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# Armi Alloers

Selected Writings on Design

## WORK WITH MATERIAL

Life today is very bewildering. We have no picture of it which is all-inclusive, such as former times may have had. We have to make a choice between concepts of great diversity. And as a common ground is wanting, we are baffled by them. We must find our way back to simplicity of conception in order to find ourselves. For only by simplicity can we experience meaning, and only by experiencing meaning can we become qualified for independent comprehension.

In all learning today dependence on authority plays a large part, because of the tremendous field of knowledge to be covered in a short time. This often leaves the student oscillating between admiration and uncertainty, with the well-known result that a feeling of inferiority is today common both in individuals and in whole nations.

Independence presumes a spirit of adventurousness—a faith in one's own strength. It is this which should be promoted. Work in a field where authority has not made itself felt may help toward this goal. For we are overgrown with information, decorative maybe, but useless in any constructive sense. We have developed our receptivity and have neglected our own formative impulse. It is no accident that nervous breakdowns occur more often in our civilization than in those where creative power had a natural outlet in daily activities. And this fact leads to a suggestion: we must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material.

Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials, that is, from materials in their original form. For the process of shaping these is so divided into separate steps that one person is rarely involved in the whole course of manufacture, often knowing only the finished product. But if we want to get from materials the sense of directness, the adventure of being close to the stuff the world is made of, we have to go back to the material itself, to its original state, and from there on partake in its stages of change.

We use materials to satisfy our practical needs and our spiritual ones as well. We have useful things and beautiful things — equipment and works of art. In earlier civilizations there was no clear separation of this sort. The useful thing could be made beautiful in the hands of the artisan, who was also the manufacturer. His creative impulse was not thwarted by drudgery in one section of a long and complicated mechanical process. He was also a creator. Machines reduce the boredom of repetition. On the other hand they permit a play of the imagination only in the preliminary planning of the product.

Material, that is to say unformed or unshaped matter, is the field where authority blocks independent experimentation less than in many other fields, and for this reason it seems well fitted to become the training ground for invention and free speculation. It is here that even the shyest beginner can catch a glimpse of the exhilaration of creating, by being a creator while at the same time he is checked by irrevocable laws set by the nature of the material, not by man. Free experimentation here can result in the fulfillment of an inner urge to give form and to give permanence to ideas, that is to say, it can result in art, or it can result in the satisfaction of invention in some more technical way.

But most important to one's own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one's whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.

All art work, such as music, architecture, and even religion and the laws of science, can be understood as the transformed wish for stability and order. But art work understood as work with a substance which can be grasped and formed is more suited for the development of the taste for exploration than work in other fields, for the fact of the inherent laws of material is of importance. They introduce boundaries for a task of free imagination. This very freedom can be so bewildering to the searching person that it may lead to resignation if he is faced with the immense welter of possibilities; but

within set limits the imagination can find something to hold to. There still remains a fullness of choice but one not as overwhelming as that offered by unlimited opportunities. These boundaries may be conceived as the skeleton of a structure. To the beginners a material with very definite limitations can for this reason be most helpful in the process of building up independent work.

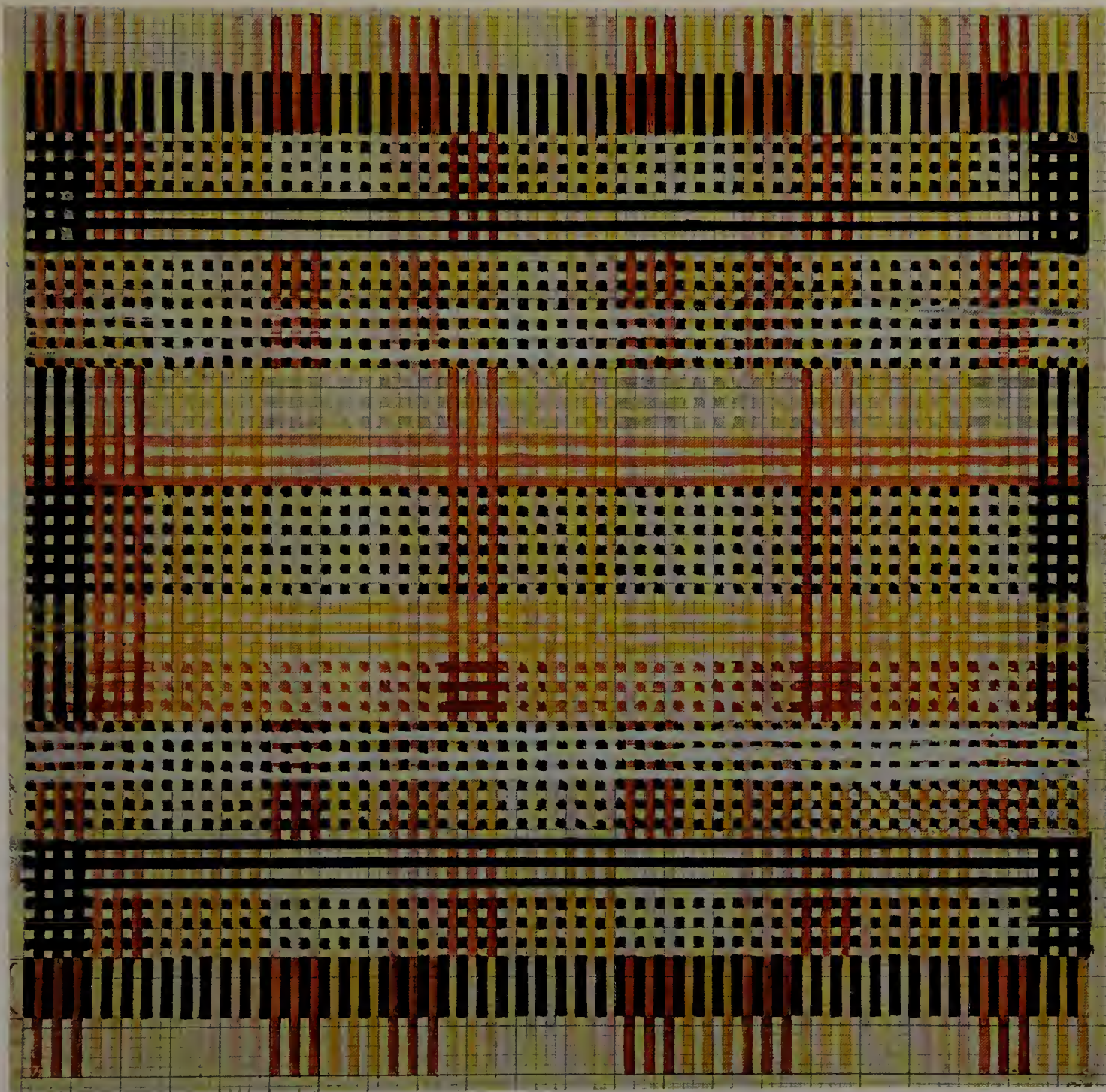
The crafts, understood as conventions of treating material, introduce another factor: traditions of operation which embody set laws. This may be helpful in one direction, as a frame for work. But these rules may also evoke a challenge. They are revokable, for they are set by man. They may provoke us to test ourselves against them. But always they provide a discipline which balances the hubris of creative ecstasy.

All crafts are suited to this end, but some better than others. The more possibilities for attack the material offers in its appearance and in its structural elements, the more it can call forth imagination and productiveness. Weaving is an example of a craft which is many-sided. Besides surface qualities, such as rough and smooth, dull and shiny, hard and soft, it also includes color, and, as the dominating element, texture, which is the result of the construction of weaves. Like any craft it may end in producing useful objects, or it may rise to the level of art.

When teaching the crafts, in addition to the work of free exploring, both the useful and the artistic have to be considered. As we have said before, today only the first step in the process of producing things of need is left to free planning. No variation is possible when production is once taken up, assuming that today mass production must necessarily include machine work. This means that the teaching has to lead toward planning for industrial repetition, with emphasis on making models for industry. It also must attempt to evoke a consciousness of developments, and further perhaps a foreseeing of them. Hence, the result of craft work, work done in direct contact with the material, can come here to have a meaning to a far wider range of people than would be the case if they remained restricted to handwork only. And from the industrial standpoint, machine production will get a fresh impetus from taking up the results of intimate work with material.

The other aspect of craft work is concerned with art work, the realization of a hope for a lawful and enduring nature. Other elements, such as proportion, space relations, rhythm, predominate in these experiments, as they do in the other arts. No limitations other than the veto of the material itself are set. More than an active process, it is a listening for the dictation of the material and a taking in of the laws of harmony. It is for this reason that we can find certitude in the belief that we are taking part in an eternal order.

1937



Design for tablecloth, Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany, 1930.

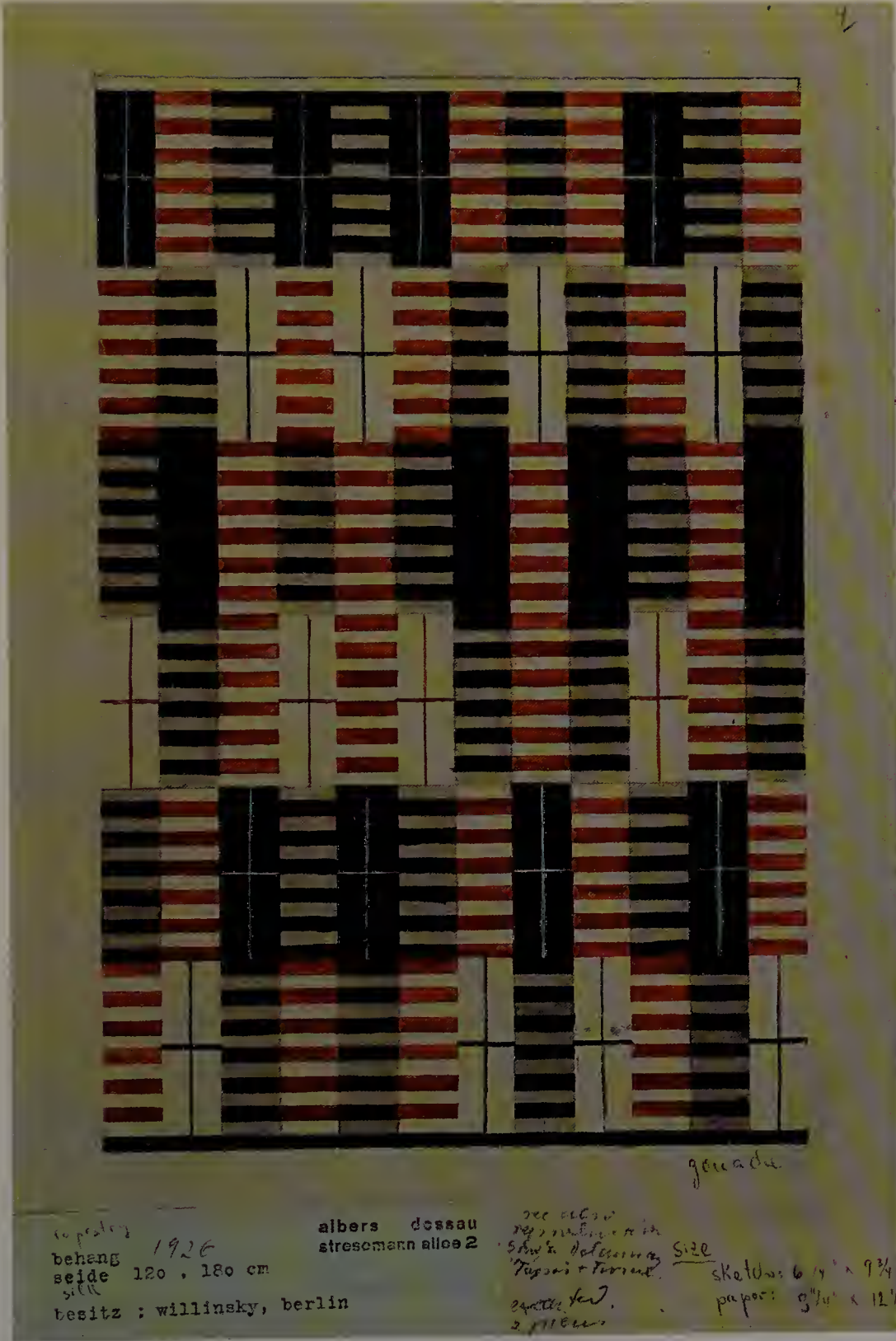
Watercolor and gouache on square-ruled paper, 26 × 24.1 cms (10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> ins).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the designer.

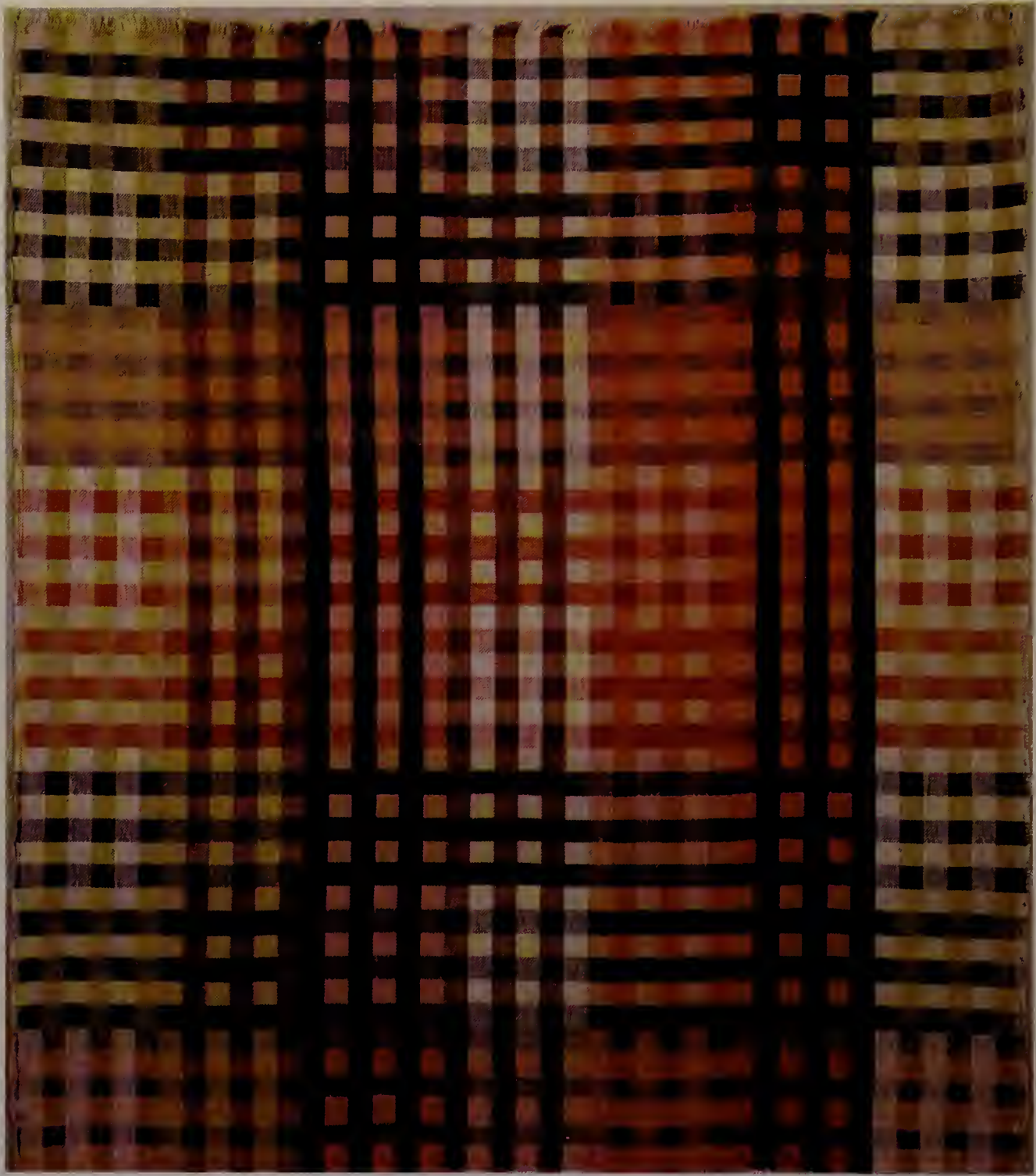
Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 393.51

*Wall Hanging*, 1926. Silk  
(two-ply weave), 182.9 × 122  
cms. Courtesy of the Busch-  
Reisinger Museum, Harvard  
University Art Museums,  
Association Fund. Photograph  
by Michael Nedzweski. ©  
President and Fellows of  
Harvard College, Harvard  
University. BR 48.132





Design for wallhanging, 1926.  
 Gouache on paper, 31.8 ×  
 20.6 cms (12½ × 8 1/8 ins).  
 The Museum of Modern Art,  
 New York. Gift of the designer.  
 Photograph © 2000 The Mu-  
 seum of Modern Art, New  
 York. 401.51



Tablecloth material, 1930.

Mercerized cotton, 59.3 × 72.4 cms (23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 28<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> ins).

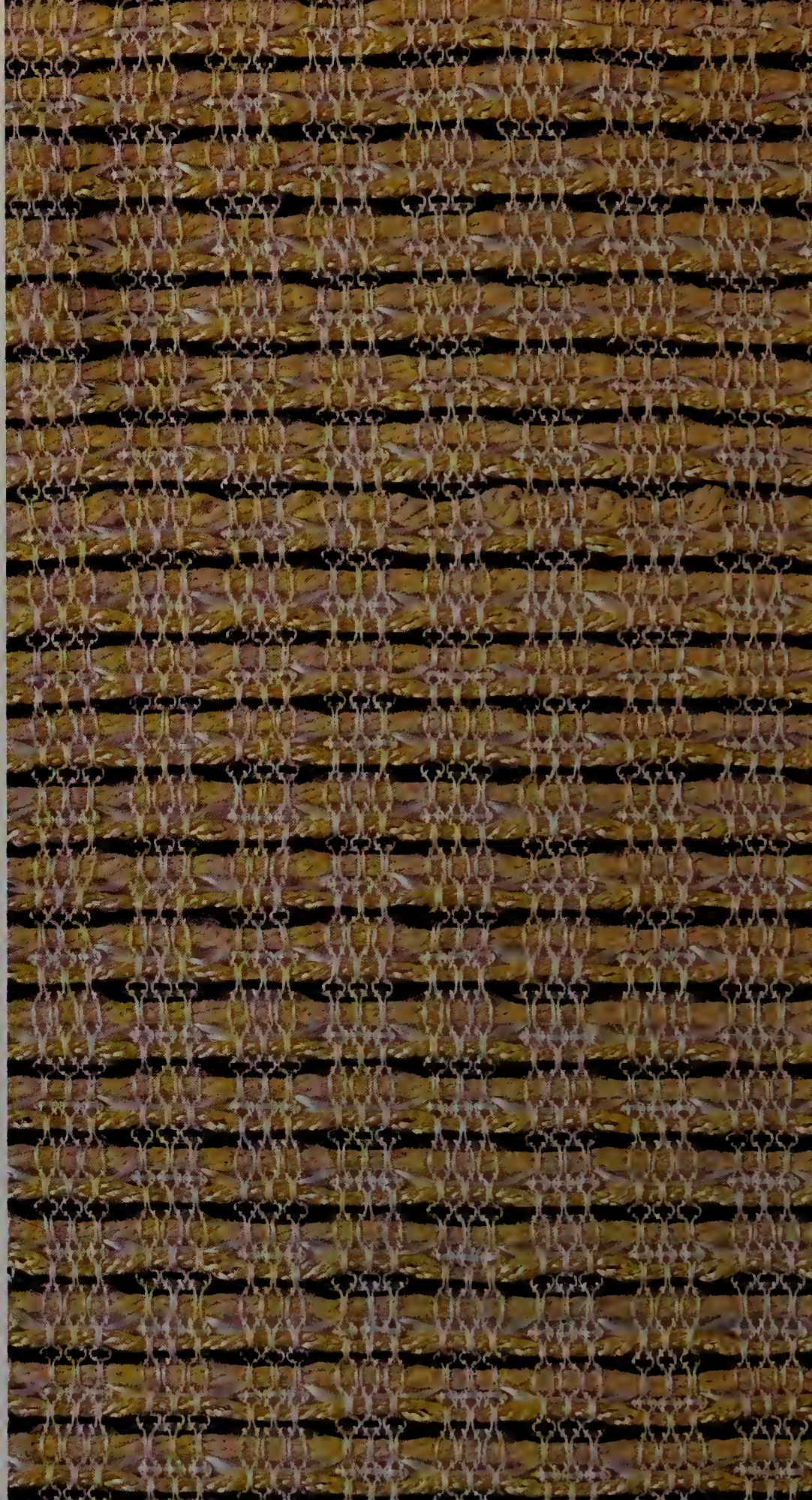
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase Fund.


Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 561.53



Untitled wallhanging, 1925.  
Wool and silk, 236 × 96 cms  
(92<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 37<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> ins). Die Neue  
Sammlung Staatliches Mu-  
seum für angewandte, Kunst,  
Munich. 364/26

Drapery material, 1927. Cotton and rayon, 15.9 × 10.8 cm (6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ins). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the designer. Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 450.51





Wall covering material for auditorium of Bundesschule in Bernau, Germany, 1929. Cotton, and cellophane, 22.9 × 12.7 cms (9 × 5 ins). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the designer. Photograph © 2000 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 433.51



Upholstery material, ca. 1929.

Cotton and rayon 11.4 × 19.4 cms ( $4\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{5}{8}$  ins).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Gift of Josef Albers.

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