

SMALL-GREAT OBJECTS: ANNI AND JOSEF ALBERS IN THE AMERICAS

Exhibition explores intersections between the collecting and creative practices of two iconic modern artists
February 3–June 18, 2017

February 1, 2017, New Haven, Conn.—The exhibition *Small-Great Objects: Anni and Josef Albers in the Americas* examines the many resonances between the art-making and art-collecting strategies of the Alberses, two of the most influential figures of 20th-century modernism. Between 1935 and 1967, the couple made numerous trips to Latin America, namely Mexico and Peru, and amassed a large collection of ancient artworks from the region. The exhibition looks at these objects in depth and considers how Anni and Josef’s collection supported their aesthetic sensibilities and teaching practices. In addition to Prehispanic objects, the show gathers together dozens of works that the couple made, including textiles, paintings, works on paper, and rarely studied photographs that Josef took at archaeological sites and museums. Demonstrating the Alberses’ deep and sustained



Lee Boltin, *Untitled (Josef Albers Holding West Mexican Figure in front of Homage to the Square: Auriferous)*, 1958. Gelatin silver print. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn., 1976.28.923. ©Lee Boltin. Photo courtesy the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation



Lee Boltin, *Untitled (Anni Albers with Pre-Columbian Head)*, 1958. Gelatin silver print. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn., 1976.28.926. ©Lee Boltin. Photo courtesy the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

engagement with ancient American art, *Small-Great Objects* explores a fascinating dimension of the couple’s creative vision.

Anni and Josef’s passion for the art and culture of the ancient Americas was first piqued while the couple was still living in Germany, where they encountered Prehispanic ceramics and textiles in museums and publications. In 1922 Anni was a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany, when she met Josef, then the head of the Bauhaus glass workshop. A decade after they met, the Nazi Party rose to power, and the couple was forced to flee the country. They received an invitation from Theodore (Ted) Dreier to teach at Black Mountain College, a newly formed, progressive art school located in the hills of North Carolina, and in November 1933 they packed their belongings and immigrated to the United States. Two years later, the Alberses arranged a trip to Mexico with Ted and his wife, Barbara (Bobbie), and the two couples visited Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Acapulco. This was the first of many trips that Anni and Josef took together through the Americas, and on subsequent journeys they frequently wrote letters to the Dreiers detailing their travels. This correspondence, now housed at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, in Bethany, Connecticut, forms the archival backbone of the exhibition.

Anni and Josef began collecting Prehispanic objects and textiles during these excursions to Mexico. In the preface of her 1964 book *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, Anni described a memorable episode in which she was given the opportunity to purchase either a live goat or small ceramic figurine; she went with the latter. In addition to collecting on the road, they also purchased objects from art dealers in the United States and abroad. Over a period of 30 years, they amassed a large and varied group of artworks that today exist as three separate collections: approximately 1,400 Prehispanic objects now at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, the more than 100 textiles that comprise the Gallery's Harriet Engelhardt Memorial Collection, and the Alberses' private collection of textiles and ceramic figurines, now held at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.

This exhibition weaves together objects from all three of these collections and organizes them according to geographic location, emphasizing the stylistic differences between their sites of origin and retracing Anni and Josef's itinerary. The Alberses traveled through Mexico on numerous occasions, revisiting favorite places such as Mexico City and Oaxaca, and they also ventured out to the Yucatán Peninsula and eventually farther south to Peru. Over time, they embedded themselves in the social fabric of Mexico City: they visited the Museo Anahuacalli with Mexican artist Diego Rivera, they exhibited Josef's paintings alongside those of Guatemalan artist Carlos Mérida, and Josef taught courses at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

For Anni and Josef, Mesoamerican and Andean objects were anything but "primitive"; rather, they were modern in their materiality and geometric abstraction, and they provided inspiration



Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*, 1936. Cotton and rayon. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of John Young, 1984.150. ©2017 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C./ Art Resource, N.Y.

for the Alberses' own work. When seen alongside Josef's photo-collages depicting scenes from Mexico, the artist's *Variant/Adobe* series of the 1940s and 1950s—a predecessor to his more famous *Homage to the Square* paintings of the 1960s and 1970s—is clearly rooted in the architecture of Oaxaca. Techniques that Anni used in her weavings, including the leno weave in *Thickly Settled* (1957), find an antecedent in the Andean textiles she collected.

The title of the exhibition comes from a quote in Anni's book *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, in which she praised "small-great objects" such as handheld ceramic and stone figurines. She wrote, "Today, when large size in art is carried to an absurdity, the smallness found here seems to be a special virtue, when contrasted with the arrogance of exaggerated scale." Anni and Josef were drawn to these objects because they admired the ability of Prehispanic artists to encapsulate the human form in basic materials like clay and stone. Similarly, they marveled at the talent of ancient weavers, who used simple back-strap looms



Josef Albers, *To Mitla*, 1940. Oil on Masonite. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, Conn., 1976.1.1364. ©2017 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tim Nighswander

to transform cotton or wool thread into intricate patterns that are present in even the smallest Andean textile fragments. The exhibition invites visitors to look at these objects and textiles through Anni's and Josef's eyes, and to appreciate, as they did, the greatness of these small artworks.

“While Josef Albers is known the world over for both his art and his pedagogy, intimately tied to his transformative teaching at the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and the Yale School of Art, less is known about what Anni and Josef accomplished together as pioneering modern artists, educators, and collectors inspired by the art and architecture of the ancient Americas,” explains Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director. “The Gallery holds the largest collection of Josef's work of any U.S. museum. Having the Alberses' collections and archives reside in the New Haven area—at the Gallery, the Yale Peabody Museum, and the Albers Foundation in Bethany—provides an incomparable opportunity to study these artists and share their rich legacy.”

“From day one, the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation opened its doors to me and provided access to their archives and collections,” states exhibition curator Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye. “It has been a delight to work with their team on the exhibition and book, and I am grateful for their mentorship and friendship. Michael D. Coe, the Charles J. MacCurdy Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University and Curator Emeritus of Anthropology at the Yale Peabody Museum, contributed greatly to this project with his expertise in Prehispanic art, stories of his friendship with Anni and Josef Albers, and firsthand knowledge of the Alberses' collection. On behalf of our collaborators, the Gallery is pleased to share with the public the story of Anni and Josef's inspiring journeys.”

Exhibition Credits

Organized by Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman-Joan Whitney Payson Senior Fellow, Education Department. Made possible by the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, the Wolfe Family Exhibition and Publication Fund, and the Art Gallery Exhibition and Publication Fund.

On View

February 3–June 18, 2017

Podcast

This exhibition is accompanied by a free podcast, available in the gallery space. To listen at home, visit soundcloud.com/yaleartgallery/sets/small-great-objects.

Related Programs

Conversation

Thursday, February 2, 5:30 pm

“An Evening of Albers: Conversations on Small-Great Objects”

Michael Coe, Nicholas Fox Weber, Mary Miller, and Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, February 8, 12:30 pm

“Making Mesoamerica Modern”

Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye

Wednesday, March 29, 12:30 pm

“Stories for Sharing: Creating a Podcast for the Albers Exhibition”

Phoebe Petrovic and Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye

Studio Programs

Friday, February 10, 1:30-3:00 pm

“Small-Great Exercises with Weaving”

Registration required; please call 203.432.9525.

Friday, March 3, 1:30-3:00 pm

“Small-Great Exercises with Color”

Registration required; please call 203.432.9525.

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For more detailed programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar.

Related Publication

Small-Great Objects: Anni and Josef Albers in the Americas

Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, with an essay by Michael D. Coe

96 pages / 9×11 inches / 56 color and 18 black-and-white illustrations / Available February 2017

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September–June); and Saturday–Sunday, 11 am–5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

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