

## Black Mountain College Case: Transformation Trends in Art Education in the First Half of the 20th Century\*

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**Abstract:** In the 19th century, a gradual reform of art education began, which achieved its peak in the 1930s. This process manifested itself in the form of schools with an explicit anti-academic spirit – the Bauhaus in Europe and Black Mountain College in the United States. In this paper, I contend that such attempt at reform has never repeated again after the Black Mountain College case, where the combination of John Dewey’s educational principles, Josef Albers’ peculiar conception of art instruction, and the college founders’ ideas concerning the essentiality of art for contemporary democratic societies created a unique environment for the development of an experimental form of art education. Examining this innovation with regard to the current situation of teaching art and the humanities, I argue that - despite a process of reform lasted more than a hundred years - art education still manifests residues of the old, conservative academic spirit, while art schools show features of exclusivity or even elitism. The pursuit for a wholesome social position of art, on the other hand, was the most striking endeavour of many brilliant thinkers in 19th and 20th century (e.g. Semper, Morris, Lichtwark, Dewey, Albers), something that art educators and art theoreticians of the 21st century must take this into a serious consideration.

**Keywords:** Black Mountain College, Josef Albers, art education, learning by doing, perception, ethics.

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### Introduction

Black Mountain College, a school founded in 1933 in Black Mountain, North Carolina was a a new kind of college in the United States in which the study of art was seen to be central to liberal arts education, and in which John Dewey’s principles of education played a major role. Many of its students and faculty were influential in the arts or other fields, or went on to become influential, such as Josef Albers, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Kenneth Snelson. Although notable even during its short life, the school closed in 1957 after only 24 years of operation (Anonymous [online], 2017).

In spite of the fact, that Black Mountain College became mainly famous for its graduates, e.g. John Cage or Robert Rauschenberg, who made a huge impact on the art field, I am rather focusing on the path which led to the establishment of the college as a specific and progressive type of art educational institution that was centred around anti-academic and anti-traditional concept influenced by the most fundamental school of this type – the Bauhaus (see Wick, 2000; Bergdoll – Dieckerman, 2009).

I aspire to trace this path from the reforming movements of art education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (represented by ideas of French Leon de Laborde, German Gottfried Semper or English Owen Jones and William Morris), when the problem of applied arts education or design school became more prominent and

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traditional academies were enforced to change their conservative and (at the same time) conserving curriculum (Pevsner, 2018, p. 250). Nonetheless, the main goal of my paper is to present and endorse theoretical background of the progressive educational methods and ideas of the leading figure of Black Mountain College – Josef Albers.

### Historical survey: the cracks in the shield of the “traditional” academy

As Nicolas Pevsner (in his famous book *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, originally published in 1940) pointed out, in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prevailing trend of the time was to deprive the craftsman of all creative work. But this started to change in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when different scholars published their ideas about need for a returned unity of art and craft. Architect Gottfried Semper (1851)<sup>1</sup> critically declared that academic instruction lead to “*an over-production of artists not justified by demand*” (Semper in Pevsner, 2018, p. 252). He added: “*Tuition in Fine Arts and Decorative Art should not be separated at all. All training should take place in workshops conducted in a spirit of community and with a 'brotherly relationship between master and apprentice'*” (Ibidem, p. 252). Another milestone appeared to be the William Morris’s theory (see Clamp, 1987, pp. 40–53; Morris, 2008). He learned tapestry-weaving to acquire an insight into the process which must govern design.<sup>2</sup> In contrast with concepts of designers as mere decorators, Morris’ educational methods emphasised organic inter-relation between material, working process, purpose and aesthetic form. In the fashion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, he yearned for the Middle Ages. Morris preferred a “*wholesome social position of art, and consequently, beauty*”; as well as (similarly the Nazarens) idea, that artists together with craftsmen should be educated in workshops<sup>3</sup> (Pevsner, 2018, pp. 259–260).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Pevsner asserts, that the most important steps in the reformation of art education was not taken in Britain, but in Germany. It was Alfred Lichtwark (and his *Kunsterziehungs*<sup>5</sup>), who came with the cardinal opinion: “*Art, because it is the expression of the creative powers in man, must be made the centre-piece of all education. The school of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, too exclusively intellectual, has completely neglected the artistic faculties which exist in every child. Thus life became drab and mechanized*” (Lichtwark in Pevsner, 2018, p. 266). The second key moment occurred, when *Kunstgewerbeschulen*<sup>6</sup> adopted a method of teaching in workshops (1902).

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations are taken from H. Semper: *G. Semper, ein Bild seines Lebens und Wirkens*, Berlin, (1880, p. 21) in Pevsner, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of weaving in an educational or scientific processes was also proven by Ada K. Dietz, who used the artistic craft for an algebra, to visualise multivariate polynomials. As an outcome, she published her famous work *Algebraic Expressions in Handwoven Textiles* (1949).

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the workshop as an educational method for the art education – not just in fine arts, but also in the theatrical field is stressed in the text of Eva Kušnířová (2019, s. 164): “*The aesthetic interaction, that is a condition of aesthetic experience, thus establishes an aesthetic relationship between the viewer or recipient and the actor or object, while the possibility of experiencing the aesthetic situation is not unilateral. To the same extent, where a recipient is invited to experience that aesthetic condition, the actors may also benefit from such aesthetic condition, especially when it comes to a creative workshop where do students (and thus, inexperienced artists) participate [...]*”.

<sup>4</sup> In his famous work *Useful Work v. Useless Toil*, originally published in 1888 (especially praised and quoted by Marxists), William Morris (2008, p. 100) wrote a critical remark on an account of the academic art schooling and revealed it as principally elitist: “*At present, all education is directed towards the end of fitting people to take their places in the hierarchy of commerce - these as masters, those as workmen. The education of the masters is more ornamental than that of the workmen, but it is commercial still; and even at the ancient universities learning is but little regarded, unless it can in the long run be made to pay*”.

<sup>5</sup> The key publication on Lichtwark’s art education concept is *Alfred Lichtwark: Kunsterziehung als Kulturpolitik* by Nobumasa Kiyonaga (2008).

<sup>6</sup> Schools of arts and crafts or schools of applied arts were a kind of vocational arts schools established in German-speaking countries since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them existed until the 1920s, afterwards they were merged with academies of art or universities. The good example of such a combined institution is the Slovak Academy of

Unlike Morris' Britain art schooling, Werkbund-movement did not decline machine industry, oppositely, they understood, that besides handwork, new art education must concern machinery.

Germany's aspirations were directed by men who knew that architecture and design would be more essential to an authentic style of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than painting and sculpture, and who acted accordingly. In two centres above all the re-birth of the academy of art was achieved; at Weimar, where Gropius founded and developed the Bauhaus, and at Berlin, where under Bruno Paul, the famous academy was completely amalgamated with the Kunstgewerbeschule. The curriculum of the Walter Gropius' school was clearly conceived to serve this programme. It consisted of practical instruction in the use of stone, wood, metal, glass, clay, textiles, pigments; and of formal instruction, which was divided as follows: study of nature of materials, study of geometry, construction and model-making; and study of design according to volume, colour and composition (Pevsner, 2018, p. 276).

Nonetheless, in the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's (1994) sociologic thinking, academy, above of all of art schools still has the most intensive *consecrating power* and academy also disposes of the variety of mechanisms of consecration and preservation of the game; it provides belief in the game, or – in Bourdieu's terminology – *libido artistica*. From all of mechanisms, I would like to highlight two: the “apparatus of the competition and prize giving”<sup>7</sup>; and the second one: so called *chef d'oeuvre*, masterpiece or magnum opus. In the candidate's fledgling career, this is no longer perceived as a training work, it is the best artwork of one's studies and the first “mature work”, the product of an artist. It represents a “portal”, a ritual artefact or, rather to say a “ticket” for entering the art field as an artist. We might admit that these two old academic mechanisms are still functioning. To suggest, in spite of many revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art education development, art colleges still preserve traditional academic institutional appliances.<sup>8</sup> By all means, Black Mountain College was the apparent heir of the Bauhaus legacy and of the aforementioned reformation processes.

### Community as a heart of Black Mountain College

Black Mountain College was founded in order to provide a place where tested and proved methods of education were used freely and new methods were tried out in a purely experimental spirit. Initially, it was not established as an art school. The curriculum embraced mathematics (prof. Drier), psychology (prof. Hickley), English (prof. Martin), classics (prof. Rice), economy (prof. Boyden), weaving (Anni Albers, formerly Bauhaus) and art (Josef Albers, formerly Bauhaus). At the same time, the college was a social

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Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, which has been from the beginning of its existence (1949) an amalgamation of the fine arts and crafts education institution.

<sup>7</sup> In case of the “art competition” and prize-giving Lukáš Makky (2019) has pointed out, that the institutional apparatus confuses aesthetic value with a potential economic value. Let us add, the prize can be perceived as a form of financial evaluation, which determines the position of an artwork on the art market. We can admit, that art market can “sell” also works of frauds, without high quality aesthetic value, but, at the same time, art market is a useful tool for a spreading artistic artifacts to the people's lives. Of course, there is no doubt, that art market has still bourgeois roots and it has elitist character.

<sup>8</sup> Above all academic institutional appliances, I would like to emphasise the entrance exam, which is in our cultural milieu called “talent exam”. For example, official requirements for applicants at Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (Czech Republic) are based on a drawing according to a live model, or, in the case of sculpture, on a “realistic portrait”, bust. For more information, see official web pages of the academy. Available at: <[https://www.avu.cz/sites/default/files/document/5958/2020\\_2021\\_prijimaci\\_rizeni\\_mgr\\_a\\_navazujici\\_mgr\\_studium.pdf](https://www.avu.cz/sites/default/files/document/5958/2020_2021_prijimaci_rizeni_mgr_a_navazujici_mgr_studium.pdf)>.

unit. I quote the bulletin foreword by college founders, where the art as a focus of the curriculum is articulated (Bulletin 3, originally published in 1933-1934):

*“Dramatics, Music, and the Fine Arts, which often exist precariously on the fringes of the curriculum, are regarded as an integral part of the life of the College and of importance equal to that of subjects that usually occupy the centre of the curriculum. In fact, in the early part of the student's career, they are considered of greater importance; [...] because of the conviction that, through some kind of art-experience, which is not necessarily the same as self-expression, the student can come to the realization of order in the world; and by being sensitized to movement, form, sound, and other media of the arts, gets a firmer control of himself and his environment than is not possible through purely intellectual effort”* (Anonymous, 2017).

The curriculum, organisational structure, and the core social justice values of its central faculty were all based in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey's magnum opus on the topic of education, *Democracy and education*, perhaps the central philosophical text of progressivism in education, was published in 1916; nevertheless, John Andrew Rice and Theodore Drier, two of the founders of the Black Mountain College continued to use *Democracy and Education* as a guidebook for the foundation of the college two decades later (Fischer, 2010).

Besides the college founders John Rice and Theodore Drier, probably the most influential personality at the college was Josef Albers. Entering the Bauhaus in 1920 in his early thirties, he had previously taught at primary school and later art, coming into contact with the flourishing reform education movement in Germany. Albers followed John Dewey (whose *Democracy and Education* appeared in Germany in 1916): its *learning by doing* rallied progressive educators throughout Europe (Díaz, 2008, p. 280). To paint a picture of his educational methods, let me quote a journalist, who was observing the college atmosphere for several months in 1935: *“The courses in art which Professor Josef Albers teaches at Black Mountain College are, surprisingly, not for artists but for people. [...] It is a standing joke, that the only course that was originally intended to be exclusively for students majoring in fine arts, is attended by nearly anyone in the college, students and faculty. It is painting seminar, which Professor Albers conducts informally, talking about any phase of painting he may choose”* (Young, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, I would like to highlight the principles of Josef Albers' art theory which is organically linked with his educational methods and opinions on education and society as such.

### **Josef Albers's art education**

To select and differentiate core problems of Albers's theory of art education, I suggest tracing these 3 topics: form, experience and perception (better to say – vision) which is in Albers's thoughts linked with ethics and politics. To Josef Albers, art itself was the experimental arm of culture; as well as an investigation into better forms that were the prerequisite of cultural production and progress. As we can see, for him art, experiment and education were an organic complex situated in a social and philosophical framework. To Albers, every perceivable thing had a form and every form had a meaning. But through routine, the richness of the visual and material world was frequently overlooked. Therefore, he started his courses for example with mirror writing or rendering the script in the non-dominant hand and other simple exercises aiming for de-familiarization for challenging sterile habits of observation (Díaz, 2008, pp. 260–265). As he wrote in his “educational manifesto” *Concerning Art Instruction* (originally published in Bulletin 2, 1934): *“Our first concern is not to turn out artists. We regard our elementary art work primarily as a means of general training for all students”* (Albers, 2017).

Albers believed that understanding the meaning of a form is the indispensable preliminary condition for culture. Culture is the ability to determine the more meaningful form, the better appearance, the better behaviour. Culture is concerned with quality and art is a part of culture, and, therefore – it is its proof and measurement (Díaz, 2008, p. 265).

His course Art Instruction was divided into three disciplines: Drawing, *Werklehre* (work with materials and forms) and Colour.<sup>9</sup> As he declared, drawing - we regard as a graphic language. We cannot communicate graphically what we do not see. Drawing consists of a visual and of a manual act. For the visual act one must learn to see the form as a three dimensional phenomenon. For the manual act the hand must be sensitized to the direction of will. With this in mind we begin each drawing lesson with general technical exercises: measuring, dividing, estimating; rhythms of measure and form, disposing, modifications of form (Albers, 2017). It is clear, that he excluded the so called expressive drawing (which was typical for abstract expressionists and led to release of subjective, individual emotional forms). Albers (2017) argues, that this type of exercise hardly results in a solid capability which alone can give the foundation and freedom for a more personal work. For this reason, the elementary drawing instruction is a handicraft instruction, strictly objective, unadorned through style and mannerism.

Albers explains: “*In Werklehre we cultivate particularly feeling for material and space. We want reach a general constructive thinking, especially a building thinking, which must be the basis of every work with every material*” (Albers, 2017). In short, *Werklehre* is training in adaptability in the whole field of construction and in constructive thinking in general. Finally, the Colour discipline was designed to prepare for a disciplined use of colour. Colour was always relational for Albers, as he argued: “[...] *we consider colour first as working material and study its qualities; we study systematically the tonal possibilities of colours, their relativity, their interaction and influence on each other*” (Albers, 2017). These fundamental studies occupied half a year. The striking aspect of the aforementioned postulates is slowness and discipline, but not discipline as a mere drill (in academic terms); it is a new concept of discipline in art education which is, paradoxically anti-academic and invented on the grounds where traditional academic preparation failed.

Albers advocated experiment without aiming to make a product. The goals of courses were not necessarily to produce anything useful but rather to train observation. He saw experimentation as the pre-eminent method by which the new and changing experiences of modernity could be expressed, and its modern problems addressed and he envisioned its practice as a disciplined testing process encouraging innovative visual articulations. Albers saw freedom for exploration and experimentation as antithetical to the negative freedom of someone who is a passive recipient of specific rights (freedom from something not freedom for something) (Díaz, 2008, p. 281).

The problem of perception has for Albers deep social, or rather ethical roots (see Díaz, 2008, p. 260; Barry, 2015). In his notes on design written in 1958 (*Dimensions of Design*) Albers (2014, p. 280) stresses the moral issue: “*With this I point at design as an outspoken human affair and its concern with quality and selection and consequently at its ethical implications*”. He praises design as an exclusively human acting, planning, producing, creating, making order. It is necessary to learn design, but really from the beginning, from so called elementary studies. He believes in a systematic step-by-step training of observation and articulation, that is, of clear seeing first, and of precise formulating the second. Albers (2014, p. 281) concludes: “*Basic design as a grammar of visual language cultivates 'thinking in situations'*”

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<sup>9</sup> These are supplemented by exhibitions and discussions of old and modern art, of handicraft and industrial products, of typographic and photographic work.

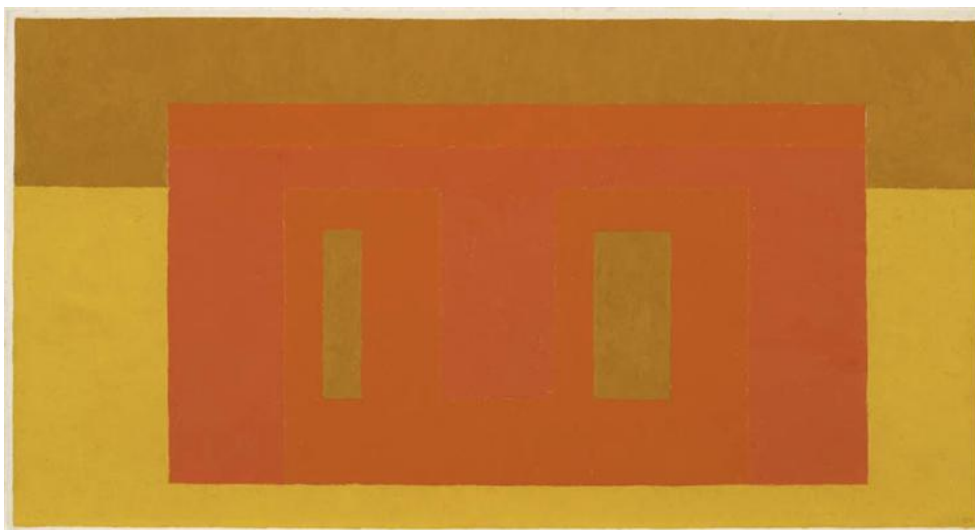


Through thinking about design, observing and perception Albers advocates art education as a core of democratic schooling, and training in art as a necessary social “equipment” not just for minority of intellectuals, but also for manually working people. *“As he stressed, empowering individuals with attentive perception laid the foundation for an educated citizenry challenging regressive, outdated customs and sowing greater freedom in the world. [...] Indeed, Albers’s audience is invited to extend this concern with destabilizing vision to other aspects of how the world is perceived, represented, and understood”* (Díaz, 2008, pp. 275–281).

One might be misleading that Albers’s mode of Geometric Abstraction is also a manifestation of avant-garde elitist position, but in fact it is far from the detachment of art from social conditions advocated by “formalist” critics such as Clement Greenberg at the time. In the Art Instruction, the painter offers: *“We recognize that although our optical vision is correct, our overemphasis on the psychic vision often makes us see incorrectly [...] For this reason, we learn to test our seeing, and systematically study foreshortening, overlapping, the continuity of tectonic and of movement, distinction between nearness and distance.”* As Eva Díaz (2008, p. 273) pointed out, this can be illustrated by his work, oil painting *Variant: Southern Climate* (1948) [Figure 1]: *“The oscillation between foreground and background emphasizes the inherent temporality of the process of perception and brings home the fundamental ambiguity of seeking any final, stable resolution to the pictorial problems.”* Constant comparing and correcting, abandoning pursuit for a final and perfect solution plays also a role in a social life, forasmuch as all evaluation stems from the comparison. Let me quote from Albers’ (2014, p. 282) thoughts on design maintaining his formatting:

*“So I am looking forward  
to a new philosophy  
addressed to all designers  
-in industry – in craft – in art –  
and showing anew  
that aesthetics are ethics,  
that ethics are source and measure  
of aesthetics.”*

Albers would add that he saw art also as an epistemological project, as a form of knowledge. Let us enclose this chapter by Albers’ (2017) words from the Art Instruction: *“For me studying art is to be on an ethical basis. Better design alters habits of perception and can improve society - a nervey claim, perhaps, and yet a thoughtful argument for artistic responsibility.”*



**Figure 1: (c)**  
Josef Albers:  
*Variant/Adobe:  
Southern Climate;*  
oil, masonite, 31 x  
57 cm.

## Conclusion

To conclude, students of Black Mountain College recognized that as pedagogue Josef Albers trained them not to produce work that looked like his own but, with the help of his methodology of experiment, to represent the world liberated of sterile habit.

Robert Rauschenberg (in Díaz, 2008, p. 281) praised Albers' method:

*“I'm still learning what he taught me, because what he taught had to do with the entire visual world. He didn't teach you how to 'do' the art. The focus was always on your personal sense of looking. When he taught water color, for example, he taught specific properties of water color - not how to make a good water-color picture. When he taught drawing, he taught the efficient functioning of line. Color was about flexibilities and the complex relationships that colors have with one another. I consider Albers the most important teacher I've ever had, and I'm sure he considered me one of his poorest students.”*

What is the general legacy of Black Mountain College? The cooperation of different faculties and disciplines with an art as a core of education, as a synthesis of solving problems in humanities as well as in natural sciences – this should be concerned for the sake of contemporary education, especially art education at so-called academies or art colleges. Albers' educational practice at Black Mountain College was a solution for this “missing link”. He explained how form, seeing, design and art are related to culture as a continuous selection of more meaningful forms, as concerning quality. We have to admit, that in spite of the endeavours at the Black Mountain College and absolutely striking necessity of the “wholesome social position of art”, the period of 1930s still represents the peak in thinking about the position of art education in the educational system as well as about the position of art in a social life.

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