Joséf Albers; Teacher and Artist

By Clara Porset

Six months ago I did not know Joséf Albers at all. My appointment to the Technical Industrial School for Women — a place rich in possibilities, but an uncertain quantity because of its newness — led me to seek orientation where similar experiments were taking shape. And from one place, from another, from everywhere, there came to me an insistent advice: Joséf Albers is in America; get in touch with him. It was always Joséf Albers, Joséf Albers.

Seeing is better than reading, so I went to Black Mountain College, a place lost in the mountains of North Carolina, beautiful if there is anything beautiful, where Albers now gives his wonderful teaching with the prodigality of one who is the owner of an inexhaustible treasure.

THE TEACHER

Albers looks at the learning of any branch of art as a personal experience closely connected with other general experiences, or derived from them, which increases vitality because of what it means of interpenetration of the individual with the world of things and events.

So he breaks with the traditional concept that art is produced as a thing apart and attainable only by a few; a theory unfortunately very widely held, which deeply affects the common life because it deprives it of the sharpening of the sensibilities, of aesthetic enjoyment. So he takes the student to a purely experimental ground, to the abundance of discovery and invention, putting aside the system, which might be called "second hand", where teaching is only repetition and copying of other
people's work.

This attitude of course implies the belief that any normal person has a creative faculty and the capability of developing it; that all of us are sensitive, in greater or lesser degree, to colors and tones, and that all of us have the sense of touch, and spatial reactions.

These are the principles underlying the discipline originated by Albers, which he calls Werklehre. It consists of working manually with materials and forms as a means of developing the feeling of material and space. With the least possible instruments—in order to obtain a tactile knowledge of materials and accuracy of measurement of sensations—it is attempted to give plasticity to various materials. The materials are combined in order to analyze their relations and learn their strength, their tension, their elasticity, in short, their technical properties. And out of all this there comes an appreciation of balance. It is a general training in the field of construction. And as such, it is the only compulsory discipline of the Bauhaus of Weimar and Dessau, of which Albers was the animating genius, side by side with Walter Gropius, Mies von der Rohe, and Vassily Kandinsky.

MANUAL WORK IN THE BAUHAUS?

The question at once arises, why the Bauhaus had manual work, being as it was a sort of laboratory of the artistic industry of Germany, between her creative forces and her great mass production. It was because the Bauhaus viewed the educational problem in an organic way.

On a plane of simple manual technique, the student could see the process from beginning to end, grasping its organic total. (On the other hand, in mechanized manufacture, what is learned is just a part of the process, and the rest of it is
known only through description and oral presentation). In manual work, the individual is always responsible for the whole job and for the way the product functions. So, what was done in the Bauhaus was only done as an educational factor, a part of the laboratory, and in no way was an end in itself. It is evident that manual work — leading to the making of artisans — could not be taken as an objective in the Bauhaus, which was until its closing the focus of the most noted European creative forces, consciously accepting the challenge of their times and of technical progress, with full recognition of their social responsibilities, and of the mass interest in the creation not of something unique, but of the commonly used thing, of the standardized type.

THE ARTIST

I was surprised to find that a man whose mentality is more plastic than pictorial was a painter; Albers is a man obsessed with the third dimension and the special relations of forms. I understood him, however, when I saw his works. Oil paintings, glass paintings, wood engravings, all of them show his constant preoccupation with plastic values. In his concept of creation of volumes, they seem more like sculptures represented through different means than like pictorial works.

Albers' paintings cannot be definitively placed within any of the expressionist groups. He is nearer the neo-plasticist and constructivist than any other group, because like them he is completely away from the representative, but at the same time he gives much less importance to color than they do. His objective is always the expression of abstract forms; the harmony between, and his impressions of, aesthetics and dynamics; the absolute values of color do not occupy him. So then, we must place his simply and more accurately at the end of the process of elimination of the representative element which started with the distortions
of Cezanne, to reach its summit with the abstractions of Kandinsky
or of the "purists" Ozenfant and Jeanneret.

Albers illustrates in his pictorial works the theory of
the abstract which takes painting to participate of the character
of music in that both arts are free from the objective or associ-
ative interest. This is a theory which, according to the parti-
sans of absolute painting, raises the latter to nobler categories,
to a pure expression of lyricism, as it liberates it from all
servitude (i.e., social, religious, or political propaganda) and
that maintains itself in co-existence with its enemy, the verist
theory, which is founded upon a precise objectivity and asserts
that there is no art without direction, that is to say, that
art must always be the agent of a cause.

Josef Albers is explaining at the Lyceum his view of
the pedagogies of art and exhibiting a score of his works.

His lectures of tomorrow and next Friday will take a
great number of listeners to the Lyceum.