

EYE-OPENING HOMECOMING

The Asheville Art museum hosts Josef Albers' work

BY KATHERINE DUNCAN

No. It's a rare exhibition of art.

Were he still alive (he died in 1976), Josef Albers would no doubt be pleased by the care now being taken with his work. According to his own writings, U.S. Customs broke "ten of thirty-two glass pictures" when he and his wife Anni arrived in the United States from their native Germany in 1933.

Today, however, several of those precious surviving pieces have been carefully mounted and included in "Josef Albers: Glass, Color and Light," on display through Jan. 4, 1997 at the Asheville Art Museum — one of only six international venues hosting the exhibition.

What cargo is so precious, it has to be transported from Connecticut to Asheville in an air-cushioned, climate-controlled, 18-wheel tractor-trailer, and followed by a courier in a car?

Some new, highly volatile, secret weapon dreamed up by the Pentagon, to be deployed in the mountains?

Or, perhaps, those extraterrestrial bodies we all secretly believe the U.S. government has been hiding for years, now destined to be stashed in Pisgah National Forest?

October 22, 1996



Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in 1948.

Albers is a major figure in the history of modern art — and a man who wasn't afraid of making radical shifts in his life and career. In 1920, at an age when many of his peers were irrevocably settled in their life-courses, Albers chucked his respected role as a schoolteacher to enroll in the experimental Bauhaus school of applied arts, in Weimar, Germany. The Bauhaus, which aimed to bring leading lights in architecture, modern technology and visual art together so they could learn from one another, was led by such luminaries as Walter Gropius, Vassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.

"I was thirty-two ... threw all my old things out the window, started once more from the bottom," Albers later wrote of his decision to become an artist. "That was the best step I made in my life."

Albers' father first taught him to etch glass, and Albers resurrected this medium in Weimar. Lacking money, Albers worked with discarded glass scavenged from urban refuse, and the results are illuminating, showcasing both the artist's profound ability and his innate sense of color and design.

Gitterbild (Grid Mounted), featured in the show, was created in 1921, during Albers' Bauhaus tenure: Glass pieces are interlaced with copper wire in a sheet of fence latticework, creating a series of tiny squares within squares. Nevertheless, *Gitterbild* predates Albers' later obsession with the square, as seen in his *Homage to the Square* series (1950-65), which used compositions of squares-within-squares in varied color relationships to create paintings, prints and tapestries. Several examples of this famous series, which heavily influenced later abstract painters, are also included in the traveling exhibit.

"No matter what the medium or vehicle, his concerns remained consistent throughout his career," notes Asheville Museum of Art Curator Frank Thomson III.

Color was perhaps Albers' primary concern, as evidenced in both his art work and his teachings: He is known throughout the world for his contributions to color theory. His *The Interaction of Color* (Yale University Press, 1963) has, for years, been a standard text for art and design students.

"The primary objective of my teaching of color is recognition of how color constantly deceives us," Albers wrote. "We study experimentally the interaction of color with color and light ..."

But Albers is far better known for his paintings than for his works in glass. Both *Gitterbild* and the later work *Park* (1924) showcase Albers' fascination with the interaction between color and light; while their abstract and impersonal calm reflect the international architectural style of the 1920s, which used the cube as a modular unit, and glass walls to visually lighten large structures.

Factory, which also survived the U.S. Customs mauling in 1933, was created eight years earlier by sandblasting opaque flashed glass. It shows Albers delving into more complex compositions, and transforming shapes by positioning them in different configurations and reversing figure and ground.

The arrival of Albers' work in Asheville represents something of a homecoming: When the Gestapo closed the Bauhaus school and Albers fled Germany, he and his wife Anni came to western North Carolina. From 1933 through 1949, the couple taught at Black Mountain College, the experimental liberal-arts school which also attracted such other well-known artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Motherwell and Kenneth Noland.

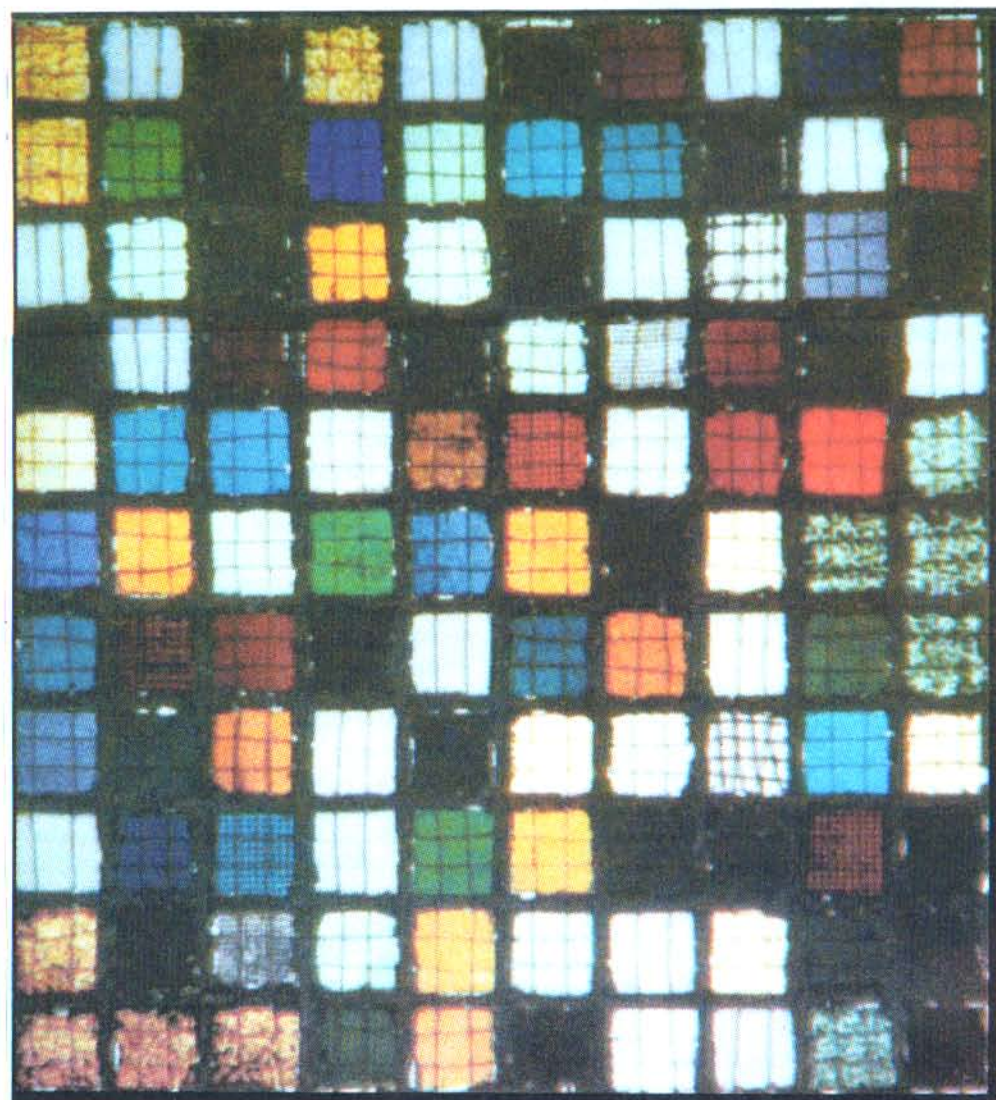
"Josef Albers: Glass, Color and Light" was organized by the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, but the show has been updated for its trip to Asheville, incorporating pieces Albers created in Black Mountain.

If the show's content is a bit on the heady side, the Asheville Art Museum has provided programs and other aids to help viewers along. Museum staff will be present at all times, and a CD-ROM edition of Albers' *Interaction of Color* is on hand for those who want to create their own experiments in color. The museum will also be

hosting workshops and other Albers-related programs, a film on Albers entitled *To Open Eyes* (shown in the gallery), and a presentation by Nicholas Fox Weber, director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, on Wednesday, Oct. 23, at 6 p.m. (a dinner, held on the museum's promenade, will follow).

Albers' work introduces new ways of seeing — and that, after all, is the role of museums, which can only thrive in communities whose eyes are open to the crucial importance of individual expression.

The Asheville Art Museum's Appleby Gallery hosts "Josef Albers: Glass, Color and Light," a superb exhibit spanning the career of an influential and inspired artist, which runs through Jan. 4, 1997. Admission is \$3, and the museum is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. Call 253-3227 for more information.



Josef Albers' *Gitterbild* (Grid Mounted), from 1921: glass pieces in mixed media.