

The Museum of Modern Art

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Eight early black and white prints and eight recent uninked embossed linear constructions by artist Josef Albers will be on exhibit at The Museum of Modern Art from December 8th through March 15th, 1970. The exhibition, entitled THE GRAPHIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF JOSEF ALBERS, was directed by Riva Castleman, Assistant Curator for Prints and Illustrated Books, and is installed in the Northeast Gallery on the Main Floor.

In 1968 Albers commemorated his eightieth birthday with the publication of a pamphlet devoted to his series of eight lithographs called Graphic Tectonic, printed in 1942, and presented a set of the eight prints to the Museum. With the appearance of his new series, Embossed Linear Constructions, Albers has carried his work with graphic constructions even further.

This second group of eight prints, printed by Gemini G.E.L in Los Angeles and donated by them to the Museum, offers a fortunate opportunity to study side by side the two series printed a quarter of a century apart.

Basically, both series are devoted to the capacity of pure, straight line to produce an infinite variety of visual images. Although in the Graphic Tectonic series the lines change width, in order to create depth, and in the newer prints line is actually a raised uninked ridge, both series rest upon the construction possibilities of line. According to Miss Castleman, "the Graphic Tectonic series taken together sums up all the tendencies seen in Albers' development throughout the 1930's, including to some extent several of the functions of color which he examined at Black Mountain College." In it he explores, if not exhausts, some of the basic elements of all "pictures" as they can be defined by the use of line. These elements are: the possibilities of reversible image or inverse symmetry, multiple view of the same image, interchangeable volume, sharing of common contours, and interaction of transparent planes.

Born in Germany in 1888, Albers now lives in New Haven, Connecticut. His work encompasses glass pictures of the Bauhaus period, drawings, oils, gouaches, wall paintings, lithographs, linocuts, woodcuts, etchings, engravings and serigraphs. His works in public collections are found in at least a dozen countries and about half of the States in this country including about sixty works in The Museum of Modern Art Collection, and his works may be found as well in commercial buildings such as the Corning Glass Building in New York.

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Albers came to America in 1933, after the Bauhaus was closed, and taught at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, from 1933 to 1949. In 1942, he worked on Graphic Tectonic during his first sabbatical year, part of which he spent at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. In creating these prints, he relied on drafting tools and the consistent performance of zinc lithography. At that time he wrote that the illusionary modulations created by the regular parallel lines "require the use of ruler and drafting pen and establish unmodulated lines as a legitimate artistic means. In this way they oppose a belief that the handmade is better than the machine-made, or that mechanical construction is anti-graphic or unable to arouse emotion." According to Miss Castleman, Albers has been concerned throughout his career with the most economical means of handling materials. In some instances this meant using paint directly from the tube, as he did in his Homage to the Square paintings. While he had previously created inkless embossed prints, Embossed Linear Constructions, Miss Castleman states, "are the first in which machinery achieves the perfection that the Albers straight line must have." The drawing, or mechanical scheme, was translated by an engineering programmer to digital tape. The tape directed an automatic engraving mill to cut the plates, and the paper was embossed from the plates on a hydraulic forming machine, using extreme heat and pressure to set the image. Whereas in Graphic Tectonic the title implies the constructed character of the works, which are "built with elements that are produced by mechanical means and arranged in an emphasized mechanical order," Embossed Linear Constructions fulfills the artist's intentions far more completely than he could have then imagined.

As a professor at Yale University, a poet and philosopher, Albers' influence in the second half of this century extends beyond his own work as an artist. Having devoted most of his long career to the understanding of color and line, his theories, put into visual applications, are simultaneously exercises in perception and profound aesthetic experiences. According to Miss Castleman, "any description of Albers' work must emphasize the compositional factors grounded on his theories, but the ultimate satisfaction is not in deciphering the code on which the work is based. It is the code itself which is beautiful."

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