant voices, of people touching and connected yet separate from one another, of pulsing human life.

In 1970 the Alberses moved to Orange, a small Connecticut town near New Ha-

Figure 23  
*Six Prayers*  
1966–67, cotton, linen bast, and silver Lurex  
each panel:  $7\frac{3}{4} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
The Jewish Museum, New York City  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List Family



ven, and Anni gave away her looms. She was happy to concentrate solely on graphics. She did a number of precise geometric drawings, microcosms of clarity, balance, and wholeness, each with a certain irregularity and lack of pattern that adds to its strength and interest. Her prints have always been more than mere translations of the drawings; they gained uniquely “print-erly” qualities because of Anni’s overriding interest in the capabilities of the technique, which intrigued her more than her actual subject matter.

I remember working closely with Anni Albers in 1973 on the publication of a photo-offset print at Fox Press (a printing company in Hartford, then owned by my family). Anni wanted machined-looking forms, regular and precise, the triangles just touching at their points. As she learned more about the possibilities of offset technique, she decided that she wanted to reproduce the effect of her own pencil-

ing for some of the forms. In one of our meetings she was so struck by the appearance of a negative overlaying a Velox proof of her print that she decided to make a second print of this combination, for which Josef selected an ink color.

On several occasions during our work on the two pieces, I drove Anni from Orange to Hartford so she could watch an edition being run and determine the color tone. We would talk in the car about subjects ranging from pre-Columbian art to modern technology, from artifacts to cameras, drip-dry material, or a television program featuring Chinese acrobats. Walking into the modern printing plant, she looked enormously dignified in her simple, well-fitted, carefully matched clothing. Deliberately “unarty” and unbohemian, she wore, then as now, Chanel-type suits she had sewn for herself, or simple cardigans, blouses, and skirts in a range of neutral tones. She would sit on a stool by the presses, altering the ink tones on her prints, commenting on the sheen of the

Figure 24  
With Josef, 1965



She chatted easily with the pressman, who later told me that he had never before met so respectful a client, one so disinclined to make unreasonable demands, so eager to ask time and again, "What can this machine do?," and to relish the possibilities.

Josef Albers's death in 1976 left Anni a lonely and rather frail woman with mammoth responsibilities. Eventually dependent on a wheelchair, she has felt physically confined, missing her husband, faced with decisions to make. But her vigor and acuity have astonished those who encounter her. Her opinions are clear, her passions intense. And the work she has produced in the past seven years—two major print series for Tyler Graphics, textile designs for Sunar, graphics she has published on her own—soar with faith and optimism, with a quiet but uncompromising spirit. On one level they tell nothing about their creator, whose voice is totally anonymous. On another level these vibrant, affirmative visual solutions tell everything.

rollers, the good design of the many knobs and switches, the humanoid appearance of the mechanism that stacked the finished prints. When I once mentioned my disappointment that my family had turned down an opportunity to purchase a David Smith sculpture, *Standing Printer*, for the company, Anni turned to a sparkling new thirty-eight-inch two-color press and replied, "You see that, that is more beautiful than anything David Smith ever touched."