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# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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## VALUE ADDED TACKS

Paperclips, bottle tops, erasers – Anni Albers was ahead of her time by deploying them all in the ‘hardware jewellery’ she made with Alex Reed. Eighty years on, these pieces remain far more precious than the sum of their parts, says Sacha Llewellyn

**BACK IN 1942**, Anni Albers delivered a short lecture at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, in which she expressed excitement about the ‘hardware jewellery’ that she had been designing with her friend and student Alex Reed. ‘To our surprise we found that though we used common materials... for our necklaces they sometimes looked quite

beautiful and precious,’ she said. Although less well known than her textile designs and pictorial weavings, these ‘precious’ pieces are among the most fascinating subsections within her oeuvre, and the small selection currently on display at *Anni and Josef Albers: Art and Life* at the Institut Valencià d’Art Modern is no exception. The exhibition, which features more than 350 artworks, follows >

Demonstrating how even the most common materials might metamorphose into something ‘quite beautiful and precious’, in c1940 Anni Albers and Alex Reed created this horseshoe-shaped necklace out of 38 humble aluminium washers and a small length of orange grosgrain ribbon



the timeline of her and Josef Albers's lives, from the Bauhaus years in the 1920s and early 1930s to Black Mountain College (1933-1949) and Yale from 1950 to 1976, as well as significant trips to both Europe and Latin America. It also shows how this pioneering couple supported and inspired each other, creating the same clear, simple forms – which was, after all, the very essence of the Bauhaus creed – that they believed could profoundly transform the world.

In common with many of Anni's woven pieces, the hardware jewellery was inspired by her travels to Mexico, a haven she first discovered in 1935 with Josef, who called it 'the promised land of abstract art'. In 1939, during an excursion to Oaxaca in the southwest of the country with her husband and Alex, she encountered the recently excavated 'treasure of Monte Albán', as she liked to call it. Reflecting on this epiphany, Anni recalled: 'These objects of gold and pearls, of jade, rock crystal, and shells, made about 1,000 years ago, are of such surprising beauty in unusual combinations of materials that we became aware of the strange limitations in materials commonly used for jewels today.'

Back in America, she and Alex set out to exploit similar possibilities, creating a collection of anti-luxury jewellery that challenged traditional notions of value. 'From the beginning we were quite conscious of our attempt not to discriminate between materials,' she said, 'not to attach to them the conventional values of preciousness.' They began to experiment with common objects sourced from local five-and-dime stores, including paper clips, bottle tops, hairpins, pencil erasers, cotton reels and steel washers. Unfamiliar with traditional metalwork techniques, the pair focused on simple designs that were easily assembled, with ball chains, grosgrain ribbon and cotton cord ingeniously linking the various parts. However, as Anni insisted, simplicity

was not synonymous with simpleness; their creations arose from meticulous research into the potential of the materials and a balanced interaction between them, qualities that were intended to mirror the cosmic power of ancient Mexican art.

In 1946, four of Anni and Alex's pieces, including 'a necklace combining a sieve, paper clips and a key chain', were selected for *Modern Handmade Jewelry*, a seminal exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the press release for which announced: 'Today's jewellery need be neither the princely luxury of precious stones and metals nor the dubious glitter of production-line... junk.' While other exhibitors such as Alexander Calder and the Tiffany designer Izabel Coles also exploited uncommon materials, including shards of glass and enamelled safety pins, it was Anni and Alex's simple methods and use of reclaimed objects that caught the critic's eye. Praised as 'smart' and for possessing 'the elegance of good design', their pieces were seen to clear the path for a new, democratic way of seeing, one that still resonates today in the recycled and repurposed jewellery made by artists such as Monique Péan, Saskia Diez and Melissa Joy Manning.

With characteristic humility, Anni expressed surprise that people admired the collection. 'Like ourselves,' she said, 'they did not care about value or lack of value of our materials used, but enjoyed instead of material value that of surprise and inventiveness – a spiritual value.'

Anni had a gift for being both timeless and of her time, a woman of her moment and one for all seasons. That her hardware jewellery pieces can still beguile us, more than 80 years after they were created, is testament to their shimmering, perilous artistry ■ *'Anni and Josef Albers: Art and Life' runs at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 118 Calle Guillem de Castro, 46003 Valencia, until 19 June. For more information, ring 00 34 963 176600, or visit ivam.es*

Top left: pendant from a metal plug chain, a sink strainer and paper clips are transformed into what might be an Aztec necklace after receiving the Albers and Reed treatment. Top right: the hitherto overlooked possibilities of screw eyes, as demonstrated in a 1945 photograph by Fritz Goro in *Life*