

## INTERNATIONAL ARTS

# Exhibition Tracks an Artistic Couple's Latin American Influences

By ALICE RAWSTHORN OCT. 29, 2015

MILAN — When the designer Anni Albers was driving through Mexico with her artist husband, Josef, and two friends in 1935, a boy carrying a goat approached their car and pleaded with her to buy it. She passed on the goat, but asked if she could purchase the old blanket it was wrapped in. The boy agreed, and offered to sell a clay figurine too.



Josef and Anni Albers in 1935, the year of their first of many visits to Mexico. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

The Alberses bought them both for a few pesos, and took them back to their home in North Carolina as the beginning of what would become an extensive collection of Latin American art and craft. They returned to Mexico 13 times over the next 40 years, sometimes staying as long as six months, and traveled to Argentina, Chile and Peru, always searching for antique textiles and ceramics, as well as contemporary pieces by local artisans.

The influence of the Alberses' lovingly assembled pre-Columbian collection on Anni's textile designs and Josef's paintings is explored in "A Beautiful Confluence: Anni and Josef Albers and the Latin American World," an exhibition at MUDEC, the Museum of Culture that opened in the Tortona area of Milan this week. Running through March 13, it combines the Alberses' own work — which established Josef as one of

the most influential abstract painters of the 20th century and Anni as a modernizing force in textiles — with the Latin American objects that inspired it, and related pieces from the museum's ethnography collection.



Anni Albers's "Two," designed in 1952.

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

“Anni and Josef were fascinated by the idea of people living in totally different cultures in totally different time periods loving the same colors and forms as them,” said Nicholas Fox Weber, who curated the exhibition. “They had no money,” he added, “but as they always said: ‘All it takes to collect is a good eye.’”

“A Beautiful Confluence” is the most modest, but most intriguing of the inaugural shows at MUDEC. (The others are devoted to Paul Gauguin and Barbie.) The museum opened on Wednesday as part of the revival of Milan’s cultural scene during Expo 2015, the gargantuan world’s fair, which ends on Saturday after six months. The preparations for Expo were haunted by corruption scandals and construction delays, and the critical response was largely negative, but the fair proved very popular, selling more than 20 million tickets before its final two weeks.

Several new cultural institutions opened in Milan last spring at the same time as Expo, including Armani/Silos, a museum housing the fashion designer Giorgio Armani’s archive in a renovated 1950s industrial building near MUDEC, and

Fondazione Prada, a contemporary art center financed by the eponymous fashion group and designed by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas.

Unlike them, MUDEC only managed to coincide with the last three days of Expo after a tortuous process of planning and construction that took 12 years and cost 60 million euros, about \$65 million. The British architect David Chipperfield, who designed the museum, clashed publicly with Milan City Council, which funds it, when he complained vociferously about the quality of its construction, especially the floor. A commission is now investigating the matter. Despite the mismatched stones and other flaws in the floor, some elements of the building — particularly a spectacular, sinuously curved wall around the galleries — share the grace and subtlety of Mr. Chipperfield’s other projects.

Amid the acrimony, “A Beautiful Confluence” is a gentle reminder of what museums are for, particularly one like MUDEC, whose objective is to explore the relationships between cultures and which

houses the city of Milan's civic ethnography collection. Occupying two galleries within the museum, the show includes more than 130 works by the Alberses and more than 150 Latin American artifacts.

Long before their first Mexican trip in 1935, the Alberses had been fascinated by pre-Columbian art and craft, made between the 2nd century B.C. and the early 1500s, having admired the Latin American artifacts in museums in their native Germany. The couple met there in 1922 when Anni, who came from a wealthy Jewish family in Berlin, enrolled as a student at the Bauhaus art and design school. Josef, whose father was a casual laborer, had taught at the Bauhaus since it opened in 1920, arriving too broke to afford painting materials. When Anni introduced him to her parents, she insisted on buying him a suit.

After marrying in 1925, they remained at the Bauhaus until it closed in 1933 when the Nazis, who regarded the school as subversive, took power. By then, Josef was renowned as a gifted artist and teacher, as was Anni as an innovative textile designer. Fearful of the consequences of remaining in Nazi Germany, especially for his Jewish wife, Josef accepted an invitation to run the art department at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. They sailed to the United States that autumn.

The Alberses helped to establish Black Mountain as the most radical art and design school of the 1930s and 1940s, while making regular trips to Mexico. Friends like Clara Porset, a Cuban designer who had attended a Black Mountain summer school and married the Mexican artist Xavier Guerrero, took them on craft tours of the country as they added more pre-Columbian treasures to their collection. They continued their Mexican visits after 1950, when they moved to Connecticut, where Josef accepted a post at Yale University, and traveled throughout Latin America.

After Josef's death in 1976, Anni, who lived until 1994, took Mr. Weber, who is also the director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, into the basement of her home. "There was the washer and dryer as in any 'Leave It to Beaver' American house, and a cheap closet," he recalled. "Inside the closet were over a thousand pre-Columbian objects, among them trays and trays of clay figurines."

Several dozen of those figurines are displayed at MUDEC, alongside ancient fabrics and pots, antique beads and Josef's photographs of the couple's travels. Anni's prized antique Peruvian laces are placed in a vitrine beside a drawing of hers in a delicately spindly style inspired by them. Josef's paint tests and a small selection of the hundreds of variations he made of his most famous painting "Homage to the Square" are exhibited next to a 10th-century feathered bag in similarly intense hues. These juxtapositions illustrate the importance of the Alberses' collection to their work

Both Alberses loved the vibrant colors of their acquisitions, as well as their repetitive, geometric forms. They also admired the ingenuity of pre-Columbian artisans in working with meager materials. Josef liked to paint on cheap wooden board, preferring its hard surface to canvas, while Anni incorporated paper and cellophane into her weaving, and made jewelry from corks, washers and paper clips.

And when Anni published her book "On Weaving" in 1965, she paid a formal tribute to some of her favorite pre-Columbian artisans by dedicating it to "my great teachers, the weavers of ancient Peru."

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