One of the supreme experiments in American education, Black Mountain College (1933-1956), has become legendary for the creative minds in science and literature that taught and studied there; but there has never been, until now, a major exhibition celebrating the artistic contributions of the school. Katz’s book documents that exhibition as well as significantly furthers the assessment of what took place at BMC. This book, published in conjunction with an exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, includes essays on the arts at Black Mountain and contains 470 color and black and white illustrations.

The historic importation of Josef and Anni Albers and other Bauhaus figures who came to Black Mountain to escape Nazi Germany, absolutely transformed American art, and for a time American education. Towards the end of the school’s history, Charles Olson replaced Albers as the creative force at BMC resulting in one of the most influential literary currents in twentieth-century literature. Mr. Katz’s essay recounts the school’s philosophical origins and general history; discusses the Bauhaus principles imported by Josef Albers and others that drove the development of BMC arts, particularly visual, at the school; and the artistic collaborations that took place later in the school’s history. Martin Brody gives the most complete history yet of the school’s very interesting and influential musical history. Kevin Power’s discerning essay discusses Robert Creeley and the contributions of the short-lived but momentous Black Mountain Review; while Creeley, himself, writes about the important role of poet Charles Olson in the literary events at the school. Mary Emma Harris’s earlier work, The Arts at Black Mountain, still very important in its own right, was not as sumptuously illustrated. Combined they make lasting assessments of the burst of originality and creativity that Black Mountain nourished.

BMC began under the direction of educator John Rice, and others, who had become disenchanted with the traditional education methods they had experienced at Rollins College (Rice was fired for his unconventional methods). It’s really too bad that the philosophy they brought to Black Mountain didn’t last. Two central premises were the importance of learning by doing immersed with the Imagination, and the communal exchange between faculty and students. The environment created advanced the work of its teachers including the Albers, Olson, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Stefan Wolpe, M. C. Richards, Jacob Lawrence, Hilda Morley, Franz Kline, Joseph Fiore, Lou Harrison, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, Walter Gropius, Paul Goodman, and Merce Cunningham. Its illustrious students include writers and artists such as Ruth Asawa, Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Jonathan Williams, Francine du Plessix Gray, Michael Ramaker, Fielding Dawson, Ed Dorn, and Ray Johnson.

The insights offered here are superior. Beautifully edited and gorgeously published the book lives up to Josef Albers’s stated intent when he arrived at the school in 1933: “to make open the eyes.”