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THE BAUHAUS AND BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

JoAnn C. Ellert

A great deal has been written about the influence of the Bauhaus on American institutions. The Institute of Design in Chicago has received most attention—it has even been referred to as the “New Bauhaus.” Black Mountain College in North Carolina has been practically ignored.¹ Certainly, Maholy-Nagy and other teachers who had been affiliated with the Bauhaus did achieve commendable success in introducing Bauhaus methods at the Institute of Design. However, in view of the sixteen-year tenure (1933-1949) at Black Mountain College of Josef Albers, a former Bauhaus Master, and his wife, Anni, a Bauhaus graduate and teacher, exploration of the influence of the Bauhaus on this small, progressive, art-centered college in the mountains of North Carolina is warranted.

Black Mountain College was not in any sense a continuum of the Bauhaus. Both institutions differed markedly in organizational framework. But there is no doubt that, because of the Alberses’ long involvement, Black Mountain College took over many Bauhaus ways and ideas.

The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 at Weimar, Germany, as a state-supported institution. It moved to Dessau in April 1925 and to Berlin in October 1932. Seven months after it had moved to Berlin it was closed by the Nazi-controlled government on the charges that it was a “breeding ground of cultural bolshevism.”²

Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 at Black Mountain, North Carolina, as a privately supported institution. It moved to Lake Eden, North Carolina, in 1940. The college finally succumbed in 1956 from a chronic complaint—lack of funds.

The philosophy of education advocated by both the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College represented a radical departure from traditional and prevailing philosophies. Both institutions emphasized the pragmatic, life-oriented approach to education espoused by John Dewey. Hans Wingler points out that “the philosopher John Dewey” was “not too far removed from one of the basic ideas of the introductory Bauhaus course”—the idea that in every human being there exists latent artistic powers which need only to be awakened.³ John Dewey actually visited Black Mountain College frequently and played an important role in shaping its philosophy.⁴

There is no evidence that the Bauhaus causally influenced the development of the basic educational philosophy of Black Mountain College. Nevertheless, the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College shared a common genesis in that they both were established as a protest against what

their founders considered "the false values" of existing institutions.

Walter Gropius in his *Bauhaus Manifesto* of 1919 spoke out for the unity of all the creative arts under the primacy of architecture and urged a return to the crafts by the artist. He exhorted, "Architects, sculptors, painters, we must return to the crafts." And continued, "There is no such thing as professional art; there is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is merely the craftsman at a higher level. By the grace of heaven he is occasionally granted moments of inspiration which are beyond his control and which allow his work to become a work of art; but craftsmanship is the exordium of all art."⁵

The special character of the Bauhaus lay in the fact that it aimed at evolving a process of continual development and not at creating a new "style." It followed an organic idea which was dynamic and capable of adapting to the changing circumstances of life.

The Bauhaus, although emerging as the successor to an academy and a school of arts and crafts through their mutual integration, was marked by an antiacademic attitude from its very beginnings. It was a practical educational establishment with a strong bias toward manual training. This pragmatic quality was emphasized by Gropius when he dispensed with the academic title of "Professor" and introduced for the teaching staff the craftsman's title of "Master."

Compared to the founding of Black Mountain College, the revolution carried out by Gropius and his Bauhaus colleagues was mild and moderate, a mere palace revolution which placed in power a liberal and somewhat radical elite in the place of a highly conservative one. The founding of Black Mountain College, was, rather, an establishment of a new nation by violent secession from the mother country. John Andrew Rice in founding Black Mountain College was in revolt against the entire system of standard higher education as it was represented by Rollins College.⁶ Disillusioned by the stagnancy he found in traditional education, Rice and his small band of refugees left Rollins College and began their own college in 1933. The new school at Black Mountain was to be an experiment in pure democracy and the "education of the whole man." It was also to be an experiment in self-deprivation on the part of faculty and students in starting a college without funds in the midst of the worst depression this country has ever known.

Black Mountain College was to exemplify Rice's view of learning: knowledge of the classics, history, and mathematics was not enough for modern man. Life, by necessity forever changing, demands action as well as thinking. Rice organized Black Mountain College around the practical uses and appreciation of art. He believed that art was the only force that could bring emotion into disciplined relation to thought.

Rice stated flatly that the humanities had been tried and had failed because they were too remote from the experience of an action-oriented outside world. History, science, sociology, psychology, and economics would also fail because they do not place the student in the role of an actor. Rice pointed out, "This is why we at Black Mountain begin with art. The artist thinks about what he himself is going to do, does it himself, and then reflects upon the thing that he himself has done."⁷

At Black Mountain, Rice, as had Gropius at the Bauhaus, did away with much of the academic structure of the traditional college. Significantly, Black Mountain had no Board of Trustees; Rice put the blame for the irresponsibility of the modern college squarely on the governing Board of Trustees. Further, Rice refused to be called "President" and substituted the title of "Rector."

Thus, both the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College strived for a bright, new, educational philosophy which would promote the continuing synthesis of art and life. They were opposed to traditional educational methods. More important, both institutions perceived, and attempted to prepare the individual for, a continuing and dynamic interaction with life.

These were persuasive reasons for Rice to seek his Master art teacher at the Bauhaus, which had been closed by the Nazis. Acting on a "hunch," Rice in 1933 cabled Josef Albers in Germany, asking him to come to Black Mountain as head of the art department. Albers accepted and remained at Black Mountain until 1949, when he became chairman of the Art Department at Yale University.

Josef Albers immediately assumed a key role in the affairs of Black Mountain. Louis Adamic, writing in 1938, regarded the importance of Albers to Black Mountain as "equal, and in many respects superior, to Rice's."⁸

In 1940, because of his fears that Black Mountain was becoming conventional and also because of serious personality conflicts with the faculty, Rice left the institution he had founded.

After Rice's departure, Josef Albers assumed a leading role and was the major personality at Black Mountain College. In 1940 Albers was fifty-two years old; it was natural that in his courses at Black Mountain he did not depart substantially from the teaching methods he had practiced so successfully at the Bauhaus during his youth.

It is worth emphasizing that Albers was the first of the Bauhaus Masters to settle in the United States; he arrived in 1933 and became a citizen in 1939. Walter Gropius did not come to the United States until 1937, when he left England to become head of the architecture department at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Lazzlo Moholy-Nagy came to Chicago in 1937; he headed the "New Bauhaus" at the

Chicago Institute of Design. Mies van der Rohe, also, did not arrive in the United States until 1937. Thus, the direct influence of the Bauhaus through one of its Masters was at work at Black Mountain College at least four years before any other institution in the United States.

Josef Albers was a distinguished graduate of the Bauhaus; he was the first Bauhaus student to earn the coveted title of Master.

Albers was born in Bottrop (Westphalia) on March 19, 1888. He was a student at the Weimar Bauhaus from 1920 to 1923. From 1923 to 1933 he taught the world-famous preliminary course in basic design at the Bauhaus. This course was called the *Vorkurs*, and many of its elements were adapted by Albers for his courses at Black Mountain College; of course, he added many original ideas.

The preliminary course at the Bauhaus was originated by Itten, taken over by Moholy-Nagy in 1923, and, after the resignation of Moholy-Nagy in 1928, was headed by Albers. This course was conceived as an introduction to the principles of basic design and was a prerequisite for a subsequent design course taught by Kandinsky and Klee. Students in the *Vorkurs* developed a feeling for and an understanding of the specific qualities of such materials as paper, plaster of Paris, wood, glass, briquettes, and cane. The materials were used in three-dimensional composition studies, designed to stimulate the creativity and imagination of the students. When Albers undertook the teaching of the *Vorkurs*, he investigated by working with scissors and paper how a change in form could influence the behavior of materials. He demonstrated how alterations in shape, despite the unvarying material of composition, could result in changing the qualities and the reaction of materials. Albers also studied the phenomenon of optical illusion. The appearance of the surface or the epidermis of materials was investigated, both as to its optical and tactile qualities. At the Bauhaus in the middle 1920s Albers began experimenting with geometric abstractions in stained glass. In addition to teaching the *Vorkurs* Albers took a hand in the stained glass workshop, the furniture workshop, the metal workshop, and the printing workshop.

Albers described his work at the Bauhaus:

We analyzed typical treatments and combinations of materials and worked them with our hands. We visited the workshops of various craftsmen and then applied our knowledge to the making of useful objects. We made simple implements, containers, toys, and even toy furniture. First from one material, and later from several materials combined. Soon, however, we expanded our practical work to allow more inventiveness and imagination for later specialized design.⁹

Albers continued to use the methods and the substance of his Bauhaus courses at Black Mountain College. Next to Gropius, Josef Albers probably was more responsible than anyone for the dissemination of Bauhaus educational principles.

Esteban Vicente who visited Black Mountain in the 1930s at the invitation of Dr. Rice stated, "Albers was a real teacher. He made his students actually look at things. He showed them how to see. They would go out in the woods and pick up stones, leaves, and branches and bring these natural-found objects back to the studio to draw and paint."¹⁰

V. V. Rankine, who was a student at Black Mountain College in 1946 and 1948, recollected that Albers in his classes continued his paper cutting and folding exercises and also put enormous emphasis on problems involving the interaction of color.¹¹

Xanti Schawinsky worked at the Bauhaus and also at Black Mountain College. He was a student at the Bauhaus from 1924 to 1926 and from 1927 to 1929. Schawinsky was one of the most active participants in work for the stage at the Bauhaus. One of his most specific accomplishments was his "spectrodrama" in which he created abstract stage compositions consisting of elementary forms. This idea, first worked on in 1926, he then developed further at Black Mountain College. This idea had been given its stimulus by the experiments on reflected light undertaken at the Weimar Bauhaus. At Black Mountain, Schawinsky produced many creative and imaginative sketches.

The workshops of the Bauhaus were conducted in the craftsman tradition, requiring careful planning in advance of execution. This tradition was continued in the workshops of Black Mountain College by the Alberses.

In 1949 Albers spoke of his methodology:

In my painting I adhere to what in other arts is considered a matter of course. Namely, that performance is prepared by rehearsal, that exercises precede recital, or plans prepare execution. It was a rule with the old masters of painting. Without comparison and choice, there is no evaluation. Saying that the freshness of the first sketch can't be repeated is admitting impotence. The ratio of effort to effect is a respected principle of construction in engineering. It should be considered a measure for all planning. Ergo, I apply it in my teaching of design as well as in developing my own composition and construction.¹²

Anni Albers also played an influential role in bringing Bauhaus methods to Black Mountain College. She was born in Berlin in 1899 and

studied at the Bauhaus from 1922 to 1930. She is listed in the records of the Bauhaus under her maiden name of Anni Fleischmann. At the Bauhaus she became, after the resignation of Gunta Stotzl, head of the weaving workshop. Her special achievement lay in her systematic investigation of weaving materials. She carried out many large scale commissions, published articles and books about weaving, and had many exhibitions of her work.

At Black Mountain Anni Albers taught textile design and weaving. One of the hallmarks of the mature Bauhaus was that its students studied the principles of mass production and strove to create designs suitable for commercial and industrial use. As early as 1929 in the Bauhaus weaving workshop Anni Albers created a ribbed, silvery drapery material, the front of which was cellophane (increasing light reflection) and the back, chenille (for sound absorption). The material was created for the union school of the A.D.G.B. labor union. The fabric's ideal level of daylight reflection was established by experiments undertaken in cooperation with the Zeiss-Ikon Works in Berlin.¹³

Anni Albers in her weaving and design classes at Black Mountain College continued the Bauhaus tradition of considering the needs of industry and stressed the design of textile patterns which were suitable for-machine production.¹⁴ She also collected a unique group of weavings from several different countries. The unusual and interesting collection consists of nearly a hundred items and is now owned by the Yale University Art Gallery.

The influence of the Bauhaus was also reflected in the emphasis on the workshop principle at Black Mountain. The Bauhaus had stressed the interrelationship between art and life and art and craft; it had established workshops in cabinet-making, metalwork, weaving, printing, ceramics, stained-glass, furniture making, painting, and sculpture. These workshops were quite sophisticated and many of their designs and products were sold on the open market by industry. Workshops of a similar nature, though much less elaborate, were also established at Black Mountain. These workshops included design, ceramics, music, theatre, weaving, photography, bookbinding, and printing. However, the close contacts the Bauhaus workshops had developed with industry never matured at Black Mountain. At Black Mountain there was little or no relationship with manufacturers. Nevertheless, the importance constantly given to workshops at Black Mountain was indicative of the Albers-Bauhaus influence.

Through the good offices of Josef Albers two prominent Bauhaus architects, Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, were persuaded in 1939 to design a complex of buildings for Black Mountain College in its new location at Lake Eden.¹⁵ Due to a lack of funds, however, these buildings

were never erected. Black Mountain College was able to construct six new buildings at Lake Eden, however, and these buildings show clearly the influence of the Bauhaus style of architecture.

These six new buildings were:

The Studies building, designed by A. Lawrence Kocher, and constructed by students and faculty. It contained classrooms, two faculty apartments, and fifty individual studies.

A house for the music faculty, also designed by Kocher and erected by students and faculty.

The Quiet house, a place for reveries.

The Minimum house, a building constructed by four students under a self-imposed restriction that its cost not exceed \$1,000.

A chemistry and physics building, designed by two architecture students.

A dining hall for faculty and students.

These buildings utilized, as did Bauhaus architecture in general, many new materials and methods of construction. They are still standing at Lake Eden and are being used as a children's summer camp.

Louis Adamic, who visited Black Mountain College in 1937, describes Josef Albers as the sort of person who could go to a rubbish dump, pick up a dozen or more beer and vinegar bottles, cut the bottoms from them, and, with the aid of a few wires and a piece of wood, organize these bottoms into an extremely beautiful approximation of a stained-glass window.

Adamic's report of Albers' activities at Black Mountain College is a significant corroboration that Albers was bringing Bauhaus methods to Black Mountain. "Whenever I visit Black Mountain I go to Albers' *Werklehre* class. The work that he and his students do there looks ridiculous at first sight. They take, let us say, three green bottles, four red apples, a piece of yellow cloth, and a lady's slipper, or some such seemingly irrelevant or incongruous group of articles; then work with them, together and individually, trying to arrange them so that each thing enhances the form, line, texture, and values of each of the others, and helps to tie them all together into a well-proportioned, harmonious, effective picture. Watching it awhile, one realizes that the work is anything but ridiculous. It is, in fact, important training in seeing things, in discrimination, in taste, in acquiring a sense of form, line, color, proportion, and in handling materials. . . . Things happen in that class; things that can be seen, touched, changed, analyzed, and reflected upon."¹⁶

Sewell Sillman reports that the first words in English which Josef

Albers says he learned upon his arrival in the United States in 1933 were "Open eyes." These words seem symbolic of all Albers accomplished as a teacher and artist at the Bauhaus, at Black Mountain College, and at Yale.¹⁷

One could recite a litany of creative persons who either passed through the portals of Black Mountain as students or who were connected with it in a pedagogical way. Robert Rauschenburg, who won the Grand Prix at the 1964 Venice Biennale, studied at Black Mountain College under Albers in 1948 and 1949. Kenneth Noland, a leading protagonist of the Washington Color School, studied at Black Mountain in 1946. John Cage, an avant garde musical composer and the originator of the "happening," also studied there. Esteban Vicente, the abstract expressionist painter, taught at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1953. Wilhelm De Kooning was a member of the Black Mountain faculty and followed Albers to Yale. V. V. Rankine, a sculptor whose work has Bauhaus overtones, was also a student at Black Mountain College. Joseph Fiore was a member of the faculty and taught painting and drawing at Black Mountain College.

Other notables who were at Black Mountain College at one time or another were Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Elaine De Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Ben Shawn, Theodore Stamos, Jack Tworkov, and Buckminster Fuller. This list is by no means intended to be exhaustive—many more distinguished artists were connected with the college.

A search of the published literature relating to Black Mountain College discloses a paucity of information about this exciting and novel institution. Certainly, the Bauhaus, through the connecting link of Josef and Anni Albers, had a discernible and significant influence on its development.

NOTES

¹ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus* (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1969) gives Black Mountain College only two paragraphs.

² Bauhaus Catalogue, 1961 (Zurich), p. 3; Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, p. 11.

³ Hans M. Wingler, "Repercussion and Further Development of the Bauhaus in America," *Fifty Years Bauhaus: German Exhibition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 327-29.

⁴ Louis Adamic, *My America* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1938), p. 614; J. A. Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1942), pp. 331-32.

⁵ Bauhaus Catalogue, 1961 (Zurich), pp. 4-5.

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⁶ The details of the Rollins story are set out in a ten-thousand-word report in the November 1933 *Bulletin* of the American Association of University Professors, which fully upholds Rice. A rebuttal appears in the December 1933 *Bulletin* of Rollins College. See also, J. A. Rice, *I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 316-17.

⁷ Louis Adamic, *My America*, p. 637. See also, J. A. Rice, "Fundamentalism and the Higher Learning," *Harpers Magazine*, May 1937. In a spirit of disillusionment after leaving Black Mountain College, Rice wrote: "The trouble was that there was not anyone calling himself an artist who was an artist. They were not in love with art; they were in love with themselves, alone, they loved only what they themselves did. When one has lived with them and come to know them well in their daily living, it is easy to understand how some psychologists call art a neurosis."—*I Came Out of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 329.

⁸ *My America*, p. 637.

⁹ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, p. 293.

¹⁰ Interview with Esteban Vicente on December 3, 1970, at Princeton University.

¹¹ Interview with V. V. Rankine on January 31, 1971, at New York City.

¹² Excerpt from Catalogue of Josef Albers Exhibition at Sidney Janis Gallery, New York City, 1966.

¹³ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, p. 519.

¹⁴ Grace A. Young, *Arts and Decorations* (January, 1935), p. 47.

¹⁵ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, p. 574.

¹⁶ Louis Adamic, *My America*, pp. 638-40.

¹⁷ Reported in the Catalogue of Josef Albers Exhibition at Yale University Art Gallery, April 25-June 18, 1956. The exhibition was entitled, "Paintings, Prints, Projects — Josef Albers."