

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection  
Orange County Museum of Art  
October 7 – December 31, 2017  
ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

**Josef Albers**

Born 1888 (Bottrop, Westphalia, Germany), Died 1976 (aged 88, New Haven, CT)

*Homage to the Square, Dry Season, 1967*

Oil on masonite

German-born American artist Josef Albers was one of the original teachers at the renowned German art school Bauhaus during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Bauhaus's interdisciplinary curriculum was founded with the idea of creating a "total" work art which combined artistic and technical skills and the Bauhaus style remains one of the most influential currents in modern design and architecture. While teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina and later Yale University, Albers disseminated his own artistic philosophy, and in particular his color theories, to a new generation of artists, and as a result is regarded as a paternal figure in the development of American geometric abstraction in the 1940s. This painting is part of a much larger Homage to the Square series containing over a thousand variations, which the artist executed during a period of twenty-five years, based on mathematically formulated squares in varying shades of colors. Albers' expert use of color evokes visceral experience, as in the sunlight-golden tones in *Dry Season*, which suggest the dry and arid air of a desert climate.

JOSEF ALBERS b. 1888 d. 1976  
HOMAGE TO THE SQUARE, DRY SEASON, 1967  
Oil on masonite  
48 x 48 inches.  
1971.001

"I like to take a weak color and make it rich and beautiful by working on its neighbors. What's gloomier than raw sienna? Now look at what I've done to it! It's gold. It's shining and alive like an actor on a stage. Turning sand into gold, that's my work and my aim."<sup>1</sup>

Albers was born in Bottrop, Germany where, for generations his family had been craftsmen. He explored three-dimensional illusion, first in glass paintings and woodcuts, which he called "Impossibles". Their titles, like their forms, suggest contradictory systems of perceiving the same geometric configuration.

He became the youngest master-teacher at the Bauhaus, where he was renowned for his class in basic design, a course in visual education. This led to his becoming a leader in the new OP art movement. When Hitler closed the Bauhaus in 1933 Albers was invited to teach at the prestigious Black Mountain College in North Carolina. His most famous student, Robert Rauschenberg, said of him, "He was a beautiful teacher but an impossible person. His criticism is so devastating that I wouldn't ask for it. But, 21 years later I'm still learning from it." Albers also lectured at Harvard and taught at Yale until 1960, when he retired.

Albers' most famous works are the series he called, "Homage to the Square". These are nests of squares, each of which is defined by a subtly contrasting hue or tone, chosen to interact with other colors, and thus to induce sensations, such as contraction and expansion, contrary to the squares' flat, static, locked-in character. Albers' art brought out the closest possible focus to the problem of "how do we see the third dimension when created as an illusion by the artist in terms of lines, flat slopes, and colors on a two-dimensional surface?"<sup>2</sup> He produced fifty "Homage to the Square- Dry Season" works, one of which is on display at OCMA. It shows a series of squares, each one superimposed on the others, with a minute difference between the top each square and the bottom. The illusion gives the effect of solid squares piled up in sequence of size, largest on the bottom. The yellows and oranges, are framed by a white background. All of the "Homage to the Square" paintings are executed with a palette knife, creating a smooth surface.

Eleanor Reicher

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<sup>1</sup> (1) Hunter, Sam- Jacobus, John- Modern Art, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Third Edition, Vendome Press, New Jersey, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> (2) Knight, Christopher- Los Angeles Herald Examiner, May 15, 1988.