



The writer of this bulletin would like to thank Brenda Danilowitz and the Albers Foundation for their generous correspondence.

Cover image photographed by Jason Fulford.

Luis Barragán was an architect from Mexico. He won a Pritzker Prize in 1980. I can vouch for this. I saw the trophy in his house (*casa*). It looks like a mini Henry Moore sculpture.

It actually is a mini Henry Moore sculpture. For the first eight years of the Pritzker they used the mini Henry Moore as the Prize's medal. The current Pritzker Prize looks like a gold-wrapped chocolate coin.

Born wealthy in Guadalajara, Mexico, Luis Barragán studied engineering. After graduation, he traveled to Spain and France where he became inspired by the gardens and writings of Ferdinand Bac. Bac created Mediterranean fantasies with fountains, arches, and plants that spilled over stone paths. Leaves, not flowers. Bac didn't dig flowers. After finding Bac, Barragán became an architect and gardener. The first home he built was in Guadalajara (1928). The place was hooked on Bac with arches and weepy greenery.

Barragán visited France again in 1935. This time he met Le Corbusier and saw the arch-free Villa Savoye. When he returned, Barragán moved to Mexico City and built a white boxy modernist apartment building.

In Mexico City Barragán began hanging out with the self-taught artist Chucho Reyes, and his work shifted. He found his own path.

If I were on the Pritzker's board, the first thing I would do is bring back the mini Henry Moore trophy and ditch the chocolate coin. This is not going to happen. I am not on the board. I am not an architect. I am not Mexican. Know that from the get-go.

Casa Luis Barragán is a UNESCO site. It was the architect's home and studio. There are floating stairs that people are not allowed to climb and windows with shutters that form a cross of light. Gazing balls, pink walls, yellow beams, and more. It sounds like a lot, but if you are there in person it is not. Some rooms feel like monks' cells.

Near the house's overgrown (on purpose) garden hangs a fake Josef Albers painting.

The painting is tan within yellow within yellow. It is a copy of *Homage to the Square*, the painting Albers painted over and over and over for 26 years. All of Albers's *Homages* use color straight from the tube. All are nested squares painted on primed masonite. There are more than 2,000 versions of *Homage to the Square* made by Albers. They live all over the world—none of them in Casa Luis Barragán. Albers knew about Barragán's bootleg. He respected Barragán and was flattered by it. They met more than once. They liked each other.

Josef Albers was obsessed with this idea:

Experience teaches that in visual perception there is a discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.

He taught the idea using color, but believed it could be applied to all areas of life. Albers described the aim of his teachings as “to open eyes,” and he believed that doctors and lawyers would benefit from this as much as artists.

Josef Albers was born (1888) in Westphalia, Germany. He was already a school teacher when he went to learn at the Bauhaus (1920). Two years later he started teaching there alongside Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. He taught at the Bauhaus till Nazi ideology and threats of war forced the school to close.

Albers was invited to escape the war and become a teacher at Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1933). There he went with his wife Anni. He taught in the same way he did at the Bauhaus—learn by doing, practice before theory.

Anni also taught at Black Mountain. But her passion was weaving. In 1935 the Albers took a road trip to Mexico from Black Mountain and fell in love with the country, especially its pre-Hispanic art, colors, and textiles. The Albers drove there every summer until they moved to Connecticut in 1950, where Josef became Chairman of Design at the Yale University School of Art. Nicholas Fox Weber of the Albers Foundation recalls:

Albers enjoyed pointing out the way that spoken and written language could be misleading; when he would drive or give visitors directions to his modest suburban home in the Connecticut town of Orange, he would joyfully point out a green road sign with white lettering that announced “This is Orange.”

Josef Albers lived in a town called Orange!

Before he spent 26 years painting the same painting, Albers created exercises that made the same color look different or different colors look the same. He made colors lie. He made colors linger.

He made people understand what they perceived.

Barragán used vivid colors in his architecture. He used the colors in a way that connects directly to Albers's teachings.

A wall looks yellow but is really white. Light is reflected in a gold painting to give a hot pink wall texture. Cold is made warm. Warm is made cold.

Barragán is so well known for his use of color that the Mexican paint company Pintex sells signature colors based on those at Casa Gilardi.

Casa Gilardi is the last house Barragán designed. I was given a tour of it by a woman whose name I forgot, but remember as "Karla." It was Karla's private house, but she felt it her duty to give tours. She had lived there for a very long time. On the tour she pointed out a bowl of avocados that her friend had just given her and explained how when her children were young, she was terrified they would fall off the minimalist staircase.

The second floor patio had one wall pink and one purple. The purple was chosen to match the Jacaranda tree, which the house was built around. Above was a clear blue sky. To my left was a giant billboard advertising a rainbow of products that started with a lowercase "i." Karla pointed out the billboard, though it could not be missed. "Used to be trees," she said; "Barragán did not know that would happen."

A small blue patio had clay pots covered (on purpose) in green mold. There was a room with a comfy looking sofa. And I thought to myself: Where is the magic here? Maybe Barragán was not really on his "A" game late in life.

The more than 2,000 *Homage to the Square* paintings are not exactly the same. There are variations in color and size. But they are at heart the same, transmitting the same idea and energy. The nested squares move forward and back. The edges get lighter and darker. The painting shifts as you look at it. The *Homage* is a celebration of a meaning that is not fixed.

Why did Albers paint so many of them?

My best guess is he wanted to get his perception discrepancy idea to as many people as possible. His color exercises were hard and time consuming. It is a lot quicker and easier to absorb the paintings. *Homage to the Square* has the potential to hold all the color lessons in it. And it follows that the more paintings you make the more eyes you open. In his own words again:

To distribute material possessions is to divide them. To distribute spiritual possessions is to multiply them.

At Casa Gilardi, after saying I should come back in April when the Jacaranda tree is covered in purple flowers, Karla ended the tour by leading me into a yellow hall lined with windows painted yellow.

At the end of the hall was a room with a blue wall and a swimming pool. A hidden skylight created a beam of light while a red rectangle hovered. 3D appeared 2D. The room melted into planes and color gradients. It was quiet. It was psychic.

It was magic.

There are some other fake works of art in Casa Luis Barragán. A blow-up of a drawing by Jose Clemente Orozco butts up against a wall. A copy of Picasso's *Guernica* sits above a chest of drawers. In one of the bedrooms there is a homemade tribute to Iman, the supermodel.

And in the library near the mini Henry Moore trophy is a second fake *Homage to the Square*. This one is blue within grey within black. While I was at the Barragán house I didn't see the blue *Homage*. And I didn't look that closely at the tan one.

When the tour guide told us the paintings were authorized reproductions, I was looking at a four-sided lectern with curated ephemera.

By the time I was done with the lectern there was another tour on our heels. The tour guide said "authorized reproduction" in a way that made me think Barragán had painted the homage as a color exercise, and that he had done this with detailed instructions from Josef Albers.

I loved this fact and thought of the fake as an homage of an *Homage*.

But it is not a fact.

In *Josef Albers and Luis Barragán: The Steadiness of a Profound Insight*, Brenda Danilowitz writes:

According to his friend and colleague, architect Andrés Casillas, Barragán came across the printed fabric in a department store on a visit to the U.S. in the early 1960s, and bought it (and another now framed and resting on the library desk) for “one dollar each,” proclaiming them perfect for his house. Albers, demonstrating a parallel lack of pretension, approved.

In retrospect the fake was definitely printed on fabric, not painted on board. And it was not really an homage.

To me, the pool room of Casa Gilardi is Barragán’s homage of *Homage*.

It displays discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect. It lives in that slippery land between what one perceives and what is real. It does this not only in color, but space. It doesn’t just copy the spirit of *Homage to the Square*, it multiplies it.

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