

BY CHRISTIAN SIMENC

ANNI ALBERS, THE THREAD OF LIFE

1899

Birth of the artist in Berlin

1922

She entered the Bauhaus where she met Josef Albers. Studied weaving - for lack of other disciplines forbidden to women

1949

After teaching at Black Mountain College, she became the subject of an exclusive exhibition at MoMA

1960s

Serigraphies and engravings

1965

Publication of *On Weaving*

1976

Two major exhibitions were devoted to her work in Germany

1994

Death of the artist in Connecticut

Long hidden in the shadow of her husband Josef, Anni Albers, trained at the Bauhaus, is an important figure of textile design in the 20th century, who is being gradually rediscovered.

Quite often, the name Albers is automatically connected to the male first name Josef. One should not forget so quickly the other first name that anyone must also link to the famous family name, this time a female first name: Anni. In the Alberses couple, Madam as much as Monsieur had a most substantial work, even if, in the end, we must recognize that Josef still enjoys greater renown. He was a painter and teacher of art, she, an artist and textile designer. Yet this is the gentleman who, in 2008, had the honor of Hermès, which released a collection

of his famous square scarves reproducing some paintings of the artist among the best known: the *Homage to the Square* series. Never mind: last year, this time it was Madam who was propelled to the front of the stage, if not to the podium, by the designer Paul Smith. The Alberses' work, especially works by Anni, amply inspired the British designer in his men's collection autumn-winter 2015. Scarves and coats show a recurrent use of geometric solids. Muted tones (flake oats, gray or peach) are alongside sunbathed hues, such as orange and green. A pattern is even called Jacquard Bauhaus, and a clutch bag gets more or less the color and proportions of Anni Albers's patchwork from 1941 (Untitled), mixing subtle nuances in various materials (linen, cotton, wool), a work that can now be admired in the Museo delle Culture (Mudec), in Milan, in the splendid exhibition "A Beautiful Confluence: Anni and Josef Albers and the Latin American World."

AT THE BAUHAUS, WORKSHOPS FOR WOMEN

Anni Albers was born Annelise Else Frieda Fleischmann on June 12, 1899, in Berlin. As a teenager, her mother made her have private art tuition. Discovering portraits of Oskar Kokoschka, Anni took it upon herself to go to Dresden to meet him and take lessons with him. "Why do you paint?" he asked her sharply, at the sight of one of her paintings representing her mother. Consequently, from 1916 to 1919, Anni Albers studied from an Impressionist painter, Martin Brandenburg. In 1920, she attended for a while the Kunstgewerbeschule in Hamburg, before finding the brochure of an "experimental place." On April 21, 1922, Anni Fleischmann, aged 22, embarked on the adventure of the Bauhaus in Weimar. She wanted to be a painter but went to weaving, reluctantly. In fact, Anni Albers Anni was interested in the workshop of colored glass, but the Bauhaus teachers allowed only one person in this matter – accident of history, the unique student was none other than Josef Albers, eleven years her senior. Fundamentally macho, the Bauhaus teachers also considered that wall painting and metal work would be too stressful for her.

TEXTILE

Walter Gropius, founder and first director of this forward-thinking art school, had already written to another postulant, Annie Weil, a scathing letter: "Given our experience, it is not advisable that women work in arduous crafts sectors such as framing and so on. This is why a section reserved for women was created at the Bauhaus, for the textile trades. Bookbinding and pottery also accept women. We are fundamentally opposed to the formation of women architects. "

"I had no desire at all to go into the weaving workshop because I really wanted to do a man's job and not something as effeminate as manipulating threads," she told one day Nicholas Fox Weber, an art historian and current Executive Director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, who met Anni Albers in the early 1970s and saw her regularly until her death in 1994. Despite her resentment, she nevertheless managed to achieve with textiles what her reference artists such as Paul Klee (her "god") and Wassily Kandinsky, accomplished in painting. "I didn't start as easily as I had hoped: destiny put in my hands very thin threads! Threads to build a future? But mistrust turned into belief, and I was on my path," she revealed in 1987 in an interview with Sigrid Wortmann Weltge, professor at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science.

WEAVINGS LIKE PAINTINGS

At the Bauhaus, Anni Albers progressed particularly under the guidance of Gunta Stölzl. There she made her first wall hangings and her first weavings, using threads to create "visual resting places" according to the words of her friend, the historian and German art critic Wilhelm Worringer. Her compositions are as soothing and distracting as infinitely rich and complex. Whereas in the past, weavers created floral designs and other decorative motifs, as early as the 1920s, Anni Albers made wall hangings whose strong dynamism and amazing visual sensations aroused astonishment. Pioneer of abstraction, the interaction of figure and background prompted her to invent a new language full of right angles, of vast areas of solid color or pure black headbands.

In 1933, with the rise of Nazism, the Alberses left Germany and emigrated to the United States. At the closing of the Bauhaus, a new experimental school, Black Mountain College, opened near Asheville, North Carolina. Both taught in the department of art. Experimentation was encouraged, if not unrestricted. The proof being that Anni Albers designed in 1941 fun jewelries with equipment worthy of a hardware store (paper clips, curtain rings, glass drawer knobs, metal gaskets, electrical equipment, plumbing fixtures, etc.). In textile also, the use of new materials was encouraged. In 1944, she created a curtain for the Rockefellers' guest house in New York. Neutral during the day, the piece of cloth that mixes chenille cotton, white plastic and brass sheets, is resplendent in the evening. For the designer, "textiles are utilitarian objects that must remain modest in appearance and blend in with their environment." Those of Black Mountain College reflect her aesthetic sense: particular use of threads rather than for their color effects or textures, and limited range of tones, blacks, whites and natural colors.

In the 1940s, Anni Albers started to make what she called "pictorial weavings," in this case, weavings of small dimensions that she set on canvas and then framed. The following decade, with the Knoll company, she worked on an

industrial scale for the production of fabrics by the meter. For Anni Albers, weaving by hand was more than just a "romantic attempt to find a 'lost time' " and should be more considered. "If it was regarded as a preparatory step to industrial production, this practice would go much further than a mere revival of a forgotten handicraft, and would play an important role in the evolution of textiles," she wrote in an article. Orders and museum exhibitions quickly followed on. The architect Philip Johnson, key player of the Alberses coming to the US, was the curator of the first monographic presentation of Anni on the American continent at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1949.

PRE-COLUMBIAN GEOMETRY

Long before fleeing Nazi Germany, with the discovery of Mayan and Inca objects in a Berlin museum, the Alberses had discovered a new passion and a deep affinity with the geometric rigor of pre-Columbian civilizations. Between 1934 and 1967, they stayed numerous times in Latin America, particularly in Mexico. Admired in the 1950s, the dry stone walls of the fortresses of Cuzco, Peru, inspired Anni, in the 1980s, to produce the series of watercolors *Walls*. The Mayan and Inca stylized motifs influenced her splendid embossed papers, *Mountainous*. Yet the master of the loom did not forget her own art, displaying geometric games on number of textile pieces, like *Red and Blue Layers*, a work with strong colors. In Mexico, she confidently deepened her knowledge of weaving by collecting tissue fragments and assimilating new techniques from local artisans. In the 1960s, Anni Albers turned to lithography; she eventually gave up weaving in favor of printmaking, having first written in 1965, the famous treatise "on the basis and methods of textile," *On Weaving*, published by the Wesleyan University Press. "Anni was a fantastic writer," believes Nicholas Fox Weber. "She was a very difficult and complex personality, but intensely intelligent: she had a presence and an incredible ability to see beauty in the thread." Anni Albers died on May 9, 1994 in Orange, Connecticut. According to the architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, Anni Albers, more than any other weaver, has succeeded in raising general public awareness to the complex structure of textiles. She has managed the historic blend of sculptural intuitive ability of the artist with traditional weaving arts. In other words, she had succeeded in raising textile to an art form.