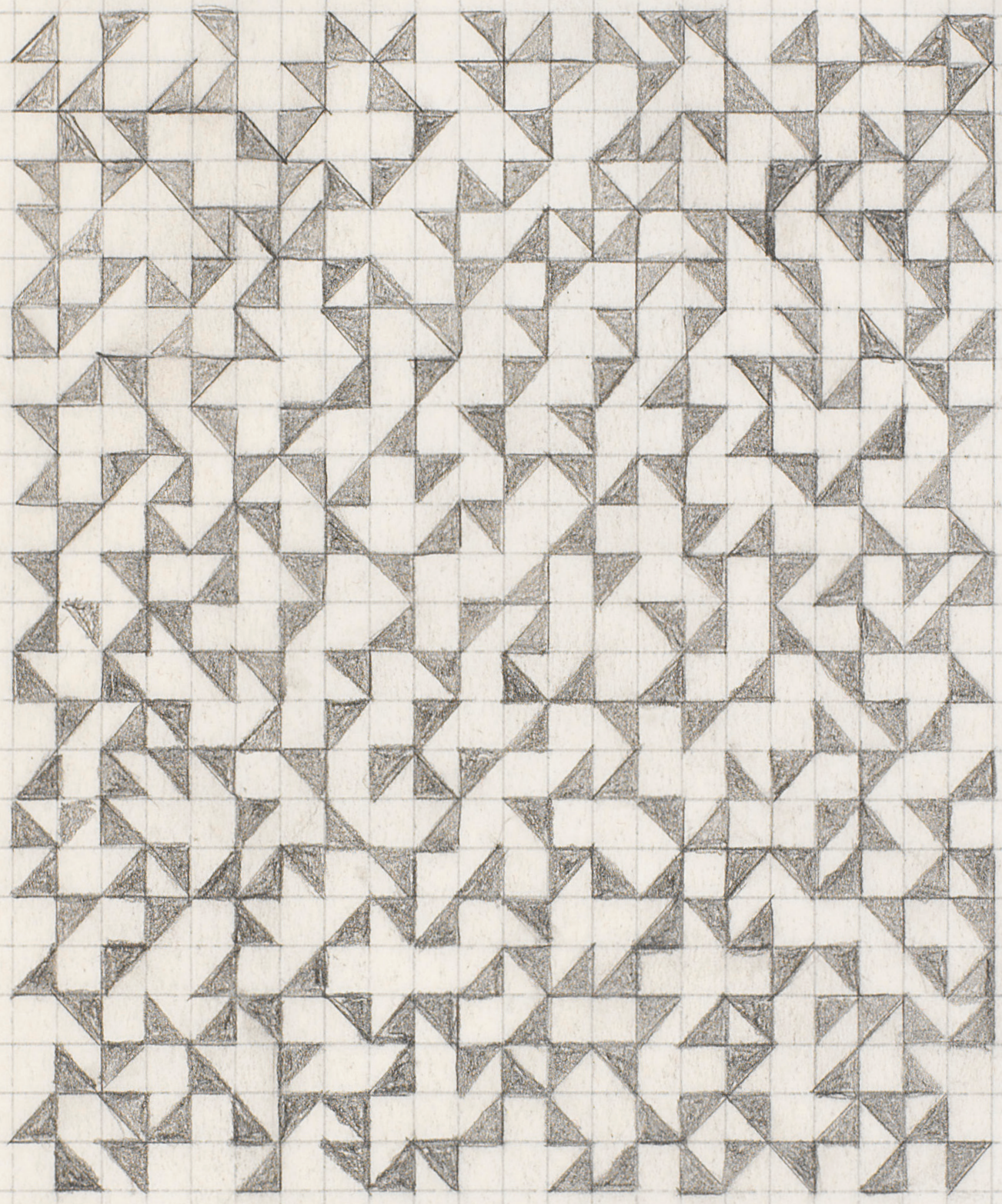


In Thread and On Paper

Anni Albers in Connecticut

As the oldest museum dedicated exclusively to American Art, the New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA) has been committed to the presentation of work by extraordinary artists who contribute to the unfolding narrative of American art, history, and culture. It is therefore with great honor that we present the exhibition *In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut,* highlighting the diverse output of one of the most groundbreaking artists of the 20th century. It was here in Connecticut where Anni Albers produced some of her most innovative work.

Celebrated internationally, Anni Albers is recognized as one of the most important textile artists of the last century, as well as a pioneering designer, printmaker, and educator. She brought to her work an expansive knowledge of materials and processes that were cultivated during her years at the Bauhaus school in Germany and later at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Perhaps most striking was her fearlessly experimental and visionary approach that married ancient Mexican and South American techniques and traditional materials with cutting-edge technology and modern design. Albers's democratic engagement with art and craft on equal terms has had tremendous impact on generations of designers, weavers, architects, and artists alike.

In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut explores the innovative work and writing that Albers produced in Connecticut from the 1950s through the end of her life in 1994, featuring an extensive body of textiles, wall hangings, commercial collaborations, and works on paper. Additionally, we are pleased to include as part of the exhibition the artist's loom, historic ephemera, and an interactive weaving wall that bring her work to life. A landmark presentation, *In Thread and On Paper* is the first museum exhibition to explore Albers's ambitious output during her forty-four years in Connecticut, as well as the artist's first major solo exhibition organized by a U.S. museum in twenty years.

Marking a major collaboration with the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, the presentation also represents the NBMAA's commitment to celebrating the tremendous impact and legacy of this extraordinary artist now and for many years to come.

Min Jung Kim
Director and CEO, New Britain Museum of American Art

(Cover) Study for *Double Impression II,* 1978
Pencil on paper, 10 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 8 $^{7}/_{16}$ in.

(This page) Anni Albers with *Black, White, Gold I,* ca. 1950–60
Photo: *New Haven Register*

(Opposite) *Black, White, Gold I* ,1950
Cotton, jute, lurex, 25 $^{1}/_{8}$ x 19 in.

Listening to Materials

In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut traces the remarkable transformation from weaving into printmaking that Anni Albers made over the forty-four years that she lived in her adopted state. The exhibition progresses from her "pictorial weavings" of the 1950s to textile samples, drawings, and designs, leading naturally into her long engagement with printmaking, and to a series of functional fabrics. Work made specifically as art blends seamlessly with that which she made for commercial purposes.

In the catalogue for a 1959 exhibition at MIT's New Gallery, Albers wrote of her pictorial weavings that their purpose was "to let threads be articulate again and find a form for themselves to no other end than their own orchestration, not to be sat on, walked on, only to be looked at…" Possibly the very first pictorial weaving that Albers produced upon setting up her studio in New Haven was *Black, White, Gold I.* Her combination of dull, rough yarns with ones that sparkle causes the weaving to shimmer and glow, appearing far larger than its modest 25 x 19-inch dimensions. The weaving embodies a clarity of thinking about both material and design. There is nothing hidden, there is nothing particularly special about the materials—just jute, cotton, and the shiny plastic ribbon Lurex. And yet the weaving emanates a sort of power, inviting the viewer into the intricacies of rhythm, line, and most importantly, texture.

Albers's ability to draw more than seems possible from her materials came in part from a decades-long investigation into the particularities of various materials' visual haptic qualities—how a material's texture plays upon the eyes. Beginning in 1922 as a student at the Bauhaus, the famous German art school, Albers's coursework included Material Studies, in which mundane materials such as metal scraps, paper, and broken glass were worked with simple hand tools in order to find the unique qualities of the material. She learned to design by allowing material to express itself.

Born in Berlin in 1899, Annalise Fleischmann took the name Anni Albers when she married Josef Albers in 1925. Together they fled Nazi Germany in 1933, taking positions at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, NC, where they taught until 1949. Continuing her focus on the fundamentals of working with materials, Albers included it in her own teaching and took it ever further in her studio. *On Weaving,* her landmark 1965 book on the history and principles of weaving, implores readers to gain a working knowledge of their materials.

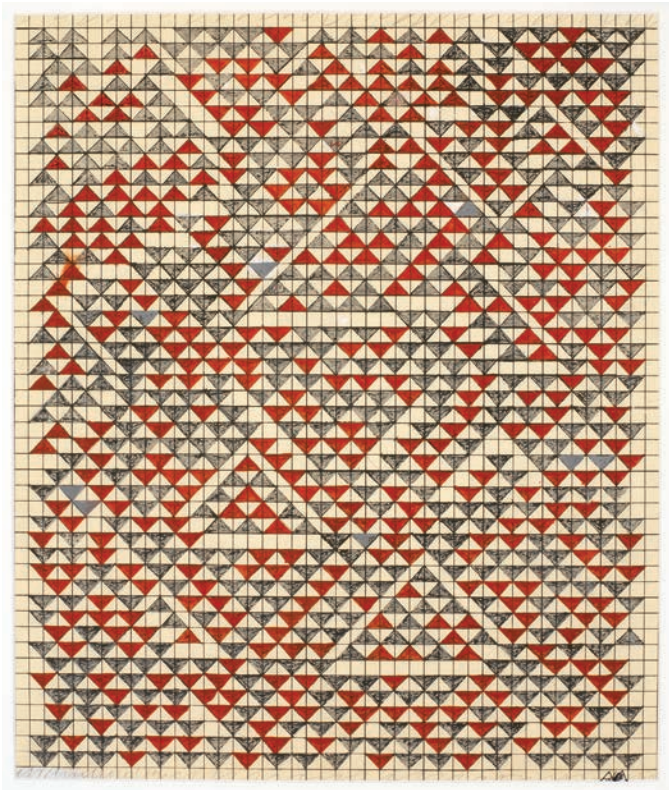
With this history as a backdrop, *In Thread and On Paper* traces Albers's trajectory into Connecticut, where she continued to balance art making with designing for industry. Small woven samples show a relationship with the textile firms to which they were sent that is similar to her interactions with the master printers and rug makers who executed her designs. In each case her genius lay not only in understanding the materials, but also in recognizing the capabilities of other specialists. This ability to delegate and openness to collaboration allowed her to frequently blur the line between art and design.

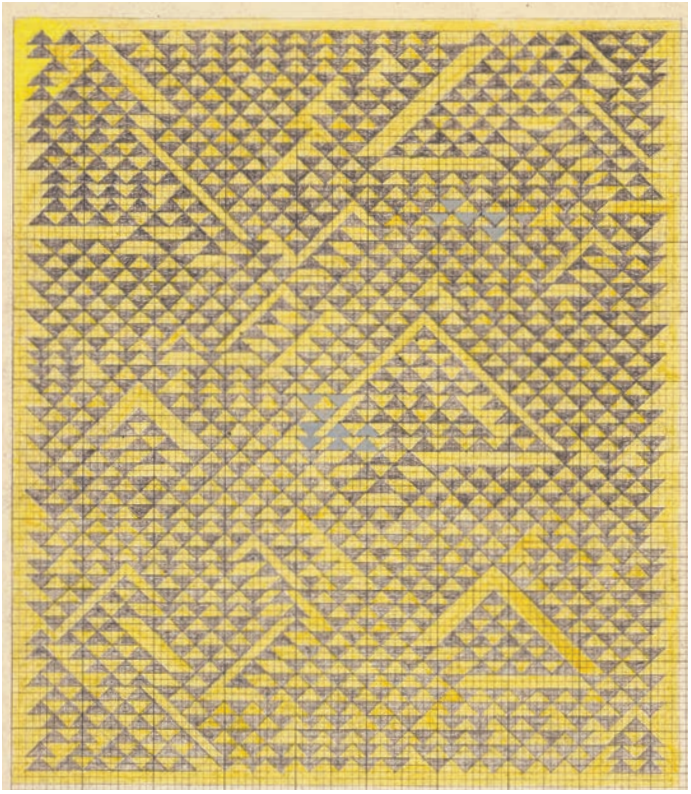
A considerable amount of space in the exhibition is devoted to Albers's prints in which the image is composed of triangular elements. Between 1967's Study for *Camino Real,* made in preparation for a commission for a hotel of the same name in Mexico City, through forays into screenprint, inkless embossing, photo-offset, lithography, copper plate etching, and aquatint, and into the early 1980s as she was designing textiles for the companies Knoll and Sunar, she was preoccupied by various triangular motifs.

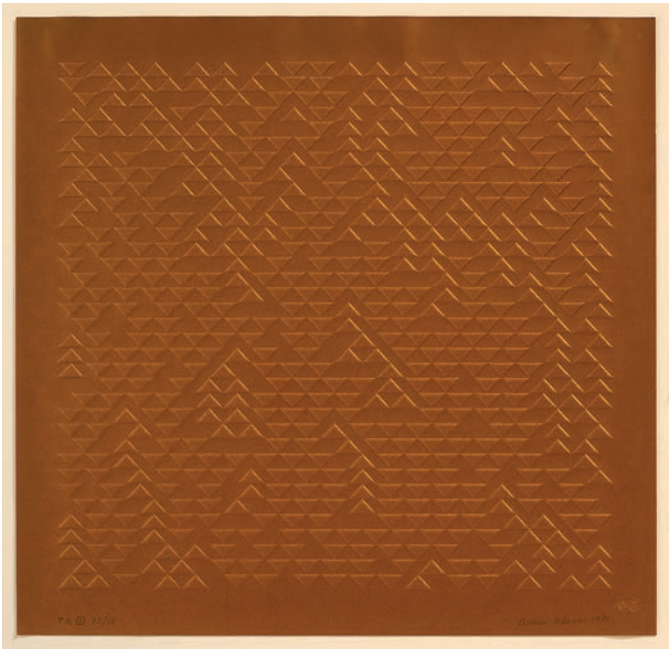
Beginning with sketches on gridded paper, the compositions appear to be simultaneously ordered and also non-repeating. Her lifelong pursuit of material knowledge was present again in a conversation in 1974 with Nicholas Fox Weber as she compared the effect of her triangular compositions to the way crystals form in nature, wherein an impurity inserted into an element is the catalyst for the formation of the crystal. Without the impurity, the crystals won't form. She made a similar comparison in her understanding of metal alloys. Bronze, for example, is an alloy of tin and copper, and is much stronger than either. Instead of having regular crystal structures of a single element, which can easily bend or slip, the alloy is composed of varying crystals, which creates an atomic grit that is harder to break. Following that line of thinking, the strength of Albers's repeated triangular compositions draws on the irregularities of the pattern. While she may have been aware of somewhat similar designs throughout human history—Native American baskets and blankets, African wood carvings, Islamic ornamentation, ceramic tiling, among others—Albers wasn't making specific reference to any such thing. To her the repeating triangles were pure abstraction based on ideas of materiality.

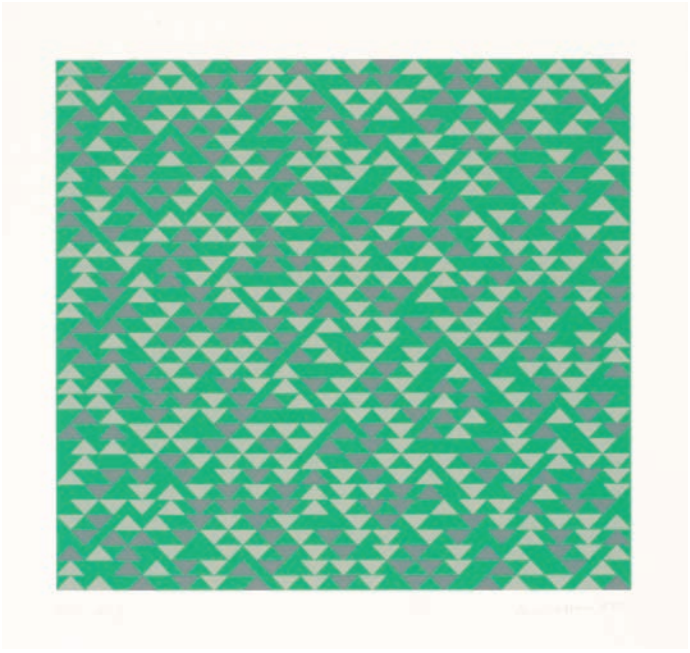
The same ability and instinct that in weaving had elicited such incredible and entirely abstract beauty, Albers applied to the materials and processes of printmaking. The resulting artworks, in both cases, are the natural product of attentive listening to the materials. As she put it in her 1943 essay *Designing,* "a good listener is told what to do by the material, and the material does not err."

Fritz Horstman
Education Director, the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation,
curator of *In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut*









(This page)
Study for *Camino Real,* 1967
Gouache and diazotype on paper
17 1/2 x 16 in.

TR III, 1970
Zinc plate embossing on silkscreen
16 1/2 x 18 1/2 in.

Untitled drawing, ca. 1967
Gouache and diazotype on paper
16 7/8 x 10 7/8 in.

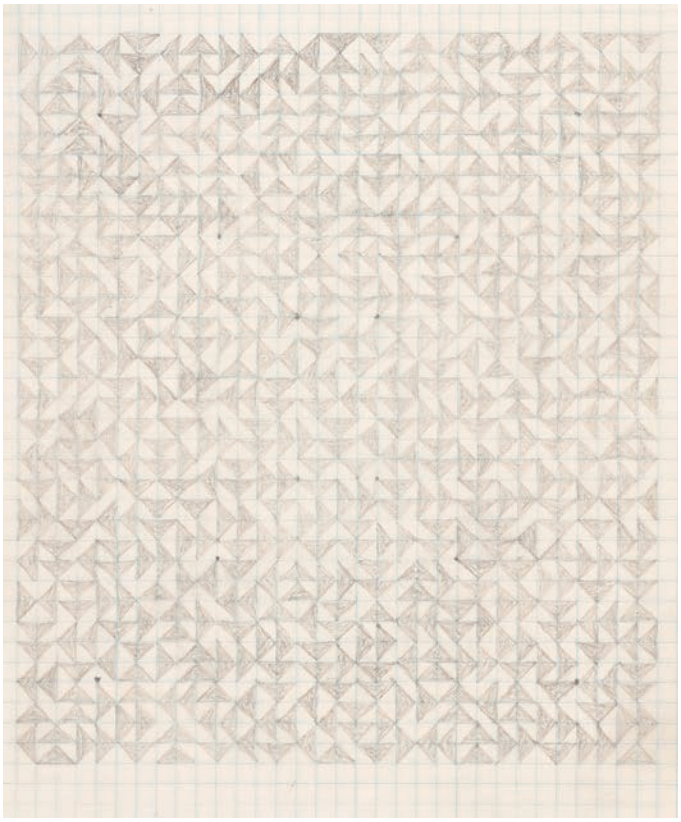
TR II, 1970
Three-color aluminum plate lithograph
19 3/4 x 21 7/8 in

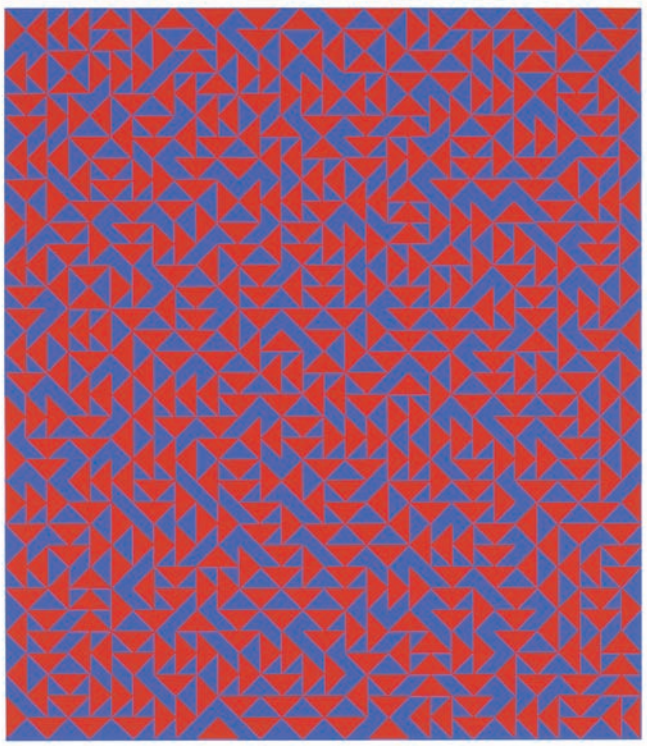
(Opposite)
Untitled drawing, 1969
Pencil on paper
Sheet 10 1/2 x 7 15/16 in.

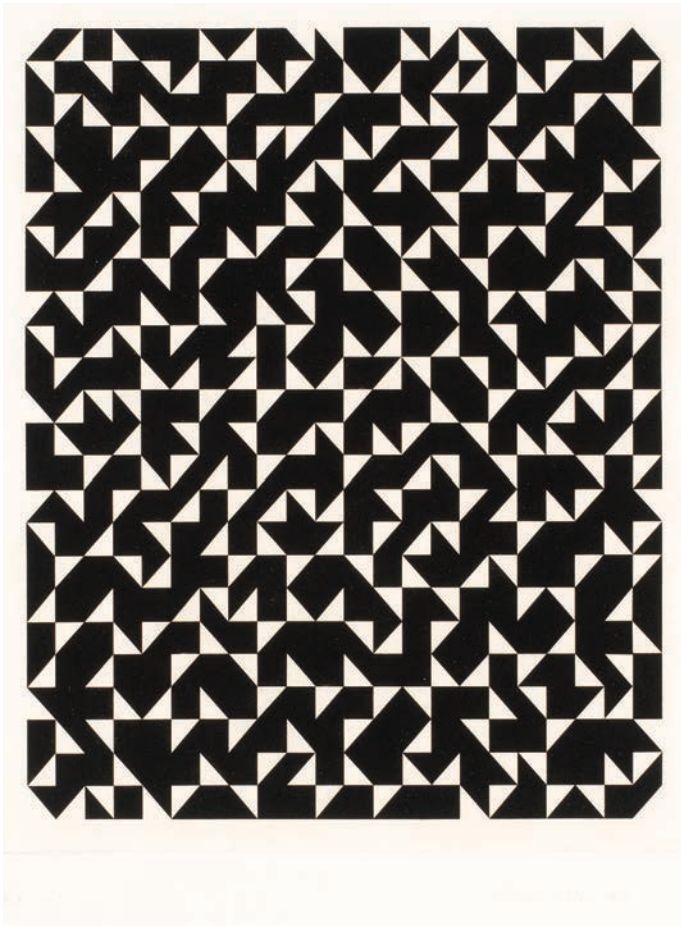
Triangulated Intaglio II, 1976
Single-color copper plate etching
and aquatint
24 x 20 in.

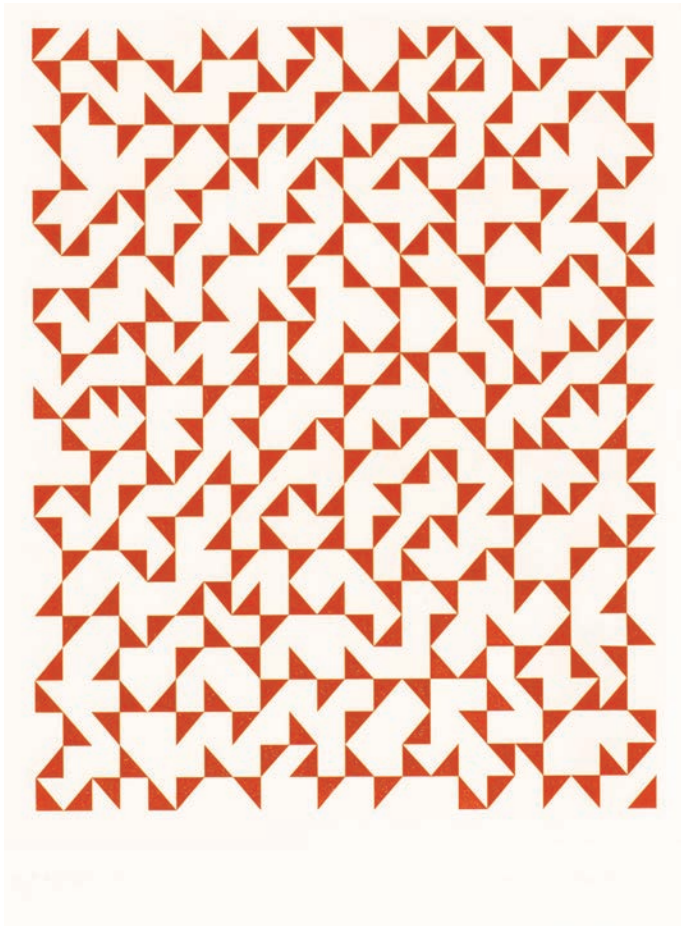
D, 1969
Screenprint
24 x 22 in.

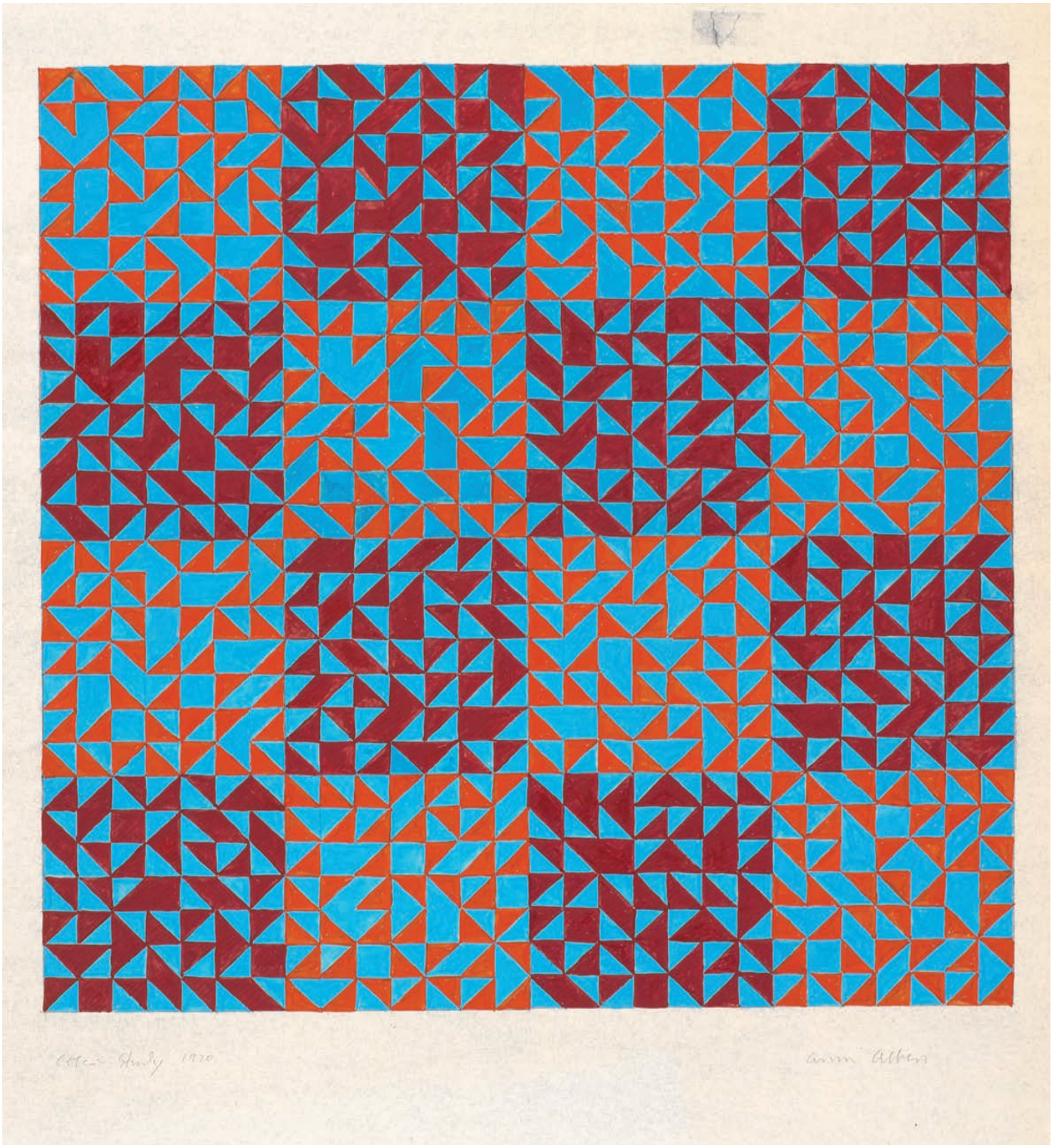
Triangulated Intaglio IV, 1976
Single-color copper plate etching
24 x 20 in.



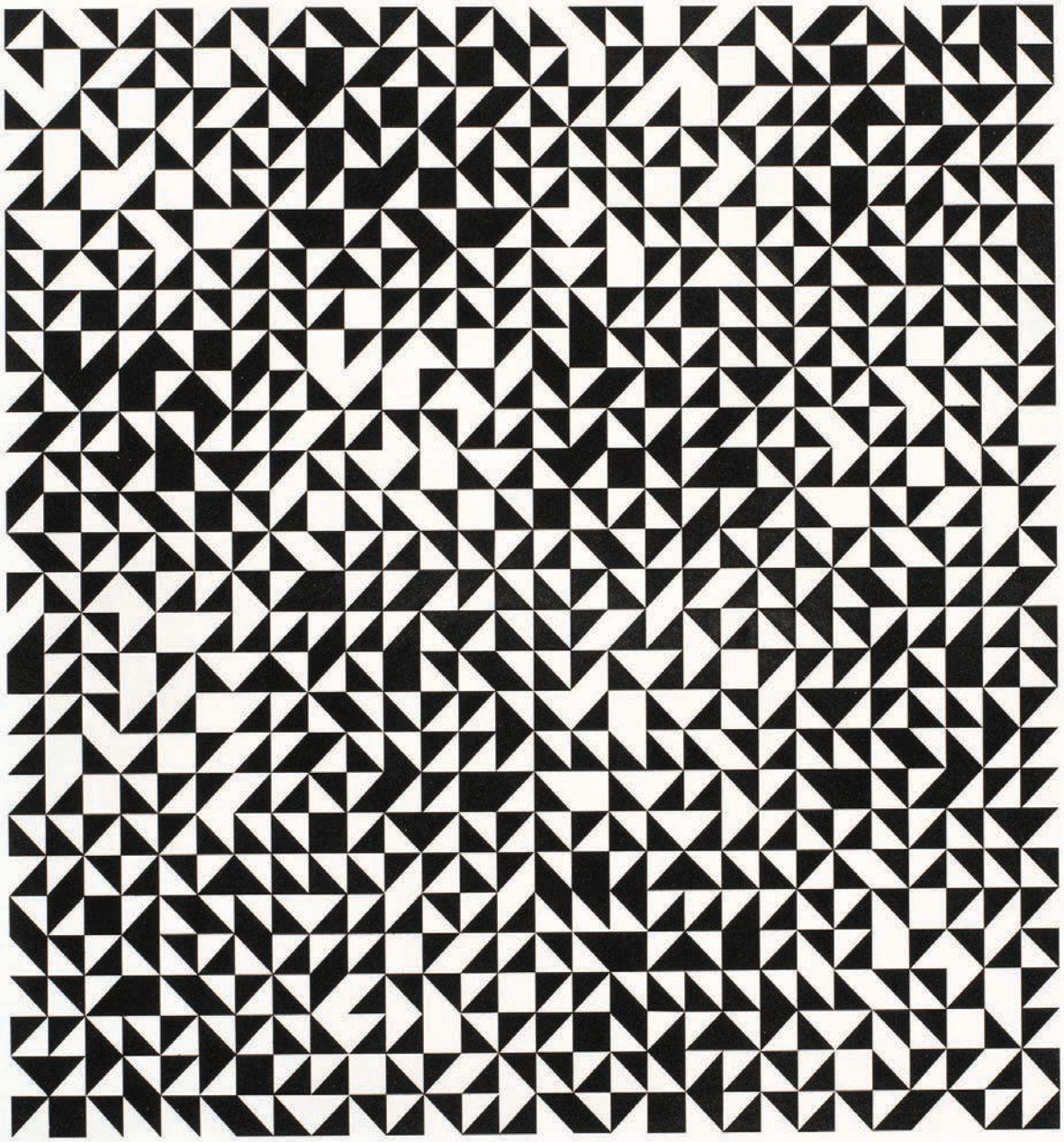








Color Study, 1970
Gouache and diazotype on paper
22 x 17 3/8 in.



Second Movement I, 1978
Single-color copper plate etching and aquatint
28 x 28 in.

Anni Albers loved Connecticut.

When she moved here in 1950 at age fifty with Josef, who was sixty-two, they had been married for a quarter of a century, but as Anni told me in 1972, she had never before had "a normal" life: "I had never cooked a meal before. In my childhood, my parents had other people to do those things, and we were not allowed in the kitchen. At twenty-two, I went to the Bauhaus; in both Weimar and Dessau, there was a cafeteria. At Black Mountain College, where we went in 1933, there was a dining room where everyone met together." So it was only when Josef became Director of the Yale School of Art's Department of Design and the Alberses bought their first house—a small Cape Cod on the outskirts of New Haven—that Anni began to experience everyday life the way many people do.

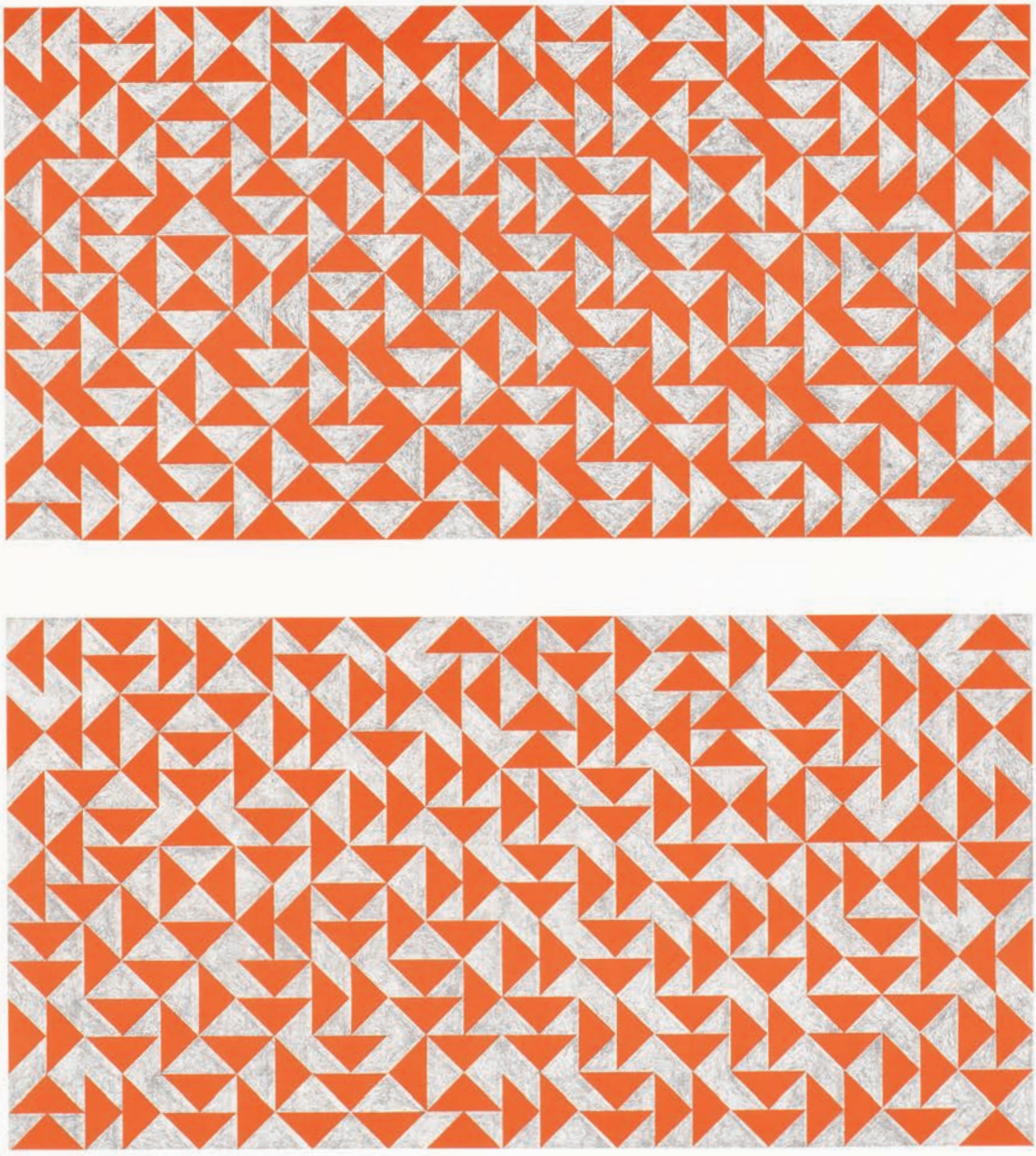
In 1949, she had been the first textile artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; she was also the first woman, in any medium, to have a show devoted only to her work. Still, on her passport she listed her profession as "housewife." It was tongue-in-cheek for her to define herself as such, but Connecticut made her relish that role. She found the check-out staff at the supermarket friendly and helpful; she considered the Sears Roebuck on the Boston Post Road "a treasure chest." She and Josef relished the offerings of New England: autumn foliage, the beauty of winter snow, picnics in the summer, Colonial architecture, life at a reasonable pace with architecture at a livable scale, and an old-fashioned work ethic where people were in their offices at 8 a.m. before plugging away—and then home for dinner with their families. The Alberses were friends of the playwright Thornton Wilder, who lived in Hamden, and if Connecticut meant existence on the level of what it is in Wilder's Our Town, they preferred this to flash or pretention; they had no use for "the New York scene" or "the art world."

By nature, Anni was an adventurer. When I, fifty years her junior, told her about my family's printing company, Fox Press, she said she was curious to visit. The idea of both letterpress and offset printing intrigued her; that it was generally used for commercial purposes attested to the value, not a deficit, in these machine processes. By then, Anni and Josef had moved to Orange. It was an easy trip north—through the tunnel on the Wilbur Cross, and onward on I-91, past Hartford: a route that she treated like a miracle of modernism—to Fox Press, housed in a building of a modern design that reminded her of the w ork of Mies Van der Rohe, the Bauhaus Director known for the statement and the practice of "less is more." Anni declared a sleek two-color press "more beautiful than what they call 'Expressionism'"; she observed the preparatory processes of lithography; she familiarized herself with inks and papers that were new to her.

Nothing thrilled Anni more than to learn from process and technique, to absorb and take direction rather than impose. The methods generally used for advertising brochures and the like enabled her to capture, on the one hand, the vagaries of her handmade pencil strokes—irregular and ever shifting—and, at the same time, to construct a meticulous design, the lines as precise as a razor blade, in an unmodulated and vibrant red. As always, she created rhythm through irregularity; she orchestrated surprises. And she utilized what she considered a gift: the capacity to reverse the figure and ground, so that what is gray above is red below, and vice versa.

Anni Albers saw life as a source of gifts. What she could do with the freedom of the life she enjoyed after she and Josef fled tyranny; what she found in self-service supermarkets and discount stores; what she could learn by looking at machinery and working with skillful craftspeople: these were miracles to her. From 1950 until 1994, this world-ranking artist, this innovator, this intrepid human being flourished in the Nutmeg State.

Nicholas Fox Weber
Executive Director, the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation



Anni Albers at home, Orange, Connecticut, ca 1970
photograper unknown

Fox I, 1972
Photo offset
24 x 20 in.

Short Conversations with Threads

In the early 1960s, Anni Albers, who had been living in Connecticut for over ten years, had been weaving for over forty years, and by all accounts, as she confirms in a letter to Florence Knoll, had not yet run out of ideas for new textiles. On July 14th, 1963, Albers wrote to Knoll, "Dear Florence, I meant to send you that sample now but another one appeared on the loom which might be nice to include…" The idea that a textile sample could "appear on the loom" is a testament to an artist and designer who saw endless possibilities in the warp and weft.

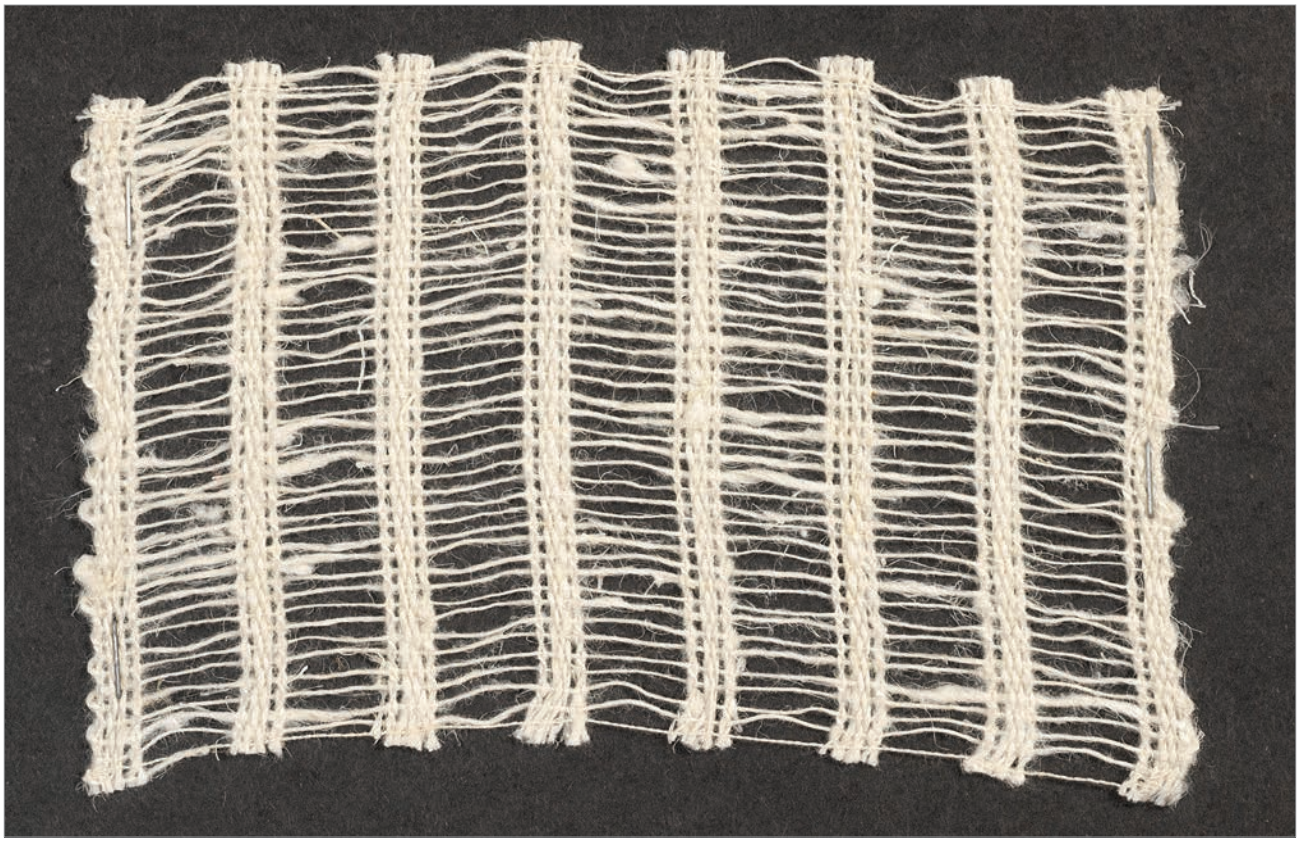
A textile sample can be many different things. It can be a small hand-woven experiment with materials, a trial in small-scale for a potential future textile. It can be a small piece, cut-off from an existing larger fabric, that gives a sense of the whole at a smaller scale. It can be a pure experiment in construction or material, an end in itself, as the development in a structure. The textile samples that Anni Albers created, especially during her years in Connecticut, are combinations of all of these elements.

Anni Albers's small-scale experiments show a designer capable of endless creative iteration and variation. Looking closely at the hundreds of textile samples Albers produced we see patterns emerge, several typologies of textile samples begin to form. Samples for upholstery fabric are made of woolen twills, using wefts in highly saturated colors that stand out against a dense black warp. In another group, linen samples constructed in the most elemental structure, plain weave, become more dynamic with the inclusion of a thick hemp weft, alternating and intertwining with a fine linen yarn or perhaps with a glittering metallic thread. Albers created numerous versions of this textile, each of them distinctive in subtle ways. In some cases, the weft is doubled or tripled, is alternated with a contrasting fiber or floats over large sections of warp, building a new texture. In each, it is apparent that Albers was not only a master craftsperson but also incredibly adept with materials, able to choose her fiber for both its tactile and aesthetic properties. Albers often wrote of the importance of paying close attention to materials to learn to "listen to them and to speak their language" and to learn the process of handling them.

One of the largest groups of textile samples is that of the gauze or leno weaves. Leno weave is an ancient technique of making a sheer yet strong fabric by twisting two warp threads over one another and inserting a weft thread in between, thereby locking the twist in place. Albers designed dozens of variations of leno weave textile samples. Some of these leno or gauze textiles use contrasting colors in warp or weft. In others, Albers inserts bright gold metallic threads through coarse linen or jute warp twists, combining two seemingly disparate materials to create something altogether new. It was some of the most minimal of these leno fabrics that were eventually produced by Knoll Textiles.

Nowhere more than in the textile samples do we see Anni Albers experimenting with the various permutations and variations possible within the limitations of the horizontal and vertical logic of the loom. These textile samples, essentially, experiments in structure and material, reveal another layer of an artist whose work with threads helped pioneer new possibilities for textile-based art. Albers didn't save drawings or weaving plans for any of her creations, and so the textile samples, these small trials, become perhaps the most essential archive of Albers's studio that we have. They are the physical result of experimentation, the products of a life spent listening to threads.

Karis Medina
Associate Curator, the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation



Textile sample, ca. 1950–60
Linen textile mounted on paper
3 x 7 in.

Anni Albers with textile samples in her home ca. 1950–60
Photo: *New Haven Register*

Two, 1952
Linen, cotton, rayon
18 1/2 x 40 1/4 in.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut*
at the New Britain Museum of American Art
March 19–June 14, 2020

In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut is part of 2020/20+ Women @ NBMAA presented by StanleyBlack&Decker with additional support provided by Bank of America.

The exhibition *In Thread and On Paper: Anni Albers in Connecticut* is made possible by the generosity of The Coby Foundation, Ltd.

Exhibitions at the NBMAA are made possible thanks to the support of the Special Exhibition Fund donors, including John N. Howard, Sylvia Bonney, Anita Arcuni Ferrante and Anthony Ferrante, Marian and Russell Burke, and The Aeroflex Foundation. We also gratefully acknowledge the funding of Brendan and Carol Conry, Irene and Charles J. Hamm and Carolyn and Elliot Joseph.

New Britain Museum of American Art
56 Lexington Street
New Britain, CT 06052
(860) 229-0257 / nbmaa.org

MUSEUM HOURS
Monday: Closed
Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday,
Friday: 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Thursday: 11 a.m.-8 p.m.
Saturday: 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

MUSEUM SHOP
Open during Museum hours
(860) 229-0257, ext. 214

CAFÉ ON THE PARK
with Riverhouse Catering
11 a.m.-3 p.m.
(860) 229-0257, ext. 240

PARKING
Free on-site parking

NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation