

Nicholas Fox Weber and Paul Smith Episode 7 Transcript

[MUSIC FADES IN]

[SOUNDBITE; PAUL SMITH: Paul Smith, boutique owner. NICHOLAS FOX WEBER: Nick Weber, father of two, married to a wonderful woman, writer, art historian.]

LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is Dialogues—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; PAUL SMITH: Everything is so instant on social media. Everything is now, now, now. And Anni's work is an example of calmness and doing things by hand. NICHOLAS FOX WEBER: And Anni was obsessed with the idea of abstraction as the one place where she could feel complete balance and joy and a sense of being centered.]

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, editorial director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

[MUSIC FADES OUT]

LZ: Today's pairing: the clothing designer Paul Smith and the writer Nicholas Fox Weber. For over forty years, Paul Smith has been one of the world's foremost designers. He's based in Britain, but he now has stores all over the world, and his creative aesthetic takes inspiration from high art to daily life and everything in between. Some of the signature details of his designs include multicolored stripes, floral prints, and splashes of color in surprising places like shirt cuffs and jacket linings. But in everything he does, he manages to combine tradition and modernity.

Nicholas Fox Weber is the executive director of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. He is the author of more than a dozen books and essays about artists, designers, and cultural movements. He also founded a nonprofit that assists with medical care and education in Senegal, which I was lucky enough to visit a year and a half ago.

We brought the two of them together because of an Anni Albers retrospective now up at the Tate Modern in London. Anni was an extraordinary textile designer and weaver and a great modernist artist. Her work continues to be a touchstone for other artists and designers, including Paul Smith, who recently created a capsule collection based on one of Anni's textiles. Nicholas Fox Weber knew Anni during her lifetime, in addition to knowing Josef Albers. And his intimacy with the artists and Paul's enthusiasm for her work were really the foundation for this pairing.

We were lucky enough to tape this conversation in Paul's design studio. It's a building in London's Covent Garden neighborhood. It's a light-filled studio with lots of his clothes and one central room with a large wooden table surrounded by walls lined with books and a really eclectic array of objects that grab your attention: from unusual toys and sports equipment to distinctive food packaging and wrappers, many other things. Paul told us that one of his fans has been hand making objects, covering them in postage stamps, and sending them with no return address, to him for years. Many of those objects were scattered around the space as well.

PAUL SMITH: Including a ski, a chair, a fluffy bunny, and they never arrive in a box. They always arrive with the stamps and the address on the actual items, and much, much more. I'm a great fan of cycling, so there's an enormous quantity of bicycles here and cycle jerseys. And I always have my design meetings around this table, and what's fantastic is we'll be starting the conversation off, of which next Wednesday, for instance, I have a 2020 inspiration meeting. So, often I just lean back and grab something or two things and that'll be kitsch and beautiful, rough and smooth, big and small, a series of colors, and that's exactly where the way that Anni worked fits in with the way I work.

LZ: Paul, was there maybe an object, or some group of objects, in your childhood that you can remember making a really big impact on you? Visually, aesthetically?

PS: Well, I had an Oskar Kokoschka book and a Kandinsky book. I can't imagine where they came from, I think my father gave them to me, and then I pretended I was Kandinsky for about three weeks and did a painting on some hardboard and had it on the wall next to a photograph from one of those famous Roman Holiday or something like that, one of those famous films from Italy. My father was an amateur photographer and he was the founding member of the local camera club in the town where we lived. And so he built his own darkroom, of course it was film then, his darkroom in the attic of our house, and so at the age of eleven, he bought me a camera which I have over there on the shelf: Kodak Ready Net. I used to develop and print with him, and one of the fantastic things about using a camera like that is they have a viewfinder. And you look through the viewfinder, and I think that is something that helped me look and see. A lot of people look, but they don't see, and I think that helped me see. Everything was so much more precious and so much more about the composition of the photograph you were taking, and that's definitely helped me like crazy over the years with the way I design my shops, the window dressing, the clothes, the proportion, the scale—it's helped a lot.

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NICHOLAS FOX WEBER: The distinction you make between looking and seeing is so germane to our discussing Anni. And I—competitive as I am, you know, I play squash and tennis, and I find it very hard to lose—but I didn't mind it when The Guardian quoted me talking too much, and then ended with the sentence to the effect of, And as Paul Smith puts it much more succinctly, she teaches you not just to look, but to see. And in this case I was very happy to see that—

PS: I'm sorry.

NFW: No, it wasn't your fault. I was very happy to see you sort of hit the winning shot because it really was the winning shot.

LZ: But you're still actively taking photographs as well, that's something that you continue? Do you see it as—

PS: Actually, I just came back from Japan yesterday and I've been using film there. I shot about ten rolls of film and I haven't seen any of the images yet. So, that'll be very exciting to see whether there are any that come out. You know, when I was starting out, I started my first little shop in [cough, cough], I'm not ready to say when because I'm not ready to say how old I am. No, in 1970, I had this twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot room that I called a shop. Then it was only open Fridays and Saturdays because I realized that nobody really wanted what I had in the shop, and I needed to earn some money. So Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday I did lots of anything that came along, I designed fabric, colorist, but one of the things was photography. I worked for magazines and took photographs.

NFW: What did you have in the shop?

PS: It was clothes, but it was in Nottingham, in the middle of England. So, there were no boutiques. There were just clothes shops, but there were no fashionable clothes shops. And so the things in my shop were very interesting. Some of them were basic, like a black cashmere sweater in a polo neck, which was my little espresso bar moment, and 501 Levi's that you couldn't get in Britain then, you had to bring in from New York. And that shop was the birth of having shops all around the world, which I have in seventy-three countries now, where my shops now have things in them: books, objects, ceramics, paintings, always what we call an art wall, and that was because the shop was so tiny that when you came in, the customer was right in front of you. So I used anything I could find, like a poster I bought in Paris or an art nouveau cigarette box from the local market, and that was an icebreaker.

LZ: You know, I've realized I've never asked you this, what was Anni's, and maybe also Josef's, relationship to clothing and to fashion, as much as one can speak to that sort of thing?

NFW: Their relationship to clothing and fashion was obsessive, but it was very personal. Anni was so involved with clothing that she could become utterly tactless. So she once said to Alfred Barr, director of The Museum of Modern Art, of the woman who was curator of design there, How can you have her as your curator of design when she wears those ghastly dresses? And I once brought my, I mean I often brought my very pretty wife to see Anni, and Kathy is not a woman who's terribly confident about clothing or really very interested in clothing. But we were going to a big Albers event, Kathy had bought a beautiful new dress, and we walked into the Alberses' house to pick Anni up to go to the opening. And she looked at Kathy and said, Is that a new dress? Yes, said Kathy, and Anni said, Can you still return it?

LZ: So very involved, surprisingly involved in clothing and in fashion.

NFW: Oh, when she was asked who the greatest artist of the twentieth century was, she answered Coco Chanel.

LZ: Wow.

PS: Of course, Coco Chanel's famous little short jackets were all from a mill in Scotland called Heather Mills and they were just peppered with color. So they would be, if you looked really under a microscope, or something called a linen prover, which I use a lot, you wouldn't believe the vibrant colors in a Heather Mills fabric, which would be probably why she liked it a lot.

NFW: And she said that Chanel liberated women by enabling them to wear pants.

PS: Katharine Hepburn said, You can't be a modern woman unless you dress like a man. That was because she liked to wear big baggy shirts and trousers because she could squat down and do things. That was, maybe Anni was the same?

NFW: Yes. She liked to be able to paint the walls of the house and be physically active.

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PS: Yeah.

LZ: So, how did you, in the context of Anni Albers, whom we're discussing, how did you first encounter that work? Was it through art or was it through textile? What was your first encounter?

PS: With Anni, you mean?

LZ: Yes, Anni.

PS: I think it was—you'd help me here—but I think there was a big Bauhaus exhibition in 1968 in the Royal Academy in London, I think, but if not, there was a book came out, which is behind you actually. I carried this Bauhaus book around with me on my Greek holidays, anywhere, and I'd found it this morning, and all the pages are falling out. Of course, there was Anni's work in there and Josef's, and of course all the famous Bauhaus people, not just the artists and the textile designers, the weavers, but that's probably when I remember, is from this Royal Academy book.

LZ: And then when did your, Nicholas and Paul, when did your conversation about Anni begin, because you, in 2015 there was already a collection that had relationships . . .

PS: Yeah, I think that was probably why we met. I don't know really.

NFW: I had seen some of the Anni Albers-related work and a Bauhaus book in the shop on the Boulevard Raspail, and I knew from that that you loved her work, you referred to it on the website, and I thought, Well, I've got to meet him. So I arranged to meet you, and then you and I went to the show in Milan together, which was the first time we met in person. And I must tell you that this was an exhibition at a new anthropology museum in Milan, very much in keeping with the Alberses' approach to life because it was art for everyone, meant to bring in a lot of migrant communities in Milan, and to mix cultures rather than separate them. And for the opening of the museum, we did an exhibition that was Anni and Josef Albers and their pre-Columbian collection. And having communicated with you before actually meeting you, Paul, I then met you at the show, and I remember one of my daughters was there, and she came in late, and I said to her, This is Paul Smith, you'll really like him. He doesn't stop using his eyes and he's no bullshit. And your comment was, Oh, I think I'd like that on my business card. Uses his eyes and no bullshit. So that was a great moment, but for me, you saw that exhibition in a way that I have very rarely seen other people observe and look and engage. I very specifically remember showing you a textile called Two by Anni, and I was talking about it as a two-headed python, because she had collected a pre-Columbian piece of the two-headed python. And you said, Yes, yes, but what I'm seeing is, and you pointed out something to me—and I knew the piece well, but I had not really observed it—what you were seeing was in the background, and you said to me, Look at the elastic quality against the taut quality. And my eyes opened, and that's what I mean about you as a real seer of things. We had a . . . it was a fantastic hour of just, just looking.

PS: One of my things I did when I had my little, my first little shop, as I said earlier, I sort of worked Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday doing anything that came along just to earn some money. And one of the things was working in Yorkshire. The mills there, designing cloth. So I learned a tremendous amount about textures and the tightness of a weave, the looseness of a weave. And the suit I've got on, which unfortunately the people can't hear, but it's got lovely little bouclé yarn in it, which means it's completely smooth everywhere.

NFW: Yes.

PS: And then the Prince of Wales check is in this yarn called the bouclé yarn, which has got little loops in it, and so things like that you wouldn't normally think, I know, I'll put a little bouclé yarn in, but I just do. I don't know where it comes from, I suppose those early days in Yorkshire.

NFW: Well, it's an instinct for surprise. When Anni and Josef were on their honeymoon in Florence, she was cold and bought a wool cap and she was so intrigued by its elastic quality that she took it apart and discovered a form of elastic thread that—this was 1925—that she didn't know existed.

PS: Exactly. It's fantastic, I love all that.

LZ: So this piece that inspired this new collection, this new capsule as it were, is a piece that she would have made right around the time of the story of the cap, 1927 or 1926, so a year or two later. How old would Anni have been at that time?

NFW: You're exactly right. She was born in 1899 and she and Josef married in 1925. And a marriage of two different worlds. And they went to Florence for their honeymoon and afterwards they both worked with a very related geometry: Josef in glass and Anni in textile. And she said that

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she considered it the direct influence of the design on the Duomo and on some of the geometric Romanesque facades, Santa Maria Novella and other churches in Florence. So there is an impact of that trip.

PS: The Duomo's magical. With its self-supporting dome, it's amazing. You know, the dome, it just leans, all the bricks lean on each other.

NFW: I did not know that.

PS: It's this famous, it's called a self-supporting dome and it's still there, luckily.

LZ: And did you both discuss, Nicholas and Paul, this particular piece, was this a decision? Did you see it somewhere, Paul? What led you to this, of all things?

PS: Because when I think I made the decision based on the fact that I thought I could translate that into something which Anni would have liked in today's world and that was cheerful, happy, easy to wear, and so that one to me worked because it's . . . I'm not sure whether I'm allowed to say Mondrianish or not. It's just very simple, vertical and horizontal lines. And so that's what attracted me to it, that I thought that I could translate the work, her work, into something that was relevant to today.

NFW: Not only is Mondrianish or -esque an apt adjective, but Anni and Josef Albers both adored Mondrian's work, and she particularly because of his faith in vertical and horizontal lines and his absence of diagonal lines. And for Anni, abstraction as it was for Mondrian, was just the source of joy in life. Mondrian often compared what he called the tragic, which was everything that wasn't abstract, to his geometric abstraction. And Anni was obsessed with the idea of abstraction as the one place where she could feel complete balance and joy and a sense of being centered. And so your reference to him is, you know, on the money.

PS: Oh, it's allowed.

NFW: Absolutely.

PS: Of course, warping, there's warps and wefts, which is horizontal and vertical, so it's perfect. It's perfect for that.

LZ: But, you know, astonishing was before the conversation began, Paul, you and I were looking at this Anni Albers notebook, which was the notebook that Nicholas and I found—Nicholas had at the foundation.

NFW: It's wonderful.

PS: Amazing.

LZ: Which I stumbled across and then we created a facsimile of which has been—

PS: I might steal it.

LZ: I'm going to leave it here for you. But what I was totally shocked by is that as we were looking through it, you began to point out something that I never realized: that the designs, the drawings were sort of paired with notes that were describing how she was going to translate these into actual weave textiles, into actual woven things. And you said, This is exactly like the process we go through when we are producing something.

PS: Because yarn is three dimensional. It's got height to it and obviously the drawings are flat, but her notes are then turning it into life. I don't know whether one of you could get, lean back and get those yarns on a piece of paper. I know that everybody can only listen, but this is how I work. So it's a white card and then around the white card we wrap yarn, and that's how we get to some of our lovely stripes. And of course the thing is with Anni's notes is that she was doing it in words, and because yarn has a height, and if you put orange and red together, it's feisty, and if you put white and blue together, it's more tranquil and calm. And so by doing it this way, which is white card and then we call them wrappings, which is where you literally wrap the yarn around, sometimes one or two threads and sometimes twenty, thirty, forty threads. Sometimes it's a twenty-minute job, sometimes an hour job. And that's, we think, why our stripes for shirts and ties and socks, et cetera, are so vibrant because we do it in a very old-fashioned way, which is what I've been doing since I was twenty-one years of age.

NFW: And the white background is the key element?

PS: It's a neutral base, basically. It's only key in the fact it doesn't, you're not fighting with a color.

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NFW: Yes.

PS: So the yarn is doing all the work.

NFW: So many people, of course, ask about the relationship of Anni and Josef and their work. And the use of white as the background, which you've also just referred to, is an essential link between them, and I think it explains the great whiteness of their house and white as the setting for action. And I have to say that one of the most glorious encounters I ever saw Anni have was 1978, and my wife and Jackie Onassis had been antiquing together, which meant crawling around dirty barns in Connecticut where Jackie was looking for country furniture for her house on Martha's Vineyard. And Anni could not resist the temptation to meet Jackie. Few people could. And so Kathy and Jackie, after this day of rummaging through barns, arrived at the Alberses' house. And Jackie turned into the perfect high school girl meeting the grande dame. And Anni sat there at the top of the stairs, and first of all, Jackie looked around and said, Oh, Mrs. Albers, it's such an honor. And Anni said, as she would, Mrs. Onassis, have you heard of the Bauhaus? And Jackie said, Oh, I have and I love it and I know how important you were there. And then she said, I've lived in a white house once too. I found quite extraordinary. And then she looked around and she said—and this was an example of Jackie being one of those people who not only looked but saw—she looked into the living room, two red Homages to the Square on one wall, two very different ones on another, and nothing else in the room, except for whiteness. And she said, Just like Matisse's chapel at Vence, all the white and then the color. And one realized no one had scripted the line for her. She just perceived it. And it was a fantastic encounter ending with the ravishing Jackie turning to me in front of the house and saying, There's a lot of power emanating from that wheelchair.

LZ: You know, hearing this reminds me, thinking about the question of reputation over a lifetime, how reputation builds. And of course, what's exciting about this moment with the Tate show opening and with this collaboration with Anni, which in itself is incredible that a twenty-eight-year-old, Anni Albers at twenty-eight designing this textile cloth is taken up now in 2018 to create clothes that will be worn by young people around the world. I mean that whole cycle is wonderful, and it's quite moving. How have you seen Anni's reputation change, Nicholas, or grow? You know, I think among the people who knew her, she was always considered a giant.

NFW: Yes.

LZ: But in a funny way, she was also overshadowed in many ways by Josef.

NFW: Yes.

LZ: And it feels like now she's really coming into her own. And do you have a sense for why that might be happening now? What it is about her work in particular that seems to be speaking so well to younger people, to people looking at art now?

NFW: I have an answer for that, Lucas, but Paul, what is it for you in her work that makes it just, it's everywhere today.

PS: It's two things really. One is, for me, it was just the fact that she was very experimental and she didn't just weave fabrics.

NFW: Bravo. Bravo.

PS: As I said earlier about this room, rough and smooth, big and small, kitsch and beautiful, she used polythene I think at one point. And then the other thing I think, which is so relevant now today, is the fact that, I hope, people are getting so bored with the homogenization, the world is just, all the big brands have got four thousand shops. They all have a similar appearance. Everything is so instant on social media. Everything quick is now, now, now. And Anni's work is an example of calmness and doing things by hand and doing things with thought and with time and lateral thinking and not all so instant. And that's why she's so fantastically relevant, now.

NFW: Paul, you've absolutely thrilled me with that answer because the qualities that you emphasized are experimental, which was vital to Anni, and taking the time to do something by hand—weaving—and never once did you refer to her as in any of the categorizations that she did not like, which were: woman artist, wife of more famous man, Jewish artist. They could all be applied to her, and she didn't like it. She wanted to be an artist. It was about vision. It was about seeing.

PS: What's so interesting, you could describe hand-weaving as craft, which it is, but hers was craft, but with a modern art. The final thing was modern art, basically, so, it was created in a craft way, but the final wall hanging or piece of fabric was like a painting.

LZ: You know, it's a question that I've always wanted to ask that's less Anni related, and more directly related to your industry, which is, at this increasing fast pace, how do you find time to actually look and really see a piece of art, you know, something that you and I have more the

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luxury of doing, Nicholas. The fact that you're able to make that time, I mean, that's sort of . . . I think there would be more designers that would probably want to have that time, but actually don't . . .

PS: I'm about to say something that's rather swell-headed, but honestly I just see things so quickly and clearly, and I don't mean to be big-headed when I say that. It's just that I seem to be . . . You know, I look at a Cy Twombly and I just say taking his pencil for a walk, and I just know that there's a little squiggle there and a little squiggle there and that'll do me. I've got it in my head. Or the Kandinsky or the fine lines and the piece of color. So I'm just, I sort of seem to vacuum it in quite quickly, and then that turns into, just into work.

NFW: Well, but Paul, when I think about what I might have anticipated in a conversation with you, I didn't expect that this would be the day when I would learn about the construction of the Duomo. I studied history of architecture at good universities. I should have known that already. This is the vision of someone who sees, but who also understands craft and construction and the necessity of how things are put together.

PS: And also, I'm a very curious person. Often in this room, I wonder if people think it's childish, whereas I think it's childlike. And what I mean by that is that children are so uncluttered with education and experience and they say, Why has that man got a big nose? Because they're completely honest. And Picasso, was it, or one of the greats said, I spent my life trying to continue to paint like a child. You know.

NFW: Yes.

PS: And I think that that's what I get from this room. If you look to your left, you see ten or twelve Japanese parcels wrapped in Japanese fabric and, you know, that's pattern on pattern on pattern, and I just look at it and see a dress.

NFW: The quality of being childlike is such an important one and something that both of the Alberses talked about a lot. So Anni said that as a child, she had favorite moments, and one was hearing an orchestra tune up. And she and her sister would go to hear the Berlin symphony. She remembered that they wore black velvet dresses with white silk cuffs and collars, so texture and color memory. But it was the orchestra tuning up that had a playfulness and a sense of the components coming together. Josef, who came from a very poor background, no money, said that his earliest visual memory was of jumping on the floor of a post office between the black and white marble squares.

PS: I actually just made some socks and some knitwear and the edge of some knitwear in black and white squares based on a floor I saw in Italy that was very shiny marble. So I think it's all there, if you want it. You can find inspiration in anything. And if you can't, please look again.

NFW: And I have to say that talking with you makes Anni and Josef seem so alive to me that I almost said, Oh, let's get a pair of those socks for Josef.

LZ: On that note, I want to thank you both so much for having done this. This was a really lovely conversation. Thank you so much.

PS: Thanks a lot. It's been great.

NFW: Paul, I cannot tell you what a thrill it is to get into the wonderful—your wonderful mind—not only your creativity, but your human values, which are rare, desperately needed in the world, and always beautiful.

PS: Ah, thanks very much, Nick. I won't be able to get out the door, my head will be so swelled. Anyway, Paul Smith, boutique owner, saying goodbye. Thanks.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: Dialogues is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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I'm Lucas Zwirner, and thanks so much for listening. I hope you'll join us next time.

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