

The Pliable Plane: Textiles, Space, and the Work of Anni Albers

In 1922, Anni Albers (1899–1994) joined the Bauhaus School in Weimar. She expressed interest in architecture, but was refused entry to the male-only construction workshop (der Baukurs) and was directed to the weaving workshop. Between 1922 and 1933, Albers produced wall hangings and designs for commercial fabrics. My research examines her textiles work according to Bauhaus architectural ideals.

I position Albers' work in the context of German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper's (1803–1879) definitions of architecture. Semper proposed that architecture is motivated by four 'elements': the hearth, mound, roof and enclosure. Just as Semper asserts that textiles are the ancestors of enclosures in his treatise *Der Vier Elemente der Baukunst* (1851), I argue that Albers wall hangings fulfil the function of spatial dividers. I argue that her interest in spatial concerns, and her use of theoretical approaches indicate that Albers' textiles are literally and metaphorically flexible enough to fulfil myriad functions in a Bauhaus interior, and as a result, that the term 'wall-hanging' belies a richness of meaning. An expansion in categorisation of her work as wall hangings contributes to a clearer understanding of Albers' oeuvre as manifestations of theoretical approaches at work in the Bauhaus during her time there.

Keywords: Anni Albers, wall hangings, architecture, Gottfried Semper, spatial division

The title for this investigation comes from the first chapter of Albers' 1954 monograph, *On Weaving*, and from a later article originally published in *Perspecta* in 1957.¹ In it, Albers defines weaving as a method of 'forming a pliable plane of threads by interlacing them in a rectangular way.'² I find this language evocative and provocative: it was Albers' words that led me to this investigation of her textiles. One of the first of Albers' works which I encountered as I embarked upon this exploration is a representative instance of Albers' interior fabrics, which bears a significant title: *Wall-hanging* (Fig. 1). This piece gives us a sense of the dominant type of textiles Albers made at the Bauhaus.³ Like others of Albers' pieces called 'Wall-hanging', this example is longer than it is wide, and its length exceeds one hundred centimetres. It is comprised of a combination of different fibres, including silk, as it does in many of Albers' other compositions. This gives us some idea about how heavy these pieces might be: they are made more substantial by the inclusion of heavier materials, like cotton. The silk in their compositions gives these fabrics lightness, and aids in the reflection of light and colour brilliancy. Finally, this wall hanging gives us an indication of the stylistic qualities shared by Albers' works from this time period. It features limited colour palettes, and a focus on straight implied lines, especially horizontal lines, which are kept to a grid.

This exploration deals with determining what exactly is meant by 'Wall-hanging', and what this might mean for Albers' ideas about architectural space. It might be tempting to assume that a wall hanging is simply that which hangs on a wall. The title of this work suggests something straightforward regarding its role in interiors, but this term belies its own richness. Albers' fabrics have been fixed upon walls, but also hanging from ceilings: wall hangings like the example from 1924 (Fig. 1) have been displayed by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York and the Bauhaus-Archiv, and

1 Anni Albers, "The Pliable Plane: Textiles in Architecture," *Perspecta: The Yale Journal of Architecture* 4 (1957), 36–41, abridged and reprinted as "Fabric: The Pliable Plane" in *Craft Horizons* 18 (July–August 1958), <http://www.annialbersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab4> (accessed January 23, 2016).

2 Anni Albers, *On Weaving* (New Haven: Wesleyan Press, 1965), 59.

3 After having moved to America, Albers continued to work in textiles, but produced fewer wall hangings, and focused instead on smaller weavings and designs for industry.



Fig. 1. Anni Albers, Wall-hanging, 1924.

the Albers' Foundation hanging against walls.⁴ Similarly, her cotton and linen curtain in Harvard's Graduate Student Centre, designed by Walter Gropius, was suspended from the ceiling and separated shared living quarters for increased privacy for the residents (Fig. 2). While she made this piece after she left the Bauhaus, and Germany, the curtain was used for a space designed by another *Bauhausler*, Gropius, and shares similar materials with other commercial fabrics from her Bauhaus years, many of which no longer survive. The varied possibilities for these textiles' situation, and by extension the word 'wall-hanging' itself, also suggests that we can play with the word: Albers' textiles might be used as wall hangings, but also as hanging walls. In this way, we engage with Albers' interest in architecture by manipulating language to create a link between two apparently disparate media: architecture and textiles.

If these weavings can act as hanging walls and as wall hangings, then perhaps part of their function is spatial division. The idea of using textiles as potential spatial dividers in an interior may have come from Gottfried Semper.⁵ Semper was a nineteenth-century German architect, designer, and theorist. Semper was active in Germany as an architect. Among his architectural projects are the Semper Opera House in Dresden, and re-designing the Ringstrasse in Vienna. He fled Germany after taking part in the May Uprising in Dresden of 1849. Semper lived in Zurich and London until 1862, when he returned to Germany and resumed his work as an architect. Throughout his career, Semper was a major proponent of polichromy in Greek sculpture, a controversial topic at the time. He also wrote about the relationships between architecture and other art forms in, among others, his works *Der Stil* and *Der Vier Elemente der Baukunst*.⁶ In these texts, he presents the four elements generating architectural forms. They are the hearth, roof, mound, and enclosure.⁷ The use of the term 'elements' can be misleading.

Semper's later publications clarify that he conceived of them not as material elements or forms, but as 'motives or ideas, as technical operations based in the applied arts.'⁸ This is to say that architecture does not actually have to have a physical hearth, roof, enclosure or mound in order to count as architecture. Instead, these four elements serve motivations that are present in all forms of architecture. These motivations, according to Semper, are: heating and warmth; protection from weather; removal from the ground; and spatial division.

The enclosure or wall as a spatial divider will be the focus of this article. The enclosure, according to Semper's definition, is that architectural element that 'formally represents and makes visible the enclosed space as such, absolutely, as it were, without reference to secondary concepts.'⁹ The enclosure acquires its architectural value by defining a 'new spatiality' or inner world separated and protected from the outer, also by surrounding the hearth.¹⁰ Each of the four elements corresponds to a particular technique of working process, developed both in a ritual and a functional sense in the practical arts. The enclosure originated with wickerwork, and therefore is a product of the technique of weaving.¹¹ We can see this connection perhaps most clearly in examples of wattle and daub construction from medieval Europe, which use stripped saplings woven between wooden posts and covered with mud to form substantial, hardy walls.

This weaving technique, Semper notes, is the first motive, which emerged in the intertwining of branches for fences and pens, which later evolved into the art of weaving with bast and wicker, later with woven threads. Semper asserts that the wall-fitter or *Wandbereiter*, that is, the weaver of mats and carpets, is the 'ancestor' of the architect.¹² He also argues that the beginnings of building coincide with those of weaving, and the first volume of *Der Stil* was meant to provide substantial



Fig. 2. Anni Albers, Wall-hanging, 1924.

⁴ The Museum of Modern Art in New York also contains later examples of Albers' wall hangings, dating from 1949 and onward. For more, see Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (eds.), *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), exhibition catalogue.

⁵ Semper's views are considered by Bauhaus historians like Giedion and Smith to belong to the pre-modern era, even though it would appear that Semper's ideas continued to influence *Bauhäusler* like Gropius and Albers.

⁶ These texts are much studied, and have provided the theoretical basis for many analyses of nineteenth and twentieth century architecture. For more information on Semper, see the *Journal of Art Historiography* online. For more analysis of Semper's work in relation to textiles, Rebecca Houze has authored some excellent material.

⁷ Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 24, translated by Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Hermann.

⁸ Semper, *Four Elements*, 24.

⁹ Semper quoted in Mari Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71.

¹⁰ Semper, *Four Elements*, 23.

¹¹ Hvattum, *Historicism*, 15.

¹² Semper, *Four Elements*, 103.

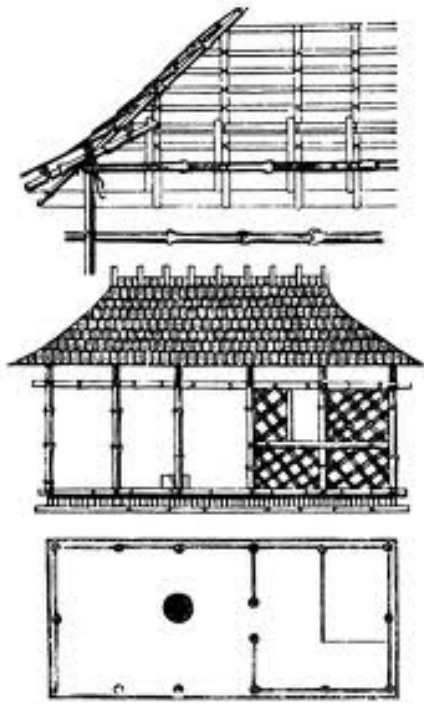


Fig. 3. Diagram of the Caraib Hut, Trinidad Display, Great Exhibition, 1851 (London, UK). Published in Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

documentation for this assertion.¹³ The influence of the carpet in its capacity as a wall, as a vertical means of protection, had a significant impact on the evolution of certain architectural forms.¹⁴ Walls, then, spring directly from acts of gathering and enclosing, acts expressed both practically and symbolically in the motifs of the textile arts.

An example of this can be found in Semper's *Der Stil*. A diagram, which depicts elements of a Caraib structure, was drawn from an example on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, England (Fig. 3). The hut illustrated for Semper the four motives in their simplest combination.¹⁵ The illustration he provides shows the wall between the support posts of the roof as black intersecting lines. This interwoven material is akin to the warp and weft of a textile.¹⁶ The supports, according to Semper's theory, are part of the roof, not the walls.¹⁷ The materials that fill the space between the posts are the walls. In this instance, Semper looked beyond the spun threads of a weaving or inter-woven plant matter of the Caraib hut to focus on the role of the woven structure: that of the spatial divider. We can perhaps imagine how he made such a link: some fibres like hemp or jute are similar in structure and appearance to other more sturdy materials normally associated with

building materials, like bamboo or wood. Both are naturally occurring, plant-based, and share similar physical characteristics, like their light weight and tensile strength. The similarity in physical properties between textile and building materials also means that similar construction techniques exist in both the fibre arts and architecture. In this case, we can see that the inter-woven strands of plant fibre making up the Caraib hut resemble the warp and weft of a textile. The plant fibres in the hut were flexible enough to shape and bend to allow for weaving, while still maintaining tensile strength to produce a 'filler' that stretched between the roof supports of the structure. As a result,

Semper identified the interwoven material of the wall as akin to warp and weft. As such, it was possible for Semper to see beyond material or contextual concerns, and recognise a similarity of process and construction between woven textiles and woven wall structures.

This is not to say that Semper did not consider materials or context important: quite the opposite is true. The physical characteristics of materials, and their bearing on production processes were important to Semper. As part of a generation that endeavoured to explain cultural phenomena in historical and anthropological terms, Semper sought the roots of architecture in empirical facts. The 'primitive' hut was not, for Semper, the original, or universal, but an empirical phenomenon. It revealed both a timeless principle, and the particular historical conditions from which it originated.¹⁸ He argues that the historical conditions of architecture begin with the history of practical art. This history of practical art, in turn, begins with the motifs, simultaneously embodying function, technique, and ritual action.¹⁹ Semper was preoccupied with the origins of art in some primordial human condition and with revealing the development of art as a metamorphosis of motifs: these were key points in Semper's thinking on art.²⁰

Albers' thoughts on textiles in architecture appear to echo Semper's assertions. It seems certain, then, that Albers was thinking about her work as an exploration of the basic means of one of architecture's most fundamental motives. Albers acknowledges the same functions accomplished by textiles that Semper champions: warmth, separation from the ground, shelter from the elements, and of course, spatial division.²¹ Albers goes on to assert that the roles played by textiles in interiors have diversified even further, to include sound absorption and light reflection, among others.²² By relating her work to Semper's theory, it is possible that Albers was reminding those same Bauhaus masters who refused her entry to the *Baukurs*, and who viewed the textile arts produced in the weaving workshop as dilettante and superfluous, that the very practice of building from which she was denied, and which was held in high regard in the Bauhaus, actually developed from the textile arts. She notes that

It is interesting in this connection to observe that in ancient myths from many parts of the world it was a goddess, a female deity, who brought the invention of weaving to mankind. When we realize that weaving is primarily a process of structural organization this thought is startling, for today thinking in terms of structure seems closer to the inclination of men than women.²³

¹³ Hvattum, *Historicism*, 70.

¹⁴ Semper, *Four Elements*, 103.

¹⁵ Semper, *Four Elements*, 28.

¹⁶ Warp threads are the upright, vertical threads of a weaving which provide structure for the fabric and do not move during the weaving process. Weft threads intersect the warp threads horizontally, and are manipulated by the weaver to 'fill' the spaces between the warp.

¹⁷ Semper, *Four Elements*, 28.

¹⁸ Hvattum, *Historicism*, 35.

¹⁹ Hvattum, *Historicism*, 14.

²⁰ Hvattum, *Historicism*, 10.

²¹ Albers, "The Pliable Plane," <http://www.albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab4>.

²² Albers, "The Pliable Plane," <http://www.albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab4>.

²³ Albers, "The Pliable Plane," <http://www.albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab4>.

In this way, we can see evidence of Albers' subtle refusal to be relegated to the position of amateur: her use of textiles in architecture was an act of resistance, and Semper's theory gave her the tools she needed to express her ideas and participate in a creative dialogue from which she had been barred. Semper's insistence that the textile arts were the ancestors of architecture, which parallel her own views on her work, allowed her to accomplish this resistance.

Indeed, Semper asserts that hanging carpets remained the true walls, the visible boundaries of space. The often solid walls behind them were necessary for reasons that had nothing to do with the creation of space, rather, they were needed for security, for supporting a load, for their permanence, and so on.²⁴ With the need for warmer and more solid walls, the textile hanging became a 'dressing', and subsequently was replaced by other surrogate dressings, like stucco or wood. In 'all cases (Semper's emphasis) the motive and spatial essence of the wall' were enacted by the dressing, not by the supporting and contingent wall-prop behind.²⁵ In this way, Semper not only relates architecture to its origins in craft practice, he also notes the reliance on flexible textile structures where pattern, material, and form were interrelated.²⁶ Wherever the need for these secondary functions did not arise then the carpets remained the original means of separating space.²⁷ When we look at images of Albers' textiles, we can see that the insertion (or re-insertion) of textiles as important elements in architectural spaces would remind inhabitants that solid, load-bearing walls were not required for textiles to exist in a space. Indeed, according to Semper, it is actually the solid, plastered and painted wall that owes its existence to the textile.

Textiles in their architectural, spatial roles were not, however, only about enclosure. In Semper's theory, as well as at the Bauhaus, they related to thinking about a range of sensory engagement. In *Der Stil*, Semper traces the origin of monumental architecture to the 'improvised festival and stage apparatus'.²⁸ Semper argues that the ritualised event and the impending sensory experience precede the architectural form. In his argument, he offers up the impromptu covered market, or festival tent, as the ancestor of Egyptian, Greek and Roman architecture, respectively.²⁹ In these festival-type instances, the physical object dissolves into experience, into sensory perception and feeling.

These examples refer directly to Semper's ideas about the visceral experience of a space: one that he calls the 'festival'. Semper posits that the decorations on public monuments were 'initially

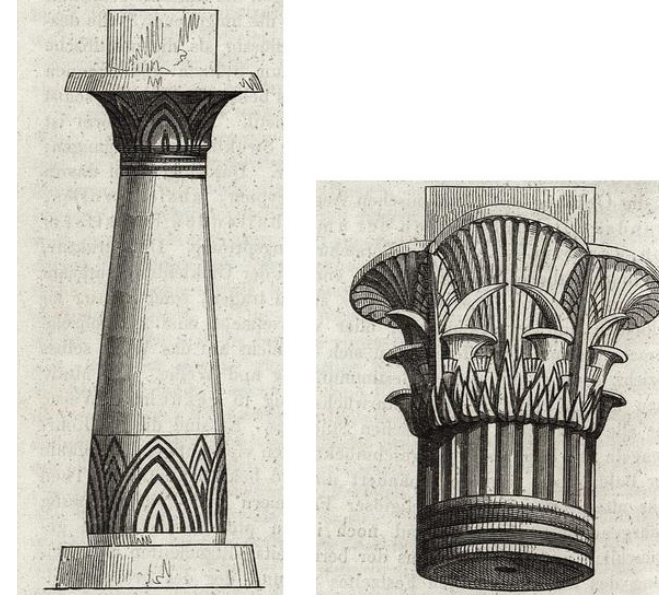


Fig. 4. Drawing of Columns with Calyx-shaped Capitals, Egyptian, Old Kingdom (date unknown). Published in Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil: Band 1: Die Textile Kunst* (Stuttgart: J.G. Sprandel'schen Buchdruckerei, 1860).

planned to last only as long' as the festival for which the decorations had been made.³⁰ As such, textiles made for excellent festival apparatus since they were easy to remove once a ritual or festival had taken place, but worked well to separate sacred spaces from secular ones during holidays or celebrations. Textiles adorning exterior façades and interior spaces alike, as well as separating spaces during celebratory moments worked to develop a sensory experience of those festive times (Fig. 4). Observers and visitors to a temple would be alerted to the potentially sacred, but certainly liminal, time and space of a festival by textiles which were used to indicate the nature of the ritual. In this way, the visual experience of a textile, in conjunction with other sensory stimuli, would

develop for the participant a distinct sense of 'festival-ness'. Indeed, nearly every time he brings up the concept of the festival in his treatise *Der Stil*, Semper references textiles.³¹ As such, textiles in this context, according to Semper, work to establish and further the visceral comprehension of festive spaces in the viewer by their very presence.

We can see Albers engaging with her audiences in a way that aligns itself with Semper's notions of the ritual, sensory event by using a visual language present at the Bauhaus to engage with her viewers. Albers uses geometric abstraction and juxtaposed fields of colour to suggest the dematerialisation of matter into perception, into its essence, grasped through the senses. Her use of flattened planes of colour and implied horizontal lines, which maintain a grid-like pattern, might be read as a visual representation of the moment of dissolution for the audience. While she may be depicting physical objects, her employment of geometric abstraction shows us those physical objects swimming before our eyes into insubstantiality. The central horizontal line of on the surface of *Wall-hanging* (1924) stretches from one side to another, recalling Semper's notion of hanging textiles draped between columns on a temple.³² The remnants of these draperies, in Semper's view, could be found in columnar decoration that signalled the vestiges of textile decoration, namely 'garlands, draperies, tapestries', which 'sheathed' or 'dressed' the hollow underlying.³³ Semper points to a pair of ornamented Egyptian columns to support his claim (Fig 4). These columns, with their calyx-style capitals and decorative patterning around their bases, recalled for Semper the

²⁴ Semper, *Four Elements*, 104.

²⁵ Semper, *Four Elements*, 24.

²⁶ Sarah Alfoldy and Janice Helland (eds.), *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855–2005* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 1.

²⁷ Semper, *Four Elements*, 104.

²⁸ Semper, *Four Elements*, 2.

²⁹ Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil* (Stuttgart: J.G. Sprandel'schen Buchdruckerei, 1860), 248.

³⁰ Semper, *Stil*, 285.

³¹ Semper, *Stil*, 249, 285, 294, 433.

³² Semper, *Stil*, 280, 317.

³³ Semper, *Stil*, 362.

garlands, banners, tapestries and draped fabrics which were, in his estimation, previously attached to columns for festival use, but had since been replaced by other modes of coloration and decor. Instead of depicting a realistic image of an ancient temple adorned with textiles during a festival, however, Albers develops a sense of abstracted, but nonetheless real, space. Now, instead of focusing on the object itself, we are encouraged to examine how we perceive the object: through colour, shape and texture. This abstraction appears to be in keeping with the shift in materials over time that Semper notes in his monographs: the style, colour, location, and form of the decoration and patterning in temple architecture did not change, so much as the materials and physical qualities of that decoration did. The sensory experience of the garlands and banners continued for temple-goers, long after the garlands themselves have been replaced by fresco. As such, Albers may be recalling the moment of visceral experience as the antecedent for architectural forms, including textiles, through geometric abstraction.

A particularly strong element of her approach to geometric abstraction in her surface design on her wall hangings is the horizontal line. This component also works to link Albers' wall hangings with Semper's theory. Semper mentions the tapestries and textiles stretched horizontally between the columns of a Pompeiian temple, especially for important festivals and religious events. The horizontal bands that run from side to side in *Wall-hanging* (1924) might recall those ancient festival fabrics. It also reminds the viewer that, according to Semper's theory, enclosures are not structural, but are stretched or suspended between the upright, vertical posts or supports of a building, which are actually part of the roof. In this way, Albers may be prompting her audience to remember that textiles are the ancestors of walls, and thus have a place alongside other architectural elements.

Further investigation of Semper's notion of the festival clarifies Albers' approach to surface treatment. Semper asserts that in Roman temple architecture, woven partitions hung between columns to furnish different zones. In his Pompeiian examples, for instance, the intercolumnnar drapery was retained in the form of a fresco, constituting, according to Semper, 'nothing more than the imitation (*Nachahmung*) of the draperies and screens that used to furnish and enclose the stoas and halls.'³⁴ He goes on to claim that the principle of dressing has greatly influenced style in architecture and other arts in all periods and in all nations. Indeed, he asserts that the relation between Pompeiian wall-paintings and earlier draperies is 'so obvious that no further evidence is needed from ancient writers'.³⁵ Despite this grand claim, there may be a grain of truth in his correlation between dressing the body and the building. In this way, Semper considers the appearance of the textile motive in architecture – his most important thesis of dressing. Ultimately, it is his justification for polichromy.³⁶

'Polichromy', from the Greek for 'many colours', is the use of more than one colour in decoration or adornment, especially in sculpture and architecture. In the nineteenth century, however, it referred to a growing argument for a change in the interpretation of classical artefacts and archeological finds: namely that statuary, architecture, and objects from the classical periods of Rome and Greece ought not to be pristine, glowing white marble, but painted in bright and varied colours. This argument was important to Semper because the presence of colour in architecture was one of his main pieces of evidence for the relationship between genitive art forms like textiles, and their collective descendent, architecture. Semper insisted that colour, imagery, and patterning on textiles translated into polichromy in wall-painting because textiles had been the original walls, and colourful wall-treatment, in Semper's view, was the vestige of that lineage.³⁷ For Semper, polichromy was the link between ancestral textiles and resulting architectural forms.

The adoption and development of Semper's arguments for polichromy in the approach to colour championed at the Bauhaus, and with which Albers was familiar, becomes evident.³⁸ Bauhaus colour theory indicated that certain colours receded, and others appeared to move forward toward the viewer, which, when applied to walls in the form of paint or wall hanging, gave the viewer spatial information about the space they inhabited.³⁹ In pictorial planes, whether in wall-painting specifically or otherwise, warm, light colours, like yellow, orange, white, and especially red, moved toward the viewer. Cool and dark colours, like blue, green, purple, and black moved away from the viewer.

Because colours had agency to move, the notion of contrast and tension arose. Students of the preliminary course learned the seven distinct types of colour contrast among them the contrast of 'pure' or primary colours, heightened by the inclusion of black and white.⁴⁰ I propose that Albers took up these notions and used them not only to align herself and her practice with Semper's ideas, but also to abstract matter, and in doing so, to make insubstantial, as it were, the gendered distinctions between architectural and textile practices. By abstracting matter, Albers works to break down the material separation between architecture and textiles: the stone and concrete of a building, and the cotton or jute of a wall hanging shimmer and fade into colour fields and sensory perception. The distinguishing features of architecture and textiles blur and dissolve, as do the gendered separation of these two art forms, therefore, if textiles are architecture are indistinguishable from one another, making distinctions between them as a 'male' practice (architecture) and a 'female' practice (textiles) becomes nonsensical.

³⁷ Semper, *Four Elements*, 37.

³⁸ This theory was taught in the preliminary course, and Albers completed that course in 1922.

³⁹ Johannes Itten, *Design and Form The Basic Course at the Bauhaus and Later* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1975), 32, revised edition.

⁴⁰ Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (London: Thames and Hudson Limited, 1984), 106.

³⁴ Semper, quoted in Hvattum, *Historicism*, 72.

³⁵ Semper, *Stil*, 280.

³⁶ Semper, *Four Elements*, 37.

This kind of abstraction is present in her *Wall-hanging* from 1924 (Fig 1). This work adheres to a grid and uses a relatively limited colour palette. The bands of dark brown work to push the lighter fields forward, so that the lightest section, at the centre, seems to bulge towards us. The increasingly dark colour fields at the top and bottom of this hanging seem to move away from the viewer, while simultaneously, the lighter areas push forward. This play with colour works to establish implied lines that indicate a kind of shimmering, insubstantial visual field: these coloured bands pulsate with a rhythm that derives from the interaction of colour. As such, Albers engages with Bauhaus colour language to develop a dematerialised, abstracted space that appeals to a viewer's senses through colour and form. Here, space is shaped by colour and form rather than the material presence of the pliable textile plane.

The textiles examined here offer instances of Albers using colour to delineate spaces and to address the visceral experiences of her viewers. As such, these visceral, functional characteristics of textiles, as they were championed at the Bauhaus, deserve consideration. Wall hangings were used to distinguish spaces via colour. As with the Bauhaus approach to wall-painting, coloured textiles indicated the spatial relationships of walls by juxtaposing different colours, although in Albers' work, juxtapositions are contained in a single textile, while with paint the juxtapositions are on different wall planes, so that part of a room forms a composition.⁴¹ This use of colour in conjunction with textile seems to harken back directly to the notion of polichromy developing out of the textile arts, as championed by Semper. These same considerations appear central to Albers' wall hangings.

Wall hangings, like those produced by Albers, also worked to show the viewer where the volume-bounding planes of a room were. If a textile hung against a wall, it drew attention to that plane through the juxtaposition or patterning of different colours, and thus the viewer was made more visually aware of a room's spatial boundaries.⁴² Albers herself notes this use of interior textiles as she reminds her readers that 'large tapestries have for centuries been used as pictorial walls and rugs as pictorial floors, warming, but principally centralizing our attention. A beautiful view, the flickering of a fire, the play of water, flowers; all serve as such a focal point'.⁴³ As such, it would appear that interior spaces were perceived as spatial compositions that could be viewed as pictorial planes themselves. Likewise, if a textile were suspended from a ceiling it constituted its own planar boundary, which nevertheless was made apparent by a change in colour. This emphasis on planar boundaries dividing volume, and the focus on the viewer's sensory perception and comprehension of a space are two significant characteristics of Bauhaus architecture, but also, I argue, of Albers' textiles.

The examples investigated here suggest that this theoretical approach was based largely in Semper's notions of the four elements of architecture, as well as his ideas about festival-apparatus and the moment of dissolution. In all of these ideas, Semper asserts that textiles play a significant role: either as the ancestor of walls, or as objects which dissolve into sensory perception to achieve for the viewer a total experience, a total work of art, which appeals to the audience in a powerful and visceral way. We have seen instances of textiles, particularly those by Albers, working to recall Semper's ideas and act as catalysts for moments of critical intervention in interior spaces. As such, textiles are capable of communicating ideas about space. They are flexible enough, metaphorically and literally, to occupy more than one function within a space, and to transmit the sometimes complex theoretical concepts set out by Semper.

This examination indicates a few key points about Albers' practice in making wall hangings. Firstly, it indicates that she found alternative methods and media to express her interest in architectural and spatial concerns, despite the sometimes hostile environment she faced as a woman at the Bauhaus. This discussion also suggests that Albers, like other *Bauhäusler*, was aware of Semper and the theories he published in *Der Stil* and *Die Vier Elemente der Baukunst*, but that she adopted and adapted those theories to suit her own purposes: namely, making architecture with textiles. Finally, this engagement with Albers' work might lead us to re-consider the richness of the terms we commonly use to deal with her work. Her work seems to exist at the meeting-place between architecture and textiles, despite the fact that these categories often appear disparate. The phrase used to title these works, 'wall-hanging' also belies a complexity and richness that I think is well-suited to Albers' work. Like her textiles, this term appears at first glance to be straightforward and denotative, but in fact encompasses a variety of ideas, contexts, and meanings.

This richness indicates that Albers' woven works can exist between or outside of categories, and that they call into question the very existence and usefulness of that system of categorisation, which has become so familiar to us. Her weavings are both architecture and textile. Like the geometric, abstracted style of her wall hangings, the distinctions between architecture and textile seem to dematerialise the more we interact with them, leaving us with only a sensory experience of an enclosed space, one that appears to support and defy a linguistic structure. Thus, the title 'wall-hanging' itself becomes abstracted, allowing us to re-arrange the words to better suit our visceral reaction to these works: they are wall hangings, and they are hanging walls. The way in which her practices transcend these categories and terms suggests that it might be best to suspend our desire to categorise and name the works we see before us, and instead desire to experience the sensory spaces Albers builds for us.

41 Hans M. Wingler, *Das Bauhaus* (Schausberg: Verlag Gebr. Rasch & Co., 1962), 10.

42 Ibid..

43 Albers, "The Pliable Plane," <http://albersfoundation.org/teaching/anni-albers/texts/#tab4>.

Jennifer Burgess

Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario Canada



Jennifer Burgess graduated from Queen’s University with a Master’s degree in art history in 2015. Presently, she studies the textile work of Anni Albers, about which she presented at the Context and Meaning conference at Queen’s University in 2015. Her other interests include craft theory, gender studies, semiotics, linguistics, children’s literature, and fashion history. She aims to continue to engage with the relationship between Anni Albers’ textiles and her published texts. She currently resides in Berlin.

E-mail: 13jmb3@queensu.ca

