CONCERNING ART INSTRUCTION
When Rembrandt was asked how one learns to paint, he is said to have answered “One must take a brush and begin.” This is the answer of genius which grows without school and even in spite of schooling. At the same time we know that he had a teacher and became a teacher.

Delacroix went further when he wrote in his diary: “How happy I should have been to learn as a painter that which drives the ordinary musician to despair.” He meant by this the study of harmony and especially the “pure logic” of the fugue: “which is the basis of all reason and consistency in music.”

These two assertions are not contradictory. They merely emphasize different aspects of an artist’s work: on the one hand the intuitive search for and discovery of form; on the other hand the knowledge and application of the fundamental laws of form. Thus all rendering of form, in fact all creative work, moves between the two polarities: intuition and intellect, or possibly between subjectivity and objectivity. Their relative importance continually varies and they always more or less overlap.

I do not wish to assert that the practice of art cannot be learned or taught. But we do know that appreciation and understanding of art can grow both through learning (the development of intuitive perception and discrimination) and through teaching (the handing on of authoritative knowledge). And just as every person is endowed with all the physiological senses — even if in varying degrees both in proportion and quality — likewise, I believe, every person has all the senses of the soul (e.g. sensitivity to tone, color, space), though undoubtedly with still greater differences in degree.

It is of course natural for this reason, that the schools should at least begin the development of all incipient faculties. But going further, art is a province in which one finds all the problems of life reflected — not only the problems of form (e.g. proportion and balance) but also spiritual problems (e.g. of philosophy, of religion, of sociology, of economy). For this reason art is an important and rich medium for general education and development.
If we must accept education as life and as preparation for life, we must relate all school work, including work in art, as closely as possible to modern problems. It is not enough to memorize historical interpretations and aesthetic views of the past or merely to encourage a purely individualistic expression. We need not be afraid of losing the connection with tradition if we make the elements of form the basis of our study. And this thorough foundation saves us from imitation and mannerisms, it develops independence, critical ability, and discipline.

From his own experiences the student should first become aware of form problems in general, and thereby become clear as to his own real inclinations and abilities. In short, our art instruction attempts first to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open to his own living, being, and doing. In this connection we consider class work in art studies necessary because of the common tasks and mutual criticism.

We find this way more successful than starting, without previous study of fundamentals, on studies in special fields with purely individualistic corrections, depending on the taste of the teacher. At first every student should come in contact with the fundamental problems in as many branches of art as possible, instead of beginning, for example, with life painting or animal sculpture.

Many years' experience in teaching have shown that it was often only through experimenting with the elements in various distinct branches of art that students first recognized their real abilities. As a consequence these students had to change their original plans. As an instance, a student of painting discovered his real talent was for metal working. Our first concern is not to turn out artists. We regard our elementary art work primarily as a means of general training for all students. For artistically gifted students it serves as a broad foundation for later special study.

We have three main disciplines in our art instruction: Drawing, Basic Design (Werkelehre), and Color-Painting. These are supplemented by exhibitions and discussions of old and modern art, of
handicraft and industrial products, of typographic and photographic work. The exhibitions are used to point out special intentions (e.g. art related to nature or remote from nature; the so-called primitivism; monumental form, pure form; and realism or imitation), and conditions due to working material (e.g. wood form, stone form, metal form; silver form in the Baroque, and gold in the Gothic). In addition collections of materials (different woods, stones, metals, textiles, leathers, artificial materials), are shown. By excursions to handicraft and manufacturing plants we seek to develop an understanding of the treatment of material and of working in general (both as matters of technique and as social matters).

Drawing we regard as a graphic language. Just as in studying language it is most important to teach first the commonly understood usage of speech, in drawing we begin with exact observation and pure representation. We cannot communicate graphically what we do not see. That which we see incorrectly we will report incorrectly. We recognize that although our optical vision is correct, our overemphasis on the psychic vision often makes us see incorrectly. For this reason we learn to test our seeing, and systematically study foreshortening, overlapping as the main form problems of graphic articulation, and distinction between and the pronunciation of nearness and distance.

Drawing consists of a visual and of a manual act. For the visual act (comparable with thinking which precedes speaking) one must learn to see form as a three-dimensional phenomenon. For the manual act (comparable with speaking) the hand must be sensitized to the direction of the will. With this in mind we begin drawing lessons with general technical exercises: measuring, dividing, estimating; rhythms of measure and form, disposing, modifications of form. At the same time we use the motor sense as an important corrective.

It will be clear that we exclude expressive drawing as a beginning. Experience shows that in young people this encourages artistic conceit but hardly results in a solid capability which alone can give the foundation and freedom for more personal work.

For this reason our elementary drawing instruction is a handicraft
instruction, strictly objective, unadorned through style or mannerism. As soon as capability in handicraft has been fully developed, more individual work may follow. As artistic performance it will develop best afterwards and outside the school.

We repeat, our drawing is the study of objective representation.

In Basic Design (Werklehre) — design with material — we cultivate particularly feeling for material and space. It stands in contrast to a pure manual training in various handicrafts, which only applies traditionally fixed methods of work. We do not aim at “a little book-binding”, “a little carpentry”, but rather a general constructive thinking, especially a building thinking, which must be the basis of every work with any material. Basic Design is a forming out of material (e.g. paper, cardboard, metal sheets, wire), which demonstrates the possibilities and limits of materials. This method emphasizes learning, a personal experience, rather than teaching. And so it is important to make inventions and discoveries. The idea is not to copy a book or a table, but to attain a finger-tip feeling for material. Therefore we work with as few tools as possible and prefer material that has been infrequently used, such as corrugated paper, wire, wire netting. With well-known materials we seek to find untried possibilities.

Basic Design deals mainly with two subjects, with matière studies on the one hand and material studies on the other.

Matière studies are concerned with the appearance, the surface (epidermis) of material. Here we distinguish structure, facture, texture. We classify the appearances according to optical and tactile perception. We represent them by drawing and other means. In combination exercises we examine the relationship of different surface qualities. Just as color reacts to and influences color — in contrast or affinity — so one matière influences another.

Material studies are concerned with the capacity of materials. We examine firmness, looseness, elasticity; extensibility and compressibility; folding and bending — in short technical properties. These studies in connection with the mathematical inference of form result in construction exercises. With these we try to develop an
understanding and feeling for space, volume, dimension; for balance, static and dynamic; for positive and active, for negative and passive forms. We stress economy of form, that is the ratio of effort to effect.

Comparisons of various examples in architecture, sculpture, painting, help to make clear the conceptions of proportion, function, constellation, and composition as well as those of construction and combination.

In short, Basic Design is a training in adaptibility in the whole field of construction and in constructive thinking in general. Although we do not actually make useful things, Basic Design is not opposed to handicraft work but is its very foundation.

Color we consider first as working material and we study its qualities and activities. Sound production comes before speech, tone before music. And so at first we study systematically the tonal possibilities of colors, their relativity, their interaction and influence on each other, cold and warmth, light intensity, color intensity, psychical and spatial effects. We practice translating color combinations into different intensities, and from colorful to colorless colors. We practice color tone scales, color mixtures and interpenetrations. We study the most important color systems, not for the sake of science or to find the harmony of colors in a mechanical way, but to learn to see and feel color; to prepare for a disciplined use of color and to prevent accident, brush, or paint-box from taking authorship.

The studies in painting, from nature or model, are in principle concerned with the relationship between color, form, space, and composition. Series painting demands serious study. Rembrandt, at the age of thirty, is said to have felt the need of twenty years of study for a certain color-space problem.

By making an extended study in the main provinces of form; namely shape, material, and color, we provide a broad foundation for the widest variety of tasks and for later specialization. No problem of form lies outside our field. Thus we do not cultivate dilett-
tantism—just something to do—(Beschäftigungstrieb) but develop the creative, productive possibilities (Gestaltungstrieb). Class instruction with common tasks and criticisms coming from the students and then from the teacher communicates understanding of different ways of seeing and of representing, and diminishes the tendency to overestimate one's own work.

It will be clear that this method is meant for mature students. For teaching children we should use other methods.

Life is more important than school, the student and the learning more important than the teacher and the teaching. More lasting than having heard and read is to have seen and experienced. The result of the work of a school is difficult to determine while the pupil is in school. The best proofs are the results in later life, not, for example, student exhibitions. Therefore to us the act of drawing is more important than the graphical product; a color correctly seen and understood more important than a mediocre still-life. It is better to be able really to draw a signboard than to be content with unfinished portraits.

Most of our students will not become artists. But if they know, for example, the capacities of color they are prepared not only for painting but also for the practical use of color in interiors, furniture, clothes. These examples also illustrate the need of an understanding of materials.

We are content if our studies of form achieve an understanding vision, clear conceptions, and a productive will.

Josef Albers

Frontispiece: Study from the Werklehre class, plastic construction in paper