Art in America

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Matisse Issue/Cover: “La Conversation” (detail)
Matisse and Decoration, Early and Late/Sculpture/Paris Matisse Show, ’75
Four Autobiographical Paintings/American Artists Talk on Matisse
Plus: Hollywood Costume/Books/Prints/Photography/Review of Exhibitions
Anni Albers tells of a night flight she took to New York from Chile. She felt disoriented and frightened in the clouds and darkness, with blank ocean beneath. Then there was an opening below, and she could see a grid of roads lined with lights. The sight soothed her. Her own kind had been there, and had left a mark on nature.

Anni Albers seeks to express clarity, and order through the use of straight line; her object is to create a microcosmic functional form. Weaving, as she has never regretted, how­ever, is the medium. Albers likes to cite examples and analogies of human ingenuity in relation to her own work, and indeed certain scientific ideas seem to relate to her imagery. She recalls reading an account of ancient man's development of metal alloys strengthened by their impurities: alloys are stronger than their component metals because, instead of having regular sequences of parallel crystals that easily slip apart, they have varying crystals which create an "atomic grit." Meditation on such phenomena, she has said, moved her to incorporate some degree of irregularity—impurity—into her apparently systematic patterns of triangles, juxtaposing the bits in ways suggesting strength and dynamism. The arrangements in her "Triadic" series—which consists of both prints and drawings—evoke the beautiful and precise patterns of scientific investigation. Though never perfectly symmetrical or based on static formulas, the patterns in these prints and drawings attain a subtle, over-all balance in their harmonious rhythms and carefully derived weights and proportions. These works cannot be grasped in a moment; their internal irregularities—within-regularity demand repeated looking.

Process and technique are important for Anni Albers. Her print mediums so far include lithography, screenprint, embossing and photo-offset. All the prints are preceded by pencil studies on graph paper. Photo-offset—the familiar half-tone black-and-white reproduction used in ordinary printing—enables her to retain a hand-penciled effect in a particularly innovative series of prints in which photo-offset and screenprint are combined. The result is a muted gray replica of the pattern of her pencil strokes, interspersed with the opaque colors and rich, impeccable textures of screen printing.

Another group of prints explores the range of the silk-screen medium alone: the maze-like "Meander" series of screenprints went through the press four times: first with a background screen that laid down a solid color, then twice with a design screen in another color placed in two different positions, and finally with the same design screen in yet another position, printed in a new, lighter, overlaid color (difficult to achieve because the ink had to be simultaneously strong and translucent and thus could contain no white). The endless meander of the design, repeatedly superimposed and constantly in motion both linearly and in depth, gains extreme vibrancy through this uniquely "printerly" method—with thanks due in part, according to the artist, to a fruitful collaboration with the printers.

Author: Nicholas Fox Weber is a freelance writer and lecturer; his book on Anni Albers (David R. Godine) will be published fall '76.