

ANNI AND JOSEF ALBERS: MEXICAN TRAVELS,
TOURISTIC EXPERIENCES, AND
ARTISTIC RESPONSES

by

Kathryn Fay

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

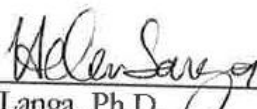
the Requirements for the Degree of

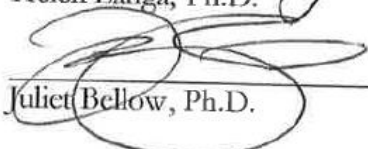
Master of Arts

In


Art History

Chair:



Helen Langa, Ph.D.


Juliet Bellow, Ph.D.



Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

April 24, 2014

Date

2014

American University

Washington, D.C. 20016

© COPYRIGHT

by

Kathryn Fay

2014

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ANNI AND JOSEF ALBERS: MEXICAN TRAVELS,
TOURISTIC EXPERIENCES, AND
ARTISTIC RESPONSES

BY

Kathryn Fay

ABSTRACT

Anni and Josef Albers made fourteen trips to Mexico between 1935 and 1967. These visits inspired in a prodigious amount of work, including photo collages, published essays, paintings, drawings, prints, and weavings. Investigating these artistic responses to their experiences in Mexico reveals how Josef and Anni negotiated the cross-cultural inspiration they gained from their travels to create work which they felt matched their Bauhaus-influenced ideals. Examining the subjects that captivated the Alberses, and how they incorporated their experiences into their artistic production, also discloses how they wanted to be understood as artists. As husband and wife, and travel companions, their respective works of art show an interplay of shared opinions and experiences, but also demonstrate what resonated with each artist individually and how each one integrated these influences into their own works of modern, abstract art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Helen Langa for her enthusiasm, patience, and guidance which helped shaped this thesis in countless ways. I am also grateful to Dr. Juliet Bellow for her words of encouragement and for the challenging questions she posed. I appreciate the comments and critiques given to me by Caitlin Glosser, J. Rachel Gustafson, Lily Sehn, Neda Amouzadeh, Jill Oakley, Carol Brown, Fanna Gebreyesus, Paul Vincent, and Can Gulan. I am thankful that they read and edited numerous drafts of this in various states of completeness. I would also like to thank Chief Curator Brenda Danilowitz, Samuel McCune, and the staff of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation for allowing me access to the archive and for sharing their insights on the lives of Anni and Josef Albers. I am also thankful to have been a recipient of the Patricia Moore Segnan Award, bestowed by the Art History Department at American University, as it provided me with the travel funding that made my research trip possible. I would like to express my gratitude for Diego Vasquez and his unwavering support and encouragement, as well as his help in planning and successfully undertaking the road trip to Connecticut... in February. I want to thank my Mom, Dad, and my sister, Jennifer—if it wasn't for their love and unending support (and Skype calls), this thesis could not have been written. (Mom, I am sorry that I could not include your interpretation of *Homage to the Square* in chapter four; as far as I know, your suggestion that it could be an abstracted depiction of a village square is a new and unexplored reading of the series.) And finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of a special research assistant who stayed on top of all my sources, my drafts, and me, throughout the entire writing process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 TAKING AND ARRANGING ARTISTIC “SNAPSHOTS”	15
CHAPTER 3 THE STORY OF A COLLECTION OF ART AND SOUVENIRS.....	30
CHAPTER 4 FINDING CROSS-CULTURAL INSPIRATION IN GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION	40
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY	56
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	59

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

1.1 Josef Albers, <i>Red and White Window</i> , ca. 1923, stained-glass, Walter Gropius' reception room at the Weimar Bauhaus, destroyed	59
1.2 Anni Albers, untitled, 1926, silk multi-weave wall hanging, 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 122 cm), Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University	59
1.3 Josef Albers, <i>Bundled</i> , 1925, sandblasted flashed glass with black paint, (32.4 x 31.4 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation	60
1.4 Anni Albers, untitled, 1926/1964, cotton and artificial silk triple weave wall hanging, 70 x 47.2 in. (175 x 118 cm), Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin, replica.....	60
2.1 Photograph in <i>Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico</i> , p. 100, Photograph caption: Josef Albers, untitled, ca. 1936, photograph, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation.....	61
2.2 Edward Weston, <i>Pirámide del Sol, Teotihuacán</i> , 1923, gelatin silver print, 7 9/16 x 9 1/2 in. (19.21 x 24.13 cm), Collection SFMOMA, Gift of Brett Weston.....	62
2.3 Laura Gilpin, <i>Steps of the Castillo, Chichen Itza</i> , 1932, gelatin silver print, Amon Carter Museum ...	62
2.4 Josef Albers, untitled (Siegfried Fleischmann and Anni Albers), n.d., photograph, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.1491)	63
2.5 Josef Albers, untitled (Anni Albers), n.d., image from negative, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.19.7448).....	63
2.6 Josef Albers, <i>Santa Maria Tonanztintla/ San Francisco Acatepec (Puebla, Mexico)</i> , n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.673)	64
2.7 Josef Albers, <i>Zimapan?/ Calvario</i> , n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.677).....	65
2.8 Josef Albers, <i>Variant/ Adobe, On the Other Side</i> , 1952, oil on Masonite, (45.7 x 68.6 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.1.1124)	65
2.9 Josef Albers, <i>Mus. Mexico/Mus. Puebla</i> , n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.685)	66
2.10 Josef Albers, untitled (Diego Rivera, Anni Albers and Clara Porset), late 1940s, photo collage, (25.4 x 20.6 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.856)	67
2.11 Josef Albers, <i>Santo Thomas, Oax./Cuyatepec</i> , n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.578)	67

2.12 Josef Albers, <i>Mitla</i> , n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.644) ...	68
2.13 Josef Albers, <i>Pazcuaro</i> (Anni Albers), n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.553).....	69
2.14 Josef Albers, <i>Pazcuaro</i> (Josef Albers), n.d., photo collage, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.597).....	69
3.1 Photograph of the frontispiece of <i>Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection</i> , n.p., Catalogue entry: Head of a dead person. Found in area of Cholula, Puebla. 4 cm high.....	70
3.2 Josef Albers, untitled (Anni Albers and her parents Siegfried and Toni Fleischmann at Teotihuacán), 1937, photograph, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.1448)	71
3.3 Josef Albers, untitled (Anni Albers and her father Siegfried Fleischmann at Teotihuacán), 1937, photograph, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.7.1442).....	71
3.4 Josef Albers, untitled (Xavier Guerrero, Clara Porset, Seki Sano, unidentified man, and Diego Rivera at Anahuacalli), ca. 1947, photograph, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation	72
3.5 Unknown artist, unknown title, n.d., ceramic bird-shaped pottery bank, 6 3/4 in., Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, Albers Collection (ANT 231383)	73
3.6 Robert Motherwell, <i>Pancho Villa Dead or Alive</i> , 1943, cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, wood veneer, gouache, oil, and ink on board, 28 1/4 x 35 7/8 in. (71.7 x 91.1 cm), Museum of Modern Art.....	73
4.1 Anni Albers, <i>Ancient Writing</i> , 1936, woven rayon and cotton, 59 x 43 3/4 in. (147.5 x 109.4 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.	74
4.2 Anni Albers, <i>Monte Albán</i> , 1936, silk, linen, and wool, 57 1/2 x 44 1/2 in. (143.8 x 111.3 cm), Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University.....	75
4.3 Josef Albers, <i>To Monte Albán</i> from the series <i>Graphic Tectonics</i> , 1942, zinc plate lithograph, composition: 13 5/16 x 10 3/8 in. (33.8 x 26.4 cm), sheet: 23 5/8 x 19 in. (60 x 48.3 cm), Museum of Modern Art.....	75
4.4 Josef Albers, <i>Variation on Tenayuca</i> , ca. 1938, watercolor wash with black ink and lithographic crayon, 9 1/2 x 15 1/2 in. (24.1 x 39.4 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.2.245).....	76
4.5 Josef Albers, <i>To Mitla</i> , 1940, oil on Masonite, 21 1/2 x 28 1/8 in. (54.6 x 71.4 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.1.1364)	77
4.6 Josef Albers, <i>Variant/ Adobe, Southern Climate</i> , 1948-1955, oil on Masonite, 12 1/4 x 22 1/2 in. (31.1 x 57.1 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.1.1107)	78

4.7 Anni Albers, <i>With Verticals</i> , 1946, cotton and rayon, 61 x 46 1/2 in. (154.9 x 118.1 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (2004.12.1).....	79
4.8 Unknown weaver, Serape, Queretaro, Mexico, nineteenth century, woven silk and cotton, 81 x 50 in. (205.7 x 127 cm), Harriett Englehardt Memorial Collection, gift of Mrs. Paul Moore, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.....	79
4.9 Josef Albers, <i>Homage to the Square</i> , 1950-1954, oil on Masonite, 12 x 12 in. (30.5 x 30.5 cm), The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation (1976.1.1301)	80
4.10 Anni Albers, <i>South of the Border</i> , 1958, cotton and wool, (10.5 x 38.7 cm), The Baltimore Museum of Art. Decorative Arts and Contemporary Crafts Fund (1959.91)	81

Due to copyright restrictions, the illustrations for this thesis are only available in the hard copy version that is on file in the Visual Resources Center in the Katzen Art Center at American University.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On August 22, 1936, from their hotel on the Calle de Paris in Mexico City, Anni and Josef Albers wrote a letter to Wassily and Nina Kandinsky.¹ Using a typewriter, Anni began the letter recounting their adventures in and impressions of Mexico. In four succinct yet descriptive paragraphs, Anni declared that Mexico was “full of art, such as perhaps no other country”—a statement that referenced the “wonderful ancient art” but also included folk art and contemporary murals. She noted that the Kandinskys would recognize the names of “rivera, orosco and others, then merida, the excellent abstract artist, crespo [sic].” Relating her impression of Diego Rivera, Anni called him a “powerful chap,” but lamented over his recent artwork, which she described as “pretty horrible stuff.” She also mentioned the positive reception of an exhibition of Josef’s woodcuts held in Mexico City.² Instead of further discussing the contemporary art scene, she expounded upon the “beautiful little pottery heads” that could be purchased at archeological sites and the folk art in the museums that Josef “spent days” photographing. Conveyed through sentence fragments and with few capital letters, Anni’s depiction of Mexico is both hyperbolic and analytical, and suggests her passionate exploration of Mexican art and culture.

On the back of the page, Josef handwrote an additional message “to tell what remains.” Notably, he touched upon many of the same topics. He began his account with the declaration “Mexico is truly the promised land of abstract art.” He also determined that the ancient abstract art

¹ For the full transcript of the letter in German and its English translation, see Nicholas Fox Weber and Jessica Boissel, *Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky: Friends in Exile: A Decade of Correspondence, 1929-1940* (Manchester and New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2010), 87, 89, 91.

² In August 1936, a selection of Josef’s prints and gouaches were shown in an exhibit sponsored by the *Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR)*, an association of revolutionary writers and artists in Mexico City. For more information on the exhibition and its response, see Brenda Danilowitz, “‘We are not alone.’ Anni and Josef in Latin America” in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 20.

was much better than the contemporary art, which he dismissed as “political propaganda.”

Admitting that he had expected objections to his exhibition, Josef shared his surprise that artists were interested and that the press wanted to write more articles about it. He also noted his productivity, having “gained 7 pounds and painted 11 pictures in oil.” Josef thus proclaimed that they had “seen very many, very beautiful things” and that they “hope[d] to return soon and often,” before continuing his letter on other subjects.

Written at the end of their second trip to Mexico, the Alberses’ joint letter portrays Mexico as an artistic oasis and shares this news with their friends and colleagues from the Bauhaus. As Josef and Anni were married and traveled to Mexico together, the overlap in subject matter speaks to their shared experiences and opinions. However, attention to the content, and the manner in which each one wrote about these subjects, is also indicative of their individual perspectives and what parts of their trip resonated with each artist. These differences are even manifested in the contrast between Josef’s terse language and Anni’s more descriptive narrative, as well as the different writing tools (typewriter versus pen) each used in composing their respective parts of the letter. Accordingly, this letter encapsulates the Alberses’ trip to Mexico and reveals what aspects they each wanted to communicate to others about their experiences.

Anni and Josef made fourteen trips to Mexico of various lengths—ranging from one week to six months—between 1935 and 1967.³ During these trips, the Alberses were curious and productive travelers, enthusiastically exploring the country and creating artwork. Brenda Danilowitz has enumerated the many activities that the Alberses engaged in during their trips: “Painting, weaving, writing, photography, travel, collecting artifacts, discovering new places and people,

³ There appears to be some ambiguity with regard to the number of trips the Alberses made to Mexico. Anni wrote that she and Josef made fourteen trips to Mexico; see Anni Albers, *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection* (New York, Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970), n.p. However, Jessica Csoma has detailed thirteen total trips in a chronology focused on the Alberses’ trips to Latin and South America; see Jessica Csoma, “A Chronology” in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 207-222.

friends, parties, teaching, all were intertwined in the fabric of Anni and Josef's experience in Latin America."⁴ Accordingly, their travels were a creative catalyst that inspired in a prodigious amount of work. Although all of these artistic responses represent different expressions of cross-cultural experience, they have not been considered works of art. Josef took thousands of photographs while in Mexico and used his images to create over one hundred photo collages which demonstrate an artful construction of their travel memories. One of Anni's essays describes how she and her husband, as adventurous tourists and modern artists, acquired and appreciated their collection of Pre-Columbian figurines. Their geometrically abstract art—which includes paintings, prints, and weavings—also evidence cross-cultural exchange, and investigating the ways scholars have interpreted this provides insight into the work of this artist-couple. This inquiry also underscores the ways that cultural definitions of abstraction and the hierarchies of art that have shaped art historical discourse and an understanding of modern art. Examining the subjects that captivated the Alberses, and how they incorporated their experiences into their artistic production, discloses how Josef and Anni wanted to be understood as artists. As husband and wife, and travel companions, their respective works of art show an interplay of shared opinions and experiences, but also demonstrate how each one integrated these influences into their own works of modern, abstract art.

Mexico: A Destination for the Development of Modern Art

Mexico has long been recognized as a popular travel destination for artists, and during the twentieth century, numerous American and European artists and photographers were fascinated with Mexican art and culture. Art historians have taken various approaches in writing about these cross-cultural encounters and explicating how they have influenced artistic production. While some scholars emphasize issues of appropriation and primitivizing discourse, others underscore how

⁴ Brenda Danilowitz, "‘We are not alone.’ Anni and Josef in Latin America" in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 17.

international travel presents opportunities to explore different cultural perspectives and gain new understandings of artistic concepts. These contrasting attitudes reveal the complicated and conflicting nature of cross-cultural artistic discussions; furthermore, they suggest the multitude of ways that artistic cross-cultural exchange with “Mexico,” and its many representations, has been interpreted.

Barbara Braun situates modern artistic appropriation within the long history of Western exploration and discovery to reveal how this discourse has shaped the production and perception of Western art. In her book, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: American Sources of Modern Art*, Braun focuses on five modern artists, highlighting the ways Paul Gauguin, Henry Moore, Frank Lloyd Wright, Diego Rivera, and Joaquín Torres-García appropriated elements of Pre-Columbian art in the development of their own modernist styles. Braun observes that these artists often used their sources irrespective of the history and culture that the art objects represented, and instead, adapted them to suit their own aesthetic strategies.⁵ Furthermore, she underscores that this act of appropriation has been understood by Western viewers as indicative of these artists’ creativity as modern geniuses.⁶ Braun presents the Alberses as a parallel example to Torres-García’s legacy: she describes them as individuals who were also interested in a Constructivist aesthetic, but engaged in their own independent exploration of Mexico.⁷ While Braun acknowledges that Anni’s and Josef’s artistic production both exhibit “formal and associational references” to Pre-Columbian sources, she distinguishes Josef’s efforts in abstracting forms from Anni’s “craft orientation.”⁸ Briefly summarized, the Alberses’ interests and experiences in Mexico are interpreted through an

⁵ Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: American Sources of Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 294.

⁶ Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World*, 294.

⁷ Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World*, 303.

⁸ Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World*, 303.

understanding of Western artistic appropriation and the hierarchical distinction between the fine and decorative arts.

Olivier Debroye emphasizes the significant role that foreign photographers have played in producing images of Mexico. His book, *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico* relates this history from the nineteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth century, and features a discussion of Josef's photographs. Even though Debroye dismissively refers to Josef's images as tourist snapshots, by incorporating them into the historical narrative, Debroye suggests that they are significant enough to be included in the history of photography in Mexico. In comparison, Carole Naggar and Fred Rictin's anthology, *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes, 1850-1990*, focuses solely on foreign photographers' visions of Mexico. Naggar's essay, "The Fascination for the Other" is included in the anthology, and argues that non-native photographers have a position of seeing, and capturing on film, aspects of a foreign place and culture that would be taken for granted by native photographers. She bases this argument upon historical examples and her own experiences as a foreign photographer.

Mary Panzer focuses on the experiences of American artists, and draws upon letters and archival sources from the Archives of American Art, in order to describe what she calls the "American love affair" with Mexico. Through their stories, Panzer reveals that visiting artists felt free to create works of art in their preferred style, and considered themselves uninhibited by the racial and social prejudices that discouraged them in the U.S.⁹ Accordingly, Panzer determines that these artists envisioned Mexico as an artistic bohemia unburdened by European conventions and traditions.¹⁰ Panzer points out that the "American love affair" began in the early part of the twentieth century but progressed in phases: cultural pioneers, writers, and politically-minded artists

⁹ Mary Panzer, "The American Love Affair with Mexico, 1920-1970," *Archives of American Art Journal* 49: 3-4 (2010): 18.

¹⁰ Panzer, "The American Love Affair with Mexico," 15-16.

went to Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, but by the 1940s, artists and veterans were using the G. I. Bill to finance their studies in Mexico.¹¹ Panzer sketches out these phases and relates individual artists' experiences in Mexico into the 1970s. Reflecting upon these sources from a "twenty-first century perspective," Panzer concludes that Mexico was "a place where artists could work outside the prevailing fashions."¹²

In contrast, James Oles examines the visual representation of Mexico that manifested in the work created by American artists. Oles' exhibition catalogue *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* explores the "varied ways in which Mexico has been represented in visual terms by and for Americans."¹³ Oles determines that American artists worked in a wide range of artistic styles and with different media, but depicted a limited range of subjects in their work: the Mexican landscape, its folk culture and Pre-Columbian past, and the struggles for social and political justice. Josef, but not Anni, is among the many artists featured in the catalogue, and his work is discussed in relation to American visual culture. However, Oles asserts that American artists' fascination with Mexico was temporary and that the "reopening" of Europe after World War II and the development of Abstract Expressionism turned American attention away from Mexican art and culture.¹⁴

Alternatively, Ellen G. Landau makes a case for reconsidering the role that Mexico played in the development of Abstract Expressionism.¹⁵ In her book, *Mexico and American Modernism*, she argues that encounters with Mexican art and culture significantly shaped the careers of Isamu

¹¹ Panzer, "The American Love Affair with Mexico," 18.

¹² Panzer, "The American Love Affair with Mexico," 24.

¹³ James Oles, *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 3.

¹⁴ Oles, *South of the Border*, 209.

¹⁵ Ellen G. Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), x.

Noguchi, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. With a revisionist and interdisciplinary approach, Landau aims to complicate the Eurocentric understanding of American artistic accomplishments and to introduce a new paradigm for discussing modern art.¹⁶ Landau proclaims that these four artists were unlike the artists who traveled to Mexico before them, as they “were not aesthetic tourists on the way to crafting their own originality.”¹⁷ Instead, she determines that “cross-fertilization” with Mexican art and culture enabled new avenues for their artistic achievement.¹⁸ Landau acknowledges that this may contradict current perceptions of Abstract Expressionism; nevertheless, she asserts that including “issues of ethnicity, marginality, inter-and intra-subjectivity, and social and political conscience” into the discussion provides a more nuanced understanding of the “goals of mid-century abstraction.”¹⁹ Although the Alberses are not included in this discussion of American modernism, this revisionist approach offers a new model to consider how cross-cultural experience has influenced abstract art.

César Paternosto offers a different understanding of abstraction—one which underscores the cultural definitions and critical language that have distinguished Western and non-Western art. His essay “Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm” aims to counter the “hegemonic, Eurocentric, and formalist understanding” of abstract art and to challenge Western conceptions of “art” and “decoration.”²⁰ He does this by describing the “Andean textile model,” a system of abstraction that employs a grid-format to make meaning out of the assemblage of smaller units. Paternosto emphasizes that this is an artistic system that has been used by non-Western artists for centuries, in

¹⁶ Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, viii.

¹⁷ Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, 165.

¹⁸ Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, viii.

¹⁹ Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, 166.

²⁰ César Paternosto, *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm* (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Brussels, 2002), 26.

contrast to the relatively recent development of abstraction in the Western art tradition—that is told through a history where “Western geometric abstraction becomes an adventitious flowering within a monolithically figural art tradition.”²¹ Anni and Josef are included in Paternosto’s discussion as Western artists who embraced a “learning attitude,” rather than one of appropriation, in their engagement with ancient American arts. Accordingly, Paternosto’s analysis provides a new paradigm with which to consider their work and the cultural definitions of abstraction.

The Alberses as Bauhaus Artists

Arguably, Anni and Josef are included in only a few of these discussions of cross-cultural exchange, as they are primarily recognized as Bauhaus artists who produced works of geometric abstraction. Since their paintings and weavings do not portray realistic depictions “exotic” scenes, nor do they demonstrate the appropriation of “primitive” iconography, cross-cultural influence is not immediately apparent in their art. Instead, their work in abstraction has been acknowledged as part of the search for a “universal” language of form. Describing the varied positions and orientations of the Bauhaus, Leah Dickerman notes that the school was characterized by its artists’ search for forms “grounded in the geometric” that did not express personal subjectivities or celebrate national identities, but were thought to be “universal.”²² Dickerman also determines that the Bauhaus’ most significant achievement was the “nurturing of a sustained cross-media conversation about the nature of art in the modern age.”²³ As artists whose aesthetic ideals were significantly shaped by their time at the Bauhaus, Josef and Anni have been recognized for their attention to the role of the artist and material specificity in their artwork.

²¹ Paternosto, *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm*, 25, 27.

²² Dickerman, “Bauhaus Fundamentals,” 21-22.

²³ Dickerman, “Bauhaus Fundamentals,” 15.

While at the Bauhaus, Josef created work in various media. Nicholas Fox Weber has described Josef as the Bauhaus' "greatest polymath" as he made prints; built tables and chairs; designed new typographies; drew plans for buildings; took photographs; and created compositions in glass.²⁴ Interested in exploring the "objective, impersonal absorption in visual phenomena," Josef worked to remove self-expressive elements from his work.²⁵ Describing the glass assemblage, *Red and White Window* [Figure 1.1], Weber underscores how Josef chose materials and techniques that helped to achieve his goals:

The material of glass and the method of sandblasting enabled Albers to achieve the detachment and control he considered requisite for the optimal functioning of color and form. Hue and line had their own independent voices; Albers's own hand was not evident. Even if a few brush marks showed in the parts he painted in black and baked, those strokes were no more revealing than housepaint, and the mechanical method removed "personal handwriting"—as Albers called the undesirable imposition of the individual self. This deliberate avoidance of certain truths of human existence permitted visual performance not unlike the perfect playing of a Mozart symphony, with the orchestra working in tandem, the instruments perfectly tuned, the conductor's baton unifying the whole.²⁶

Weber's metaphorical comments effectively underplay Josef's artistic choices in the creation of the glass assemblage. Instead, he gives agency to the materials and forms of Josef's work, noting how they "had their own independent voices." Weber's description suggests that Josef succeeded in removing himself from his composition and that the role that he played is akin to the "baton" rather than the conductor who orchestrates the performance.

Although Anni was at first reluctant to join the Bauhaus weaving workshop—finding weaving too "womanish"—she eventually embraced the study and production of textiles.²⁷ Anni

²⁴ Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Bauhaus Group: Six Masters of Modernism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 290.

²⁵ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 335.

²⁶ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 311.

²⁷ Ulrike Müller, *Bauhaus Women: Art, Handicraft, Design* (Paris: Flammarion, S.A., 2009), 52. Anni's initial reluctance to join the weaving workshop and her eventual passion for woven work has been a topic of scholarly debate. Weber notes that Anni had admitted to him, "I was not at all enthusiastic about going into

thus joined the artist weavers who experimented with weaving different materials and studied Andean textiles. Virginia Gardner Troy notes that the handmade “primitive” textiles served as models to infuse modern art with spiritual expression.²⁸ However, Troy distinguishes Anni as a weaver who used this inspiration in “developing a universal language of non-objective form as it was generated directly from the structure of weaving.”²⁹ Troy exemplified this by pointing to Anni’s untitled silk multi-weave wall hanging from 1926 [Figure 1.2]. She notes that Anni created this wall hanging using Andean techniques and exploring complex color systems, and did so without copying the imagery of the sample pieces.³⁰

Nevertheless, Anni’s and Josef’s work demonstrate specific approaches to abstraction which also represent cultural perspectives and particular artistic choices. This is perhaps best evidenced by comparing works that Josef and Anni made after a trip to Florence. Weber recounts discussing this influence with the Alberses:

The Albers went to Florence together for a sort of wedding trip in the summer of 1925. They would never have used the term ‘late honeymoon,’ with its suggestion of the way more ordinary people celebrated their weddings, but that was the idea behind the journey to Italy. What Josef did in glass and Anni did in textiles after returning showed, in her opinion, the impact of the geometric facades of San Marco and Santa Croce and the stripes on the Duomo. When I mentioned this to Josef, thinking it would evoke fond recollections of the trip and of those early Renaissance buildings, he pooh-poohed the idea; as always, the concept of direct influence was unacceptable to him. Afterward, Anni confided to me that she was certain: they had both been so moved by the boldly patterned buildings that they

the weaving workshop, because I wanted to do a real man’s job and not something as sissy as working with threads”; see Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 357. However, Weber counters the arguments that Anni had to go into the weaving workshop because “nothing else was open to women,” noting that there were female student in the other Bauhaus workshops. He alternatively proposes that the real reason that Anni had to join was that she had Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, which caused muscular atrophy; he argues that this disease inhibited her from standing for long periods of time and from more strenuous artistic production; see Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 356-357.

²⁸ Virginia Gardner Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain College* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 39.

²⁹ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 40, 74.

³⁰ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 75.

worked accordingly back in Dessau, which is why their art from about 1925 to 1928 is so remarkably similar in appearance.³¹

Comparing Josef's sandblasted glass work, *Bundled* from 1925 [Figure 1.3] to Anni's 1926 untitled wall hanging [Figure 1.4] reveals a tellingly similar play of red, black, and white rectangles, reminiscent of the colors and patterns on the facades of the Italian Renaissance churches they saw on their trip. The comparison also reveals a parallel translation of architectural decoration into geometric compositions. While both works present asymmetrical but balanced compositions, Anni's all-over patterning contrasts with the centralized design of Josef's glass assemblage. Neither artist named their work in reference to their experience in Italy; this would be different for the art that they created inspired by their trips to Mexico.

From Germany to the United States and then to Mexico

In 1933, the Nazis shut down the Bauhaus, and the Alberses were invited to immigrate to the United States to become professors at Black Mountain College. Displaced from their home, the Alberses found themselves in the United States at a time when Americans were captivated by Mexican art and culture—a phenomenon that Helen Delpar describes as “the enormous vogue of things Mexican.”³² Taking part in this phenomenon, the Alberses would make fourteen trips to Mexico—traveling first by car, and later by train since Josef did not like to fly—from their new homes in the United States.³³

Making their first trip to Mexico from December 26, 1935 to January 21, 1936, Josef and Anni visited during the mural movement when artists were painting politicized murals. In 1935, Rivera had finished painting *History of Mexico from the Conquest to the Future* on the walls of the

³¹ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 370-371.

³² Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

³³ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 18.

National Palace.³⁴ Uninterested in the social realist contemporary art, the Alberses visited archeological sites, churches, markets, and museums. It was in ancient architecture and folk art that they found artistic qualities which they felt matched their Bauhaus-influenced ideals, and shared these connections with their friends and colleagues. A letter from the Kandinskys dated March 17, 1939, lightheartedly addressed the Alberses as “you passionate Mexicans.”³⁵ Nevertheless, part of their interest derived from the country’s foreignness; Anni remarked in a letter she wrote to Inés Amor, their friend and art dealer, following their final trip to Mexico: “Mexico which we love and admire is also puzzling to us in some ways. We still have to discover more of it.”³⁶ Anni’s words suggest that despite their numerous visits, Mexico nevertheless remained a mysterious place to “discover.”

Several scholars have investigated the Alberses’ experiences in Mexico. These sources generally contextualize this cross-cultural discussion in terms of Anni’s and Josef’s individual artistic interests: for Anni, this has meant that her Mexican experiences have been understood in relation to her study of Andean textiles. In contrast, Josef’s exploration has been interpreted in relation to his approach to abstraction and his famous series, *Homage to the Square*. This provides insight into the ways that Mexico inspired each artist, but arguably limits the discussion of how this inspiration was shared between this artist-couple who traveled to and throughout Mexico together.

In her book, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain College*, Virginia Gardner Troy examines Anni’s relationship with ancient American textiles and includes a chapter on her visits to Mexico. Troy evidences the cross-cultural inspiration with detailed and technical discussions of Anni’s woven work and suggests the way it reflects Anni’s experiences in

³⁴ Kirsten E. Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011), 147-148.

³⁵ Weber and Boissel, *Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky*, 141.

³⁶ Csoma, “A Chronology,” 221.

Mexico and her appreciation of Andean textiles. While Troy acknowledges the couple's shared admiration of ancient American art, she pointedly asserts that Anni was the first to "make thematic and visual references" in her own work, and thus portrays Josef as a "partner" to her investigations.³⁷

Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys is an exhibition catalogue which presents a collection of essays and excerpted texts, written by different authors at different times. Among the scholarly sources, essays by Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock relay stories of the couple's trips to Cuba, Mexico, Peru, and Chile and underscore the parallels between the Alberses' and ancient American art. Paula Brugnoli and Soledad Hoces de la Guardia examine the lessons that Anni learned from Andean textiles. In her essay, Kirsten (Kiki) Gilderhus uses Josef's photo collages to connect his paintings to his interest in ancient Mesoamerican architecture, and to suggest a new interpretation of *Homage to the Square*. Jessica Csoma's chronology enumerates the Alberses' trips to Mexico and outlines the highlights of each visit. The primary sources include Josef's essay "On My Variants" and Anni's commentary on their collection of Pre-Columbian Mexican miniatures. Accordingly, this exhibition catalogue does not just focus on the Alberses' trips to Mexico, but discusses them in relation to their journeys throughout Latin and South America.

Gilderhus expanded the argument of her essay featured in the catalogue in her dissertation, "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico." Her dissertation thus aims to offer a fuller and more nuanced study of Josef's photo collages and to investigate the complex intersections of primitivism and abstraction in his art.³⁸ Although she covers a broad range of topics related to the Alberses' trips in Mexico, Gilderhus nevertheless focuses on Josef's experiences and introducing a new reading of *Homage to the Square*. Although she mentions Anni, and occasionally quotes her

³⁷ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 98.

³⁸ Gilderhus, "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico," 27.

writing, Gilderthus focuses primarily on Josef's experiences in Mexico and how they shaped his abstraction.

Josef and Anni can thus be understood as artists, traveling to and throughout Mexico, whose artistic and touristic sensibilities shaped what they observed and how they documented their journeys. This thesis examines the products of these trips to reveal how they understood their cross-cultural experiences and how they incorporated this influence into their artistic production. Chapter two reevaluates the qualities of Josef's photographs that have been dismissed as tourist snapshots. This chapter also examines the photo collages he made from these photographs, investigating the ways the arrangement of images and travel memories artfully present themes that he and Anni kept out of their geometric art. The third chapter interprets the essay that Anni published in *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection*. In contrast to Josef's photographs and photo collages, this book was a public statement about their collection and how they acquired it. Anni's essay reveals how she and Josef related to and appreciated their Pre-Columbian collection, not as anthropological scholars, but as tourists and artists who found qualities in them that matched their artistic ideals. Chapter four discusses Anni's weavings and Josef's paintings and prints to consider the ways scholars have interpreted cross-cultural influence in their art. This chapter also reflects upon the significance of invoking pictorial references in visual analysis of geometric abstraction and how it has challenged and reinforced cultural definitions and artistic hierarchies. This approach—considering the Alberses' art and other artistic responses—enables an overview of the subjects and the aspects of Mexico that shaped Josef's and Anni's travel experiences. It also underscores the choices that each one made as artists and the ways they negotiated this cross-cultural inspiration into their efforts to create modern, abstract art.

CHAPTER 2

TAKING AND ARRANGING ARTISTIC “SNAPSHOTS”

While traveling in Mexico, Josef Albers took over two thousand black and white photographs. Having them developed as contact prints or small-sized photographs, Josef drew upon these images to create over one hundred photo collages.³⁹ Despite their number, little is known about these works: while he may have shared them with family and friends, Josef neither discussed, nor exhibited them publicly.⁴⁰ They only become more widely known after his death when Nicholas Fox Weber found “piles of photographs and photo collages, as well as contact sheets and tins of film” in an old storage room.⁴¹ Since their rediscovery, scholars have understood Josef’s photographs and photo collages of Mexico as private works and as the work of a tourist. They have only been considered with serious attention when they can be connected to his abstract paintings and prints. However, these photo collages exhibit the artful construction and approach that Josef took in taking and arranging his travel photographs. As they juxtapose images from different times and places, the photo collages do not solely document the courses of each trip. Instead, they disclose an exploration of imagery and themes that Josef and Anni did not include in their abstract art. Careful analysis of what subjects were photographed and which images were put into these photo collages thus reveals what captured Josef’s and Anni’s attention during their travels, how Josef constructed their travel memories, and how these aspects shed new light on their artistic choices.

³⁹ Josef also made photo collages with photographs that he took while at the Bauhaus and at Black Mountain College. His Bauhaus photo collages have been described as demonstrations of sophisticated approaches to portraiture and the juxtaposition of formal elements—interpretations which dramatically contrast with the interpretations (and the scholarly silence) of his photographs of Mexico. See Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 321-324; Achim Borchardt-Hume, *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 73-74; and Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 121-135.

⁴⁰ Brenda Danilowitz, conversation with author, February 11, 2014.

⁴¹ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 321, 283-284.

Olivier Debroise includes one of Josef's photographs in *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico*. This photograph [Figure 2.1] is an untitled image of Tenayuca,⁴² an Aztec double pyramid with adjoining stairways that was built around 1100 AD and was excavated and reconstructed in the 1920s.⁴³ Circa 1936, the photograph presents a view of Tenayuca that accentuates the geometric interplay of the dark shadows and the angled stone walls. A street sign and its shadow draw attention to the raking sunlight and to the low wall in the foreground. This wall appears to be the *coatepantli* or "serpent wall" which circles the base of the double pyramid and is topped by approximately one hundred and fifty stone serpents.⁴⁴ Showing two of these stone serpents from a slight angle, the photograph obscures their figurative forms and so they look like two spouts casting triangular shadows in the foreground. Without any archeologists or tourists in the photograph, the image emphasizes the geometry of the site.

Debroise uses this image as an example of Josef's interest in photographing Pre-Columbian architecture at a modernist angle, and to note that it was an interest he shared with Edward Weston and Laura Gilpin, who were contemporary professional photographers.⁴⁵ Comparing Josef's photograph of Tenayuca with Weston's *Pirámide del Sol, Teotihuacán*, 1923 [Figure 2.2] and Gilpin's *Steps of the Castillo, Chichen Itza*, 1932 [Figure 2.3] discloses similar approaches. All three photographers chose to frame parts of their respective Mesoamerican pyramids, rather than document their complete structures. This use of cropping underscores the formal elements

⁴² Debroise does not identify the architectural site. I identified the site as Tenayuca based on comparisons with other photographs of Tenayuca; for example, see *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, p. 121.

⁴³ "Site Descriptions" in *The New World's Old World: Photographic Views of Ancient America*, ed. May Castleberry (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 139.

⁴⁴ Kiki Gilderhus, "Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers," in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock. (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 126.

⁴⁵ Olivier Debroise, *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 101.

presented in the images, including the lines of the architecture and the shapes of the cast shadows. Furthermore, the three photographs do not show any people and consequently, emphasize the contours of ancient Mexican architecture, without the distraction of other figures visiting or photographing the sites.

However, Debroyse dismissively describes Josef's photographs as the "snapshots of a tourist dazzled by Precolumbian architecture, 'popular types,' and exotic landscapes."⁴⁶ Since Josef took his pictures during his trips to Mexico and did not share them publicly, his images can be categorized as tourist photographs. Mike Robinson and David Picard note that it is common for travelers to photograph "very personal moments of the holiday experience and the stories that emanate from these" and then place them into photo albums.⁴⁷ In this way, the snapshots transcribe travel experiences into tangible and visual memories which are "integrated to pre-existing personal souvenir collections or filing systems."⁴⁸ Accordingly, Josef's photographs, and the photo collages he created from them, could be understood as photo albums or scrapbooks, which enabled Josef to record his experiences and then store them until he was ready to revisit them. Robinson and Picard have also commented on the ways that visibility significantly influences the ways that travel and tourist photographs are understood:

In contrast to the canon of travel photographs, vernacular tourist photographs and holiday 'snaps' have attracted limited attention from the research community. Despite the incalculable number of such photographs in existence they are, by definition, located largely in the private rather than public sphere and consequently removed from scholarly consideration. Arguably, and linked to their public absence, their social impact is somewhat minimal; visibility being all. Regardless of various degrees of competency and artistic flair with which the photographer may capture the occasion of travel, and the holiday experience

⁴⁶ Debroyse, *Mexican Suite*, 99, 101.

⁴⁷ Mike Robinson and David Picard, "Moments, Magic and Memories: Photographing Tourists, Tourist Photographs and Making Worlds," in *The Framed World: Tourism, Tourists and Photography*, ed. Mike Robinson and David Picard (Farnham, England/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2009), 19-20.

⁴⁸ Robinson and Picard, "Moments, Magic and Memories," 19-20.

as a series of frames, the process of photography is divested of technical reference points and the holiday photograph is almost entirely an amateur object.⁴⁹

In this manner, it is perhaps not surprising that Debroye distinguished Josef's photographs from those that were taken by professional photographers that were intended for exhibition and publication. Additionally, some of Josef's photographs seem to "capture the occasion of travel": one example is a photograph [Figure 2.4] which snaps Anni and her father, Siegfried Fleischmann, inquisitively observing the trumpet-shaped flowers of the *Brugmansia* tree. Another image [Figure 2.5] presents Anni looking at the camera and smiling while pointing toward two turkeys. In contrast to Weston's and Gilpin's photographs, and Josef's photograph of Tenayuca, these pictures are focused on the activities that his wife and father-in-law are engaged in, and encapsulate moments of discovery and amusement that occurred during their trips.

By selecting and organizing his images into photo collages, Josef engaged in a process of shaping his experiences and actively (re)constructing his memories. Josef did not write on the back of his photographs and only captioned select photo collages with dates and titles. When he did, he handwrote the name of the city or the museum where the photographs were presumably taken. However, these labels are often abbreviated or misspelled, and they do not identify all of the figures or objects in the images. This suggests that these photo collages were not meant to document specific trips or record detailed information about the sights seen.

Thus, Josef's photo collages are the result of a two-part editing process: the first occurring behind the camera at the time the photographs were taken, and the second taking place when he arranged his photo collages. This is especially evident in *Santa Maria Tonanzintla/San Francisco Acatepec (Puebla, Mexico)* [Figure 2.6], a photo collage which presents images of the Spanish baroque church, San Francisco Acatepec, and Josef's family members viewing the church. The contact prints are arranged in an unbalanced composition: vertical sequences of three contact prints have been

⁴⁹ Robinson and Picard, "Moments, Magic and Memories," 9.

placed on the left and right sides, while a single contact print has been pasted on its own near the center of the page. Eight of the ten contact prints show the church and its bell tower from multiple angles, including one which frames the church through an arched gateway. The other two images focus on Anni and her parents. One of these photographs shows Anni, Siegfried, and Toni, looking through the archway. Taken at an angle perpendicular to the direction they are looking, the photograph captures Josef's family members in profile in the act of looking. An open car door is also visible at the right side of this photograph. It is possibly the door to the Alberses' car, as the two couples traveled throughout Mexico "often squeezed into the Alberses' new two-seater automobile."⁵⁰ Included in the image, the open car door underscores the touristic nature of their observation, as it suggests that they have quickly emerged from the vehicle to get a closer look; alternatively, it may signify that they have not yet decided to explore the site and may get back in the car and continue driving on.

Indecision is also visible in the design of the photo collage as indicated by the "pentimenti" left on the page. Underneath the contact prints on the left side, the caption "[illegible] from Puebla/Santa Maria Tonantzintla/San Francisco Acatepec" appears to have been written in three separate rows. Even though it was written in pencil, it has been crossed out with horizontal, wavy, and diagonal lines. As the caption presumably identifies the subjects of the photographs, the fact that they have been crossed out calls into question its documentary purpose—but it may also be indicative of creative thinking. The fact that the collage does not appear to have any photographs of the church of Santa Maria Tonantzintla, even though the church is still listed (and misspelled) on the page, denotes that Josef was considering juxtaposing images from the two churches in Puebla, but ultimately did not. Additionally, a bracket was drawn beside two of the contact prints on the right side, with an arrow that points from the bracket to the left side of the page. Underneath the last

⁵⁰ Danilowitz, "We are not alone," 23.

image, Josef has written “the first one?” One of these bracketed photographs is the image with the open car door; this suggests that it may have been one of the first images taken while visiting San Francisco Acatepec, even though it was pasted on the right side of the cardboard page. These notations not only reveal that Josef was not documenting a chronological record of their visit, but also indicate that he was willing to reorder the images even after they were glued down. This raises the possibility that Josef may not have assembled all of the photographs before he began creating the collages. Instead, he may have started them, leaving space for images from potential future trips.

While Kirsten (Kiki) Gilderhus acknowledges that the photo collages may have in part acted as travel mementos, she argues that they shaped Josef’s approach to abstraction and to his paintings. In her essay, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” she focuses primarily on his collages of archeological sites and contends that Josef primarily used them as an analytic tool, “a kind of sketchbook or sourcebook for three-dimensional structures, volumes, and patterns.”⁵¹ Accordingly, she describes his approach in creating these photo collages as “systematic,” asserting that he saw the cardboard pages as a grid upon which he could “reconstruct” the sites.⁵² Gilderhus’ dissertation aims to provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the photo collages by including collages of other subjects into her discussion, and to describe how they demonstrate what she determines is Josef’s “variant of primitivism.”⁵³ She argues that this primitivism is manifest in Josef’s ahistorical distillations of Mesoamerican architecture and that the photo collages were instrumental to Josef’s process of translating images of architecture into abstract paintings.

⁵¹ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” 123.

⁵² Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” 123, 124.

⁵³ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 2.

However, understanding the photo collages as a sourcebook for Josef's abstraction offers a narrow understanding of both the photo collages and his paintings. A photo collage captioned *Zimapan?/Calvario* [Figure 2.7], includes images of what appears to be an adobe building with a façade which bears a remarkable resemblance to the design of his series *Variants/Adobes* series—as exemplified by *Variant/Adobe, On the Other Side* [Figure 2.8].⁵⁴ This comparison bolsters the idea that the photo collages may have been a source for patterns and geometrical motifs for his paintings. However, seeing the photo collages in this role suggests that one should only look to them to search for the “original” images that were translated into paintings. This search not only simplifies an understanding of Josef's abstraction but also overlooks the careful arrangements and complex meanings of these photo collages. It also implies that the photographs and photo collages which are visually similar to Josef's geometric art are the only ones worthy of study and attention.

While it appears that Josef may have been struck by shapes that appear in some of these photographs, it is also important to acknowledge that he placed these photographs in collages with others that did not portray the same motifs. For example, the contact prints of the adobe building in the *Zimapan?/Calvario* photo collage were placed on the same page with contact prints that document the elaborate, sculptural decoration of a baroque church. The visual similarity between the contact prints and *Variant/Adobe, On the Other Side* does not explain why images these photographs—along with an image of silhouetted figures facing a courtyard and contact prints of at least two other churches—are all on the same page. Nor does the idea that Josef was “reconstructing” the town—which he thinks may have been Zimapan—explain why he organized and captioned his photo collage in this manner. To see this photo collage as an artfully arranged collection of travel photographs enables an appreciation of their touristic and artistic qualities.

⁵⁴ A visual comparison has also been made between one of Josef's photographs of an adobe house and *Variant/Adobe, Gray Facade*; see Csoma, “A Chronology,” 215. The comparison is not discussed but the photograph and the painting are placed next to each other, and both images have been resized so that they appear relatively the same size on the page.

Josef made over one hundred photo collages from the photographs he took of archeological sites, churches, objects in museums, market scenes, and of his family and friends viewing these sights. Many of his photographs and photo collages reveal an interest in portraiture, as well as ornate and figurative subjects. These are aspects that Josef kept out of his own artistic production, or at least those works that he shared publicly. In the same storage room that held Josef's photographs, Weber found figurative drawings and paintings that Josef had made early in his artistic career.⁵⁵ Commenting upon this secrecy, Weber has hypothesized: "As with the early drawings, [Josef] Albers had essentially concealed this early figurative art—as if his obsession with the representation of the human body and various landscapes and buildings would later detract from the emphasis on pure line and undiluted color."⁵⁶ However, considering Josef's exploration and interest in the figurative, the realistic, and ornamental—as seen in his photographs and photo collages—does not diminish the elements he focused on in his abstract work; instead it underscores the significance of aesthetic and stylistic choices he made. Writing from personal experience and historical example, Carole Nagggar describes the unique position of foreign photographers in her essay, "The Fascination for the Other." Considering both the violent and voyeuristic aspects of photography, Nagggar contends that "destroying the other" is a way of attacking the unfamiliar part of ourselves, while photographing the other, may in fact be a way to better understand ourselves.⁵⁷ In this manner, understanding the ways that Josef photographed what he saw in Mexico, including subjects that he kept out of his publically exhibited artwork, reveals his artistic exploration of "unfamiliar" interests.

Additionally, the variations seen in the subjects and arrangements of the photo collages suggest that Josef was not systematically packaging his images, but approached each one individually

⁵⁵ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 284.

⁵⁶ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 321.

⁵⁷ Nagggar, "The Fascination for the Other," 53.

and embraced asymmetry and imprecision in their creation. He created these photo collages on pieces of cardboard using pieces that were different colors and sizes. Some of the photo collages were organized on a single page, oriented horizontally or vertically, while others were arranged across two pages that were taped or folded together so that they could be opened and closed like a book. Each one remains as a single entity: they were not all bound together into an album or even stored separately from his photo collages of other trips.⁵⁸ Working with contact prints, photographs, and sometimes postcards and newspaper clippings, Josef would place images in different groupings, sometimes combining prints from different rolls of film and other times leaving spaces for additional images. The spacing between these images varied, especially as horizontally and vertically oriented photographs were frequently placed in the same row. Josef also pasted sequences of contact prints down without separating them, or had them overlap each other. On at least two occasions, Josef pasted contact prints upside down. He would also incorporate photographs that were over or underexposed into his compositions. This variation in materials, arrangements, and even the quality of images indicates that Josef was willing to experiment with the appearance of each photo collage and to explore their subjects in varying ways.

By combining the images of the same place from separate trips, or different perspectives of the same subject, Josef explored various ways to frame his subjects and how his interests developed over multiple experiences. This also allowed him to contrast visuals of different places and objects, as demonstrated by the two-page photo collage, *Mus. Mexico/Mus. Puebla* [Figure 2.9]. The captions suggest that the images were taken in two museums, yet the contact prints record multiple perspectives of a just a few objects including stylized representations of a jaguar, a frog, and a coiled serpent. The photo collage does not provide any documentary information about these photographed objects: artists, titles, cultures, and dates are not listed. Nevertheless, the numerous

⁵⁸ Conversation with Brenda Danilowitz, February 11, 2014.

images could still be considered “documentary” as they record various sides and angles. More contextual shots reveal what surrounds the sculptures in the museum displays. These are juxtaposed with more artistic images: one shot shows the jaguar sculpture seen from below, resulting in a glowing corona above the jaguar’s head; another image snaps it from the front and includes a few individuals, possibly fellow museum visitors, in the background. The photographs appear to have been taken with different kinds of film and were possibly from different trips; the fact that the two cardboard pages were bound together with tape indicates that Josef wanted these images be seen in juxtaposition.

Josef chose to organize his photographs into photo collages, a medium which can invite a personal, private mode of viewing. Rather than printing these images large-scale or submitting them for publication, he had them developed as contact prints or small photographs and pasted them on pieces of cardboard. To see these photo collages and study their images, one needs to look carefully at them from a close distance. Wu Hung has advocated this kind of reading for studying early Chinese photographs. Wu determines: “Intense prolonged reading—an examination process akin to visual probing or mining—is especially vital to studying early photographs of China, above all because of the paucity of contextual information.”⁵⁹ Wu underscores the photograph’s research value as a primary document and how various interpretations can be gleaned from the internal evidence of photographs.⁶⁰ He encourages looking at photographs’ physical forms, inscriptions, and images when searching for this internal evidence. This kind of reading is helpful for examining the Josef’s photo collages and appreciating their arrangements.

However, unlike the examples that concern Wu, contextual information is available about the Alberses’ travels in Mexico. Although Danilowitz has noted that an understanding of their exact

⁵⁹ Wu Hung, “Introduction: Reading Early Photographs of China,” in *Brush and Shutter* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 1.

⁶⁰ Wu, “Introduction,” 1.

itineraries is “partial and incomplete,” she acknowledges that information about their journeys has been pieced together from correspondence, the journal entries of Toni Fleischmann, and Anni’s records from their last visit in 1967.⁶¹ Danilowitz notes that close study of Josef’s photographs has been one way of deciphering who they met, where they went, when they made particular trips, and their impressions of Latin America.⁶² Attention to the photographs’ and photo collages’ forms, inscriptions, and images can help unpack the contextual information available in these photographs; however, this contextual evidence can also shape the ways they are interpreted. This is evidenced by an untitled photo collage [Figure 2.10] which features six photographs of Anni with Diego Rivera, Clara Porset, and Xavier Guerrero.⁶³ As the photographs present recognizable historical figures, it is possible to identify the people and deduce what brought them together, despite the fact that Josef did not inscribe the collage with names or places. Anni appears in one of the images looking off into the distance, her face set in a thoughtful expression. Porset and Guerrero are seen in partial profile, as they are captured viewing something not included in the pictures’ frames. Rivera emerges as a dominant figure, wearing a wide brimmed hat and thick, dark glasses and appearing in five of the six photographs that make up the photo collage. Photographed alone and beside Guerrero and Porset, he is caught looking away, smiling, and clasping his hands. Architectural details and a roughhewn rock wall in the background of the photographs suggest that they be from the visit that the Alberses

⁶¹ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 17.

⁶² Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 17.

⁶³ Gilderhus discusses this photo collage in relation to Josef’s position in the Mexican art world which she explores in the fifth chapter of her dissertation. Gilderhus gives this photo collage the title *Diego Rivera* and determines that this is the only photo collage that features a Mexican artist. She asserts that Rivera’s central position in the composition stands as an acknowledgement of his prominent role in the Mexican art world. She goes on to say that Josef and Rivera shared a deep appreciation for Mesoamerican art and archeology even though they were stylistically and politically opposed. Later in the chapter, she asserts that Rivera is the most famous figure in the photo collage, but Clara Porset is “the more important of the two with regard to [Josef] Albers’s work in Mexico.” She notes that Porset was a key figure in Latin American modern design and was one of Josef’s first contacts in Latin America. See Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 145-146, 156-158.

made to see Anahuacalli, Rivera's museum of Pre-Columbian objects.⁶⁴ These photographs thus appear as portraits of Rivera, depicting him as a confident and cheerful man, without any pictorial reference made to his identity as an artist. However, if the names and identities of these individual were not known, it is likely that this photo collage would likely be read as an abstraction of a group encounter rather than a depiction of Anni and Josef's artistic acquaintances.

In comparison, *Santo Thomas, Oax./Cuyatepec* [Figure 2.11] demonstrates Josef's position as an observer of his wife's interest in textiles. At the top of the page, Josef pasted three contact prints of two churches and wrote the captions underneath the images. Beneath these is a sequence of contact prints which show Anni seated at a small backstrap loom with one woman by her side, and three other women watching from a close distance. The whole group appears to be outside in a dusty area in front of a wooden hut or shed. All of the contact prints are cut and individually pasted to the cardboard, but the bottom images suggest a narrative as they show multiple images of Anni sitting at the loom listening to the woman next to her. In some of the photographs, the woman by Anni's side is bent over the loom, seemingly demonstrating how to use it. Josef encircled the scene, seeing and documenting it from multiple angles. These images appear as candid shots since no one is captured looking at the camera and Anni is not shown posing or smiling for the camera. Some of the images crop out the loom and instead focus on the women watching Anni and her teacher. The photo collage does not include an image of the finished woven work, nor the experience from Anni's perspective. This suggests that Josef was uninterested in documenting the weaving technique that was being taught or even Anni's experience in learning it (and not a staged representation of the experience). This is underscored by the fact that the images of Anni are placed alongside two other contact prints that similarly document a woman in the process of hand spinning some yarn. That the

⁶⁴ Csoma, "A Chronology," 216.

photographs reflect Josef's experience as an outside observer of the encounter seems particularly resonant in relation to Anni's legacy as an innovative textile artist.

Although Josef is credited as the photographer of all the photographs and photo collages of Mexico, he also appeared in some of them. One two-page photo collage which is double captioned as *Mitla* [Figure 2.12] seems to have images from multiple trips.⁶⁵ The contact prints show various scenes of Mitla, a site which consists of five buildings that date to 1000-1521 AD.⁶⁶ Snapped from various distances and angles, the photographs present images of the domes of the colonial church that was built on the ancient site; as well as the columns and elaborately patterned walls of the Hall of Columns.⁶⁷ Anni appears in a number of these along with Fritz and Anna Moellenhoff, two professors from Black Mountain College. Two pictures of Josef are pasted at the very bottom of the right page. He is pictured standing in front of intricately patterned stone walls; turned away from the wall and the camera, both images capture him in near profile looking beyond the edges of the photographs. This candid, documentary shot is similar to the perspective which Josef photographed his family members as they explored Mexican sites. However, the fact that he is the subject indicates that someone else had to have pushed the shutter button. As Anni was his most frequent travel

⁶⁵ Gilderhus discusses this photo collage in her chapter on the relationship between Josef's photo collages and his paintings. She argues that this photo collage marks a "subtle shift to portraiture" and contrasts it with the images of people included in the photo collage *Monte Albán '35*, which she argues included figures (Anni and their friend Bobbie Dreier) who "appear incidental [sic] to the walls, doorways, and staircases." Gilderhus draws attention to the portraits of Josef, calling them "humorous and significant." She notes that Josef almost never appears in his own photo collages, and speculates that this is due to the fact that he was the one taking pictures. She does not hypothesize who took these photographs of him; instead she credits the image to him: "In this case, he creates a direct formal relationship with his body and the relief sculpture, adding two shots of his head against the mosaic walls on the very bottom." She ultimately concludes that this photo collage reflects an interest in portraiture that connects with the photographs that he took at the Bauhaus; see Gilderhus, "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico," 142-143.

⁶⁶ "Site Descriptions" in *The New World's Old World: Photographic Views of Ancient America*, 133.

⁶⁷ Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1996), 205-207.

companion, it is perhaps not too much to conjecture that she took these photographs and to speculate that she may have also taken others.

Two photo collages titled *Patzcuaro* [Figures 2.13 and 2.14] arguably epitomize the combination of the personal and artistic nature of Josef's photo collages. While both of them are named after (and misspell) the Mexican city of Patzcuaro, they do not include pictures of the city or its residents; instead, they are solely made up of images of Anni and Josef. In the images of her, she is seen from the waist up, from various angles, rarely looking at the camera. She is caught gazing out of the frame or possibly in the midst of a conversation with someone not included in the photograph. These images are arranged into a photo collage that is oriented vertically. Josef appears in some of the same situations: looking beyond the edges of the photographs, and in front of the same door and window where Anni was photographed. Yet, his images are grouped on a page that is oriented horizontally. The fact that the images show them both wearing multiple outfits indicates that the photographs were taken on different days; a look at their faces also suggests that they may have been taken in different decades. The captions also specify that these photographs are not just of Anni and of Josef, but of Anni and Josef in Patzcuaro. This implies that the images in the photo collage evoke a particular place, and by extension, the occasions when the photographs were taken; accordingly, they evoke associations with Patzcuaro and the experience of being there, even though the images do not portray scenes of the city. These photo collages arguably reflect Anni and Josef's travels and experiences, shared over the years.

The photographs from the Alberses' travels to Mexico are easily categorized as touristic photographs; they not only document the sights (and sites) that were seen, but also captured Anni's and Josef's experiences. However, rather than visually recording the itineraries and dates of their visits, the photo collages reveal a greater interest in the juxtaposition of the imagery and narratives associated with particular places. Each photo collage stands alone as its own artistic creation. While

an attempt could be made to put them in chronological order, or recreate the journeys of each visit to Mexico, the fact that images from different trips were arranged into the same photo collages would make this a very difficult task. Instead, it would be more productive to interpret these as pictorial juxtapositions, abstracted from Josef's and Anni's experiences in Mexico.

CHAPTER 3

THE STORY OF A COLLECTION OF ART AND SOUVENIRS

In November 1969, Anni Albers wrote an essay about the Pre-Columbian objects that she and her husband had collected.⁶⁸ Published as the preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection*, the essay reveals how she and Josef related to and appreciated their Pre-Columbian collection, not as anthropological scholars but as tourists and artists who found qualities in them that matched their artistic ideals.⁶⁹ Her essay underscores how their appreciation for these figurines was shaped by their experiences as foreign tourists, and as artists interested not in the historical specificity of these miniatures, but in the abstract, artistic qualities that they found in them. This effectively replaces the history of the objects with the stories that Anni (and Josef) recount of them—their value and history deriving not from the intentions of the objects' creators, but from the Alberses' appreciation of them.

While *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures* is dedicated to small objects—and focuses on figurines less than six inches in size—Anni begins her essay celebrating their “monumentality.” Reflecting upon the way that art is often experienced through photographic reproductions, she notes

⁶⁸ Although Anni and Josef Albers may have considered themselves amateur collectors—“amateurs in the true sense of the word”—they acquired sizeable collections: Anni purchased over one hundred textiles for herself and also assembled the Harriet Engelhardt Textile Collection, a memorial collection at Black Mountain College. She and Josef also accumulated over 1,200 figurines, whistles, jewelry, and tourist trinkets, with objects from Peru, Japan, the United States, and Mexico; see Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 143-146 and “Albers Objects,” document from the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, accessed February 4, 2014. Although the Alberses studied and praised the objects in their collections, the Alberses did not display most of them in their home. They stored their collected treasures in closets and their drawers, which has led Danilowitz to hypothesize that they were unseen but “ever-present talismans perhaps, of true creativity”; see Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 25.

⁶⁹ In 1970, Anni published *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection*. In 1988, the archeologist and historian Karl Taube published, *The Albers Collection of Pre-Columbian Art*. Both books include anthropological essays, histories of Pre-Columbian Mexican cultures, and black and white photographs of the objects in Josef and Anni's collection. Anni's essay was not reprinted in Taube's book; however, it was reprinted in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys* with the title “Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures.”

that such images often reduce the size, scale, and effect of the original artwork. She contends, however, that the photographs in this book have the opposite effect, to the benefit of the objects shown. Accordingly, Anni argues that the enlarged photographs enable the reader to recognize how the “monumental can be imbedded in the minute.”⁷⁰ She connects this sense of “monumentality”—expressed through an abstracted form—with the process of art making: “It is truly a lesson in economy of artistic articulation, as all art is an act of condensation.”⁷¹ Through this exalted language, Anni presents these objects as examples of artistic production, exemplary for their expressivity through an “economy of artistic articulation.” On the page facing the beginning of Anni’s essay, a sculpted head is pictured as the frontispiece [Figure 3.1]. The catalogue identifies this piece as the “Head of a dead person. Found in area of Cholula, Puebla. 4 cm high.”⁷² Rendered with its eyes closed and lips parted, the sculpture encapsulates the gravitas and stone-cold calmness of the deceased. However, the photograph facilitates this elegiac reading as the object is presented in near profile against a dark background, and subtly lit from above so that half of it is cast in shadow. Shown in this evocative manner, the sculpture’s own expressivity is arguably obscured, literally overshadowed by its presentation. This suggests that the representation of these objects, may in fact, undermine the qualities that Anni wants to show.

Anni notes that she and Josef “marveled” at the great pieces of Pre-Columbian art in museums in Berlin and in Mexico. However, she determines, “To see this art now in its own setting kindled anew the sense of its greatness.” This declaration implies that the experience of finding these pieces is incomparable to observing them in a museum and that the scholastic environment did not

⁷⁰ Anni Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970), n.p.

⁷¹ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁷² “Catalogue,” *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970), n.p.

fully exhibit the “greatness” of this art. Yet, the setting that she refers to is not the one where the art was made, but where she and Josef acquired them. Describing how she and Josef purchased the first objects in their collection, Anni emphasizes how they originated from the Mexican soil:

Our first small pieces came to us on our visits to prehistoric sites from little boys offering them to us through the car window, just as turkeys and goats were also held up for sale. As we examined the fragments of pottery, which included subtly formed heads and, alas, usually broken figurines, we could not believe that here in our hands were century-old pre-Columbian pieces found by the peasants when plowing their fields. We showed our treasures to the late George Valliant, the authority on Mexican archaeology, who was excavating at the time on the outskirts of Mexico City, and he confirmed their authenticity. Yes, here was a country whose earth still yielded such art.⁷³

Choosing little “treasures” over turkeys and goats, Anni connects and celebrates that this old art comes from the earth, and indirectly parallels the nourishing aspects of food and art. Anni acclaims the fact that these objects were harvested from the ground and that it demonstrated that they had found “a country whose earth still yielded such art.” While this narrative is meant to be celebratory, it makes no allusion to the history of these objects: that they were created by a particular individual for a particular reason, and then unknown circumstances led to it being buried in the ground, only to be discovered centuries later. Instead, she focuses on the ways that she and Josef made their first acquisitions, not from store owners or art dealers, but from “little boys” who brokered these purchases through car windows.

Two of Josef’s photographs appear to portray an occasion when the Alberses may have purchased items in their collection. One 1937 photograph [Figure 3.2] shows Anni with her parents, Siegfried and Toni Fleischmann, standing with two young boys who have small objects that they present to the three travelers. Taken slightly at a distance, the photograph captures the group with their faces cast in shadow, and with one of the grand pyramids of the Teotihuacán partially visible in the background. Siegfried and Anni are reaching to pick up the small objects in the boys’ hands while Toni looks on. Another photograph [Figure 3.3] shows Anni and Siegfried seated looking at

⁷³ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

what appears to be a small pottery shard in Siegfried's hand, while a young boy stands in front of them. These photographs focus on the scene, rather than the objects themselves, and visually corroborate the unofficial and touristic aspects of these exchanges.

As she describes how they purchased these objects from non-official vendors, Anni raises the issue of authenticity. Her anecdote suggests that she and Josef did not know that they were purchasing authentic works of art until they were confirmed by George Valliant, an archeologist from the American Museum of Natural History. Notably, authenticity is a concept which has significantly shaped cultural definitions of art. In his essay, "'Primitive Fakes,' 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity," Larry Shiner reveals how the issues of authenticity create a double standard: works of "Art" from non-Western cultures are only considered "authentic" if they were made for a ritual or traditional purpose (but then can also be labeled as "artifacts").⁷⁴ If the objects are made solely for the purposes of visual appreciation, then they are scorned as fakes or tourist art.⁷⁵ Drawing out this distinction, Shiner effectively reveals how this conception contradicts the definition of paintings on canvas, sculpture, or works on paper—objects considered to be "Art" in the Western tradition because they are made without a specific functional purpose. Since Anni refers to the objects in their collection as art, she evokes the idea of authenticity to underscore that they had found old, genuine pieces of great quality, rather than reproductions made for tourists. This leads her to assure her readers that she and Josef did not steal the objects. She relates that she showed their collection to Mexican museum authorities—figures she does not name—who not only confirmed their value, but also told her to "Take it, take it," since they already had many of them.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Larry Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes,' 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 226.

⁷⁵ Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes,'" 226.

⁷⁶ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

Despite her insistence on their authenticity, Anni relates how the art objects in their collection are also souvenirs. Recounting how they acquired them during their travels, Anni connects the objects to their experiences and memories of Mexico:

Most of the pieces shown here bring back recollections of places and incidents. Our special interest led us to regions that heightened our sense of adventure and discovery. We went along high cactus fences in village streets silent and empty, but whenever we turned around and looked back, faces would quickly withdraw and hide. We were obviously the sensation of the day. We sat in fields, sandwiches in hand, and wherever we looked, ancient pottery shards protruded.⁷⁷

This description bolsters the idea of Mexico as an artistic oasis, waiting to be discovered by adventurous artists. Nevertheless, it also underscores the Alberses' positions as amateur collectors, unintentionally finding these objects on their trips, rather than knowledgeable collectors purposefully searching for particular pieces. Anni emphasizes that she and Josef were unlike other tourists, recalling their travels outside the tourist circuit where they too were objects of fascination.

Anni reinforces this by contrasting their experiences with the opinion of a “lady tourist” that she had seen during one of their excursions. Anni notes that this lady tourist chose not to buy any of the little clay pieces that were for sale near the great pyramids of Teotihuacán—an assortment which Anni determined included objects that were “genuine” and “obviously newly made.” Anni remembers hearing this lady tourist proudly proclaim, “No thank you, I only buy what I really can use!”⁷⁸ This story follows one that Anni shares about an experience haggling for an object: Anni relates how she was in the midst of “the expected game of the market place” when Josef, not knowing enough Spanish to understand the prices being negotiated, turned to her and suggested that they offer thirty pesos, a price “way beyond what had been considered at all.”⁷⁹ Anni reports that the young man selling the object then remarked, “See, lady, the señor has a real understanding of art!”—

⁷⁷ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁷⁸ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁷⁹ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

and for her to lightheartedly confirm, “He was right, of course.”⁸⁰ Stereotypically, the idea of being a tourist evokes negative connotations and conjures images of ignorant foreigners spending too much money, as they are swindled in the local market and pay too much for cheap trinkets. These examples however overturn the stereotype by contrasting the image of the philistine tourist with Josef and Anni’s readiness to pay—and in fact overpay—for art.

Anni acknowledges that she and Josef were not the only artists who acquired Pre-Columbian art, yet she is critical of others’ collecting practices. She proclaims: “Only such Mexican artists as Diego Rivera and Miguel Covarrubias recognized the greatness of the indigenous art of their native land, while the social élite appreciated almost exclusively the art of the Western European tradition.”⁸¹ Anni’s statement is surprisingly condescending, not only to the cross-cultural collecting interests of the social elite (who may have been drawn to the art produced by her or her husband), but also to Rivera and Covarrubias, as she distinguishes them for having “*recognized* the greatness of the indigenous art of *their native land* [italics mine].” Anni notes that they neither met Covarrubias nor saw his collection in its entirety, but determines that they had seen enough to acknowledge his “highly discerning eye.” In contrast, she mentions that she and Josef were “among the privileged few ‘gringos’” to see Rivera’s objects and Anahuacalli, the museum that housed his full collection. Anni states that this museum was an “impressive gesture” as she did not think there was a setting that was “worthy” of exhibiting the ancient arts of the country.⁸² One photograph [Figure 3.4] shows Rivera standing outside Anahuacalli with four individuals, possibly the “privileged few ‘gringos,’”

⁸⁰ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁸¹ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁸² Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

surveying the unfinished stone building in front of them.⁸³ Taken from a slight distance, the photograph shows these individuals from the back, but framed against the architecture of the building and what may be a sculpture to the right corner of the image. Discussing Rivera's collection, Anni shares the disparaging opinion she and Josef had of its variety:

We felt that Rivera had an oversized appetite for all that came to light and was brought to him by the natives from many parts of the country. The pieces in his collection varied from unsurpassed, rare, and precious stone masks and clay figurines of great power, to poorly broken pottery bits that must, however, have carried a meaning for him in his speculations on archaeological history.⁸⁴

This description parallels the narrative of their own collecting practices: despite the fact that Rivera was a Mexican artist, Anni suggests that “natives” also brought him pieces for his collection.

However, in contrast to their ability to find and select authentic objects, Anni implies that Rivera fed his “oversized appetite” by accepting everything that he was given. She thus determines that his varied collection represents his “speculations on archaeological history” rather than aesthetic or artistic aims.

This distinction is significant as scholars have primarily understood the Alberses' collection in relation to the couple's aesthetic ideals and interests as artists. Michael D. Coe has noted: “The objects represent the personal taste of a painter and a weaver, a pair who have influenced the course of American and European art.”⁸⁵ While this comment references Anni's and Josef's “personal

⁸³ The individuals in the photograph have been identified as Xavier Guerrero, Clara Porset, Seki Sano, unidentified man, Diego Rivera, and Anni Albers at Anahuacalli; see *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 22. However, this identification lists six names while five people (and only one woman) are visible in the photograph. Although it has been credited as Josef's image, it seems possible that he is the “unidentified man” and that Anni has taken the photograph.

⁸⁴ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁸⁵ Michael D. Coe, “The Albers Collection of Ancient Mexican Art,” *Discovery* 16, no. 2 (1982-1983): 25.

taste” it also qualifies it as the taste of an influential artist couple.⁸⁶ In her essay, Anni identifies the objects’ “timelessness” as the first aspect that attracted her and Josef’s interest.⁸⁷ Nicholas Fox Weber has also recounted how Josef praised the “eternity” of a Mexican clay bird that he and Anni kept in their kitchen: “You see this bird! We’ll never know who made it, who the anonymous artist was. It’s no different from the same sort of thing that you could buy in any market place in any Mexican village. And it has eternity.”⁸⁸ On another occasion, Josef is said to have declared that a bird figurine had “more eternity” than anything Robert Motherwell ever touched.⁸⁹ That Josef would have extolled the “timeless” qualities of a clay bird [Figure 3.5]—and would not have done the same for Motherwell’s 1943 painted collage, *Pancho Villa Dead or Alive* [Figure 3.6]—is indicative of a selective view of art-making and artistic self-expression. The sculpture and the painted collage are both reflective their historical moments and the choices of their creators. However, discussing the work of an “anonymous artist”—who will never be identified—arguably impedes consideration of

⁸⁶ Coe has proposed another understanding of Josef’s appreciation for the objects in their collection: “I first saw all of these fascinating objects in the Alberses’ home in New Haven, where I spent many pleasant hours discussing them with Anni and Josef. Josef’s own favorites were the charming little pretty-lady figurines from the Chupicuaro culture of Late Formative Mexico. I think that it was their humor, elegance, and seeming lack of sophistication that appealed to him. As he held each little masterpiece in his hands, he would exclaim, ‘Isn’t she a beauty!’ and he took mischievous delight in pointing out the charms of their derrières”; see Michael D. Coe, foreword to *The Albers Collection of Pre-Columbian Art* by Karl Taube (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1988), 7. This interpretation evokes the gendered discourse that Abigail Solomon-Godeau deconstructs in her essay on Paul Gauguin and the mythologies of primitivism; see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism,” *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). In this manner, Coe’s interpretation offers a Western, heterosexual male perspective that enabled Josef to find “mischievous delight” in viewing the objects, but one that also eclipses Anni’s viewpoint. Although Coe notes that she was there during his visit, she appears in his description as a silent observer; he does not mention her favorite pieces or note her reaction to Josef’s comments. In her essay, Anni does not allude to the feminine charms of the objects in their collection.

⁸⁷ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁸⁸ Nicholas Fox Weber, foreword to *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock. (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 11.

⁸⁹ Sedat Pakay, producer and director, *Josef and Anni Albers: Art Is Everywhere* (Hudson, NY: Hudson Film Works, 2006), videorecording.

this artist as a specific person, and consequently, facilitates a celebration of the “eternity” of this artist’s creation. Furthermore, it is significant that Josef determined that the artistic value a clay bird had remained undiminished, even though similar ones were available throughout Mexico. In this manner, the bird sculpture seems to act as a stand in for Josef’s geometric series of numerous variations, which also contrast strikingly with Motherwell’s expressive abstraction. Danilowitz has commented: “As true modernists who believed unwaveringly that works of art spoke a universally understood and shared language, Josef and Anni Albers valued the objects in their collection as traces of creative invention that validated their own creative lives.”⁹⁰ By collecting these objects, and interpreting them through their own experiences and aesthetic ideals, the Alberses were in fact bolstering their understanding of modern abstract art.

Anni concludes her essay acknowledging that *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection* was a “gesture of our thanks to the anonymous makers of the small-great objects that have given my husband and me such delight.”⁹¹ While intended as an expression of gratitude, this dedication arguably disconnects the objects from their creators. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have demonstrated this effect through the example of a dedication that was written in an exhibition catalogue published by the Whitney Museum of Modern Art, in conjunction with the 1972 exhibition *Abstract Design in American Quilts*:

The creators of the abstract forms are oddly acknowledged in the introductory essay of the exhibition catalogue and indeed the exhibition was dedicated to ‘the anonymous women whose skilled hands and eyes created the American quilt’. This separates the makers from the objects, dedicating the exhibition to them suggests that they are not present, that they are not represented by the work they made. It is practically inconceivable that an exhibition devoted to the works of, say van Gogh, would also be dedicated to him.⁹²

⁹⁰ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 24-25.

⁹¹ Albers, preface to *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures*, n.p.

⁹² Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, “Craft Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts,” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Pandora, 1995), 71.

This analysis thus reveals the significance, not only of the language used, but also of the fact that the dedication was made. That the language in this dedication to American women quilters is oddly similar to Anni's statement to the "anonymous makers" of the Pre-Columbian objects reveals an overlap in the discourse used to discuss the decorative arts and non-Western art—which also seems slightly ironic given the fact that Anni's art has also been considered "craft" and categorized as a decorative art. However, Anni also references the "delight" that she and Josef experienced in these objects. Accordingly, Anni's dedication returns the focus to the real subject of her essay: how she and her husband, as artists known for their modern and geometric abstract art came to own, appreciate, and celebrate their collection of Pre-Columbian Mexican miniatures.

CHAPTER 4

FINDING CROSS-CULTURAL INSPIRATION IN GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION

As artists whose aesthetic ideals were shaped by their time at the Bauhaus, Josef and Anni Albers eschewed the self-expressive from their work. Nevertheless, their art is reflective of their individual choices, and as husband and wife and travel companions they shared opinions and experiences, but integrated these influences into their own artistic production in various ways, and in different media. This chapter discusses Anni's and Josef's art and investigates how scholars have found the personal and the pictorial in their geometrically abstract compositions, and how these aspects connect to their trips to Mexico. Since scholars have offered different approaches to understanding how Anni and Josef engaged in cross-cultural dialogues, attention to the language of these interpretations reveals the ways they have challenged, and reinforced, the cultural definitions and artistic hierarchies which have defined abstract modern art and which have shaped the perception of the Alberses' art.

In 1936, after the couple's second trip to Mexico, Anni produced two wall hangings, *Ancient Writing* [Figure 4.1] and *Monte Albán* [Figure 4.2]. The compositions of both wall hangings are divided into three vertical sections with a darker central panel framed by two lighter ones. Virginia Gardner Troy determines that the two works are companion pieces as they are almost identical in size and format.⁹³ *Ancient Writing* is composed of intertwined threads of rayon, linen, cotton, and jute, and present a dynamic interplay of patterns and textures over the whole textile. Rectangles of various sizes and orientations are interspersed throughout its central section. Troy reads the rectangles as "text":

⁹³ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 117.

[Anni] Albers used a text format, a title, and abstract visual forms to imply content. Without actually representing particular glyphs or pictures, she evoked the idea of a visual language by grouping differently textured and patterned squares together like words or glyphs, and locking this 'text' with an underlying grid. Ultimately, it appears as if the 'text', set within margins, jumps forward to be 'read' as if on a page.⁹⁴

Additionally, the Smithsonian American Art Museum's website proposes that the wall hanging could be interpreted as "a Rosetta stone of an unknown language."⁹⁵ These interpretations focus primarily on the rectangles, suggesting that they are the bearers of meaning and represent the language of an unknown culture, waiting to be deciphered by archeologists. This implies that the textile presents an abstract representation of a language that would have been written on paper or inscribed in stone.

In contrast, César Paternosto has determined that this wall hanging reflects the ways the Alberses' trips to Mexico renewed Anni's interest in the "symbolic/semantic sense" that weaving had in ancient American cultures.⁹⁶ Accordingly, Paternosto suggests that Anni was exploring the communicative nature of textiles—considering them as the bearers of meaning, rather than the vehicles where emblematic forms were applied. In this manner, "Ancient Writing" does not refer to the particular designs on the wall hanging, but to the entire textile. These readings thus offer different perspectives of Anni's cross-cultural exploration: she appears as an artist representing archeological discovery and as one engaging in a non-Western understanding of textiles. While both of these interpretations imply some degree of appropriation, the differences between the two are nevertheless significant: while archeological discovery can connote looting and the misappropriation of objects, the study of cultural perspectives suggests an adoption or understanding of dissimilar ways of thinking.

⁹⁴ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 119.

⁹⁵ "Renwick @25: Anni Albers, *Ancient Writing*," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/renwick25/albers.html>.

⁹⁶ Paternosto, "Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm," 89.

In comparison, *Monte Albán* has been interpreted in relation to Anni's travel experiences. Paulina Brugnoli and Soledad Hoces de la Guardia have determined that this wall hanging in fact "consolidated [Anni's] experiences on visiting Monte Albán."⁹⁷ Divided into three parts, the central section of this wall hanging is composed of alternating bands of grays and black. On the surface of the wall hanging, black and white threads delineate triangles, chevrons, and irregular geometric shapes, which occasionally extend beyond the borders of the central section and into the beige and gray segments on the sides. Troy identifies this as Anni's use of a supplementary-weft brocade, or 'floating' weft: this technique enables a thread to rest atop the woven surface and "can be picked up and looped at will, traversing over woven areas, because it does not serve a structural purpose."⁹⁸ Troy thus suggests that Anni used this technique in order to "draw" lines and make pictorial references.⁹⁹

The geometric designs of the wall hanging are understood as visual allusions to the architectural and archeological structures at Monte Albán. Troy determines that Anni employed the supplementary-weft brocade to "form layers that refer to the ascending and descending steps, the flat plazas, and the underground chambers of the ancient site."¹⁰⁰ Brugnoli and Hoces de la Guardia also suggest that Anni used this technique to "create profiles in relief fluidly suggesting different levels of architecture merging into a landscape."¹⁰¹ Brenda Danilowitz interprets the shapes in a

⁹⁷ Paulina Brugnoli and Soledad Hoces de la Guardia, "Anni Albers and Her Great Teachers," *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock. (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 68.

⁹⁸ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 117.

⁹⁹ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 117.

¹⁰¹ Brugnoli and Hoces de la Guardia, "Anni Albers and Her Great Teachers," 68.

similar manner, concluding that Anni “wove the essence of Monte Albán” into her wall hanging.¹⁰² Pointing to the fact that there are black and white threads which seem to double each other, Danilowitz suggests that they represent “the still unexcavated mounds” of the site.¹⁰³ The authors thus construe *Monte Albán* as an abstracted representation of the archeological site for which it was named. This casts Anni in the roles of artist, tourist, explorer, and cartographer: she has traveled to Monte Albán, observed it, and depicted the site for others. In these readings the wall hanging’s abstraction does not obscure the viewer’s understanding of the site; instead it is understood to be portraying the “essence” of the site, as interpreted by Anni.

Josef also created a work that he named after Monte Albán. In the spring and summer of 1941, Josef made pencil and ink drawings which he developed the following year into a zinc-plate lithographic series: a. *Ascension*; b. *Interim*; c. *Introitus*; d. *Prefatio*; e. *Sanctuary*; f. *Seclusion*; g. *Shrine*; and h. *To Monte Albán*.¹⁰⁴ Each lithograph portrays a geometric design made up of straight black lines of various widths against a white background. Noting that they were produced “at the height of [Josef] Albers’ involvement with the [sic] sacred architecture,” Paternosto views the lithographs as variations of a single theme: “With the crisp array of straight lines of different thickness [Josef] developed a number of variations on the theme of the truncated pyramid, or, in actuality, what appears to be a bird’s eye view of them.”¹⁰⁵ This reading suggests that the lithographs could be read like blueprints or schematic drawings; in this manner, the two narrow rectangles in *To Monte Albán*

¹⁰² Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 23.

¹⁰³ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 23.

¹⁰⁴ There appears to be some ambiguity as to the number and order of the *Graphic Tectonics* series. While Paternosto does not include *Shrine* as part of the series, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s website does; see Paternosto, “Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm,” 85 and “*Shrine*, from *Graphic Tectonics* series,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 16, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/373165>. Gilderhus states that there are nine prints in the *Graphic Tectonics* series and that *To Monte Albán* is the second. However, she only discusses *Introitus* and *To Monte Albán* in detail; see Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 70-76.

¹⁰⁵ Paternosto, “Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm,” 85.

[Figure 4.3] are understood as the levels of one, or perhaps two interconnected stepped pyramids, transcribed into horizontal and vertical lines. Paternosto thus concludes that the prints are “the ultimate translation of tectonic volumes into a bi-dimensional system.”¹⁰⁶ Kirsten Gilderhus also argues that the architecture at Monte Albán inspired Josef to experiment with the depiction of line and space.¹⁰⁷ She interprets this artistic experimentation as a manifestation of Josef’s “variant of primitivism” as he rendered the Mesoamerican pyramids in “a deliberate, de-historicized view of architecture across space and time.”¹⁰⁸ Although Gilderhus emphasizes the cultural dominance that this rendering may suggest, both she and Paternosto suggest that Josef’s work is like that of an architect. This arguably parallels the tourist, explorer, and cartographer roles that scholars have described in analyzing Anni’s wall hanging. In this manner, these interpretations portray Josef and Anni creating abstract depictions of Monte Albán, the same archeological tourist site that they visited together on multiple trips.¹⁰⁹ The readings underscore additional corresponding elements in Anni’s and Josef’s work as they emphasize the exploration of line that both artists employed in their respective artworks.

Nevertheless, *To Monte Albán* and *Monte Albán* can also be interpreted through different associations; this is due in part to the works that Anni and Josef made in relation to the ones they named after the Mexican site. *To Monte Albán* is the only print in the *Graphic Tectonics* series given a title that refers to a specific place. The other prints have conceptual titles that have quiet, isolated, or

¹⁰⁶ Paternosto, “Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm,” 85.

¹⁰⁷ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 76.

¹⁰⁸ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico,” 26.

¹⁰⁹ Csoma notes that the Alberses visited Monte Albán during their first (1935-1936) and third (1937) trips to Mexico; see Csoma, “A Chronology,” 210, 212.

religious connotations.¹¹⁰ That Josef included the reference to a Mexican archeological site in this print series implies that he also associated these aspects with Monte Albán. Nicholas Fox Weber has noted that Josef considered spirituality a necessary component of art:

Like [Walter] Gropius, [Josef] was a connoisseur of beauty, but for him it required a spiritual element. Much of what topped Albers's list of humankind's greatest creations had a deeply religious aspect. The deities varied—the Parthenon, Piero della Francesca's frescoes, and Machu Picchu were among his chosen masterpieces—but the attitude of worship was consistently vital.¹¹¹

Monte Albán could be considered another one of Josef's "deities"—and one that he revered through the creation of *Graphic Tectonics*. In contrast, reading Anni's wall hanging in relation to its companion piece, *Ancient Writing*, suggests further exploration of the communicative nature of textiles. This comparison underscores how Anni's and Josef's artwork exemplifies complicated examples of cross-cultural study, appropriation, and adulation, which correspond artistically, but can also be interpreted as representations which imbue the same site with different connotations.

Anni did not name any additional works after Mexican sites, but Josef did.¹¹² Between 1936 and 1943, Josef drew and painted variations of a motif that he named after Tenayuca. One example is *Variation on Tenayuca* [Figure 4.4] which Josef created circa 1938. For this work, Josef inscribed the geometric design with a thin black line and brushed a blue watercolor wash over the horizontally-oriented page. Applying this wash with long strokes, Josef concentrated the color towards the top and bottom, so that only small sections of the motif are tinted blue. Since he did not paint to the edges of the page, Josef left a small, uneven margin on all four sides. Drops of ink were also dripped sporadically across the top and bottom of the composition; and two larger splatters appear

¹¹⁰ For Catholics, "Ascension" refers to the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven; *Introitus* and *Prefatio* are Latin terms which refer to parts of the Catholic Mass and to Eucharistic prayers. See "Ascension," "Introitus," and "Preface" entries in Catholic Encyclopedia, Catholic Online, www.catholic.org.

¹¹¹ Weber, *The Bauhaus Group*, 273.

¹¹² In 1958, Anni created a pictorial weaving that she may have named after Tikal, a Mayan archeological site located in Guatemala.

underneath the central motif. Oles argues that viewers experience the line of the geometric design as if it was three-dimensional, and in turn, asserts that this “three-dimensionality reflects the architectural profiles” that Josef photographed while visiting Tenayuca.¹¹³ Oles determines that Josef created *Variation on Tenayuca* by making “a partial tracing” from one of his photographs, which he used to create an abstract design that he then “silhouetted against a bright blue Mexican sky.”¹¹⁴

Considering multiple works that Josef named after Tenayuca, Gilderhus concludes that these drawings and paintings demonstrate a study of color and line; nevertheless, she also looks to Josef’s photographs for her analysis. Gilderhus counters Oles’ interpretation, contending that the motif is not a representation of the double pyramid but of the serpent sculptures found at its base.¹¹⁵ She thus describes Josef’s abstraction as a translation of the serpentine body and head into stylized shapes which appear to “rear back and move at a diagonal” across the page.¹¹⁶ Although Oles and Gilderhus propose contrasting descriptions of the motif, they both suggest that Josef derived his abstraction from pictorial sources which can be found through a careful examination of his photographs. Accordingly, both describe Josef’s abstracting process as the innovative distillation of figurative sources.

Josef’s 1940 painting, *To Mitla* [Figure 4.5] has been acknowledged as one of his early works which combined his interest in Mexican sites and his experimentation with color. In the painting, irregular blocks of color—sky blue, brick red, dark brown, mulberry purple, and chartreuse—have been arranged into a loosely painted rectangle. The edges of each of these blocks and the overall rectangle are relatively straight, but also show signs of imprecision that indicate that this geometric

¹¹³ Oles, *South of the Border*, 167.

¹¹⁴ Oles, *South of the Border*, 167.

¹¹⁵ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” 127.

¹¹⁶ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” 127-128.

composition has been painted by hand. Additionally, the colors are painted in different shapes and sizes which enable the same colors to be juxtaposed in various combinations. Danilowitz interprets the painting as an abstracted landscape which “re-forms” a depiction of Mitla: she attributes the brick red color as an allusion to the “fortress-like walls” around the Palace of the Columns, and the sky blue and chartreuse colors as an evocation of the sky and the green fields surrounding the site.¹¹⁷

Considering the title and the painting’s vivid colors, Oles suggests multiple interpretations:

The title of *To Mitla* implies not only a gift or homage but also a voyage toward the site, through freshly plowed fields and past small villages. Here, instead of emphasizing the geometry of Precolumbian architecture, [Josef] Albers isolates the essential colors of the Mexican earth and sky. As Kelly Feeney has noted, ‘the pervasive effects that the southern climate, light, and palette had on his work’ were crucial. In fact, for many visiting Americans, Mexico was distinguished by its vibrant, tropical colors, a recurring theme recorded in innumerable travel accounts. Color not only expressed Mexico’s difference from New York or Berlin; it also symbolized an intensity of life and an opposition to the grays and blacks of machine age existence, made even more dreary by the Great Depression. Like the popular Fiestaware of the 1930s and 1940s, Albers’s *To Mitla* distilled Mexico down to dramatic color and an allusive name.¹¹⁸

Oles underscores the significance of the “To” in the title, as he reveals that it enables the painting to be construed as a “gift,” a “homage,” and an abstracted landscape seen on “a voyage toward the site.” Nevertheless, Oles derives the rest of his analysis from the colors of the painting and the ways they represent the Mexican landscape. Oles draws upon the idea of Mexico as a colorful destination, untouched by the difficulties of “machine age existence” that darken the modern cities in the United States and Europe. This leads Oles to compare *To Mitla* with Fiestaware, a commercialized, mass-produced brand dinnerware and to assert that Josef’s depiction of Mexico is similar to the one

¹¹⁷ Brenda Danilowitz, “Josef Albers 1936-1946: A Decade of Abstract Painting” in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 97.

¹¹⁸ Oles, *South of the Border*, 167, 171. Original citations: Nicholas Fox Weber, personal communication to author, August 1992; Kelly Feeney, *Josef Albers: Works on Paper* (Alexandria, Va.: Art Services International, 1991), p. 39; Véase Helen Delpar, “‘Everything’s So Goddamned Pictorial’: North American Autobiographers’ Impressions of Mexico, 1919-1924,” *Auto/Biography Studies* 3:4 (verano de 1988), págs. 48-59.

represented by brightly colored plates, cups, and bowls. This comparison implies that Josef (and by extension, Anni) titled their abstract works after Mexican sites to imbue them with the idea of “Mexico.” This also suggests that any depiction an artist makes in response to traveling to a foreign place is, in some sense, an act of appropriation.

Scholars have understood Josef’s interests in architectural distillation, color juxtapositions, and variations to have first converged in his series, *Variants/Adobes* which he began painting in 1946. The paintings are composed of rectangles of various colors, sizes, and orientations. Although similar, the compositions are not exactly the same; yet, it is the color combinations that differentiate each painting. The juxtaposition of different colors make some of the rectangles appear to recede, or come forward, while others blend together as seen in *Variant/Adobe, Southern Climate* [Figure 4.6]. Danilowitz contends that by making “Adobes” the series’ second title, Josef signified the paintings’ association with adobe buildings in Mexico.¹¹⁹ She asserts that the paintings are “unimaginable without the highly colored painted exterior walls of flat roofed Mexican houses, their tall windows framed with contrasting, sometimes clashing, hues and set against the intense blue sky.”¹²⁰ She reinforces the idea that the composition could be interpreted as a building façade with her own photograph of a street scene in Oaxaca, which shows an orange building with green trimming around the windows and doors.¹²¹

In a short essay titled “On My Variants,” Josef wrote about the development of these paintings and reasoning behind his numerous variations. Josef specifies that he “put [himself] on a very strict painting diet” which consisted of unmixed colors (with the exceptions of pink and rose)

¹¹⁹ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 27.

¹²⁰ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 27.

¹²¹ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 26.

and a “checkerboard-like structure” underlying his compositions.¹²² Josef likened his variations to the practice sessions of other art forms:

In my paintings I adhere to what in other arts is considered a matter of course. Namely, that performance is prepared by rehearsal, that exercises precede recital, or plans, execution. It is still a good habit in music or dance and the theater, in architecture or typography. It also remains a good procedure in poetry or sculpture. And it was a rule with the old masters of painting.¹²³

While Josef aligns himself with musicians, performers, and “old masters of painting,” Danilowitz has proposed other comparisons. She describes Josef as a “scientist in a laboratory” experimenting with the effects of combining pure colors.¹²⁴ She also suggests that he painted within these self-imposed limitations in order to take up the challenges of weaving: by choosing not to mix his paints, Josef forced himself to explore other color mixing techniques, such as those used by weavers.¹²⁵ In this manner, Danilowitz suggests that Josef engaged in an exploration of the challenges that Anni negotiated in her woven work. Although Josef did not refer to textile arts in his essay, Danilowitz’s suggestion raises the idea of a dynamic dialogue between the art created by the Alberses.

In 1946, the same year that Josef began painting *Variants/Adobes*, Anni created *With Verticals* [Figure 4.7], a red and white wall hanging, punctuated with black vertical lines of various lengths. Danilowitz considers *With Verticals* to be a work that “raises the frequently posed question of influence and exchange between the works of Josef and Anni Albers.”¹²⁶ Danilowitz underscores that the Andean textiles that Anni admired “co-exist with the strongly linear geometries of pre-

¹²² Josef Albers, “On My Variants” in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 147.

¹²³ Albers, “On My Variants,” 147.

¹²⁴ Brenda Danilowitz, “From *Variants on a Theme* to *Homage to the Square*: Josef Albers’s Paintings 1947-1949” in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Heinz Liesbrock (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 143.

¹²⁵ Danilowitz, “From *Variants on a Theme* to *Homage to the Square*,” 143.

¹²⁶ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 27.

Hispanic architecture” and thus enable Anni’s textiles to “create multiple resonances.”¹²⁷ This assertion encourages more complicated readings of the couple’s works. To understand the cross-cultural inspiration in the Alberses’ art solely in terms of Josef’s interests in Mesoamerican architecture and Anni’s fascination with ancient American textiles arguably inhibits a discussion of shared influences and explorations—even though they were an artist couple who traveled to and throughout Mexico together. Nevertheless, recognizing this crossover should not overshadow their particular artistic visions. As Danilowitz points out, comparing Anni’s wall hanging *With Verticals* with Josef’s drawing *Study for Sanctuary* “is to become aware of what each artist shared, rather than emulated, in the work of the other.”¹²⁸

In contrast, Troy associates *With Verticals* with a serape [Figure 4.8] that Anni had purchased in Mexico for a memorial textile collection.¹²⁹ Troy compares the patterns of both textiles and comments upon the “optical interplay” produced with only three colors.¹³⁰ She proposes that the longest vertical line in Anni’s work is a reference to “the slit-tapestry technique and to the neck openings of Latin American tunics.”¹³¹ Interpreting the longest vertical in this manner suggests that Anni drew inspiration from the design of wearable textiles; by incorporating the allusion of a functional design element into her woven work, Anni evokes the hierarchy of art and the distinctions between art and craft. However, as a wall hanging with this cross-cultural reference

¹²⁷ Danilowitz, ““We are not alone,”” 27.

¹²⁸ Danilowitz, ““We are not alone,”” 27.

¹²⁹ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 123. The collection was the Harriett Englehardt Memorial Collection of Textiles and was held at Black Mountain College. Harriett Englehardt had been a student of Anni’s and her mother wrote to Anni in 1946 about setting up a memorial fund after her daughter’s death. See Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 143-146.

¹³⁰ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 123.

¹³¹ Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*, 123.

integrated into its abstract composition, *With Verticals* arguably challenges and maintains the distinction between the aesthetic object that is worn and the one that is placed on museum walls.

Scholars have argued that Josef's famous series, *Homage to the Square*, also integrates cross-cultural references into its abstraction. Josef began painting this series in 1949 and created nearly one thousand variations before his death in 1976.¹³² While the title pays tribute to its shape, and the squares depicted, the composition presents the juxtaposition of three or four colors radiating from the center. One of these paintings [Figure 4.9] portrays an arrangement of white, teal, gray, and yellow; the white square is positioned slightly below center and the other colors are applied in sequence, from the white square and almost to the edges of the Masonite board. The vibrancy and saturation of the yellow and teal are slightly tempered by the cool white and gray colors, resulting in a dynamic interplay of color and visual effect. However, scholars contend that consideration of this series as a modern masterpiece has overshadowed its cross-cultural influences and Josef's artistic evolution. Paternosto declares: "The world-wide success of [Josef] Albers's *Homage to the Square* series of oil paintings obscured the perception of his earlier work, much of which was developed under the spell of the ancient Mexican arts and architecture, a fact that has also remained obscure."¹³³ In her catalogue essay and dissertation, Gilderhus reconnects the series with Josef's earlier Mexican-themed work and his fascination with Mesoamerican architecture. Gilderhus acknowledges that Josef never described the series in this manner, even though he used various metaphors—including cooking and acting analogies—to describe the color combinations and their accompanying visual effects.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, she proposes a new understanding of the series, asserting that it could be seen as the abstract depiction of a Mesoamerican pyramid: "An

¹³² Gilderhus, "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico," 1.

¹³³ Paternosto, "Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm," 84.

¹³⁴ Gilderhus, "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico," 67-68.

archeologist mapping this pyramid would draw it as four nested squares, and one can imagine the *Homage to the Square* as such a floor plan, but in color.”¹³⁵ This reading casts Josef in the same metaphorical roles that scholars, including Gilderhus, have also used to describe his (and Anni’s) early work. This not only suggests that *Homage to the Square* is the result of an evolution of his early interests, but also demonstrates an insistence to find the same pictorial and cross-cultural elements in these paintings, even though Josef did not reference them in the title or in discussions of the work. Accordingly, this is a bold reinterpretation of a famous series, known for its non-representational exploration of color.

Considering the evolution of Anni’s work reveals a dramatic change in her approach; in the late 1940s Anni stopped making large-scale wall hangings and started produced smaller works that she called “pictorial weavings.” Danilowitz determines that Anni used the term “pictorial” not to refer to figurative imagery, but to “ascribe to textiles the same status as traditional easel paintings—objects of pure aesthetic meaning and intent.”¹³⁶ Mary Jane Jacob also observes that Anni emphasized these works as artistic pieces by mounting them on linen and framing them like paintings.¹³⁷ One example of these pictorial weavings is *South of the Border* [Figure 4.10] which Anni made in 1958. Unlike her earlier wall hangings, this piece is oriented horizontally and is composed of vibrantly colored cotton and wool in shades of blue, pink, orange, yellow, white, and black. The textile is intricate, with different patterns of woven threads forming an asymmetrical all-over design. Although Oles does not discuss this (or any of Anni’s weavings), he points to the fact that the phrase “South of the Border”—which is also the name of his exhibition catalogue—refers to a famous song from 1939 and to a “honky-tonk tourist stop in Dillon, South Carolina, familiar since

¹³⁵ Gilderhus, “Homage to the Pyramid: The Mesoamerican Photocollages of Josef Albers,” 129.

¹³⁶ Danilowitz, “We are not alone,” 28.

¹³⁷ Mary Jane Jacob, “Anni Albers: A Modern Weaver as Artist” in *The Woven and Graphic Art of Anni Albers* by Nicholas Fox Weber (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), 93.

the 1950s to all who have driven down U.S. 1 or I-95 to Florida.”¹³⁸ Nevertheless, Anni’s pictorial weaving does not evoke the story of the ill-fated romance sung by Gene Autry; nor does it present a stereotypical representation of Mexico, like the sombrero that sat atop the sign for the South of the Border rest stop.¹³⁹

Instead, Anni’s weaving has been interpreted as a colorful, abstracted work that is celebrated for its painting-like effects. Jacob relates *South of the Border* to *Pasture*, another of Anni’s pictorial weavings 1958 which she called “impressionistic.”¹⁴⁰ Jacob determines that with works like these, Anni “truly ‘painted’ with thread” and that the colors of *South of the Border* “create a work of fiestalike gaiety.”¹⁴¹ Paternosto argues that Anni’s pictorial weavings “thus paralleled—when not expanding [sic]—the experience of *abstract* pictorial art [italicized in original].”¹⁴² However, making and interpreting woven art in relation to abstract paintings can also emphasize the distinction between the two art forms. Parker and Pollock have also demonstrated this through the example of an art critic who had to re-envision Navajo blankets in order to see them as abstract art. Drawing attention to the language used, Parker and Pollock quote the beginning of Ralph Pomeroy’s critique of a 1974 London exhibition that included woven Navajo blankets:

“I am going to forget, *in order to really see them*, that a group of Navajo blankets are not only that. In order to consider them, as I feel they ought to be considered—as Art with a capital ‘A’—I am going to look at them as paintings—created with dye instead of pigment, on

¹³⁸ Oles, *South of the Border*, 7.

¹³⁹ For a more in-depth discussion on the rest stop and Mexican-themed kitsch, see P. Nichole King, *Sombreros and Motorcycles in a Newer South: The Politics of Aesthetics in South Carolina’s Tourism Industry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). For information on the rest stop’s current attractions (including Pedro, a 97 ft. statue with legs that “you can drive your car through”), see the official website “South of the Border,” <http://www.thesouthoftheborder.com/>.

¹⁴⁰ Jacob, “Anni Albers: A Modern Weaver as Artist,” 96.

¹⁴¹ Jacob, “Anni Albers: A Modern Weaver as Artist,” 96.

¹⁴² Paternosto, “Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm,” 89.

unstretched fabric instead of canvas—by *several nameless masters of abstract art* [italicized in original].”¹⁴³

From this example, Parker and Pollock determine that the craft and feminine associations of woven work have to be transformed in order to appreciate these objects as art: “The geometric becomes abstract, woven blankets become paintings and women weavers become nameless masters.”¹⁴⁴ That Anni changed the presentation of her woven art is revealing of her efforts to create work that would also be recognized and appreciated as modern art. That scholars commend these efforts, without any discussion of *South of the Border*’s cross-cultural inspiration (drawing on pop culture references or otherwise), is also revealing of the language that continues to be used to discuss and celebrate modern art.

Accordingly, scholars have applied different metaphors and comparisons to discuss the cross-cultural inspiration found in Anni’s and Josef’s geometric abstraction. These interpretations have offered various approaches to understanding how Anni and Josef negotiated their Mexican experiences into their work and how they engaged in these artistic dialogues across media. Attention to the language used in these interpretations also reveals how scholars have consequently challenged, and reinforced, the cultural definitions and hierarchies that have defined abstract modern art and the perceptions of the Anni’s and Josef’s art.

¹⁴³ Parker and Pollock, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of Art,” 68. Original citation: ‘Navaho Abstraction,’ *Art and Artists*, 1974, p. 30.

¹⁴⁴ Parker and Pollock, “Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of Art,” 68.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Investigating the art and artistic responses that Anni and Josef Albers produced as a result of their travels to Mexico reveals how they engaged in cross-cultural dialogues and channeled this inspiration into their work. This inquiry thus brings to light what aspects of their trips the Alberses considered important to document and what they wanted to share with others. It also underscores the individual visions of these travelers, and notes how their aesthetic ideals and personal prejudices shaped their shared experiences. Considering these elements in relation to their artistic production, discloses how Josef and Anni negotiated their experiences in Mexico and reveals how they wanted to be understood as artists.

Additionally, this discussion of cross-cultural influences brings different art historical discourses together. The ideas of “cross-cultural inspiration” and “travel experiences” are concepts which evoke questions of appropriation and cultural definitions of art, especially when manifested visually or in writing. Post-colonial art history has also revealed the problematic language that has been used to distinguish Western and non-Western art. That this discourse echoes the one that maintains the hierarchical position of the fine arts over the decorative arts is significant. Thus the ways that scholars have analyzed Josef’s paintings, Anni’s weavings, and their relationship to Mexican art, significantly shapes the perception of all of these art objects.

Accordingly, the Alberses’ experiences should be recognized for their historical specificity, and they should be acknowledged for their engagement in explorations that were cross-cultural and across media. It is important to recognize the choices that each artist made, and how interpretations of these choices continue to significantly shape an understanding of how Josef and Anni Albers endeavored to create modern, abstract art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albers, Anni. "The Pliable Plane: Textiles in Architecture." *Perspecta* 4 (1957): 36-41.
- Albers, Anni. *Pre-Columbian Mexican Miniatures: The Josef and Anni Albers Collection*. New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970.
- Albers, Josef. *The Interaction of Color*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Auther, Elissa. *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Bergdoll, Barry and Leah Dickerman. *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops For Modernity*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009.
- Berger, Dina and Andrew Grant Wood. *Holiday in Mexico: Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Bloom, Nicholas Dagen. *Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism beyond the Border*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.
- Borchardt-Hume, Achim, ed. *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: from the Bauhaus to the New World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Braun, Barbara. *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World: American Sources of Modern Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993.
- Buchenau, Jürgen. *Mexico OtherWise: Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.
- Castleberry, May, ed. *The New World's Old World: Photographic Views of Ancient America*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003.
- Cody, Jeffrey W. and Frances Terpak. *Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011.
- Danilowitz, Brenda and Heinz Liesbrock, eds. *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys*. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007.
- Danilowitz, Brenda, ed. *Anni Albers. Selected Writings on Design*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Debroise, Olivier. *Mexican Suite: A History of Photography in Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001.
- Delpar, Helen. *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992.

- Desorgues, Juliette, et al. *Bauhaus: Art as Life*. London: Koenig Books, in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 2012.
- Gilderhus, Kirsten E. "Homage to the Pyramid: Josef Albers in Mexico." Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 2011.
- Gomringer, Eugen. *Josef Albers: His Work As Contribution To Visual Articulation In The Twentieth Century*. New York: George Wittenborn, n.d.
- Landau, Ellen G. *Mexico and American Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.
- Miller, Mary Ellen. *The Art of Mesoamerica: From Olmec to Aztec*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1996.
- Müller, Ulrike. *Bauhaus Women: Art, Handcraft, Design*. Paris: Flammarion, S.A., 2009.
- Naggar, Carole and Fred Richtin, eds. *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes, 1850-1990*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993.
- Oles, James. *South of the Border: Mexico in the American Imagination 1914-1947*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Panzer, Mary. "The American Love Affair with Mexico, 1920-1970." *Archives of American Art Journal* 49: 3-4 (2010): 14-25.
- Pakay, Sedat. *Josef and Anni Albers: Art Is Everywhere*. Hudson, NY: Hudson Film Works, 2006. Videorecording.
- Parker, Rozsika and Griselda Pollock. *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Pandora, 1995.
- Paternosto, César. *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm*. Brussels: Societé des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Brussels, 2002.
- Robinson, Mike and David Picard, eds. *The Framed World: Tourism, Tourists And Photography*. Farnham, England/Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2009.
- Shiner, Larry. "'Primitive Fakes,' 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 225-234.
- Taube, Karl. *The Albers Collection of Pre-Columbian Art*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1988.
- Troy, Virginia Gardner. *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain College*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002.
- Veneciano, Jorge Daniel, ed. *The Geometric Unconscious: A Century of Abstraction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.

Wearing, Stephen, Deborah Stevenson, and Tamara Young. *Tourist Cultures: Identity, Place and the Traveller*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2010.

Weber, Nicholas Fox. *Josef Albers: A Retrospective*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1988.

Weber, Nicholas Fox. *The Bauhaus Group: Six Masters of Modernism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

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

Weber, Nicholas Fox and Jessica Boissel. *Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky: Friends in Exile: A Decade of Correspondence, 1929-1940*. Manchester and New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2010.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Due to copyright restrictions, the illustrations for this thesis are only available in the hard copy version that is on file in the Visual Resources Center in the Katzen Art Center at American University.