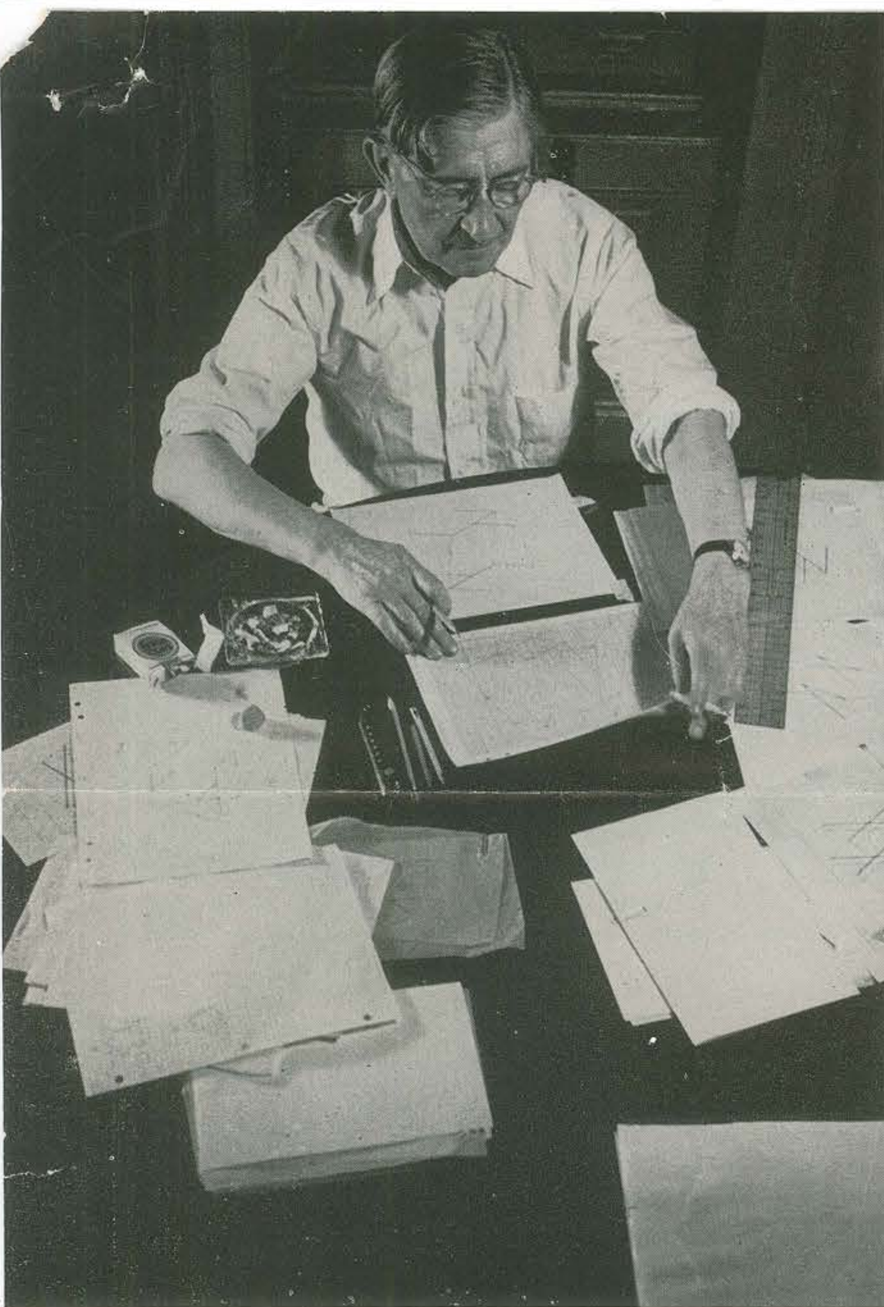

Working at night (Albers' duties as head of Yale's new Design Department occupy him in the day), he begins searching for a theme, making small freehand pencil drawings, trying various geometric configurations.

Albers paints a picture

By Elaine de Kooning

Photographs by Rudolph Burckhardt

Holding a tube of pigment in one hand and a palette-knife in the other, Josef Albers finished his *Homage to the Square* in five hours. Evenly painted in grey, black and white, the severe, anonymous construction of this picture does not seem to demand a virtuoso touch, and the artist insists that "someone else could have executed it." But the aseptic, almost militant simplicity of each of Albers' designs is the result of a long series of rejections—an arduous and complicated exercise of the element of choice. It is not surprising, therefore, that the artist tends to describe his technique in terms of what he renounces: "no smock, no skylight, no studio, no palette, no easel, no brushes, no medium, no canvas." (He works on a table in any room handy, and can keep a white linen suit immaculate throughout a painting session.) And, continuing to list his rejections in terms of style, he says "no variation in texture or *'matière,'* no personal handwriting, no stylization, no tricks, no 'twinkling of the eyes.' I want," he concludes, "to make my work as neutral as possible." And so each single color and form in his work is clearly circumscribed, measurable and describable (the artist lists them in his spectacularly tiny handwriting on the back of each board). But the complex moral issues and attitudes toward society—the puritanical conviction—that a susceptible observer might find in the total effect of any one of his pictures, could not be so easily accounted for. This extra dimension is precisely intended; as Albers says: "The concern of the artist is with the discrepancy between physical fact and psychological effect."

Eminently articulate, the fresh-complexioned, sixty-two-year-old artist has been making himself clear (and entertaining) to students of art, architecture and industrial design ever since he held his first classes in the Bauhaus workshop in 1923. After ten years at the world-influential German school and laboratory, where he married a student of one of his fellow-professors, Albers came to North Carolina, staying there for seventeen years to form the avant-garde art policy of Black Mountain College. Here he gave his unorthodox and far-reaching classes in design, while his wife Anni, who is celebrated for her elegant tapestries and fabric designs, taught weaving. Recently appointed chairman of a new Department of Design at Yale University, Albers, unlike many other artists, has always managed his duplex career of teaching and painting without infringement either way. Rather, each seems to be an integral part of the other: his own paintings make brilliant demonstrations of his verbal theories, while his theories constantly expand with his discoveries in design and color.

Exactly the opposite in method and approach from Mondrian, with whom his name is often inaccurately coupled, Albers does not arrive at his strict, geometric forms through sensibility—by inching a contour back and forth until it settles in place. Rather, his is a completely intellectual attack. With an almost oppressive consciousness of every aspect of his art ("not to be aware is a

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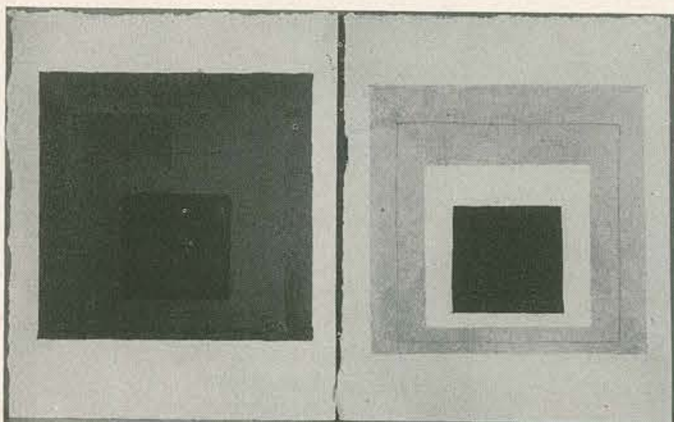
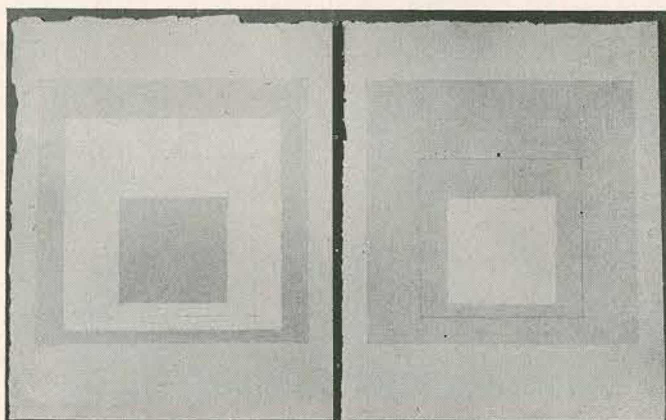
weakness for an artist," he says), Albers confines himself to "actual, mathematical relationships." As Mondrian strove until he found the utmost rigidity of a plane or straightness of an edge, Albers—a master of optical illusion—will try to make a ruled line look bent or a flat color seem modeled. As his opaque reds, blues, yellows or greens approach each other, they seem to shift in tone, lightening or deepening, becoming warmer or cooler, creating effects of overlapping films of color that have more in common with Turner's shimmering, transparent hues than they do with the Dutch master's unyielding primaries. And, finally, as Mondrian worked for months over one painting, Albers always makes his directly, never changing a color or form once it is put down. But although the physical execution takes only one night, the real evolution of a composition by this artist is through a long, tortuous series of sketches.

Working mainly by night, he begins searching for a theme, making small, freehand pencil drawings, playing with different geometric configurations. He manages to find such a staggering variety and expressiveness here that he is never lured away from his straight lines and symmetrical designs. "For me," says Albers, "a triangle has a face. A square, a circle—any elemental form—has features and therefore a 'look.' They act and provoke our reactions, just as complex forms, such as human or other faces and figures do. That many don't see this is unfortunate—but does not prove the contrary. Many are willing to see features in dress or furniture. Fewer are able to accept that every visible form and color has meaning." (Although he received a thorough academic training at the Royal Art School in Berlin and later at the Art Academy in Munich, Albers, with the years, became less and less interested in representational art. More related to his concept of the making of a picture was his Westphalian family tradition of craftsmen—blacksmiths on his mother's side, carpenters and tinkers on his father's.)

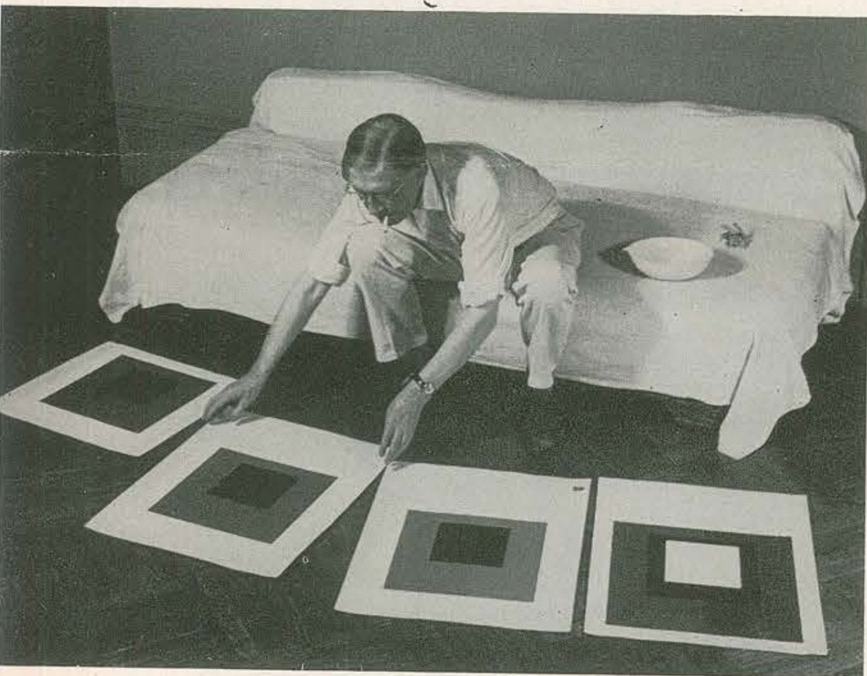
Right from this first step, through each stage, Albers finds

After hours of study, he tries out new effects, using masks (some of colored cellophane) and switching borders and centers of sketches.





Format for the new picture is decided upon—four squares, two the same color but divided by a pencil line. Sketches are in oil on blotting paper.



Reducing his choice to four and dispensing with the penciled square in the grey area, Albers studies his large final preliminary sketches.

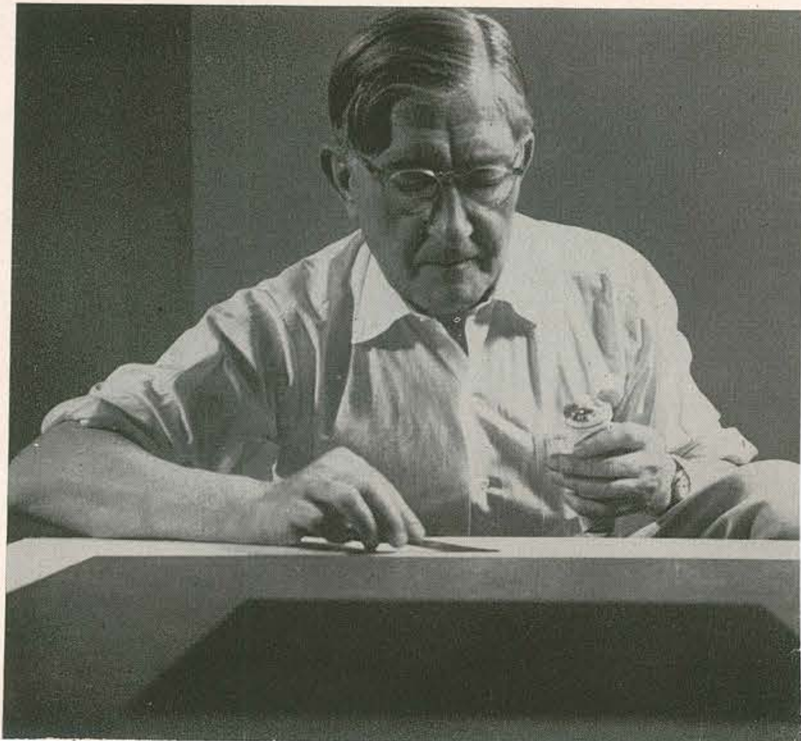
Albers continued

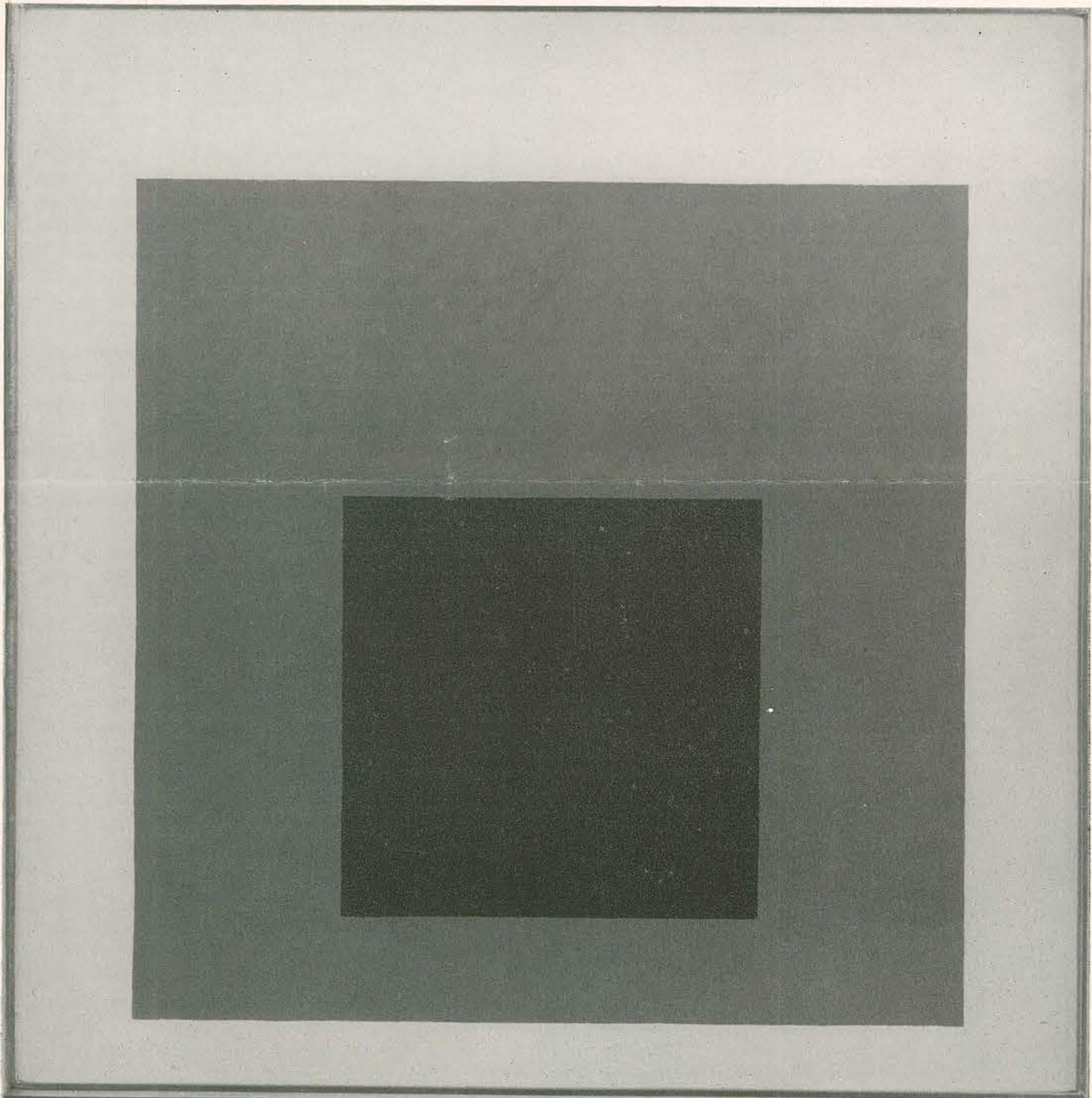
himself confronted with thousands of possibilities. The lines that form his brittle diagrams are diminished here, lengthened there, made finer or heavier, juggled to yield up a constantly increasing number of relationships. Teasing a problem for more and more solutions, Albers admits that he "hates to leave butter on the plate." When he finds some themes that interest him—for *Homage to the Square*, a group of progressively smaller squares, asymmetrically set on the horizontal axis, but symmetrically on the vertical one; and for the series of designs called *Transformations of a Scheme* (p. 58), an arrangement of overlapping squares tilted against the rectangle of the panel—he discards a mass of sketches and begins to refine the few he has settled on.

From now on, the diagrams are more carefully controlled. He uses a ruler, working on graph paper, measuring his lines and angles exactly, balancing unit relationships. At this stage, he uses tracing paper over the graph paper, lifting forms from one drawing after another, constantly altering proportions and adjusting combinations; sometimes effecting a change with his soap eraser, but more often making a completely new plan. He will pick out a basic motif, using a pin to mark it off on five or six sheets of paper at one time, and then introduce counter-movements in the different variants. "After your first sketches," says the artist, "you must either enlarge or reduce." So the drawings in this group range from postage-stamp size to double that of the final work.

He goes no further than this preparation for the shiny-surfaced laminated plastics which comprise about half of his output

After making his final selection, Albers at last says "the picture is finished." He then paints it on masonite with slow palette-knife strokes.





The finished picture, *Homage to the Square,* in black, grey and white, is framed. Though Albers says anyone could execute it after he made the plan, his own work is stamped with a unique touch. (Janis Gallery.)

every year. When he has decided on the final sketch here, he makes a plan (actual size) on tracing paper, indicating the precise gauge measurements of the lines, which are then engraved, to reveal the white core of the board, on a pantograph machine by a company in New Jersey (Insulation Fabricators). The hard surface of the plate permits the drilling of very fine lines—down to .015 of an inch. When the finished engraving is returned to him, he sometimes wants to make further adjustments. He may find an area "too full," in which case he will reduce a set of lines by filling them in with black ink, but more often changes are in the nature of amplification. He will decide that certain shapes should be emphasized, which can be done either by making the outlines heavier or by making the enclosed areas grey and mat (this is accomplished by sand-blasting) in contrast to the smooth black finish of the rest of the panel. In these engravings, straight lines, describing static, geometric forms, fall into designs of the coldest orderliness—and yet the artist, with his genius for emphasis, avoids the immobility one would expect, achieving an unaccountable liveliness of expression as his forms seem to march from one plane to another (Albers sees them as "making grimaces"), giving a vivid sense of temporal—as well as spatial—rhythm.

But, for his paintings, this stage is just the point of departure for the next series of sketches in oil. He has made his format more specific: the number of squares is more or less fixed at four, two of which are to be the same [Continued on page 57]

gers, though less in evidence than it used to be, is the linking of resemblances between vegetable and human growths. Among the most successful O'Keeffe canvases of this year are two immaculate studies of vacuum-cleaned tree trunks; and I give you my word that at first I mistook the photograph of one of these pictures, *Dark Tree Trunks*, which happened at the moment to be upside down, to be a version of Marlene Dietrich's celebrated legs encased in black nylons. To be sure, there seemed to be quite a few legs in the picture when thus seen upside down, and Miss Dietrich, so the publicity agents tell us, only has two; but even so, the resemblance of the two middle ones was pronounced. In abstract work where good organization is so necessary it is never against the law to test a work upside down. It is one of the ways to see if it really composes well. Artists have always done this.

Before saying good-bye to the gallery and to this new group of O'Keeffes, I must yield to an old-time custom and guess at the two pictures which I think will have the quickest success. The first one to be sold, I should say then, will be the *Yellow Cottonwood*, and this because it includes so many of the aspects the artist has taught her customers to like. It also has the luck to have an entire wall to itself, which is always a help to any O'Keeffe. Number two to go into a private collection will be *In the Patio, Number 1*, for in addition to being handsome in itself, it has a narrow gold edge to set it off. When Americans know a product to be gilt-edged they instantly fall for it; and here they have the artist's own word for it.

Albers continued from page 43

color but divided by an inscribed pencil line. These are made on blotting paper so that the surplus oil is absorbed (Albers finds that "tubed colors nowadays have too much oil"), leaving only enough to bind the color and produce the mat finish he generally prefers. And, as with his line drawings, he makes innumerable variants "to see what fish are in the net." Although he begins these with ruled lines, the pigment is applied rather quickly (he may make thirty in a week) and the edges are often unintentionally wavering. At this point, his main interest is the balance of masses of color next to one another. Using twenty different shades of grey ("all I could find"), several blacks and whites and some twenty other colors, the artist made all of these sketches rarely if ever mixing his pigments. "All mixing is a subtractive measure," he maintains, "costing some loss of color and light." Although he works by night "because most pictures are looked at under artificial light," he occasionally breaks this routine since "certain colors demand cold daylight."

An authority on optical effects of colorants, Albers does not agree with the "harmony laws of various color systems which hold that only certain colors related in certain ways fit well together." (Among the theoreticians, he likes Ostwald and Chevreul —the latter for stressing contrasts over harmonies, and also Goethe, for his exhaustive studies on the science of color.) Interested in employing "color-discords" rather than harmonies, Albers feels that any group of colors can have an exciting relationship. "That seems simple enough," the artist continues, "but since the effect depends on the quantity, placement, shape, recurrence, ground, reflectability, etc., it remains a struggle, as color is the most relative medium in art, and it takes a trained eye to see the possibilities of correspondence among any given tones." In each of his sketches, he fixes proportions and area subdivisions before applying his pigment, explaining "I want color and form to have contradictory functions." Thus, working with one format, but varying the color in the different versions, he can alter the relation in depth of his fixed forms, making one rectangle become a hole in the surface of the larger one enclosing it, jut forward or even assume the identical plane; or he can make a shape expand or contract, from version to version, on the flat surface of the picture.

When the artist feels he has exhausted the possibilities here, he is ready to begin another selection. Spreading them out on the floor, he studies his sketches for hours, from up-close as well as from a distance (often using a reducing glass to qualify their effect), rejecting some immediately, and finally choosing some fifteen or twenty from a group triple that many. Then, taking this smaller group, he begins to experiment further, cutting out masks to lay over them, painting on the masks to try out other effects, employing sheets of cellophane, as a time-and material-saving device, to paint on. (He is able to scrape the pigment from the cellophane and use it over again indefinitely). He also cuts up some of the sketches, removing a "border" or a center from one to place it over another.

Now, with one painting in mind, he decides on a range of colors—white, black and grey—for the first version of *Homage to the Square* (for subsequent versions—there are ten in the making—he returns to these sketches to pick out other combinations). Dispensing with the inscribed pencil line of the previous studies, he makes his final, and largest, preliminary sketches (p. 42). In enlarging from one sketch to another, he finds that fixed relations of color and form alter with changes in size of the entire design. Therefore, he can't simply square off a sketch he likes and blow it up, but has to change a tone here or a proportion there to achieve the effect of the original. In all but one of the four, he has settled on a black center surrounded by grey, then white; but even here he continues to find a range in the play of tones. He has experimented with different greys (in the illustration one can see two in one area, in the sketch to the right of the couch)—in the outer two sketches, sooty and deep in tone; in the others, closer to the center of the scale. The greys also vary in warmth, ranging from yellowish to bluish shades. When the artist

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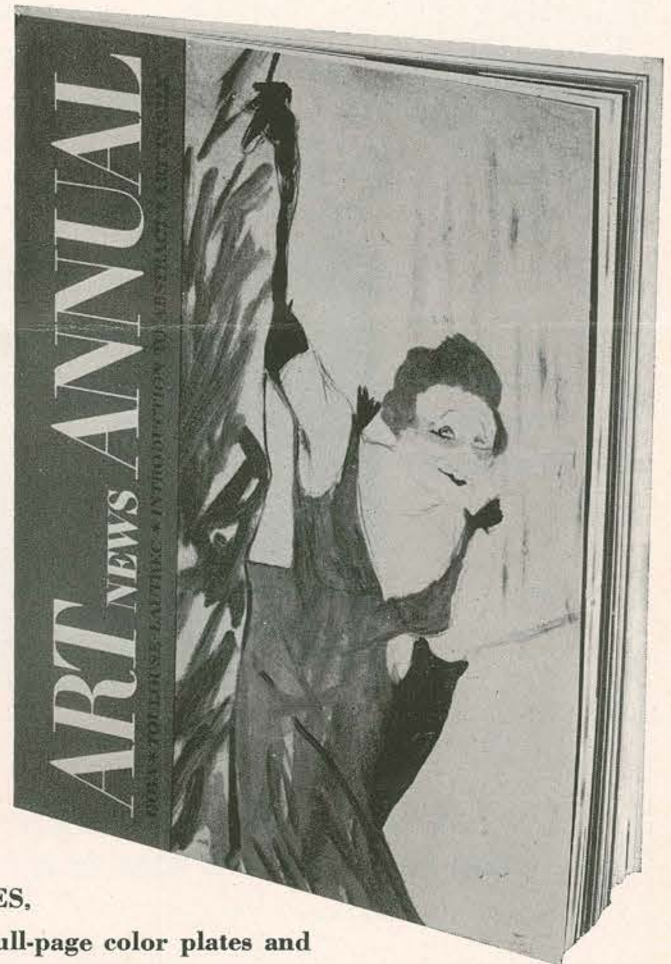

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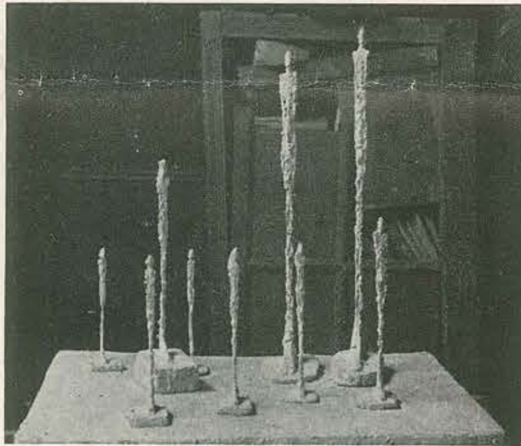

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made his ultimate selection from these, he said: "The picture is finished. All the problems are solved. Nothing remains but the execution."

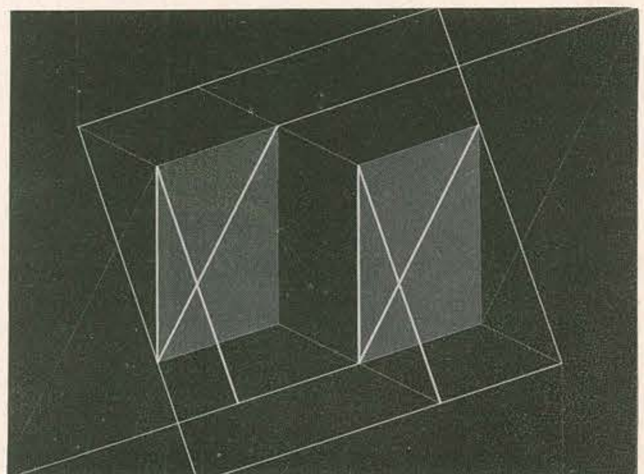
In executing his pictures, he works exclusively on masonite because he likes the "wall resistance" of boards, saying "canvas runs away from me." Preparing several boards at a time, he gives them three or four coats of Luminol casein, mixing the casein paste with linseed oil, turpentine and damar varnish "to make a fine soup." (If he used straight casein, his paintings might eventually flake off because he employs no medium while working.) Quick-drying, and still water-solvent despite the addition of oil, several coats of this mixture can be applied in one day, leaving the panels smooth, hard and ready for use in a couple of days. After giving the back of the board an oil coat so that it won't warp, he takes his first step—the ruling of the lines with a 7H pencil.

Conceiving of the area of the picture as one hundred units (the unit, in this case, being 3¼ inches square), he allowed sixteen units for the black area, forty-eight for the grey, and thirty-six for the white, so that a cross-section of the composition would reveal the following proportions: divided horizontally—1 to 2 to 4 to 2 to 1; and divided vertically (rising from the bottom)—½ to 1 to 4 to 3 to 1½.

In painting, he starts from the lines, working slowly with equal strokes and equal quantities of pigment toward the center of a form. He often has to scrape off the burr at the edges of a color in his sketches, but this is not necessary here because he uses his paint thin—"just enough to cover." "It's a durable technique," he remarks, "only one coat of paint. Black, of course, loses its blackness but it acquires a 'nobler skin.'" The artist finds that different makes of black "paste" differently: "the butteriness is different." For *Homage to the Square*, he discovered a three-year-old tube that had dried out a bit. "The pigment had become stickier, harder to manipulate"—a factor Albers found useful in qualifying the surface of the central square. But he never modulates a color by his application of pigment. His impastos are kept as uniform as possible, with the barely visible tufts—"the marks of the tool"—left by his palette knife, the only variation he allows. He does not believe in juxtaposing different textures to alter the effect of drawing or tones. "Every color, every form should speak with its own voice," says the artist, who further expresses his disapproval of the use of texture by describing a varying impasto as "too painterly." However, he finds the contrast between mat and shiny surfaces very important—and a point to be considered when he selects his pigments. For the white areas in his painting, he prefers Permalba because "it's hard," but sometimes he uses Delux Dupont Superwhite Enamel, a flat paint which "stays white."

When a painting is finished, Albers designs a frame, taking into careful consideration its width and formation (he prefers beveled edges), and the color and texture of the wood—sometimes leaving it natural, sometimes polishing it or painting it himself. Occasionally he uses a strip of metal, and sometimes he just "backs" the picture so that it can be hung without a frame.

Although, throughout the development of each of his paintings, Albers' methods might seem to have more in common with the techniques of science than those of art, he disavows the attitudes of the former, stating "science aims at solving the problems of life, whereas art depends on unsolved problems." Thus, he considers each finished painting a variant rather than a final solution, leaving the way open for endless experiment. And the endless experiment that went before *Homage to the Square*—the interminable weighing of positions, proportions and tones, the constant comparison and selection, the amplification and condensation—stubbornly haunts this picture as three squares, reversing their offices and assuming different depths and sizes, seem to continue the flux that led to their creation. From the ruled lines which are, at last, peculiarly gentle and tentative, to the opaque colors lying next to one another in a delicate translucent atmosphere, an unadmitted sensibility stamps each aspect of this art, denying its first impersonal impact and maintaining, finally, that no one of his quiet pictures could have been painted by any one but Josef Albers himself.



Engraved compositions on laminated plastic comprise over half of Albers' output. *Transformation of a Scheme* was executed by a New Jersey company from a detailed diagram supplied by the artist.