

“BACK TO ZERO:” THE ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL  
PHILOSOPHY OF ANNI ALBERS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: "Back to Zero:" The Artistic and Pedagogical Philosophy of Anni Albers

This thesis investigates Anni Albers's development from a student at the Bauhaus to a teacher at Black Mountain College, focusing on her pedagogical practice that was informed by her "back to zero" approach. Albers's "back to zero" philosophy frames the narrative of each chapter. In chapter two I examine her time as a student at the Bauhaus, exploring precisely which aspects of her Bauhaus education she continued to reference in her own teaching career. The third chapter focuses on Albers's role as a teacher at Black Mountain College, especially how she viewed the process of haptic creation by which objects signaled their intrinsic connection to the essence of weaving, and the influence of ancient textiles. The fourth chapter explores the teaching environment that Albers created for her students, ultimately asserting this to be an expression of the same "back to zero" philosophy that she embodied in her artistic practice.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Anni Albers (1899-1994), a designer, weaver, writer, and teacher, was among the pioneers of twentieth-century modern art pedagogy. In 1922, Albers enrolled at the Bauhaus, an innovative art and design school in Germany.<sup>1</sup> When she first arrived, she was interested in painting, but was pushed toward the Weaving Workshop because of her gender. The Weaving Workshop was considered to be a part of the “women’s department” along with bookbinding and pottery.<sup>2</sup> Albers’s personal introduction to weaving at the Bauhaus was uninspired as she felt that weaving, as an artistic medium was too “sissy.”<sup>3</sup> However, she came to find that her woven work opened itself up to independent experimentation.<sup>4</sup> She also found that the tremendous freedom of a painter overwhelmed her. As she worked in the Weaving Workshop, the possibilities that existed within the material limitations of weaving intrigued her.<sup>5</sup> During her formative years in the Bauhaus’s Weaving Workshop, Albers took Paul Klee’s theory course, in which he taught lessons in structural composition, patterns (polyphony), and compositional schemes, such as rotation and reflection.<sup>6</sup>

With the rise of the Nazi Party in the early 1930s, the Bauhaus was forced to dissolve. In 1933, Albers and her husband Josef moved to North Carolina to accept teaching positions at Black Mountain College and to escape Germany’s dangerous

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1 Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus, 1919-1933* (Köln: B. Tashen, 1993), 40.

When Gunta Stölzl left the Bauhaus in 1931, Albers took over her role as Head of the Weaving Workshop.

2 Anja Baumhoff, “Women at the Bauhaus—a Myth of Emancipation,” In *Bauhaus*, ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann, 2000), 102.

3 Anni Albers, interview by Sevim Fesci, July 5, 1968, Oral History Interview, transcript.

4 Helen Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape,” In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson, (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 31.

5 Anni Albers, interview by Sevim Fesci, July 5, 1968, Oral History Interview, transcript.

6 Virginia Gardner Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 80.

political climate. After moving to the United States, Anni and Josef Albers made fourteen trips to Central and South America between 1935 and 1967.<sup>7</sup> During these trips, Albers felt that she had stepped back in time and had found a powerful source of creative energy.<sup>8</sup> Ancient Andean textiles provided a major inspiration for her. At Black Mountain College, Albers taught weaving courses and developed what she called a “back to zero” curriculum.<sup>9</sup> It was during her time at Black Mountain College that Albers departed from the production of industrial prototypes and developed a pictorial weaving technique, wherein she used titles and abstracted visual forms to imply context.

This thesis investigates Albers’s development from a student at the Bauhaus to a teacher at Black Mountain College, focusing on the development of her unique pedagogical practice that was informed by what she called a “back to zero” approach. While other scholars have looked at how outside factors, especially the radical Bauhaus school ethos, influenced Albers’s teaching, the relationship between her pedagogy and artistic practice remains widely unexamined. My aim is to look at the individual parts of Albers’s pedagogy, and also to analyze her educational background, artistic growth, and the environments she created for her students. Ultimately, I contend that Albers’s pedagogical philosophy was intimately related to her artistic evolution, as both were marked by a turn toward the fundamentals of artistic creation, an approach that she referred to as “back to zero.”

In an interview with Sevim Fesci, Albers described her method of teaching:

I tried to put my students at the point of zero. I tried to have them imagine, let's

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7 For a complete timeline, please see the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation website.

8 Brenda Danilowitz, “Josef and Anni Albers: Mexico and Modernity,” In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 147.

9 Anni Albers, interview by Sevim Fesci.

say, that they are in a desert in Peru, no clothing, no nothing, no pottery even at that time (it has been now proved that archaeologically textiles have come before pottery), and to imagine themselves at the beach with nothing. And what do you do? There are these fish at the Humboldt Current, marvelous fish swimming by, the best in the world in fact, because of the cold current there. And it's hot and windy. So what do you do? You wear the skin of some kind of animal maybe to protect yourself from too much sun or maybe the wind occasionally. And you want a roof over something and so on. And how do you gradually come to realize what a textile can be? And we start at that point. And I let them use anything, grasses, and I don't know what. And let them also imagine what did they use at that point. Did they take the skin of fish and cut it into strips possibly to make longitudinal elements out of which they could knot something together to catch the fish? And get carrying materials in that way.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of going “back to zero,” or back to elemental or fundamental principles, was a philosophy that was initially presented to Albers at the Bauhaus and was perpetuated throughout her career as an artist and teacher. This philosophy was manifested in a variety of ways, such as the experiential nature of the Bauhaus’s Weaving Workshop, and the embrace of a “primitive” ancient culture for inspiration, specifically the abstract motifs and self-referentiality of ancient Andean textiles (wherein the surface appearance references internal structure and production methods). Furthermore, Albers utilized haptic exercises to retrain the artists’ tactile sensibilities. The term “primitive,” as post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai have argued, proves to be problematic, as it often presumes a privileged western subject position.<sup>11</sup> This is evident when looking at artists like Klee, who used “primitive” to define a work as “pure” or morally superior due to its “primitive” associations. By studying with Klee, Albers was exposed to the ideas and theories of “primitivism” and “primitive” art, which championed pre-modern handicrafts and non-Western art. By having her main source of

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10 Ibid.

11 Please see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge Classics Ed./with a New Preface by the Author. ed. Routledge Classics. London; New York: Routledge, 2004). and Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2013).

inspiration be ancient Andean textiles, Albers was undoubtedly participating in a “primitivist” discourse, but unlike her mentors at the Bauhaus, Albers looks specifically at the materiality of ancient Andean textiles without attributing to them spiritual purity. Albers’s infatuation with ancient Andean textiles is apparent in her art and teaching, as well as in her related travels and collecting activities. Albers looked to these textiles as a solution to the limitations of the industrial age, because they were seen as the most effective model of an ideal pre-industrial art.<sup>12</sup>

Recently, interest in the textile work of Albers and, more generally, the history of Black Mountain College have become popular topics with exhibitions like “Leap Before You Look,” (2015-2016) organized by Helen Molesworth, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Ruth Erickson, an assistant curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. “Leap Before You Look” began its journey at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; made its way to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and concluded at the Wexner Center for the Arts. The catalogue for this exhibition contains essays written by numerous scholars that document the diversity of the college, which spanned a myriad of subjects from farming to experimental art.<sup>13</sup>

There is only one monograph, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles* by Virginia Gardner Troy, which follows the evolution of Albers’s work from her enrollment at the Bauhaus to the moment when she abandoned the loom and turned to printmaking. In her book, Troy primarily looks at the importance of ancient Andean textiles/art in Albers’s teaching philosophies and art practice. Along with many other

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12 Virginia Gardner Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 26.

13 Helen Anne Molesworth, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2015).

twentieth-century weavers such as Gunta Stölzl, Albers often used ancient Andean textiles to explore the role of handicraft in industry.<sup>14</sup> The text briefly examines the development of Albers's pedagogical philosophies and breaks down Albers's aesthetic philosophies into three major tenets: that the weaver had the potential to be an artist, that woven structures could be both artistic and utilitarian, and that these specific tenets could only be achieved by following the laws inherent to weaving construction.<sup>15</sup> As Troy observed, Albers used Andean textiles in the classroom to discuss both technical and design issues. Troy saw Albers's intrigue with material and structures used in ancient Andean textiles as the motivating factor that Albers used to encourage her students to experiment with material.<sup>16</sup> Troy also mentioned how Albers's work was influenced by the Bauhaus curriculum, particularly Johannes Itten's Preliminary Course, in which students did non-loom exercises with material not conventionally used in weaving. The author thus clarified that Albers's pedagogical techniques referred back to her own training at the Bauhaus and the conditions linked to the founding of Black Mountain College. Troy's analysis, however, remained limited by a relatively narrow focus on how Albers used ancient Andean textiles as a vehicle for teaching, rather than as a crucial piece of her educational experience/artistic evolution that she was recreating for her students.

What is missing from the limited literature on Albers's teaching philosophy is an illustration of how it was connected to her art practice through the aim of getting "back to zero." This is crucial to consider, as Albers is regarded not only as a highly influential teacher, but as an innovative artist as well. These two identities do not exist separate from

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14 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 25.

15 Ibid, 129.

16 Ibid. 129.

one another, but are constantly intertwining; one draws inspiration from the other. My study analyzes the parallels between Albers's art and teaching by looking at her experience as a student, teacher and artist. Albers's "back to zero" philosophy frames the narrative of each chapter. In the chapter two, I examine her time as a student at the Bauhaus, exploring precisely which aspects of her Bauhaus education she continued to reference in her own teaching career. The third chapter focuses on Albers's role as a teacher at Black Mountain College, especially how she viewed self-referential aesthetics, the processes of haptic creation that produced art objects signaling the essence of weaving, and the influence of ancient textiles, especially ancient Andean weavings.<sup>17</sup> The fourth chapter explores the teaching environment that Albers created for her students, ultimately asserting this to be an expression of the same "back to zero" philosophy that she embodied in her artistic practice.

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17 Virginia Gardner Troy defines self-referential textiles as those that display the nature of their construction, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 74.

## CHAPTER II

### ANNI ALBERS AS STUDENT

“Art itself cannot be taught, but craftsmanship can. Architects, painters, sculptors are all craftsmen in the original sense of the word. Thus it is a fundamental requirement of all artistic creativity that every student undergo a thorough training in the workshops of all branches of crafts.”

--Walter Gropius, Bauhaus Manifesto and Program,” 1919

Art not only reflects the society in which it arises, but also the social systems of art education.<sup>18</sup> In order to understand how Albers developed her art practice along with her teaching philosophy, one has to acknowledge all of the influential factors, and specifically her teachers from the Bauhaus. This becomes extremely important when parsing out which elements of her teaching philosophy were taken directly from the progressive education values of the Bauhaus and which were forged from her own experience. The Bauhaus’s curriculum and community deeply influenced Albers, as she advocated the same progressive arts education that the Bauhaus championed.

Following the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent mechanization of production, factories began to supplant craft workshops. This meant that craft and design skills were being lost because the handicrafts could not compete with the low prices of mass-produced products. There was an expectation for artists to fill this void and become designers of industrial products. The professionalization of arts education marked the realization that the academic education in fine arts could not provide designers for industry. After about eighty years with this design gap, the solution was the development of schools like the Bauhaus and its ability to nurture artists like Albers.

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18 Arthur Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 3.

In order to establish Albers's distinct philosophies, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of the Bauhaus and its pedagogical aims. The German architect Walter Gropius (1883-1969) founded the Bauhaus in 1919. The school's main goal was to bring together all creative effort into one whole and to unify all practical art including, but not limited to, sculpture, painting, and handicrafts.<sup>19</sup> Gropius laid out this new vision in the Bauhaus Manifesto:

Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.<sup>20</sup>

Gropius's vision harkened back to the medieval craft guild system and sought to bridge the gap between artist and craftsman.<sup>21</sup> After the industrial revolution and the devastation of World War I, it was believed by some members of the Arts and Crafts movement, such as John Ruskin and William Morris, that machines had not only poisoned traditional crafts aesthetically and economically, but also morally and spiritually. The utopian notion that social reform and cultural renewal could be achieved through arts and crafts was widely circulated. The progressive ideologies of the Bauhaus embodied those utopian notions as a movement fueled by hopeful youths.<sup>22</sup> The early Bauhaus was often considered more Expressionist in nature, aligning itself with the ideal of spiritual renewal to initiate social reform. In 1923, the school moved away from its goal to unite art and life, aiming instead to unite art and technology. Despite the shift, the school was

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19 Walter Gropius, "Bauhaus Manifesto and Program," (Weimar: Staatliche Bauhaus, 1919).

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Andreas Haus, "Bauhaus: History," In *Bauhaus*, ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann, 2000), 19.

consistent in its pedagogical philosophy that positioned the artist-teacher as a figure who could use his or her artistic practice to inform educational issues.<sup>23</sup> The Bauhaus created a space where disparate views could coexist in a state of productive tension. In other words, art and craft informed one another, but the hierarchy that placed art above craft still existed.

Walter Gropius was also informed and inspired by the philosophies of American educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952), who was interested in how a school could become a cooperative community while allowing individuals to develop in their own capacities and satisfy their own needs.<sup>24</sup> Not only did Dewey bolster the communal aspect of education, he believed that experiential inquiry was crucial. Throughout his life, he protested against the notion that students should be subjected to “a program of authoritarian, routine habituation.”<sup>25</sup> Up until the twentieth century, arts education followed the model of the École des Beaux-Arts, which stressed the observation of nature and the imitation of previous artistic masters. The apprenticeship of an artist involved the acquisition of skills such as life drawing and anatomical knowledge. The academic mode of arts education was more concerned with the maintenance of tradition and passing down a standard of quality rather than teaching its students to develop their own creative sensibilities.<sup>26</sup> The academic model of arts education was not concerned with its ability to produce artists with individual and unique perspectives.<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Dewey’s

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23 James G. Daichendt, “The Bauhaus Artist-Teacher: Walter Gropius’s Philosophy of Art Education,” *Teaching Artist Journal* 8, no. 3 (2010), 157

24 Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*, 169.

25 John L. Childs, *John Dewey as Educator. Two Essays: “The Educational Philosophy of John Dewey”* (New York: Progressive Education Association, 1940), 424.

26 Thierry De Duve, *When Form Has Become Attitude—And Beyond* (2005), 21.

27 Ibid.

educational aim was to move away from the mechanical conditioning of reflexes in order to liberate individual intelligence.<sup>28</sup>

Dewey's empirical mode of thought demanded that education take its ultimate point of departure from the world of ordinary experience and the acknowledgment that life is a process of experimental adjustments.<sup>29</sup> In his major writing on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, Dewey attempted to shift the understanding of what was important about artistic creation from "expressive objects," to the process itself. The central aim of process was no longer the physical work of art, but rather the culmination of an experience.<sup>30</sup> The connection between Dewey and Gropius is clear, not only by the Bauhaus's departure from academic-style arts education, but also by Gropius's vision of what education should be and do. When offering Emil Lange a position at the Bauhaus, for instance, Gropius wrote, "We intend to establish a large-scale experimental studio where piratical workshop problems may be addressed in both the technical and formal senses."<sup>31</sup> The establishment of a creative space akin to a laboratory was a cornerstone of the Bauhaus program.

Albers was exposed to these pedagogical philosophies at the Bauhaus and later carried them over to her classes at Black Mountain College. The development of a community focused on experiential learning was a hallmark of the Bauhaus that was actualized when artist-teachers like Itten moved away from the academic mode and encouraged students to unlock their own creative capabilities. The philosophies of the progressive education movement were included in the Bauhaus curriculum, which

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28 Childs, *John Dewey as Educator. Two Essays*: "The Educational Philosophy of John Dewey," 423.  
29 Ibid, 429.

30 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balach & Company, 1934).

31 Barbara Elisabeth Ascher, "The Bauhaus: Case Study Experiments in Education," *Architectural Design* 85, no. 2 (2015), 31.

consisted of three main parts: the Preliminary Course (*Vorkurs*), courses organized round technical instruction, such as Study of Nature (*Naturstudium*), and courses themed around structural instruction, such as Study of Space, Color, and Composition (*Raumlehrer Frblehre Kompositionslehre*) (Figure 1). As the visual representation of the Bauhaus curriculum illustrated, students started out on the periphery of the circle and as they moved closer to the center their education became more specific. In the Preliminary Course, students would have studied form and material—tools, space, nature, and composition are all topics that would have been covered. This happened in the third year/the third layer in the wheel. The Preliminary Course constituted the first two years. In the third year, students went through the other three layers: theory education, material focus, and finally the workshop/apprenticeship at the center of the circle.

In 1922, Albers enrolled at the Bauhaus in Weimar. During her first year, she took the Preliminary Course from Itten, who was committed to free artistic expression as an educational principle. At the founding of the Bauhaus, Itten had proposed to Gropius that all students who showed an interest in art should be given an opportunity to awaken their talent.<sup>32</sup> This opportunity presented itself as a provisional semester in the Preliminary Course. Gropius gave Itten complete freedom with the structure and theme of the course. Itten's main goals were to “free the creative power, make the students' choice of career easier, and to convey to the students the fundamental principles of design.”<sup>33</sup> In order for new ideas to present themselves as art, Itten felt that it was necessary to prepare and coordinate physical, sensual, spiritual, and intellectual forces and abilities.<sup>34</sup> At the

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32 Johannes Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (New York: Reinhold Pub., 1964), 9.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid, 10.

beginning of every class, Itten had his students perform gymnastic exercises to both loosen up the body, and to “lead the students from chaos into harmony.”<sup>35</sup>

While there is no explicit record of Albers requiring her students at Black Mountain College to do physical exercises, perhaps the physical experience of weaving achieves the same goal. Weaving on a loom has a physical rhythm to it. While the basic purpose of a loom is to hold the warp (vertical) threads under tension, allowing the interweaving of the weft (horizontal) threads, the loom and the weaver have to work together to create a textile. Each time the weaver pulls the reed, a comb-like piece that is used to push the weft threads securely into place, there is a repetitive movement and the sound of pushing those threads into place. The Preliminary Course may have been where Albers first came in contact with a curriculum that encouraged its students to begin with the basics, not just the basics of figure drawing but, the basics of looking, understanding, and moving. Itten’s students were taught both the fundamental principles of design and how to see the human body as the most elemental tool for artistic creation.

In Itten’s Preliminary Course, students were expected to experiment with and understand the materials they worked with. Materials and their characteristics were analyzed to assess their contrast and order, first independently of their particular use, as the material itself.<sup>36</sup> According to Itten, it was not enough for the students to simply recognize the qualities, but the characteristics of the material had to be described and, more importantly, experienced. First, he would evoke a feeling through visual experience, followed by an intellectual explanation, and then finally end by prompting the execution of a task. In the laboratory classrooms of the Bauhaus, falling in line with

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35 Ibid.

36 Norbert M. Schmitz, “The Preliminary Course under Johannes Itten—Human Education,” In *Bauhaus* ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend. (Cologne: Könemann, 2000), 365.

Dewey's philosophy, Itten created a space where experience was the path to knowledge; thus, the student could own knowledge. In order to learn the character of various materials, students made montages of different material with contrasting effects, such as a "smooth-rough, transparent-opaque" example of student art as seen in Figure 2.<sup>37</sup> In Margit Tery-Adler's material and contrast study, made from wood, glass, and feathers, the materials in this assemblage move beyond their individual materiality. By placing the clear, ridged glass next to the wispy feathers, the tactile response to each was enhanced and distinguished. The glass appeared more ridged and the feathers looked even softer. After the construction of this assemblage, it was photographed in front of a window to "accentuate the transparency of the dragon face with its peacock feather diadem."<sup>38</sup> Itten emphasized the balance between outwardly directed scientific research and technology with inwardly directed thoughts and spirit. Through these montages, Itten directed his students to acknowledge the basic elements of the material and guided them to draw inspiration from this. While I could not find any definitive examples of artworks produced by Albers during her time in Itten's Preliminary Course, this course was required for every Bauhaus student and similar ideas show up in her curriculum at Black Mountain College.

In 1923, Itten left the Bauhaus as the curriculum became more concerned with industry and technology. The more industrially oriented László Moholy-Nagy replaced Itten. Nonetheless, many of the former's concrete ideas about teaching and the extension of creativity and observation into the metaphysical realm remained a cornerstone to both

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37 Itten, *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus*, 48.

38 Schmitz, "The Preliminary Course under Johannes Itten—Human Education," 364.

Bauhaus pedagogy and aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> Albers may be one of the students who best achieved this balancing act between the metaphysical philosophies of Itten and the industrial tendencies of Moholy-Nagy, as she emphasized the value of the hand-woven textile as the first step toward mechanical production.<sup>40</sup> Albers felt that her main concern was to explore the process of designing, not to analyze the design itself. She felt that one should try to position him/herself as the individual who brings new things into formation.<sup>41</sup> In her essay “Designing as Visual Organization,” she wrote, ”every designer, every artist, every inventor or discoverer of something new is in that sense an amateur. And to explore the untried he must be an adventurer. For he finds himself alone on new ground. He is left to his own devices and must have imagination and daring.”<sup>42</sup> Hand weaving gave Albers the freedom to experiment with woven structures before a textile was sent to the monotonous and repetitive world of mass production because with “each step toward the mechanical perfection of the loom, in common with all machinery, in its degree, lessens the freedom of the weaver, and his control of the design in working.”<sup>43</sup>

During the formative years of the Weaving Workshop, it was believed that the mechanical weaving process was not advanced enough to achieve the same effect of hand weaving and, since these hand woven prototypes were essential for growing creativity, the Bauhaus weavers mainly worked by hand. In her book *Women’s Work*, Sigrid Wortmann Weltge observed, “only the work on the hand loom provided latitude to

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39 Ibid, 368.

40 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 89.

41 Anni Albers, “Designing as Visual Organization,” In *On Design* (New Haven: Pellango Press, 1959), 59.

42 Ibid.

43 Anni Albers, “The Loom,” In *On Weaving* (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 25.

develop an idea from one experiment to another.”<sup>44</sup> Albers’s goal was to find structural solutions to the problem of making textiles for a mechanical era, as the woven structure was the origin of the textile itself and could be linked to both its strength and aesthetic. Albers began to utilize a gauze weave technique, also known as the modern leno weave.<sup>45</sup> The gauze weave allowed for two warp (vertical) yarns to be twisted around the weft (horizontal) yarns to produce a strong yet sheer fabric. Not only could this technique produce a strong fabric, but it was also a technique that could easily be translated to industrial production.

Albers’s ability to minimize the gap between designer and producer was reflected in examples like the curtain design for the “Old Theater” Café in Dessau. The watercolor design and spun silk fabric samples for the curtains for the “Old Theater” Café were given as a gift from Albers to the Museum of Modern Art (Figure 3 and 4). This design emphasized the strong vertical and horizontals created by the structure produced by the process of weaving. One could also see that the colors used by Albers in the watercolor design matched the colors of the sample fabrics. The connection between the watercolor design and the samples shows that Albers was working through an intellectual design process, going from plan, to sample, to finished product. A photograph of the “Old Theater” Café captured Albers’s emphasis on structure and making visible the textile’s vertical and horizontal elements, which were carried through to the end product (Figure 5). Unlike other commissions, which required the production of fabric by the meter and were largely unseen by the Bauhaus weavers themselves, “Old Theater” Café allowed the

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44 Sigrid Weltge-Wortmann, *Women’s Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 97.

45 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 90.

weavers to influence the combined effect of their fabrics in the room.<sup>46</sup> The curtain design for the “Old Theater” Café exemplified the way in which Albers’s work bridged the gap between art and industry by highlighting the design’s strong vertical and horizontal lines, the fundamental elements of weaving.

Along with Itten’s Preliminary Course, Albers took theory courses from Klee, who also occasionally taught directly in the Weaving Workshop. Albers had often been quoted referring to Klee as a “god,” a reference that speaks to the influence he had over her art practice and the development of her teaching philosophy.<sup>47</sup> Klee often drew connections between the creation of artistic design and the cosmos.<sup>48</sup> His famous quote, “color is the place where our brain and the universe meet,” placed art as the mediator between the terrestrial and the spiritual domain.<sup>49</sup> In his courses on the theory of artistic form, Klee’s aim was to introduce his students to basic forms, which, in his opinion, were derived from structural principles. Weaving stood as the perfect example of Klee’s theory materialized, as the horizontal and vertical structure of a textile explicitly connected to its design aesthetic. In a lecture he gave in 1922, Klee explained “composition at its most ‘primitive’ and pure occurs through the repetition of a single line or unit in parallel sequence, such as a stripe or a row of squares.”<sup>50</sup> The linking of structural elements of the over-and-under pattern of the warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) threads to visual composition would have been particularly relevant to the students in the Weaving

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46 Anja Baumhoff, “The Weaving Workshop,” In *Bauhaus*, ed. Jeannine Fiedler and Peter Feierabend (Cologne: Könemann, 2000), 475.

47 Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 6.

48 Schmitz, “Teaching by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee,” 387.

49 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 141.

50 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 85.

Workshop. As a result, color was also discussed as a structural element because it was dictated by the manipulation of the warp and weft inspired by Klee. Albers strove to produce textiles that acknowledged their own materiality by displaying their underlying structure.<sup>51</sup>

Klee's individual style was influenced by Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism, movements that on some level deal with notions of primitivism, which simply meant primary, basic, or essential.<sup>52</sup> Through reductive appropriation, non-Western aesthetics often lost their original context and were manipulated to serve the needs of Western European artists. Despite these complex implications, numerous Western European artists working in the first half of the twentieth century embraced primitivism as a way of producing "pure," untainted forms of expression.<sup>53</sup> In 1911, Klee became acquainted with the German Expressionist group, *Der Blaue Reiter*, founded by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. During his time with *Der Blaue Reiter*, Klee shifted away from the limitations of using aesthetic primitivism to the inclusion of cultural primitivism. Cultural primitivism is a cultural ideology that placed more freedom on a natural and uncomplicated way of life.<sup>54</sup> Klee utilized cultural primitivism in order to facilitate connections between the inner spirit and creative process.<sup>55</sup> Klee believed that through his study of art from various time periods and various places he would free himself from the narrow European tradition and broaden his range of visual expression. Because Klee's "primitivist" ideals were a major part of the curriculum of his theory

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51 Ibid, 88.

52 James Smith Pierce, *Paul Klee and Primitive Art*. Outstanding Dissertations in the Fine Arts. (New York: Garland Pub, 1976). 2.

53 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 48.

54 Erik Camayd-Freixas, *Primitivism and Identity in Latin America : Essays on Art, Literature, and Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), vii.

55 Ibid, 11.

course at the Bauhaus, it was likely that Albers's interests in "primitive" or pre-industrial works, such as ancient Andean textiles originated, or at the very least were fueled by her time at the Bauhaus. Klee's explanations of structural composition were relevant on a theoretical level, as students in the Weaving Workshop would turn to the study of ancient Andean textiles for practical examples in lieu of traditional academic instruction, which focused on European predecessors.

During the early years of the Weaving Workshop, the Bauhaus infrastructure failed to provide any solid professional direction. Albers explained, "There was no proper teacher for textile work, and we didn't have proper classes... We learnt absolutely nothing at the beginning... We just sat there and practiced."<sup>56</sup> This created a dichotomy within the workshop where students were frustrated over the lack of sophisticated instruction, but were also given the opportunity to explore and experience the characteristics of different materials.<sup>57</sup> Due to the lack of direction, students in the Weaving Workshop began to turn to other source material. At this time, Germany was sponsoring archaeological explorations off the coast of Peru, so a number of resources on the ancient Andes were being published and Andean art collections in German museums were growing. Initially Albers merely valued and appropriated/referenced the geometrically abstract motifs of ancient Andean textiles. However, as Bauhaus attitudes towards production and technology shifted, Albers began to look and apply the complex weaving structures and forms into her own work. In her book, *On Weaving*, Albers discussed how almost all known methods of weaving had been employed in ancient Peru.<sup>58</sup> One example of a

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56 Ulrike Müller, *Bauhaus Women: Art, Handicraft, Design* (Flammarion: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 52.

57 Weltge-Wortmann, *Women's Work: Textile Art from the Bauhaus*, 44.

58 Anni Albers, "Weaving, Hand," *On Weaving*. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965) 21.

technique used by the ancient Andeans was an interlocking tapestry, where the geometric designs, along with the relationship between positive and negative shapes, were related to the woven structure (Figure 6).<sup>59</sup> This technique that unified craftsmanship and aesthetics would have appealed to Albers, while supporting the Bauhaus ethos. Albers moved beyond imitating ancient Andean techniques, as she searched for a weaving structure in alliance with the natural coloring of the material that highlighted the natural pattern.

Albers explored complex colors and shape patterns in conjunction with intricate weaving structures. One of the most direct visual connections that could be made between Albers's early Bauhaus wall hangings and ancient Andean textiles was the use of a grid. This modulation could be found in the checkerboard pattern of the Inca military tunic and the royal tapestry tunic (Figure 7). The royal tapestry was completely covered in *tocapu*, a set of squares with geometrically abstracted decoration. The viewers' first instinct when looking at this textile would be to find a pattern, but the arrangement was devoid of predictable repetition, which had specific cultural implications for the Inca. By wearing an *unku* (tunic) covered in *tocapu*, the *Sapa Inca* (Inca Emperor) used his royal costume as a visual metaphor that spoke to his control over his empire by representing all the diversity that could have possibly been expressed through *tocapu*.<sup>60</sup> The *tocapu* in the royal *unku* did not make up a pattern. The individual symbols were repeated, but in no particular order. This suggested that not only was this textile one of a kind, but that no man could replicate the power possessed by the *Sapa Inca*.

A similar unpredictable modular patterning was a reoccurring motif in Albers's wall hangings. Albers crafted her first wall hanging (*untitled*) at the Bauhaus in 1924

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59 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 28.

60 Rebecca Stone, *Art of the Andes : From Chavín to Inca* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 212.

(Figure 8). This wall hanging was roughly the same dimensions as later Andean tunics if they were unfolded, approximately 5.5 by 3 feet.<sup>61</sup> One might also relate the symmetry of this wall hanging to the center head slit and shoulder folds that would have been visible on the tunics displayed in museums like the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde.<sup>62</sup> While Albers's aesthetic changed when she moved to the United States and began teaching at Black Mountain College, allusions to ancient Andean textiles remained constant both in her art practice and her pedagogical philosophy.

As a student of the Bauhaus, Albers absorbed the progressive education principles of her teachers and mentors. Even though the Bauhaus was an undeniable influence, she further developed her art practice and philosophies, as an individual, reacting personally to the lessons of Itten and Klee. In order to understand how she refined her pedagogical philosophies, it is important to examine the philosophies of her educators. Armed with this knowledge, we can determine which tendencies were taken directly from the Bauhaus and which were unique to her personal experiences. Beginning during her time as a student at the Bauhaus, Albers built her art practice from the most fundamental elements, turning to ancient examples for guidance. When she left the Bauhaus in 1933, she took this "back to zero" or back to basics philosophy with her to Black Mountain College and throughout the rest of her career.

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61 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 73.

62 Ibid.

## CHAPTER III

### ANNI ALBERS AS TEACHER

“What you do with what you know is the important thing. To know is not enough”

--John Rice, Harper's Magazine, 1937

In 1933, the same year that the Bauhaus closed due to pressure from the Nazi party, Philip Johnson, then a curator affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, invited Anni and Josef Albers to teach at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Josef Albers initially responded, “I do not speak one word of English” and Johnson replied, “Come anyway.”<sup>63</sup> In a letter the couple received from Theodore Dreier, an engineer, educator, and founding member of Black Mountain College, he described the school as a “pioneering adventure.”<sup>64</sup> As the Alberses had long been a part of the experimental enterprises of the Bauhaus, terms like “pioneering” appealed to them and ultimately helped them decide that “this is our place,” that Black Mountain College was where they were meant to be.<sup>65</sup> Even though Albers was working within an institution with a very specific aim that informed her teaching philosophy, she was able to individualize her pedagogy centered on the foundational principles of textile construction, thereby employing the “back to zero” approach that she had developed in her creative explorations at the Bauhaus. At Black Mountain College, Albers created for her students the same type of environment that allowed her to thrive at the Bauhaus. In her essay “Work with Material,” Albers explained that “it is here that even the shyest beginner can catch a glimpse of the exhilaration of creating, by being the creator while at

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63 Anni and Josef Albers, interview by Martin Duberman, transcript.

64 Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community* (New York: Dutton, 1972), 56.

65 Ibid.

the same time he is checked by irrevocable laws set by the nature of the material, not by man.”<sup>66</sup> She created a space where students were free to experiment with materials, but also maintained a structure through the limitations of those same materials.

Black Mountain College was founded on the belief that the study and practice of art were crucial aspects of a student’s general liberal arts education. Just as Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus in alliance with John Dewey’s principles of progressive education, the educator and founder of Black Mountain College, John Andrew Rice, aimed to create a college that would produce individuals rather than *individualists*.<sup>67</sup> According to Rice, individualists often advocate for social theories that favor freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control where Rice wanted to prepare his students for democratic life in America. Through Dewey’s philosophies, Rice discovered a way to link his pedagogical convictions with his commitment to democracy.<sup>68</sup> He also believed that to make a student aware of themselves, he or she must be aware of his or her relation to others.<sup>69</sup> In this respect, the whole community became each individual’s teacher. One of the popular slogans from the college was that “as much real education took place over the coffee cups as in the classrooms.”<sup>70</sup> At Black Mountain College, education was directly linked to life experience, dissolving the distinction between curricular and extracurricular activities.

While Black Mountain College and the Bauhaus followed some of the same intellectual values, namely an insistence on art as a central, unifying educational

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66 Anni Albers, “Work with Material,” In *Black Mountain College Bulletin* no. 5. (1938).

67 John Andrew Rice, “Black Mountain College” (January 21, 1935), (copy at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation).

68 Ruth Erickson, “A Progressive Education,” In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 79.

69 John Andrew Rice, “Black Mountain College.”

70 Duberman, *Black Mountain: an Exploration in Community*, 41.

component, they were different genres of schools; the Bauhaus was a design school and Black Mountain was a liberal arts college. Despite the dissemination of Bauhaus curriculum within Black Mountain College, there was a fundamental disconnect between the professionalizing impetuses of the Bauhaus and the self-actualizing nature of Black Mountain College.<sup>71</sup> At the Bauhaus, when a student completed the Preliminary Course, he or she would be placed in a specialized workshop that focused on a single material while working toward the collective Bauhaus goal of a standard design prototype for industrial reproduction. At Black Mountain, in contrast, the pedagogy focused on creative refinement for the sake of individual growth.<sup>72</sup> The expectations for their respective students seemed to match the intended outcome for a design school and a liberal arts college. The students from the Bauhaus moved on to be professional artists and designers, and the graduates from Black Mountain College, not as concerned with direct professional paths, graduated as generally educated and well-rounded members of society.

Before embarking on a philosophical discussion about Black Mountain's pedagogy and, more specifically, the teaching philosophy of Albers, I will provide a brief overview of the college's structure. The curriculum was intended to be organic, as there were no required courses or standardized grading systems. The only overarching structure was that classes were separated into junior and senior divisions. Lower division courses were comprised of five or six one-hour weekly seminars and upper division credits were

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71 Self-actualization is a term originally introduced by the organismic theorist Kurt Goldstein in the 1930s to describe the motive to realize one's full potential. This later influenced Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation."

72 Jefery Saletnik, "Bauhaus in America," In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 105.

mainly independent study.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, the faculty gave the students the responsibility to shape their educational experience. The first Black Mountain course catalogue specifies that the college would not employ the usual course credits; in place of credit hours, students were required to pass two comprehensive exams.<sup>74</sup> Black Mountain College was never accredited, and examiners were brought in from other institutions to conduct the graduation examinations in collaboration with Black Mountain faculty.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the lack of accreditation is linked to the environment Rice was trying to achieve at Black Mountain, as he prohibited the formation of a Board of Trustees to avoid outside dictation of policy.<sup>76</sup>

Rice wanted to form a school where art was at the center of the curriculum. He asserted, “Don’t ask me how or why I know it, but I know it: if I can’t get the right man for art, then the thing won’t work.”<sup>77</sup> The man that Rice was looking for was Josef Albers. Rice believed that, through some kind of art experience, which was not necessarily purely self-expression, a student could come to realize and understand his or her place in the world.<sup>78</sup> Through the student’s sensitivity to movement, form, and sound, or, in other words, the basic elements of living, he or she would get a firmer sense of self. Josef Albers’s pedagogical goal was to “open eyes” by honing in on the dynamics of

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73 Black Mountain College Course Catalogue (copy at the North Carolina State Archives).

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Duberman, *Black Mountain; an Exploration in Community*, 30.

77 Ibid, 55.

78 Ruth Erickson, “A Progressive Education,” In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 80.

intellectual emancipation and creative refinement to promote individual growth.<sup>79</sup> He

elaborates on this idea in a letter he wrote to Milton Rose, an economist:

Instead of training only intellect and memory we consider the development of will, demonstrated in initiative and action as our main task. We aim at a democratic education, which is opportunity of development for everybody, for the visual, oral and manual type of student as well as for the minority of intellectuals. In this way we hope to realize Pestalozzi's demand for an education for all and also his advice to develop head and heart and hand.<sup>80</sup>

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was a nineteenth century Swiss pedagogue and educational reformer who felt that education must be broken down to its elements in order to have a complete understanding. He asserted that every aspect of a child's life contributed to the formation of his/her personality and character. Pestalozzi laid the foundation for institutions like Black Mountain College where education and life were treated as one in the same. Rather than having his students endlessly practice figure drawing, Josef Albers required material studies (*matière*), in which students combined found material to obscure the original material. Josef Albers believed that by taking those textures out of their normal context and by relating them to one another, his students would begin to see the world of materials around them more accurately.<sup>81</sup> Ultimately Josef Albers wanted his students' experiences to break down their preconceived notions about the world. Additionally, while there were weekly meetings where faculty members discussed their respective pedagogies, many were in line with or informed by Josef Albers's exploratory model.<sup>82</sup>

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79 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

80 Letter from Josef to Milton Rose (copy at the North Carolina Archives).

81 Michael Beggs, "Josef Albers: Photographs of Matières," In *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957*, Ed. Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson (Boston: New Haven; London: Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston; In Association with Yale University Press, 2015), 86.

82 Saletnik, "Bauhaus in America," 103.

Along with the other faculty members, Albers shared some pedagogical similarities with her husband, but the most clearly defined teaching strategy she used was starting her students at the point of “zero.” This “back to zero” approach was not only apparent in her entry point to weaving education, but also in the models she used and the tactile experience she hoped for her students to achieve. Albers emphasized a return to the foundational principles of textile construction. Just like Itten’s Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus, Albers asked her students to participate in non-loom exercises with non-weaving materials like grass sourced from the surrounding landscape. She asked her students to arrange or manipulate materials to highlight underlying horizontal and vertical structures, paralleling structures they would have seen in woven works. There were two main reasons Albers used this approach. First, when she moved to Black Mountain she had to build the weaving department from the ground up. Because the school lacked sufficient funding, purchasing looms and other materials was no easy task. The second, and perhaps more important reason for focusing on non-loom activities, was the need to clarify fundamental textile principles. These activities helped students see the immutable connection between woven structures and weaving patterns.

Part of Albers’s strategy to bring her students to the “point of zero” was to retrain their tactile sensibilities through haptic experiences. The term haptic, at its most basic, is defined as relating to the sense of touch. When used to describe a work of art, the term generally refers to works that offer visual engagement through an appeal to tactility.<sup>83</sup> In teaching and producing, Albers was concerned with both the surface quality of matter and its structure in relation to tactile experiences and the surface quality and structure of textiles. While material studies were a fundamental aspect of Josef Albers’s pedagogy at

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83 Molesworth, “Imaginary Landscape,” 66.

Black Mountain, Anni Albers's interest went a step further. She described how there seemed to be no common word to describe the tactile perception of the material's inner qualities linked to the surface pliability, sponginess, brittleness, or porousness despite the fact that the inner structure is the origin of the surface's aesthetic.<sup>84</sup> She related structure to the function of an object, which required our intellect to decipher it, and *maitère* to non-utilitarian aspects like color, which could not be experienced intellectually.<sup>85</sup>

In *On Weaving*, Albers argued that the woven structure was as much a factor in the fabric's function as was the choice of weaving material.<sup>86</sup> She went on to say that, "in fact, the interrelation of the two, the subtle play between them in supporting, impeding, or modifying each other's characteristics, is the essence of weaving."<sup>87</sup> If you were working with students who had never woven anything or given much thought to their everyday fabrics, how could you make them see this crucial connection between structure and visual appearance? Albers focused not only on the surface appearance of material, but also on the inner support system as the origin of surface appearance.

One non-loom example of an investigation of this connection was a style of weaving known as plain weave, which was represented by the perforated effect caused by holes punched by a thumbtack in a simple piece of paper (Figure 9). Plain weave is often considered to be the simplest weave, in which a weft (horizontal) thread moves alternately over and under each warp (vertical) thread. The result is a very firm structure that is able to hold its shape.<sup>88</sup> It has a uniform surface where the warp and weft appear

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84 Anni Albers, "Tactile Sensibility," In *On Design* (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 70.

85 Ibid

86 Anni Albers, "The Fundamental Constructions," *On Weaving* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 38.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

equally, producing the same effect on the front and the back of the fabric. One way the act of punching uniform holes into a piece of paper illustrated the structure of a plain weave was that the front and back of the paper would have the same appearance just as a plain weave textile. In her chapter “The Fundamental Construction,” Albers made this remark about plain weave: “It has a tendency to be stiff and, since the threads here cannot be pushed together very closely, it appears perforated when held against the light.”<sup>89</sup> Linking this non-loom activity with this statement about plain weave, one might assume that these were the types of structural connections Albers hoped for her students to make.

Similar to the non-loom paper perforation exercise, Albers prompted her students to use the materials from their surroundings such as moss, flower stems, or wood shavings and fix them in a certain order.<sup>90</sup> She would have her students make a smooth piece of paper appear fibrous by scratching the surface, tearing it, and twisting it (Figure 10).<sup>91</sup> Because her main interest was woven work, her students were made acutely aware of the dominant elements of textiles such as the rhythm of weft and warp. These structural elements were immediate and elements like color were only a by-product.<sup>92</sup> Through these activities her students were revitalizing their tactile senses, which can be thought of as part of basic human sensibilities. Experiments with surface effects were to be understood as activities to increase the student’s awareness of the connection between woven structures and surface appearance. Haptic experiences were not an end in themselves but instead gave her students new terms in the vocabulary of tactile language. Ultimately, learning through one’s tactile senses meant using one’s hands and one’s

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89 Ibid.

90 Albers, “Tactile Sensibility,” 71.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

brain, a disruption of the Cartesian model of subjectivity that privileges the mind over the body.<sup>93</sup> Just as these haptic activities brought Albers's students back to the basics by looking at a literal representation of woven structures and compelling them to use their tactile sensibilities to comprehend the complex relationship between the appearance of a textile and its structure, studying ancient Andean textiles constituted another "back to zero" educational model.

Not only did Albers draw from ancient Andean sources in her art, she also used them in her classroom to discuss both technical and design issues with her students. There are various accounts from her former students describing how ancient Andean textiles were incorporated in Albers's curriculum. Don Page, one of her students from her early years teaching at Black Mountain recalled:

Along with her technical German knowledge of weaving, she had an abiding interest in Pre-Columbian textiles, owning quite a few books (mainly German, I think) with pictures and description of the various types of fabrics that had been woven in South America...If the technique of making any of these sometimes complicated fabrics was not explained or known in the books she would try to discover how they were made herself with the help of us as students. It was a way of teaching fundamentals of weaving as well as making students think creatively...She was always intrigued with the material used in South American work, i.e. cotton, wool, alpaca, reeds, palm fronds, etc., and she encouraged students to experiment with anything that might be a useful or handsome material.<sup>94</sup>

At the Bauhaus, the philosophies around "primitive" art were romanticized, mainly concerned with its "pure" and morally superior nature, while stripping them of their specific cultural references.<sup>95</sup> While focusing on form in a decontextualizing manner, Albers did not make any claims for the superior morality of ancient Andean textiles. She was primarily concerned with the structures and forms of these textiles. Just

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93 Molesworth, "Imaginary Landscape," 66.

94 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 129.

95 Ibid, 48.

as Albers used non-loom activities as a foundational source of information about woven structures for her students, she utilized ancient Andean textiles as teaching tools as their appearance spoke directly to their structure. Ancient Andean textiles could be considered self-referential as their surface motifs either referenced their interior structure, or were dictated by it. As a part of her curriculum at Black Mountain College, Albers had her students work from physical examples of ancient Andean textiles. She often used examples from her personal collection or from the Harriett Englehardt Memorial Collection, which Albers complied and dedicated to a former student. In 1946, Mrs. Sam Englehardt wrote to Albers about the possibility of establishing a memorial fund to honor her daughter who had recently died while working for the Red Cross.<sup>96</sup> Albers proposed a memorial collection of textiles; she was already collecting textiles for herself, so she most likely had possible sources in mind. In 1947, Albers organized an exhibition of the Harriett Englehardt Memorial Collection that was so popular that its run was extended to the end of the summer.<sup>97</sup>

One common self-referential ancient Andean motif that Albers's students would have seen, either in person or in one of her anthropological books on ancient Andean textiles, was the Inca "Key" patterned tunic. The under-and-over process was reflected in the checkerboard patterning and the interweaving of the key shapes around the dots referenced a weaving in cross-section (Figure 11 and 12).<sup>98</sup> Elite members of Andean society traditionally wore the Inca "Key" tunic.<sup>99</sup> This particular tunic was made of

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96 Ibid, 143.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid, 143.

99 Stone, *Art of the Andes : From Chavin to Inca*, 210.

cotton and camelid fibers, measuring about 36.8 x 31.7 inches.<sup>100</sup> The majority of the tunic was composed of a yellow and maroon checkered pattern that contain what has been defined as a key pattern. In the maroon squares the slope of the key goes up from left to right and in the yellow the slope goes down from left to right. As mentioned in Chapter II, this checkered pattern mimics the under-and-over process of weaving. In addition, the slopes of the keys were referring to the motion of lacing the weft (horizontal) thread through the warp (vertical). During this process, the weaver doesn't pull the weft straight across, but rather pulls it up diagonally to the other side. Here, the repetition of alternating diagonals creates a rhythm similar to that created by the process of weaving. The bottom third of the tunic is made of red and maroon stripes, punctuating the checkered "Key" pattern.

Albers not only had her students look at, analyze, and diagram actual ancient Andean examples, she also had them weave on Andean backstrap looms. During her trips to Central and South America, Albers was photographed weaving on the backstrap loom, surrounded by indigenous women. When Anni and Josef Albers traveled to the Andes in 1953, she bough an ancient Andean textile sill attached to a small loom.<sup>101</sup> A backstrap loom is a simple horizontal loom on which one or two beams holding the warp thread is attached to a strap that passes across a weaver's back (Figure 13). With this type of loom, the tension of the warp threads was directly connected to the weaver. Using this loom, the weaver would have a more literal and physical connection to the piece they were weaving. This was one strategy Albers used to reconnect her students with material and reawaken their tactile sensibilities. By having the warp threads react directly to their

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100 Tunic, Inca, "key" pattern, Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich

101 Anni Albers, interview with Richard Polsky for the Columbia University Oral History Project, 44.

body's movement, the weaver had a closer relationship to the material and more control. The backstrap loom also served as tool to lay the foundation for her students to understand industrial weaving, as Albers believed that it contained "the most principle elements used in industrial looms."<sup>102</sup> It is unclear whether Albers brought these backstrap looms back for her students, or if they worked to reconstruct their own. Albers positioned hand-woven prototypes as the first step in designing for industry and as the starting point in weaving education. She used her knowledge of ancient Andean textiles to inspire her students' relationship with material and development of their own art practice.

At Black Mountain College, retraining her students tactile sensibilities through haptic exercises and the integration of ancient Andean textiles and weaving techniques constituted Albers's "back to zero" pedagogical philosophy. Our sense of touch is one of the primary and elemental ways we discover and spark creativity. Albers asserted that "we touch things to assure ourselves of reality."<sup>103</sup> Albers also expressed concerns about limitations in the opportunity for everyday people to handle materials due to modern industry; she felt that "we grow lopsided."<sup>104</sup> By ensuring her students had opportunities to engage with material and develop their tactile sensibilities, Albers created elemental experiences to promote creative maturation. Albers used ancient Andean textiles along with the backstrap loom to move her students back from the mechanized processes of industrialized weaving, and in order to help them understand and master weaving basics.

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102 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 130.

103 Albers, "Tactile Sensibility," 69.

104 Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### ART AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF PEDAGOGY

“A longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means within oneself: for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.”

--Anni Albers, “Work With Material,” 1938

Now that Albers’s time as a student at the Bauhaus and the concrete elements of her Black Mountain College pedagogy have been explored, I turn to the evolution of her art practice and how her “back to zero” philosophy has manifested itself in her work. Over the course of her artistic career, Albers went through three distinct artistic shifts. During her time at the Bauhaus, between 1922 and 1932, she explored topics relating to technology, woven structures, and industry. Her wall hangings consisted primarily of abstract rectilinear forms. In 1934, coinciding with her move to the United States, Albers produced her first of many pictorial weaves. Then, in 1963, after many years spent at the loom, Albers abandoned weaving entirely for printmaking. This artistic development reflects Albers’s growing certainty and artistic self-awareness. By looking at her artistic evolution and the curriculum she created at Black Mountain College, it is evident that Albers was recreating the experiences that allowed her to develop as an artist for her students. In her essay “Material as Metaphor,” Albers considers how students, including herself, find their way:

Years ago, I once asked John Cage how he had started to find his way....”By chance” was the answer. Students worry about choosing their way. I always tell them, “you can go anywhere from anywhere.” In my case it was threads that caught me, really against my will...I learned to listen to them and to speak their language...And with listening came gradually a longing for a freedom beyond their range and that led me to another medium, graphics...What I had learned in handling threads, I now used in the printing process. Again I was led...What I am

trying to get across is that material is a means of communication. That listening to it, not dominating it makes us truly active...the finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art. Art is the final aim.<sup>105</sup>

The Bauhaus Weaving Workshop taught Albers how to push the boundaries of material, and how to use thread to communicate. By listening and understanding her material, she was able to produce quality work. While it may seem that John Cage, Albers's colleague at Black Mountain College, found his way by chance, Albers worked to orchestrate a learning environment at Black Mountain College that fostered a process-oriented understanding of material based on art assignments involving texture and material studies.

Many of the pedagogical philosophies that Albers developed as a teacher at Black Mountain College were directly linked to her education at the Bauhaus. The majority of her work from the Bauhaus reflected the material limitations of weaving, limitations that brought her comfort. Just like the self-referential ancient Andean textiles from which she drew inspiration, her wall hangings made similar references by emphasizing their horizontal and vertical elements; visually referencing the weaving process. For example, in her 1927 wall hanging titled *Black-White-Gray*, the rectilinear forms were composed of straight horizontal and vertical lines and right angles (Figure 14). Some of the piece's squares also contained an additional horizontal or vertical line that broke down the shape into a smaller geometric unit. If a viewer considered each individual warp and weft that crossing at right angles, as the smallest unit of this wall hanging, it would be easy to see how the larger forms reflected the structural elements that make up the fabric. The self-

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105 Anni Albers, "Material as Metaphor," In *On Design* (Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 75.

John Cage was an American composer, and music theorist. Cage, one of the leading figures of the post-war avant-garde, was a pioneer of indeterminacy in music, electroacoustic music, and non-standard use of musical instruments. He staged his first 'happening' at Black Mountain College.

referential nature of this piece went deeper than just linear elements. This wall hanging was constructed on a twelve-harness loom and the composition was broken up into twelve squares across the top and bottom.<sup>106</sup> While Albers was looking at the structural nature of ancient Andean textiles, she was also interested in their weaving techniques, such as the multi-weaves construction, which she found was the ideal method to create color relationships.<sup>107</sup> Using ancient Andean double and multi-weave, Albers was able to create pieces like *Black-White-Gray* that contained various solid color areas, rather than the blend of fibers that usually occur when the warp and weft of a different color cross.

By learning to “speak the language of threads,” as she put it, Albers came to understand how weaving works as a medium, and how individual threads combine to make a whole textile.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately, she explored the structure of weaving as a first step to understanding how she could take the medium, from her previous conception of it as a handicraft, into the realm of fine art. Due to the lack of direction of the Bauhaus’s Weaving Workshop, the most logical way to understand a new medium would be to examine its most basic parts, in this case the primary structures that make textiles. By exploring materials, Albers initiated the process of learning and art making, thus she went “back to zero.”

In a large-scale wall hanging titled *Monte Alban* (1936), Albers maintained the underlying grid pattern and the muted colors typical of her other Bauhaus wall hangings, but employed supplemental weft threads that allowed her to “draw” on the surface of the textile (Figure 15). Seemingly liberated by ancient Andean inspiration, Albers employed

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106 Weber, *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers*, 87.

107 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 77.

108 Albers, “Material as Metaphor,” 75.

see full quote on page 29

a new element, a free flowing line, which moved her work away from complete geometric abstraction. The incorporation of a floating weft was a common Andean technique that is still used in modern Central and South America.<sup>109</sup> Albers used supplemental weft threads to create imagery that mimics Zapotec architecture found at the archeological site of Monte Alban.<sup>110</sup> Albers used the floating weft to create the step motif by looping the weft thread from one row down to the next. The pyramidal and plateau-like imagery, together with the title of this wall hanging, contextualize the abstract forms. Her use of natural tones such as beige, black, and, ivory also seemed to allude to the cultural landscape from which Albers drew inspiration. After her trip to Monte Alban, Albers wrote, “We were aware of layer upon layer of a former civilization underground.”<sup>111</sup> This reference to architectural/archaeological stratification urged the viewer to remember the traditional handicraft foundations that modern society and its industrial advancement had seemingly supplanted. This wall hanging had three main vertical elements: two lighter panels flanked the main darker panel. The two lighter vertical panels along with two horizontal panels, one at the bottom and one at the top, frame the main body of the textile like a painting. Departing from her normal mode, Albers also signed the bottom left hand corner of this textile, AA, clearly defining it as an authored work of art.

While the weaving courses she taught at Black Mountain College promoted learning through experimentation, she provided guidance for her students to explore. By assigning her students textural studies, Albers provided her students an opportunity to

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109 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 117.

110 Danilowitz, “Josef and Anni Albers: Mexico and Modernity,” 147.

111 Label Text: 32Q: 1520 Art in Germany Between the Wars (Interwar and Bauhaus), Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Boston, MA.

understand the relationship between woven structures and a textile's surface through familiar mediums. Just as the limitations of weaving had created parameters that made Albers feel secure, in her art practice, she created a similar space for students to discover their own artistic self-confidence.

When Albers and her husband moved to the United States, there was a major shift in her body of work. Wall hangings had been a standard form in her art practice from the Bauhaus, but in 1930s she moved away from rectilinear abstracted imagery towards a more free-flowing abstraction in her pictorial weavings.<sup>112</sup> Unlike the forms in Albers's previous compositions that focused on issues related to structure and form, her pictorial weavings took on a more poetic, illusionistic quality.<sup>113</sup> In immigrating to the United States, Albers moved closer to her main sources of inspiration, Pre-Columbian art. In 1935, the Alberses made their first trip to South America.<sup>114</sup> This trip, along with many others, seems to have shifted the way Albers interpreted Pre-Columbian inspirations. When she was in Germany, she was only able to see ancient Andean textiles in a museum context, separated from their cultural heritage. Once she was able to see these forms in their historical and contemporary contexts, her inspiration was no longer limited to the structural elements of her wall hangings, but seeped in to the aesthetics of her pictorial weavings. The profound effect her trips to Central and South America had on her was clear as she wrote, "Perhaps it was this timeless quality in pre-Columbian art that first spoke to us...We were struck by the astounding variety of its articulation, by the numerous distinct cultures and resultant differing formulations. It made it clear to us

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112 Weber, *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers*, 87.

113 Ibid.

114 For a complete timeline, please see the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation website.

anew that a humble material...can be turned into images equal to those made of precious material.”<sup>115</sup>

The explicit connection Albers made between material traditionally used in handicraft rather than fine art, like textiles, could be seen in her piece *Ancient Writing* (Figure 16). In this piece, Albers used a text format and a title to frame her abstract visual elements in order to imply content. Without actually representing particular glyphs, Albers was able to evoke the idea of a visual language by grouping differently textured patterned squares together and placing this “text” within an underlying grid.<sup>116</sup> The abstracted units were not recognizable as actual objects, so rather than alluding to actual things, they alluded to the idea of a thing. Albers used the arrangement of visual elements in horizontal rows to further reference written communication. Albers used the visual elements of her textiles to do the same thing as text: serve as a standardization of abstracted symbols that represent ideas. She was enamored with her idealized perceptions of ancient Andean textiles and it was these ideals that she aimed to represent in her work. Ancient Andean architecture and South American landscapes inspired Albers to elevate her pictorial weaving from handicraft to work of art.

Through her pictorial weavings, Albers pushed the material limitations of weaving beyond the frame that had once comforted her during her formative years at the Bauhaus. In the 1940s, Albers departed from the wall-hanging genre altogether.<sup>117</sup> To reinforce the pictorial nature of her pictorial weavings, she began to mount them on linen, which created a mat-like border that framed her pieces like paintings.<sup>118</sup>

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115 Danilowitz, “Josef and Anni Albers: Mexico and Modernity,” 147.

116 Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 119.

117 Weber, *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers*, 90.

118 Ibid.

For Albers, preparing her students for their lives outside of Black Mountain College included fostering and developing their confidence. In her essay “Work with Material,” Albers described how valuable these qualities were:

But most important to one’s own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one’s whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.<sup>119</sup>

In 1963, Albers gave away her looms, and moved from weaving to printmaking. Curator Richard S. Field characterized this decision as one that seemed consistent with the times, “a turning away from subtle choices, personal gestures, and hands-on habits of weaving to the more highly collaborative, impersonal, and technologically explorative options of the world of prints.”<sup>120</sup> By examining the evolution of Albers’s art practice, it seems that her switch to printmaking could be her personal movement beyond her comfort zone, but she still kept elements of her “back to zero” philosophy. As a student at the Bauhaus, Albers felt overwhelmed by the freedom of being an artist. Weaving provided her with material limitations that gave her the comfort to grow. That artistic growth is manifested in her pictorial weavings and, ultimately, printmaking.

It seems obvious that the process of printmaking appealed to Albers as it can be defined as a mechanized version of painting. Even though she changed her primary medium, many of Albers artistic concerns remained the same. The intermingling of art, craft, and industry remained a constant in Albers’s art practice. While weaving was a major component of her “back to zero” philosophy she continued to use her textile background to inform her prints. She spoke of being able to picture a flow and pattern of

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119 Albers, “Work with Material.”

120 Richard S. Field, “Anni Albers: Prints and Drawings” In *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 107.

threads that was limited on the loom: “ I found that, in lithography, the image of threads could project a freedom I had never suspected.”<sup>121</sup> This idea is illustrated in her piece *Fox I* (1972). This piece was composed of red and white triangles that point the viewer in every direction (Figure 17). Albers’s use of a triangle motif was especially interesting as it alluded to the diagonal divisions of a gridded square that had been a hallmark of her woven work as it illustrated the internal structure of the textile. By looking at Albers’s educational and professional experience, art works, and writings, it seems probable that she was creating an educational environment that mirrored her educational experiences. It was through those particular experiences that she was able to develop her art practice. Through her own formation as an artist, she learned how to create a material-centric and process-focused curriculum for her students.

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121 Weber, *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers*, 108.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Anni Albers was an extraordinary artist and teacher who challenged traditional notions of art material and pedagogy, specifically through her “back to zero” philosophy, which thrived in the craft-based world of the German Bauhaus, as well as the world of post-World War II America. This “back to zero” philosophy can be linked to a variety of moments throughout Albers’s life. For example, during her time at the Bauhaus, it meant that Albers’s was beginning her career as a textile artist with little to no knowledge of the medium. This afforded her the opportunity to learn and experiment without the burden of any presuppositions. The lack of technical direction in the Weaving Workshop caused her to look to other sources for inspiration, ultimately introducing her to her greatest inspiration: ancient Andean textiles. The ancient nature of these textiles added another layer to Albers’s understanding of what it meant to go “back to zero.” When she was trying to get her students into the “back to zero” mindset, she often had them imagine that they were in a desert in Peru, and that is where they would begin. At Black Mountain College, Albers linked her “back to zero” philosophy to the idea of going back to the fundamentals, or back to basics, through haptic activities. These activities or assignments were intended to reacquaint students with the primary human sense of touch. By bringing them back to an early childhood state, Albers’s students used their sense of touch to understand the materials they worked with and their material limitations. By fostering the process of artistic evolution, Albers’s students developed courage through understanding the materials with which they worked. They were not limited by thoughts of what could

be; they knew how far their materials could be pushed. They were not just the receivers of knowledge, but also the producers of it.

Working against the development of confidence, educational institutions have historically often depended on verbal dissemination of information, which leaves students oscillating between admiration, uncertainty, or even inferiority.<sup>122</sup> In regards to her teaching, Albers continually stressed the importance of using material to satisfy our practical and artistic needs.<sup>123</sup> Ancient Andean textiles became Albers's favorite teaching tool because by looking at ancient Andean textiles, her students were not subjected to the forced dichotomy between art and craft. She integrated Andean textiles into multiple stages of a student's art education. The textiles were used to examine the foundational elements of weaving, but were also shown to encourage students to experiment.

In the article "The Maker Movement in Education," Erica Rosenfeld Halerson and Kimberly Sheridan describe how the Maker Movement has its roots in Seymour Papert's theory of constructionism, which developed out of Deweyan constructivism where learning is seen as a product of play, experimentation, and authentic inquiry.<sup>124</sup> The "back to zero" process that Albers championed would fit well with the more recent "Makers Movement," which promotes the idea that anyone is capable of performing a variety of tasks rather than relying on specialists. The maker culture requires the maker to seek out the knowledge required to complete a given task, empowering the individual or community and encouraging the exploration of alternative approaches.

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122 Albers, "Work with Material."

123 Ibid.

124 Erica Halverson and Kimberly Sheridan, "The Maker Movement in Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 4 (2014), 497.

Seymour Papert was a South African-born American mathematician, computer scientist, and educator. He was one of the pioneers of artificial intelligence, and the constructionist movement in education.

The development of confidence through the act of making was a hallmark of Albers's curriculum as knowledge was not something that she simply transmitted to her student. Rather, Albers created a space where knowledge could be derived from experience. Educators have been looking towards placing more emphasis on the process of making, which “reaches across the divide between formal and informal learning, pushing us to think more expansively about where and how learning happens.”<sup>125</sup> In a time when facts and pre-packaged truths are so easily accessible, the discovery of knowledge through the process of exploration stands out as the legacy of Albers’s art and pedagogical philosophy.

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125 Halverson and Sheridan, “The Maker Movement in Education,” 498.

## APPENDIX

### IMAGES

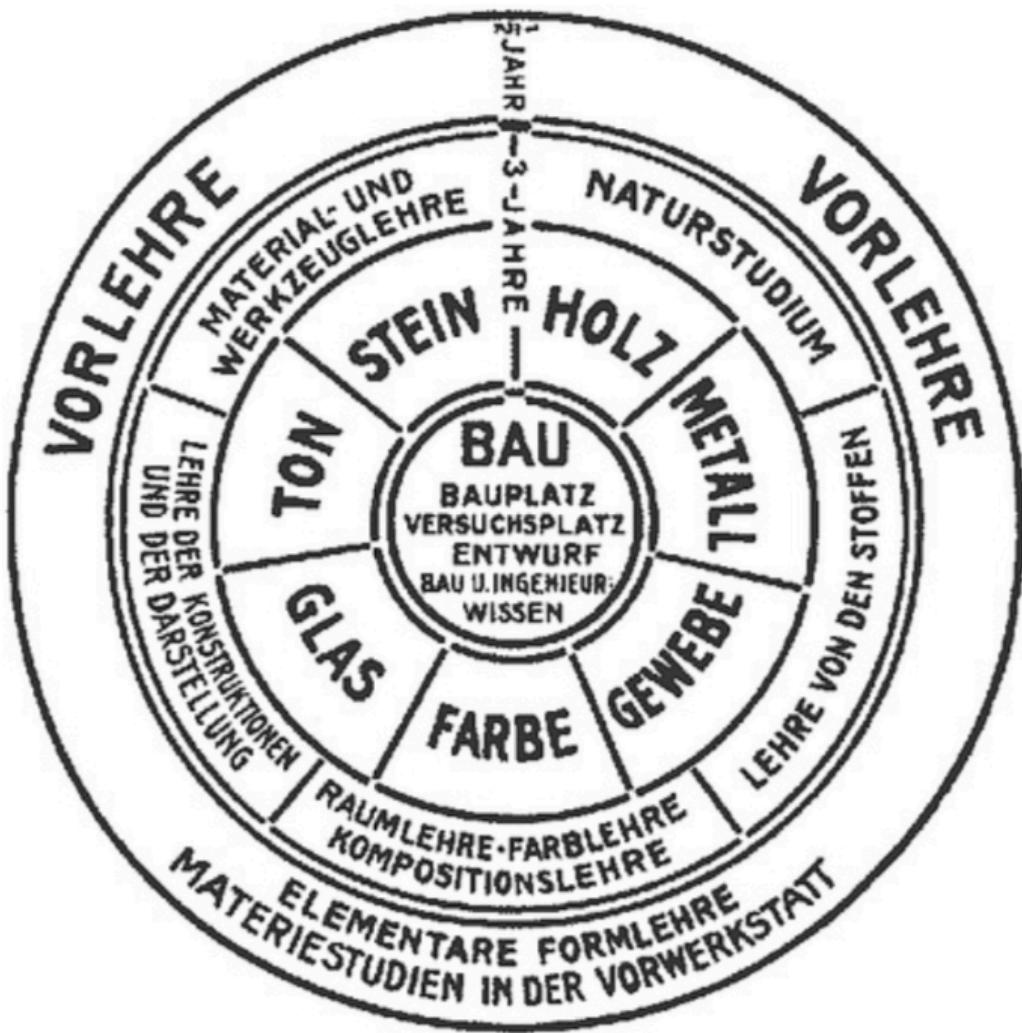


Figure 1: Walter Gropius's original Bauhaus curriculum.

Source:

[http://www.bauhaus.de/en/das\\_bauhaus/45\\_unterricht/](http://www.bauhaus.de/en/das_bauhaus/45_unterricht/)

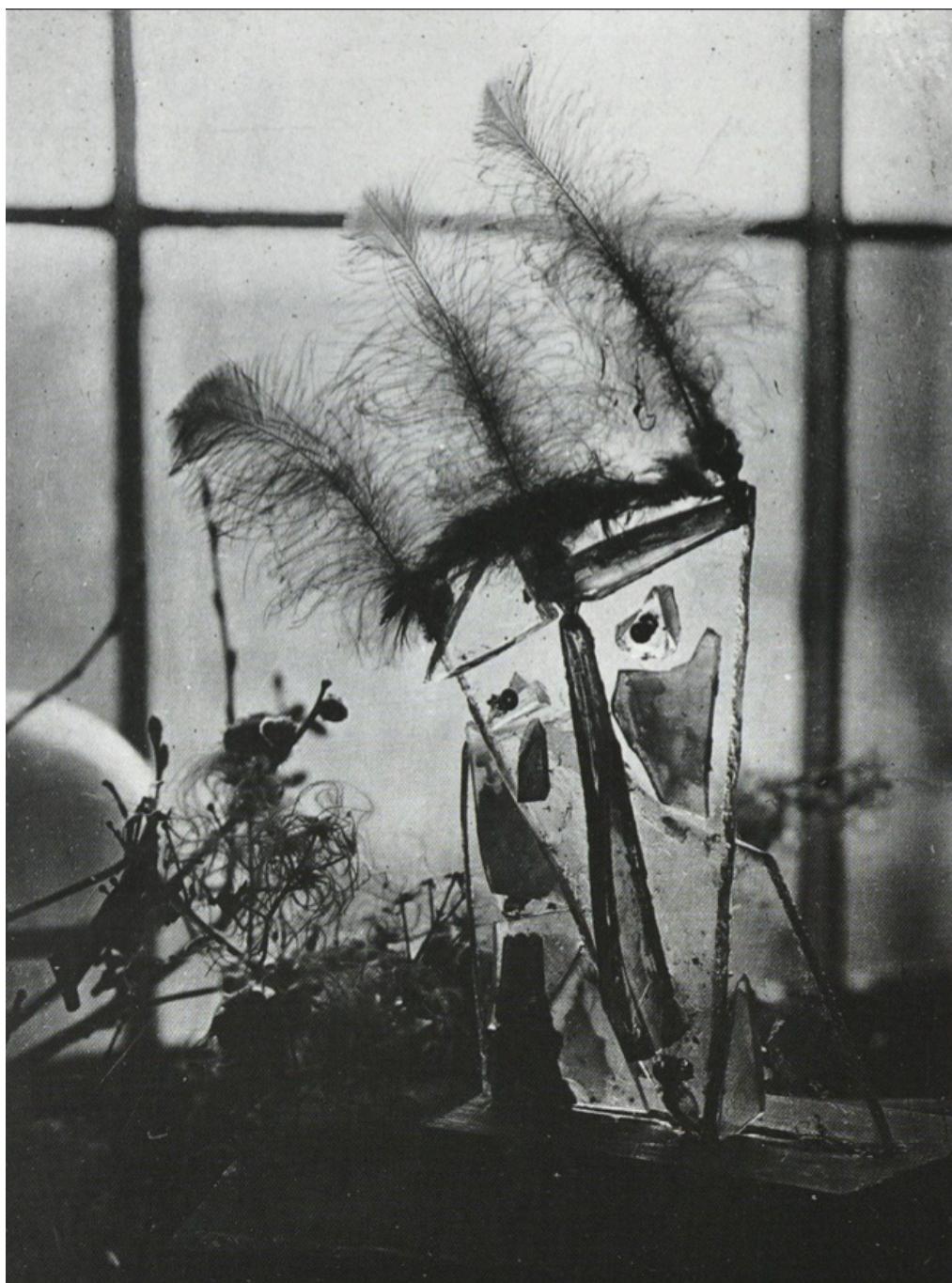


Figure 2: Margit Tery-Adler, Material and contrast study in wood, glass, and feathers.  
1920 (lost), photographer unknown



Figure 3: Anni Albers, drapery fabric sample for theater café in Dessau, 1927, spun silk. Source: The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, Gift of the artist

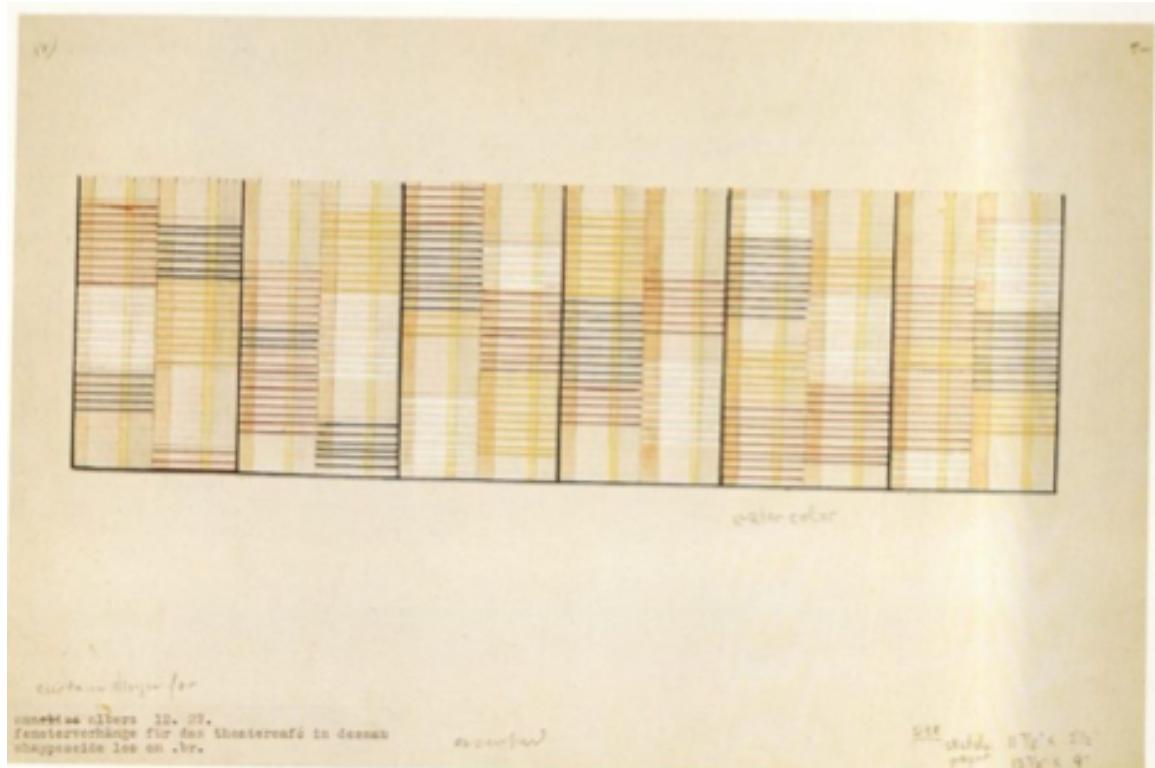


Figure 4: Anni Albers, curtain design for theater café in Dessau, 1927, watercolor on paper, 9 X 14 inches. Source: The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, Gift of the Artist



Figure 5: "Old Theater" Café, Furnishings by the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop made with Bauhaus fabrics, 1927, photographer unknown

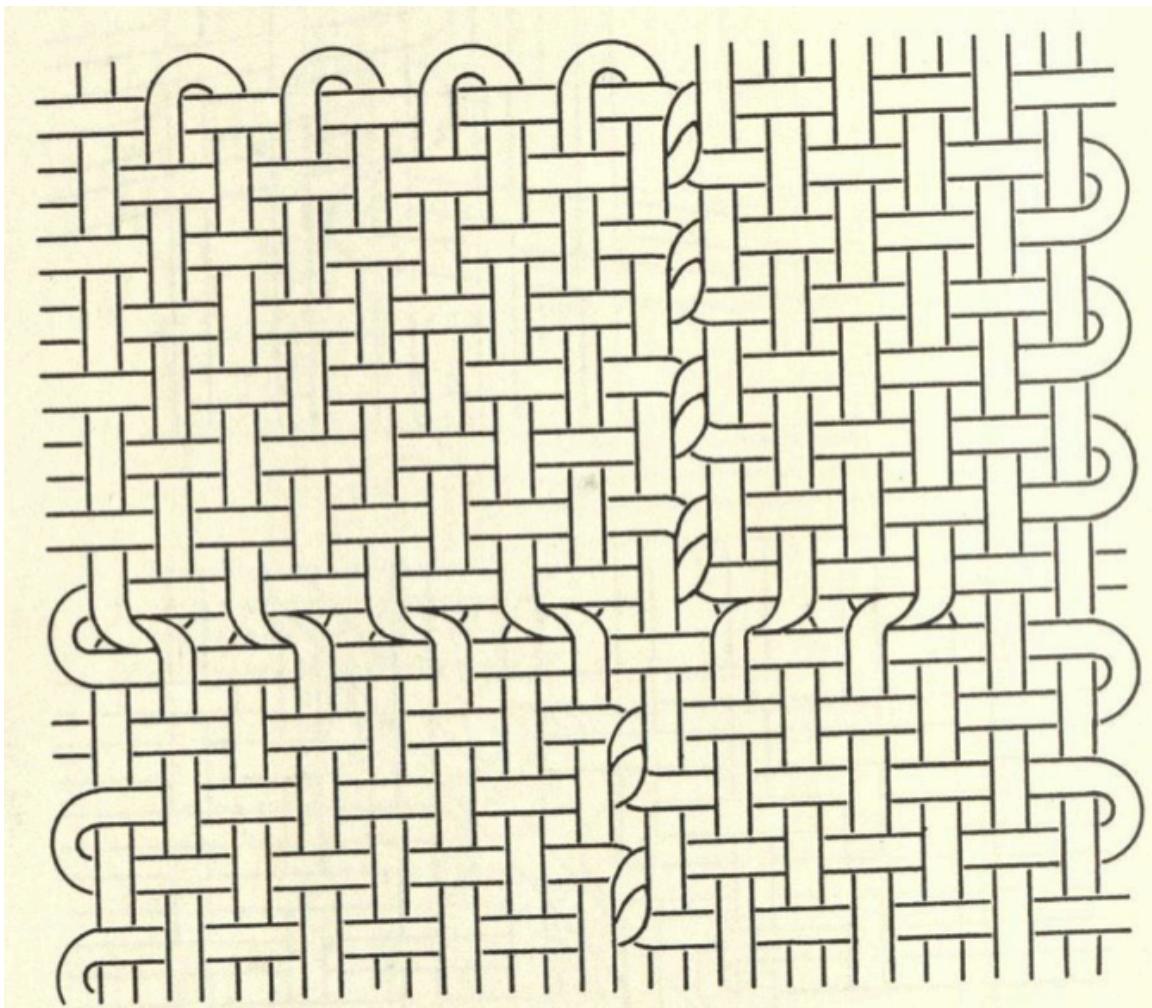


Figure 6: Interlocking warp and weft  
Source: Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, Plate 63



Figure 7: Tunic, "Royal Tunic," Inca, cotton and camelid, 28.4 X30.6 inches.  
Source: Bliss Collection, Research Library Collection, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington,  
DC

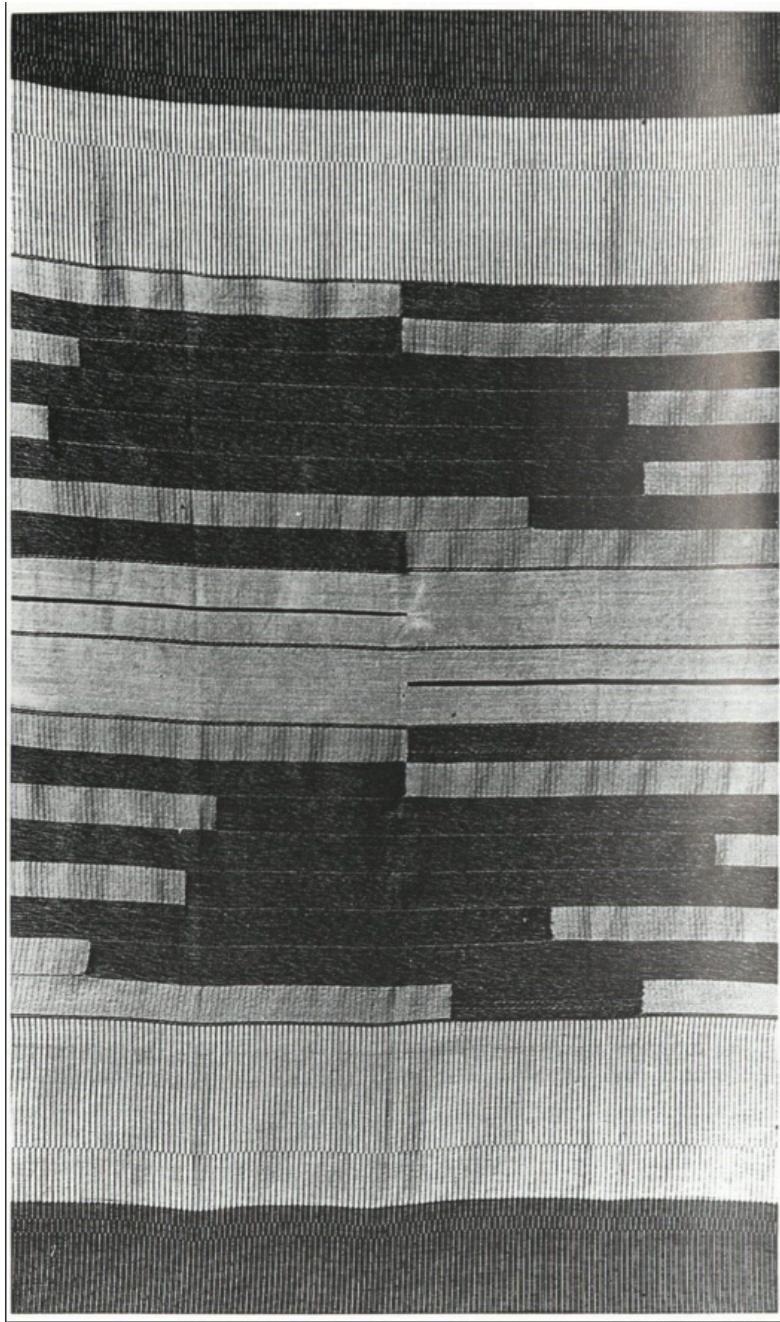


Figure 8: Anni Albers, wall hanging , 1924, wool, silk, and cotton, 48 inches wide,  
present location unknown

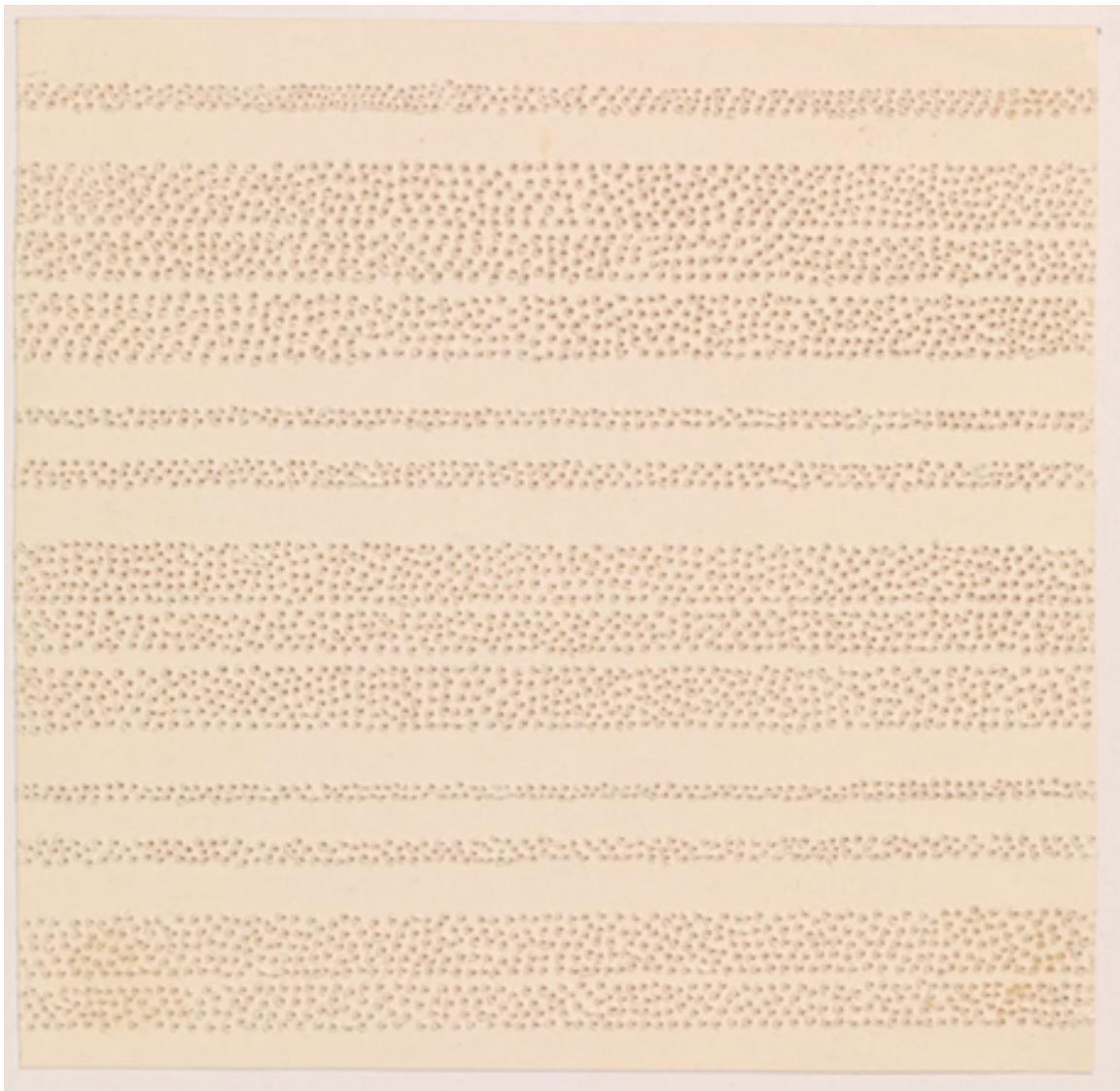


Figure 9: Anni Albers, material study, no date,  
Source: Anni Albers, *On Weaving*, Plate 38

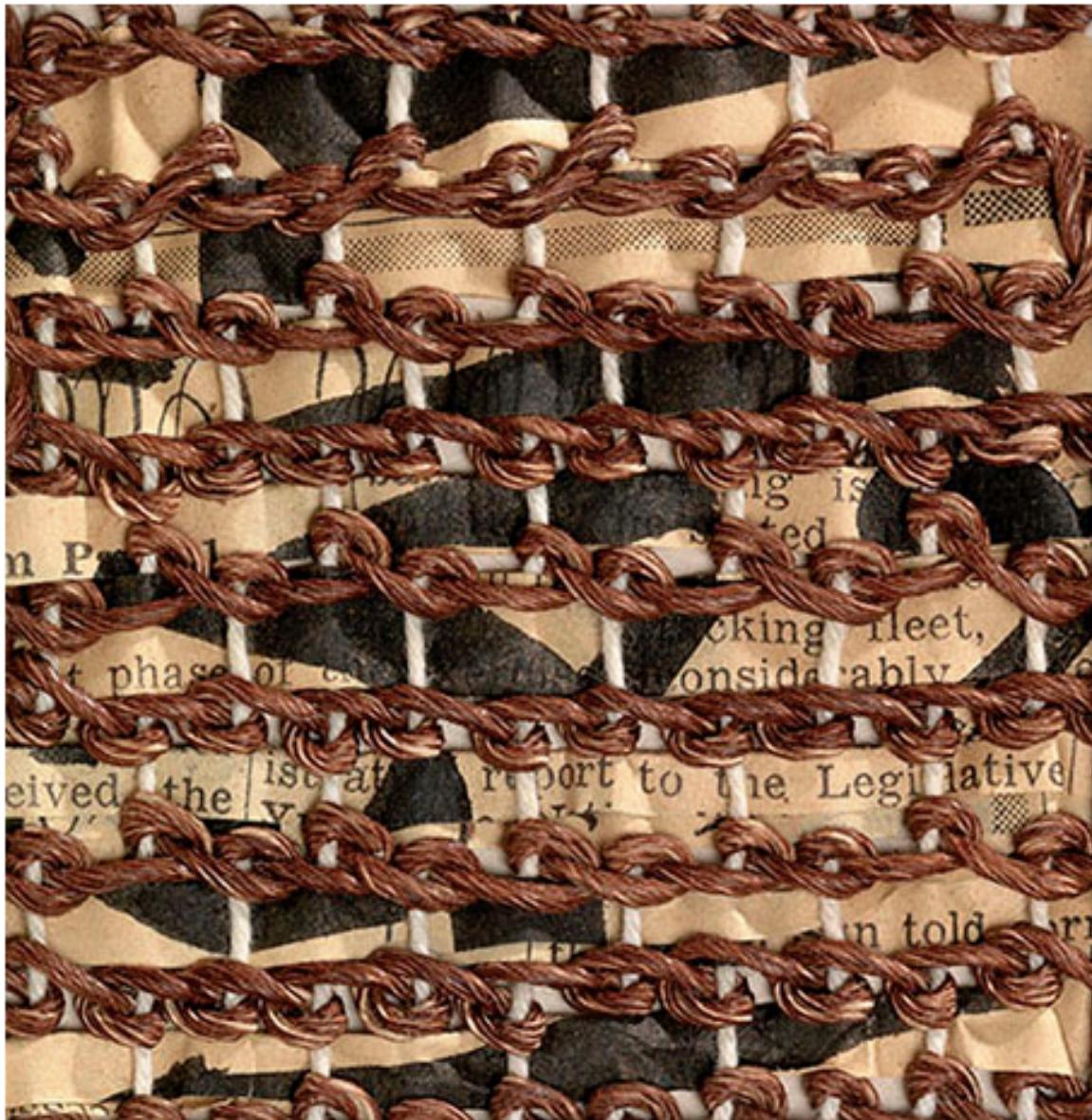


Figure 10: Anni Albers, Study of effect, of construction, of weave  
Source: Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

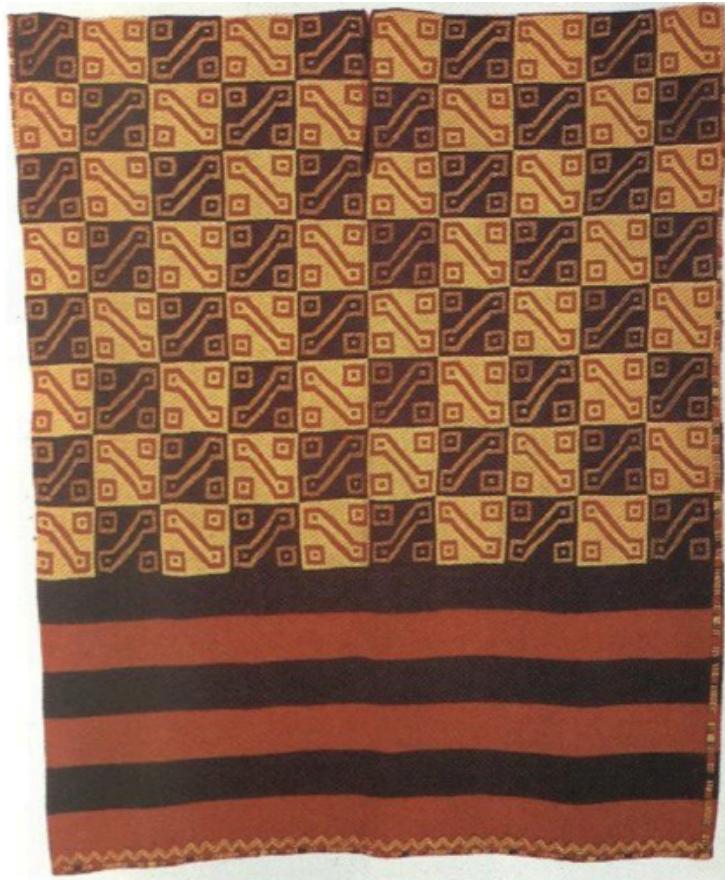


Figure 11: Tunic, Inca, “key” pattern, cotton and camelid, 36.8 X 31.7 inches.  
Source: Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich

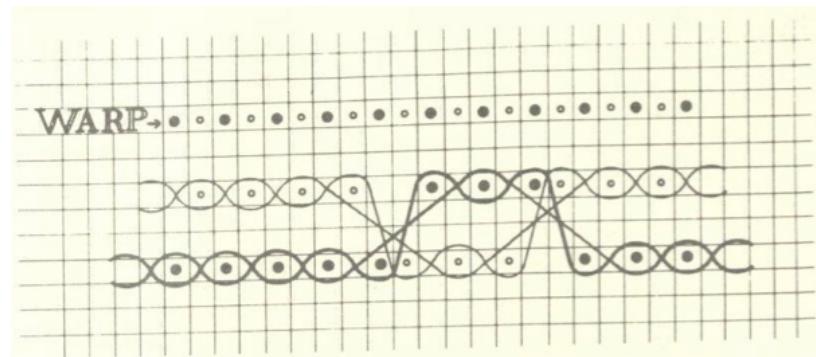


Figure 12: Anni Albers, illustration from *On Weaving*, plate 23, “cross section of double cloth in contrasting colors, interlocked for pattern effect”

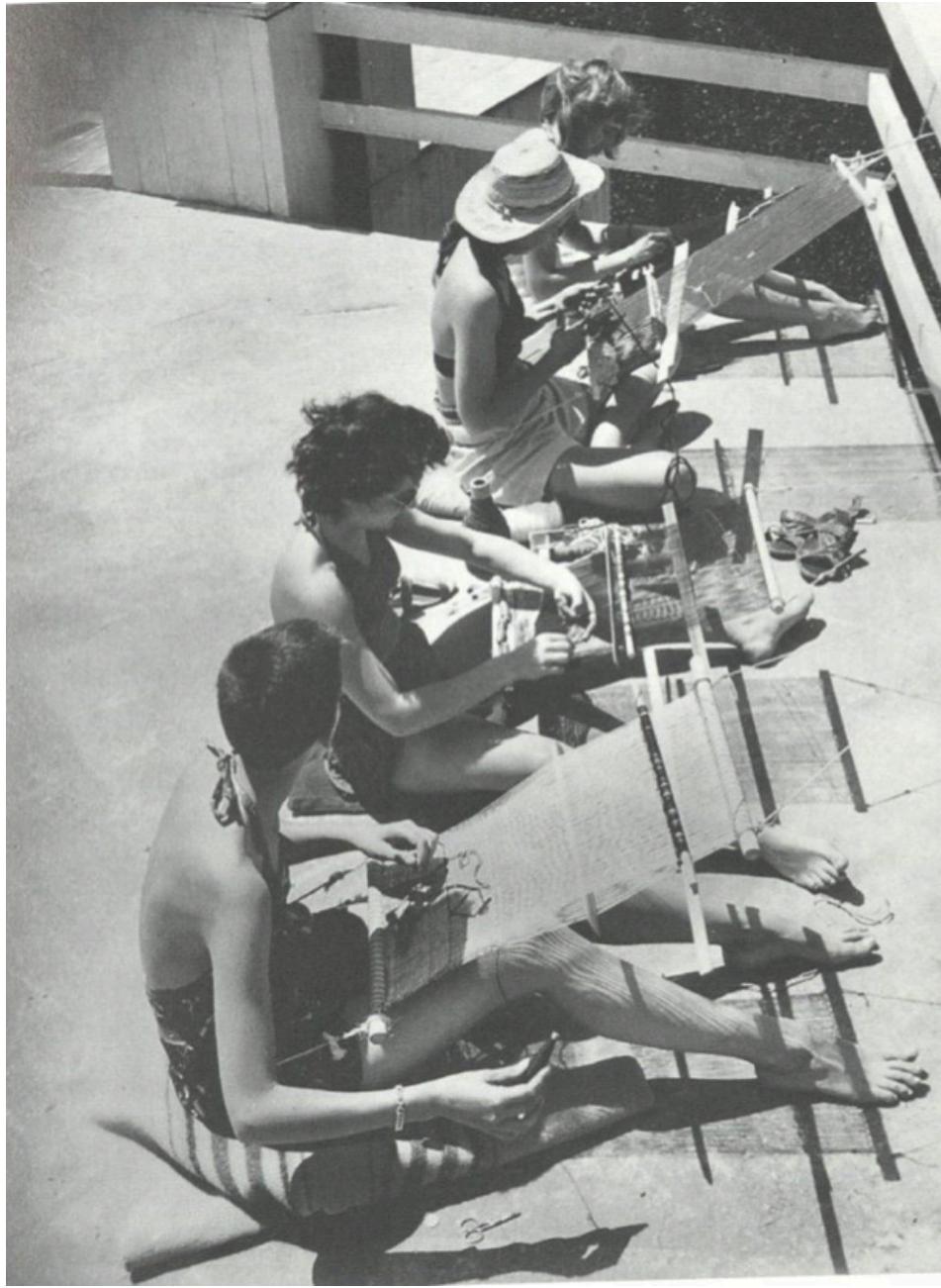


Figure 13: Black Mountain College students weaving on backstrap looms, 1945.

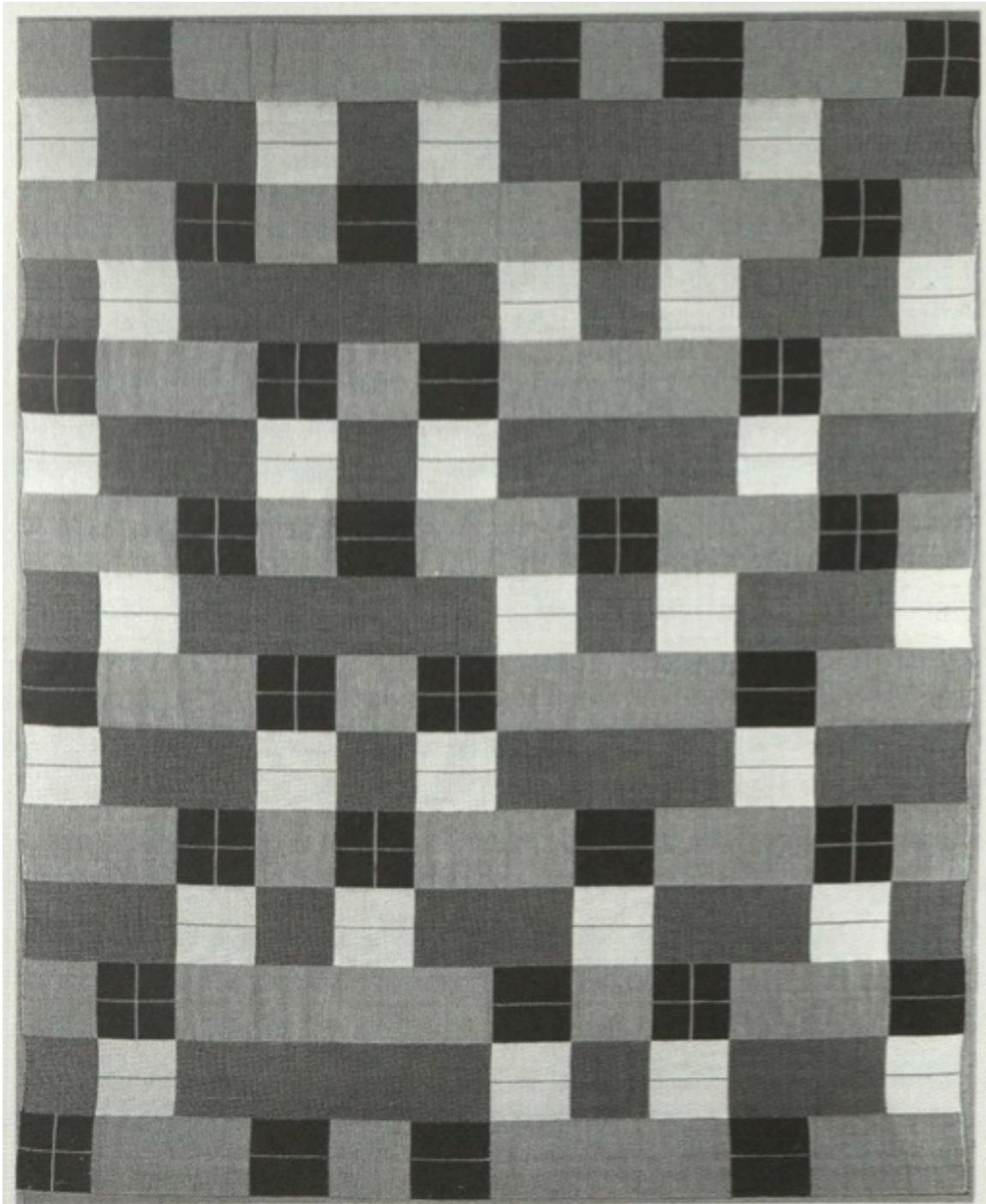


Figure 14: Anni Albers, *Black-White-Gray*, 1964 reconstruction of a 1927 original, cotton and silk, 57.8 X 46.4 inches. Source: Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin



Figure 15: Anni Albers, *Monte Alban*, 1936, silk, linen, and wool, 57.4 X 44 inches.  
Source: Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard G. Leahy



Figure 16: Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936, rayon, linen, cotton, and jute, 59 X 43.7 inches. Source: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

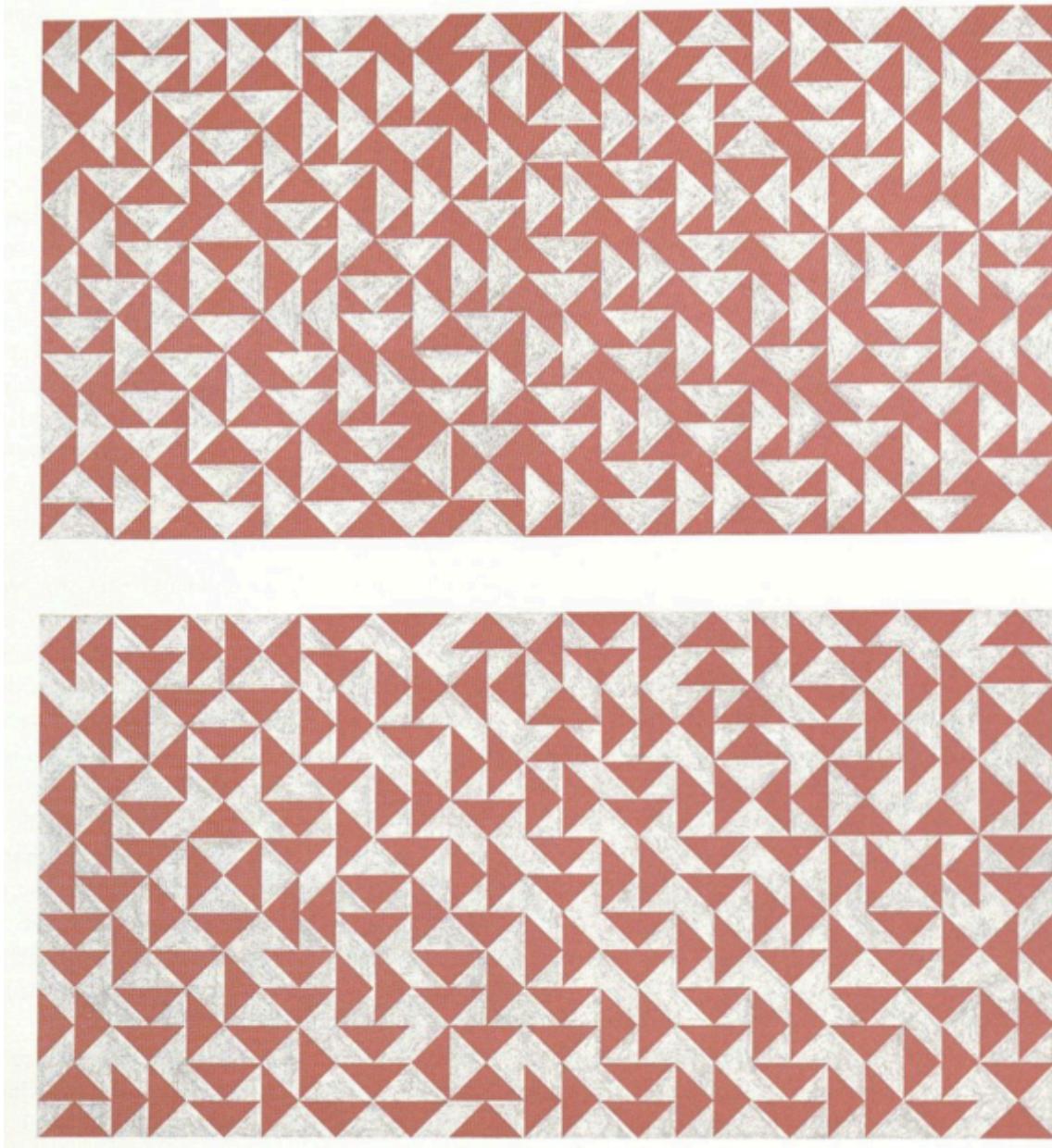


Figure 17: Anni Albers, *Fox I*, 1973, photo-offset, 14 X 13.5 inches.  
Source: Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany.

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