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## CHECKLIST

Josef Albers, American (born Germany), 1888–1976  
*Study for Homage to the Square (Early Rising)*, 1961  
Oil on composition board  
Gift of Ellen and Wallace K. Harrison, Class of 1950H, in honor of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930; P.968.7

Richard Joseph Anuszkiewicz, American, born 1930  
*From Blue*, 1972  
Acrylic on canvas  
Gift of Henry Feiwei; P.973.384

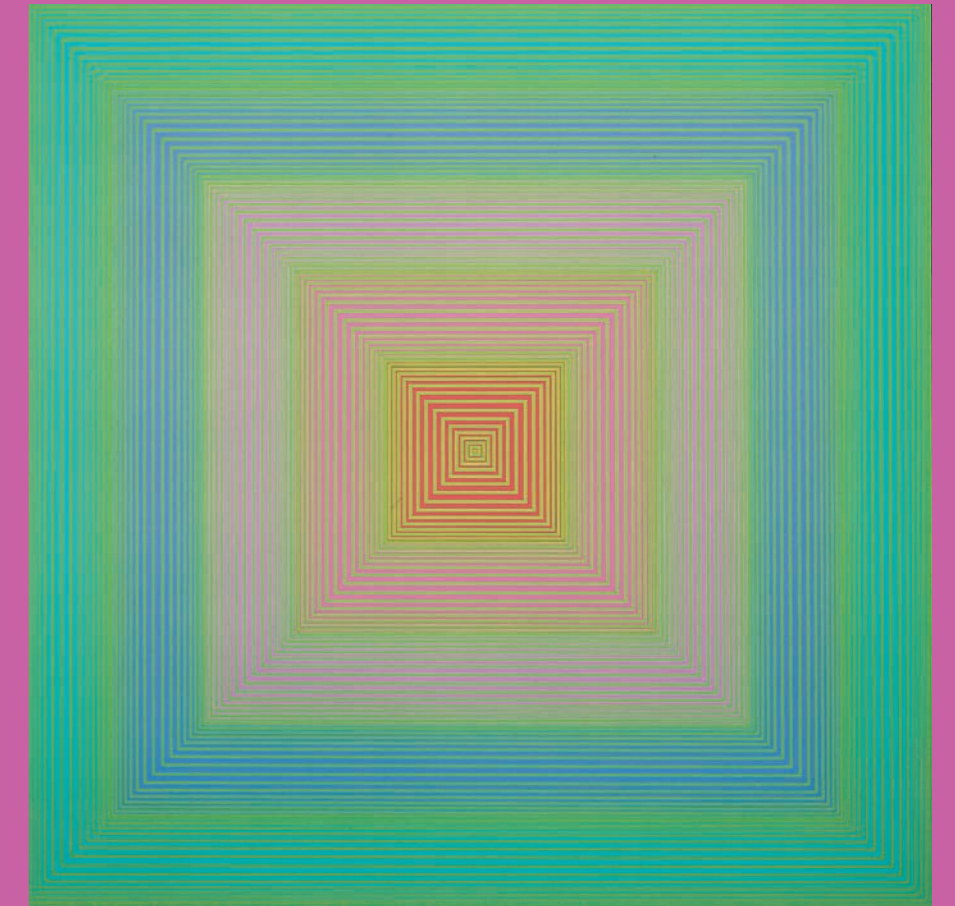
Hannes Beckmann, American (born Germany), 1909–1977  
*Muted Center (Blue Light)*, 1965–73  
Acrylic on canvas  
Gift of the artist; P.973.118

George Tooker, American, 1920–2011  
*Farewell*, 1966  
Egg tempera on gessoed Masonite  
Purchased through a gift from Pennington Haile, Class of 1924; P.967.76

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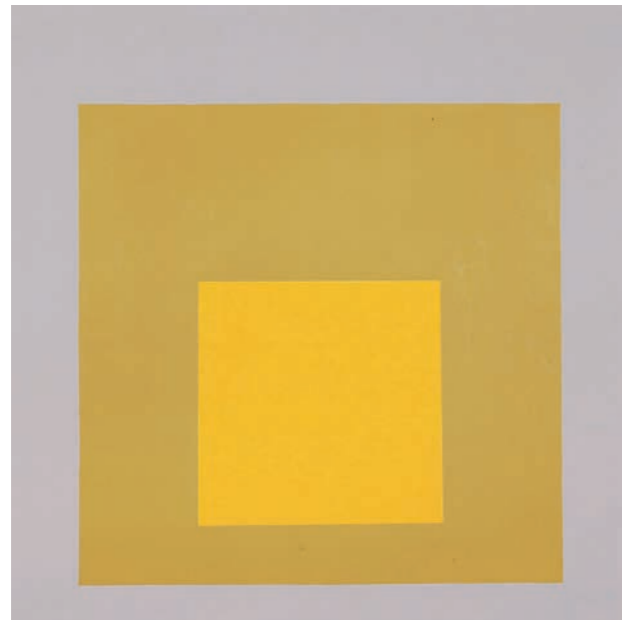
Designed by Christina Nadeau  
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Richard Anuszkiewicz, *From Blue*, 1972, acrylic on canvas. Gift of Henry Feiwei; P.973.384. Art © Richard Anuszkiewicz / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

# COLORFUL SQUARES

## Vehicles of Artistic Ideas



Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square (Early Rising)*, 1961, oil on composition board. Gift of Ellen and Wallace K. Harrison, Class of 1950H, in honor of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930; P.968.7. © 2014 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

While the use of squares as decorative elements can be traced back to the geometric patterns on Greek pottery in 700 B.C.E., the square did not become a dominant compositional element in paintings until the twentieth century. The simplicity and regularity of the square, as both surface and compositional element, might be seen to restrict freedom of representation; however, some artists found that through nuanced coloring, shading, and positioning of squares they were able to convey ideas without distracting the viewer with complicated forms. This installation explores the use of the square in paintings during the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate the range of effects produced through this simple geometric form.

The principles of modern geometric abstraction first emerged at the Bauhaus in Germany, an innovative school of art and architecture that focused on radically simplified forms. A student and later a teacher at the Bauhaus, Josef Albers was best known for his study

in color theory and interest in geometric forms. When the Nazis closed the Bauhaus in 1933, Albers was among the first of its faculty members to immigrate to the United States. As a result of the influx of European artists, the epicenter of geometric abstraction shifted to the United States. Albers, as an instructor at the Black Mountain College, quickly gained recognition in the newly flourishing American geometric abstract style. In 1950, the same year Albers formally began teaching at the Yale School of Art, he painted the first work of his renowned series *Homage to the Square*, which eventually totaled over one thousand paintings. *Study for Homage to the Square (Early Rising)* is one of these many variations of overlapping squares that visually interact with each other. At the borders between squares, the colors collide, inviting the viewer to further examine the relationships among the colors. Each painting in the series varies in both the proportions of the squares and the colors used in the composition, illustrating the infinite possibilities of the interaction between colors. Albers's color theory and square-based compositions exerted a profound impact on later generations of artists, especially among his students, including Richard Anuszkiewicz and Hannes Beckmann.

Anuszkiewicz, who studied with Albers at Yale, integrated his coursework in color theory with a personal interest in the visual psychology of art. Anuszkiewicz's works challenge the visual perceptions of viewers, making him an essential figure of perceptual art, also called op art (short for optical art). Derived from the constructivist practice of the Bauhaus, op art was first mentioned in 1963 in a *Time* magazine article by Brian O'Doherty, who identified Albers as one of the "father figures" of the movement because of his contribution to color theory.

Anuszkiewicz specialized in tightly controlled compositions that radiate energy through unexpected optical effects. In his later works such as *From Blue*, contrasting colors "collide" along razor-sharp edges, resulting in a fluorescent action and the impression of constant movement of the shapes on the canvas. While the centered squares in *From Blue* seem to emphasize linear quality over color relationships, Anuszkiewicz attributed his fascination with square forms to his teacher Albers, and in fact almost named his square-within-square paintings *Homage to Albers*. He abandoned the idea of naming them after his teacher's works because he was exploring a "more purely geometric and classical format" where all of his squares were absolutely centered to create the effect of "film color," as if the color is eradiating from a movie screen. In *From Blue*, for instance, the center square can be perceived either as a solid or as a plane of light.

Hannes Beckmann shared Anuszkiewicz's affinity for optical illusion, but was ultimately more interested in the potential symbolism in abstraction. Deeply influenced by Gestalt psychology, Beckmann often sought to integrate opposite forces, whether through color or geometric composition, without the two canceling each other out. *Muted Center (Blue Light)*, for example, explores the subtle hues of blue through a regular grid composition, creating a dark center that visually recedes while the color transitions at the edge of the canvas appear to pop out. For Beckmann, geometric forms and colors together were the perfect way to illustrate the duality and harmony between opposite forces.

While Albers, Beckmann, and Anuszkiewicz embraced the square as a vehicle for their experiments with color, optical illusions or Gestalt psychology, George Tooker used the square to represent a specific personal experience. In contrast to Tooker's typical symbolic realist paintings, *Farewell* is striking for the intimacy of its subject. Inspired by a hospital corridor where Tooker's mother passed away, *Farewell* oscillates between reading as a series of either concentric squares or stacked cubes. The painting represents Tooker's artistic idea: a dream is a reflection of reality but not reality itself. The receding squares invite the viewer to sympathize with Tooker's longing to reunite with his mother, while the advancing cubes obstruct entry into the illusory hospital corridor.

Artists who exclusively employ geometric forms like the square might risk constraining their subjectivity. The artists in this installation, however, demonstrate the expressive versatility of simple shapes in conveying a variety of ideas through the precisely calibrated interaction of form and color. Through careful study of optics and color theory, these artists manipulate the viewer's optical processes to direct the perception of form, color, and space. In their hands, the simple square form serves as a platform for the compelling color variations and spatial organizations that illustrate their core artistic ideas.

Xinyue Guo '14  
Kathryn Conroy Intern

George Tooker, *Farewell*, 1966, egg tempera on gessoed Masonite. Purchased through a gift of Pennington Haile, Class of 1924; P.967.76. © Estate of George Tooker

