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Virginia Gardner Troy
Emory University, vtroy@berry.edu

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ANNI ALBERS: PRE-COLUMBIAN RESONANCES **The Significance of Pre-Columbian Art In Her Textiles and Writings**

by Virginia Gardner Troy
Emory University, Atlanta

Beginnings are usually more interesting than elaborations and endings. Beginning means exploration, limited, not circumscribed by the tried and traditional. For those of us concerned in our work with the adventure of search, going back to beginnings is seeing ourselves mirrored in other's work, not in the result but in the process.

Therefore, I find it intriguing to look at early attempts in history, not for the sake of historical interest, that is, of looking back, but for the sake of looking forward from a point way back in time in order to experience vicariously the exhilaration of accomplishment reached step by step.

This is learning.

Anni Albers 1965 p.52

Introduction

Anni Albers is known primarily for her contribution to the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop and her woven prototypes for industrial production; she has rarely been acknowledged for her role in reviving and redefining the Pre-Columbian fiber art tradition. She researched, analyzed, collected, and extensively wrote about Pre-Columbian textiles. Her seminal text, *On Weaving*, 1965, is not only dedicated to Andean weavers, "my great teachers, the weavers of ancient Peru", but is essentially a textbook of Andean weaving techniques, revived and meticulously analyzed by Albers. Furthermore, she and her husband, Josef Albers, amassed an important collection of ancient Mesoamerican sculpture, acquired during and after their many trips to that region. Her "pictorial weavings", (a term she preferred over tapestry, even though they are not pictorial in a figurative or narrative way), and her industrial designs (often one and the same) owe a great deal to the monuments of ancient Mesoamerica as well as to Andean textiles.

The technical and philosophical approaches that Albers developed at the Bauhaus from 1922-33 are surprisingly similar to those of her Pre-Columbian counterparts; both succeeded in maintaining the inherent truth to their chosen materials, and in creating a visual grammar based on abstraction. Although Albers doubtless had knowledge of the extensive non-Western collections in Munich and Berlin, it was only after her emigration to the United States in 1933 and her subsequent direct contact with Pre-Columbian art and source material that her theories were fully refined. This paper will illuminate and analyze some of the essential issues shared by Albers and her Pre-Columbian counterparts.

Bauhaus Principles

Anni Albers was born near Berlin in 1899. She attended the Hamburg School of Applied Arts (1919-20), and transferred to the Bauhaus, Weimar, in 1922. She was attracted to the "purpose and direction" of the new school (Albers 1947b:36) which sought to resolve the growing conflicts and divisions between art and industry, artist and craftsman. As founding Director Walter Gropius wrote in 1919:

... Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith. (Wingler:31)

Students received both theoretical and practical training in order to prepare them for careers as artists and designers. After taking the compulsory six-month Basic Course, Albers joined the Weaving Workshop, one of six workshops offered.

Gropius certainly was not the first to propose a workable marriage between art and industry (the German Werkbund is an earlier example), or to concern himself with the industrial revolution which threatened to alienate the laborer from his or her product (William Morris dealt with this issue much earlier). Nor was he the first to propose activity-based learning in order to develop and reinforce sensory and intuitive skills (Maria Montessori's methods are earlier examples of education reform). However, Gropius' idealist and utopian vision, fueled by earlier innovations, had time and place on its side. By 1919, the Weimar Republic, facing outright economic ruin, was willing to reopen and reform its art institutions; students, many fresh from the trenches, were seeking a new kind of training which would provide both a practical and spiritual foundation (Fransisco:36, 173-190).

The evolution of the Bauhaus Weaving Workshop mirrored the changing orientation of the Bauhaus from an ideological and visual testing ground to a more fully operational production institution with nearly self-supporting workshops tied to industry through the sale and licensing of individual pieces and designs. Anni Albers took part in the Bauhaus' development almost in its entirety (she was a student from 1922-30, and taught intermittently in Dessau and Berlin until the Nazi's forced the Bauhaus to close in 1933), thus she serves as an ideal representative of the period.

In the Weaving Workshop two essential principles were maintained in order to progress beyond the by then obsolete practice and function of narrative tapestry, which was thought to be spiritually remote, economically impractical, and not integral to daily life. First, it became increasingly important to explore and exploit the inherent properties of materials

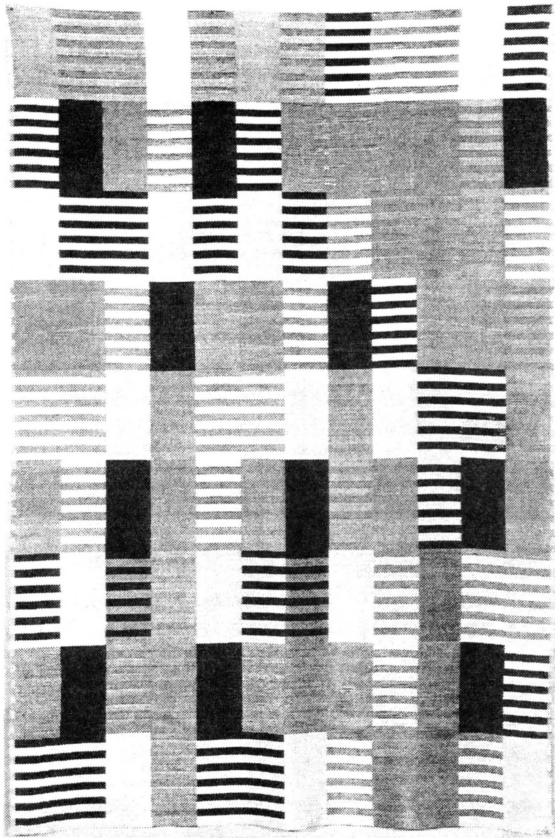
themselves, rather than impose unnatural designs on them, so that the overall form reflected the structure. Secondly, it became increasingly important to investigate the fundamental elements of design - color, value, line, unity, balance - and to use those abstract elements as a metaphorical and multi-applicable universal language. As Albers stated:

At the Bauhaus, those beginning to work in textiles at that time, for example, were fortunate not to have had the traditional training in the craft: it is no easy task to throw useless conventions overboard. Coming from Art Academies, they had felt a sterility there from too great a detachment from life. They believed that only working directly with the material could help them get back to a sound basis and relate them with the problems of their own time. (Albers 1938:38)

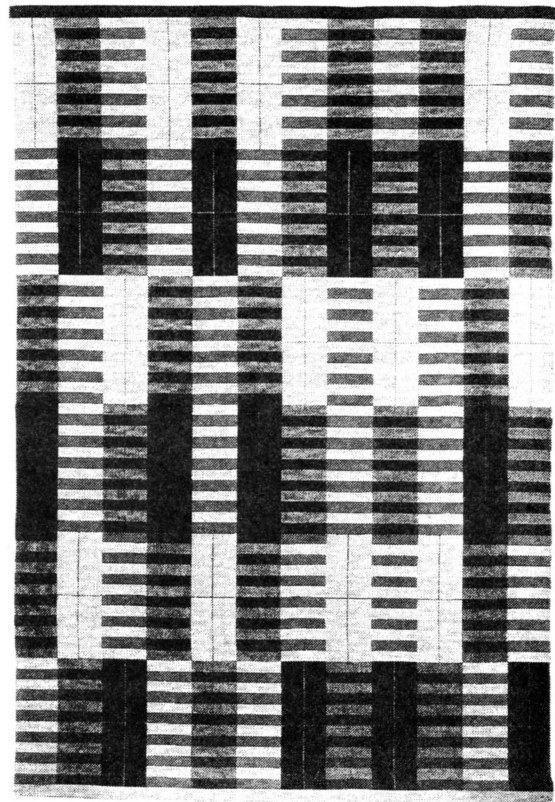
The emphasis on structure, materials and purity of form over imitation and illusionism was tied to the ongoing early twentieth century Primitivist discourse, one manifestation of which was fueled by the assumption that the further one goes back (technically, psychologically, formally) the simpler things become and ultimately the more profound, direct and universal one's expression (Goldwater:250-271). This attitude was also partly responsible for the elevation of handicrafts to a higher level of expressive and formal significance. Albers suggested this when she wrote:

Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials, that is, from materials in their original form. . . .But if we want to get from materials the sense of directness, the adventure of being close to the stuff the world is made of, we have to go back to the material itself. . . . We use materials to satisfy our practical needs and our spiritual ones as well. We have useful things and beautiful things - equipment and works of art. In earlier civilizations there was no clear separation of this sort. . . .[making art involves] listening for the dictation of the material and a taking in of the laws of harmony. It is for this reason that we can find certitude in the belief that we are taking part in an eternal order (Albers 1937:50-53)

International Constructivism and De Stijl also played a major role at the Bauhaus after 1921; all sought to increase their participation with industry while simultaneously striving to find new non-objective forms to meet the needs and spirit of a new society. These were significant issues in the Weaving Workshop because textile production and use is so integrally involved with daily life. Weaving, the most industrialized of fiber techniques, became the primary technique explored (Droste 1990:72). In order to understand materials, the weavers investigated the natural hues, textures, strengths, light absorbing and reflecting qualities, and other inherent properties of a variety of materials, from cotton to cellophane (Poling:37). Because the Weaving Workshop occasionally had limited access to dyes, the same dye lot would often have to suffice for all fibers (Weltge:94); for this reason the weavers innovatively exploited



Untitled, 1926, 72 x 48"
Silk triple-weave; Busch-Reisinger
Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge



Black-White-Red, 1927,
69-1/8 x 47-5/8" Silk triple-
weave; Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin

the color absorbing qualities of each fiber. Double-weave and triple-weave technologies were chosen to increase color intensity or to achieve additional colors through color-crossing. In addition to an emphasis on material properties, geometric forms were strongly emphasized in the Weaving Workshop. Geometric forms were recognized early at the Bauhaus as being pure, primary, objective forms, useful because they could be multiplied, used in infinite variety, and were fundamental to most materials. They also served as metaphors for natural polarities and multiplicities, controlled and harmonized within a regular system.

Albers' silk triple-weave pieces, *Untitled*, 1926, (fig. 1) and *Black White and Red*, 1927, (fig. 2) contributed to the international investigation of form and meaning. Figure and ground relationships are dissolved in favor of floating planes of pure and crossed color which create levels of pattern sequences and can be read metaphorically as the stabilization of opposing forces. She understood that certain forms and colors produce emotional and sensory responses, like "living things" as Kandinsky stated (quoted in Poling:27). For example, red will appear larger, more expansive and projecting next to white while appearing smaller, compressed and recessive next to black;

dynamic equilibrium can be created when red, black and white are counterbalanced (Poling:27-37). Her arrangements were guided both systematically (usually in multiples of three) and intuitively (no overall regular repeat appears) and are dynamic because of the perceptual oscillation which occurs between the flat surface pattern and the simultaneous illusion of depth.

Because Albers valued primary structures and abstract forms it is not surprising to learn that she admired non-Western textiles for those very reasons; what she saw, read and studied during this period is the subject of another paper. Albers was not alone in seeking non-Western models as evidence for the universal and enduring nature of certain forms and structures. However, while a direct comparison of Bauhaus with Andean textiles will reveal certain formal similarities such as rotational symmetry, contour rivalry, multi-directional organization, modularity and stacking, it is more important here to suggest that the principles Anni Albers developed at the Bauhaus involving material essence and abstraction as a carrier of ideas, predisposed her toward a rich rather than superficial understanding and appreciation of ancient American art.

Relevance of Pre-Columbian Art After 1933

In 1933, Anni and Josef Albers emigrated to the United States to begin new teaching careers at Black Mountain College, a new, multidisciplinary arts college in North Carolina. Anni Albers developed the weaving program, "by far the most advanced of the [BMC] workshops and the only one with a theoretical foundation" (Harris:8-9, 20).

In 1934, the Albers' took their first of 14 trips to Mexico and South America. In Mexico, they visited the Pre-Columbian sites of Chichen Itza, El Tajin, Mitla, Monte Alban, Palenque, Tenayuca, Teopanzolco, Teotihuacan, Tikal, Xochicalco and Uxmal; in Peru, they visited the Pre-Columbian sites of Machu Picchu, Ollantaytambo, Chan Chan and Huaca del Sol (Weber:79). They eventually assembled an important collection of over 1,000 pieces of Mesoamerican sculpture, mainly miniatures. Among some of the important pieces in their sculpture collection which relate formally to weaving are ceramics with incised and painted geometric patterns; stamps for pattern printing; repeated forms and variations of similar forms; and symmetrical and "twin" forms (animal and human forms which share body parts) (Taube:11).

Anni Albers also assembled a collection of modern and ancient textiles for the Black Mountain College collection, transferred in 1956 to Yale University (Harris:86, 132, 240) including an Andean weaving sampler, Chimu and Tiahuanaco tapestries, Andean and Mexican lace, a Nazca braid, and a Chancay painted textile (Albers 1965:199-204). This was intended to be a teaching collection and allowed Albers and her students to directly analyze the structure and pattern of Pre-Columbian textiles. In addition, she had her students work on back-strap looms which she brought back from Mexico (Harris:103).

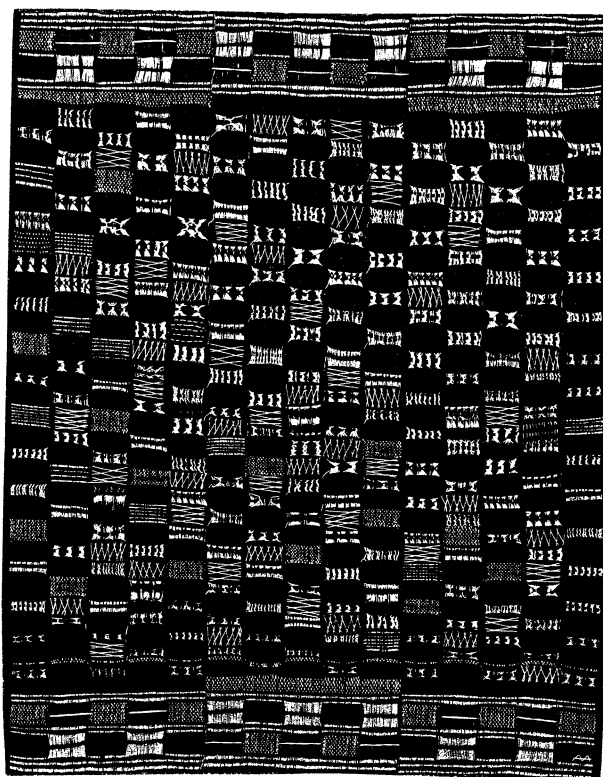
Albers was influenced and inspired by Andean textiles as seen in some of the direct and indirect references she made in her art, writing and research. For example, she wrote "A Structural Process in Weaving", 1952, in which she developed the thesis that the long lengths of cloths wrapped around Paracas necropolis mummy bundles were produced from double, triple and quadruple cloth technology woven in fan format to be ultimately unfolded into an unbroken rectangle. In addition to admiring Andean technical virtuosity, Albers particularly admired the variety of Andean textiles with interlocked abstract forms:

Works of art, to my mind, are the ancient Peruvian pieces, preserved by an arid climate and excavated after hundreds and even thousands of years. There are those, large or small, of the Tiahuanaco period, for instance - tapestries in the pictorial as well as the technical sense - showing the deities of their Pantheon: or works from other periods, full of the life of their world. There are also the highly intelligent and often intricate inventions of lines or interlocking forms. Their personages, animals, plants, stepforms, zigzags, whatever it is they show, are all conceived within the weaver's idiom. Where clear outlines are wanted, the threads are maneuvered into position to do this, sometimes in surprising and ingenious ways varying in inventiveness from piece to piece. A unique method, for instance, is that of interlocking not only the weft but the warp itself. Where relief effects are believed to strengthen the presentation, they are added and worked out imaginatively and skillfully, as are other desirable supports. Of infinite fantasy within the world of threads, conveying strength or playfulness, mystery or the reality of their surroundings, endlessly varied in presentation and construction, even though bound to a code of basic concepts, these textiles set a standard of achievement that is unsurpassed (Albers 1965:69).

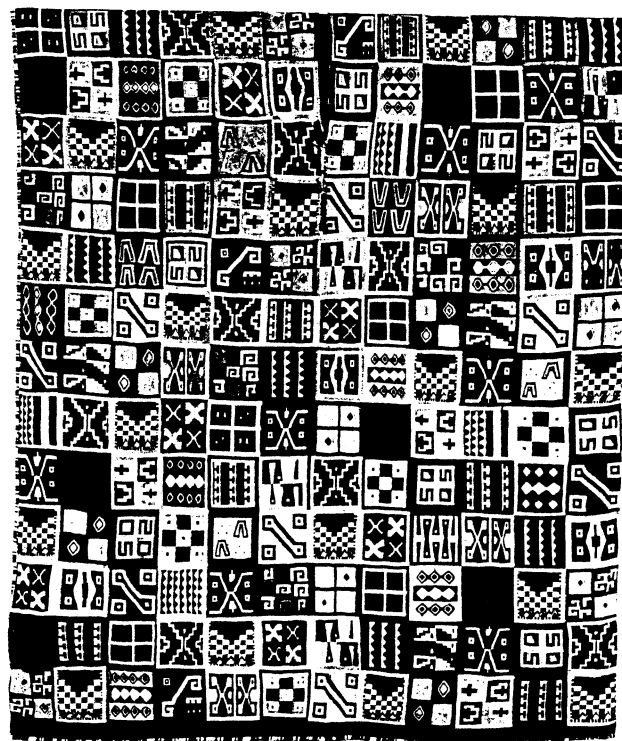
This admiration was shared by her husband, Josef, who stated in the late 1930's the "Abstracting is the essential function of the human spirit"; he, too, believed that Pre-Columbian artists were "THE representatives of abstract art" because of their "truthfulness to conception and material, truthfulness to art as spiritual creation" (quoted in Harris:13).

Albers, as always, continued to infuse her weaving with an underlying geometric system based on grids and units which provided infinite formal and metaphoric possibilities. She most likely understood and admired the role geometry played in Andean textiles beyond formal inventiveness. In Andean textiles geometry was used as a significant carrier of meaning: as a metaphor of control over chaos (Stone-Miller 1992b), as a method of standardization and a symbol of economic organization (Niles 1992), to subvert complex iconographical programs (Stone-Miller 1992a), and to act as a metaphor for cosmological viewpoints (Conklin 1986). Certainly Albers' understanding of Andean textiles helped strengthen her conviction that "again and again, straight lines, right angles and geometric forms are the signatures of man" (Brooklyn:9).

After 1933, Albers began to elaborately explore techniques of openwork in her weaving, in part because of her contact with Andean openwork textiles (Jacob:71-72); and perhaps by this time she would have been familiar with numerous scholarly publications dealing with Andean textiles, including Raoul d'Harcourt's 1924 Les Tissus Indiens du Vieux Perou (Leland). In addition, she often combined techniques within a single piece, as in Andean weaving (Stone-Miller 1992a:20). Albers particularly liked to use double weaves in combination with openwork techniques; by twisting alternating sections and layers of warps, she could create a three-dimensional structure of floating fields while anchoring the all-over pattern within a grid system. In her best work, such as *Thickly Settled*, 1957, (fig. 3) she used a combination of double cloth, openwork, and supplementary floating weft to create a visual dictionary of pattern sequences and layers which can be read simultaneously as an elaborate overall grid pattern and a composition of small motifs. Not only does *Thickly Settled* share formal similarities with the Bliss Inca *tocapu* tunic at Dumbarton Oaks (fig. 4), but they are very close in size and proportion. Albers may have seen the tunic in Washington during the 1940's and 50's (Benson:22).



Thickly Settled, 1957, 31 x 24-3/8"
Cotton and Jute, Yale Univ. Art
Gallery, New Haven, CT



Inca Tunic, 35-7/8 x 30"; Cotton and
camelid; Dumbarton Oaks Research
Library and Collections, Wash. DC.

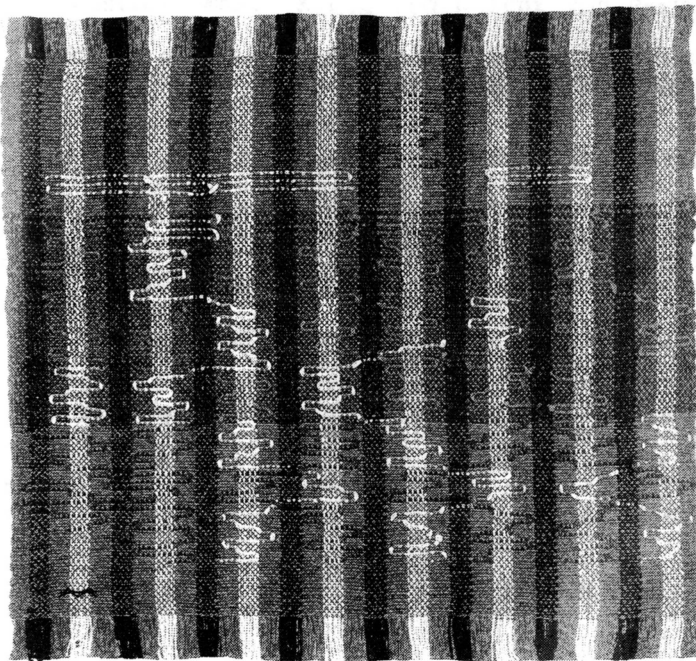
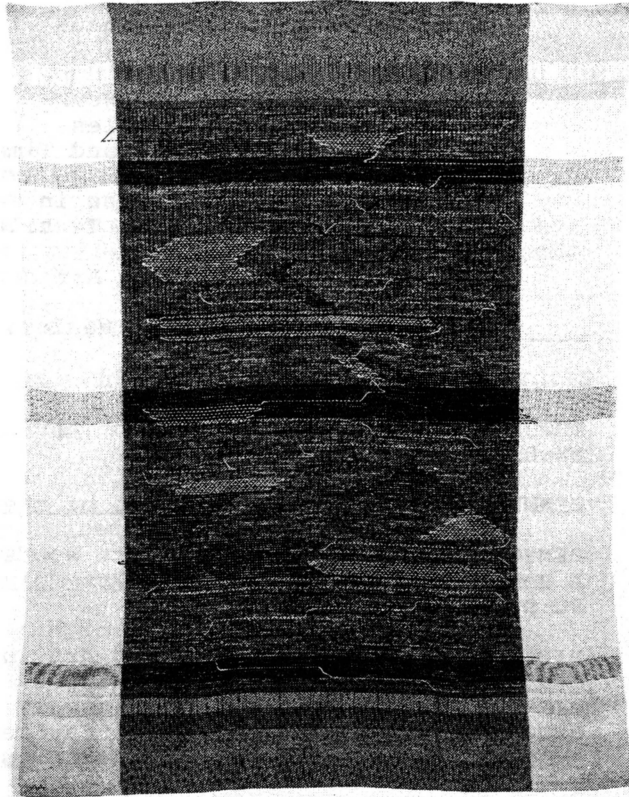
In addition to technical explorations, Albers began to experiment with the overall size and format of her compositions. For example, *South of the Border*, 1958, (cotton and wool, Baltimore Museum of Art), is a very small, horizontal piece, only 4-1/8 x 15-1/4". She realized that the relative smallness of a work of art had no bearing on its quality. "It becomes obvious," she said, "that greatness is not a matter of volume, that the monumental can be embedded in the minute" (Albers 1970:1). This attitude may have originated at the Bauhaus from one of her teachers, Paul Klee, who preferred a hand-size scale in order to quickly and economically execute the essence of his ideas. Equally important to Albers would be her understanding of Pre-Columbian miniatures which represent condensed expressions of time, materials and ideas (Bruce, McEwan and van de Guchte).

Many of Albers' weavings evoke a sense of place, rather than present a literal "picture" of a particular landscape. It is not surprising that she was inspired by Pre-Columbian architecture. As her palette enlarged, and she used more colors within each piece, color also seemed to take on a symbolic meaning as it referred to, often with an accompanying title, the Mexican and South American landscape and climate. *Monte Alban*, 1936, (fig. 5) and *Tikal*, 1958, have muted and neutral hues, the colors of stone, grass and sand. She was particularly inspired by the ancient site of Monte Alban: "We were aware of layer upon layer of former civilization under the ground", she stated (Albers 1970:2). Her weaving, *Monte Alban*, evokes the steep steps, huge blocks of stone, angles and plateaus, even the natural hues of this ancient site. Floating wefts ascend and descend the stone-like support; horizontal and vertical stripes interlock and transpose one another. Her mastery of the fiber medium allowed her to produce a complex web of textures and layers which infuse the work with literal, optical and conceptual depth.

A persistent and significant theme in Albers' art is the semiological nature of signs; many of her weavings deal with aspects of text, prayer, pictographic writing and calligraphy. Albers created *Ancient Writing*, 1936, as a possible companion piece to *Monte Alban* (Jacob:90), and it is significant that she began to investigate this theme as she was discovering Pre-Columbian art. Again, Paul Klee emerges as an additional source of influence in this context, for he, too, valued cryptic, symbolic and ideographic communication (Goldwater:193-203). In *Intersecting*, 1962, (fig. 6) Albers used floating wefts to transcribe the color-crossed support; an eloquent yet cryptic visual text emerges from the shifting color planes (Jacob:98). Depending on the orientation of the viewer, one's reading of Albers' text weavings constantly varies. They can be "read" in any direction, from right to left, top to bottom, or any variation thereof; the "texts" can be read as overall scripts, scrolls or maps. Like many Andean textiles, these "prayers" are encoded messages, understood according to one's ideological orientation.

In conclusion, Albers at once echoed and redefined the voice of her ancient Andean counterpart, not through imitation but by adapting a weaving tradition begun over 5,000 years ago to her modern environment and sensibilities. She shared many ideological principles with her Pre-Columbian counterparts, particularly those concerning material essence and abstraction as a carrier of meaning.

Monte Alban, c.1936; 57-1/2 x 44-1/2"
Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard
University, Cambridge



Intersecting, 1962 15-3/4 x 16-1/2"
Katherine and Nicholas Fox Weber
Orange, CT

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