

Painting Week for English Speakers at the Goetheanum Painting School 2010

Theme: *A Way of approaching Rudolf Steiner's Training Sketches for Painters inspired by Gerard Wagner's Colour and Painting Research*

When I saw the announcement for 'Painting Week' in 'English' at the 'Goetheanum' in 'April' these were the words that caught my attention and I knew that I would like to attend. My eyes must have glossed over 'Rudolf Steiner's Training Sketches for Painters', 'Gerard Wagner' and 'Plant Colours' for these elements all took me by surprise upon arrival; but they were really the keys to the week's painting.

Pigments derived from plants make paints that are richer and softer than ordinary water-colours. They are at their best when fresh so our first task was to prepare each of the colours we would use by mixing (as a collaborative effort) powdered pigment with a natural emulsion with the crystalline qualities to allow the colours to shine from inside out. The colours may be derived from all or part of a plant and the plants come from both temperate and tropical parts of the world and may be trees, shrubs or herbs. Examples are walnuts husks (dark brown), Gamboge tree sap (warm yellow), indigo whole plant (blue), madder root (reds).

The painting exercises that followed during the week were explorations of how the colours 'behave' both by themselves and in association with others. These were set against study of Rudolf Steiner's lectures on colour. To me, the introduction to the idea and meaning of image (yellow, blue, red) and especially lustre (green, peach blossom, white & black) colours and how they work together came as something quite startling.

We were also introduced to the work of Gerard Wagner (an Englishman) who lived and worked at Dornach from his early 20's until his death in 1999 at the age of 93 developing the indications given in these lectures and in Rudolf Steiner's training sketches for painters. With painstaking care and sensitivity he discovered how form arises from these colours and how the slightest change in a hue gives rise to a change in truly balanced form.

We were privileged to visit his archive (cared for by his widow Elisabeth Wagner-Koch) of 5000 paintings and study some of them in greater detail in our studio higher up the hill. To some members of the group our work formed part of an ongoing interest in what I, as a beginner to this approach to painting, learned was Gerard Wagner's enormous contribution to this art of the future.

As the week progressed we developed more of a sensitivity to and confidence in how the colours work together and, although each doing the same exercise, brought our own individuality to the work. The painting exercises we did based on the training sketches have names such as 'Sunrise', 'Shining Moon', 'Trees in Sunny Air' but these titles really give no indication of what the exercises involve. The form was secondary to the relationship between the colours. For example, we learned to feel how much of the space and which part of it could comfortably be occupied by black and then, where green would want to be painted and how it would behave in relation to the black. Next, what colour would be suitable to complement these and so-on, gradually building up a complex yet balanced picture in which we found the

motif 'Fruiting and Blossoming Trees'. In our seven days of painting most of us found time for six exercises.

In this we were led and supported by Caroline Chanter (herself English) who worked with Gerard Wagner for 11 years, 6 of those years on an almost day to day basis, and has made a study of this approach to painting a central theme for her own work. With her we formed a happy group of 13 - glad to meet each day and share our efforts. Although all English speaking, we came from several continents and also enjoyed the international feel of the group.

Caroline was also keen that we should make the most of the fruits of other artistic endeavours at the Goetheanum. She arranged for us to spend time observing and drawing Steiner's 'Representative of Man', explained to us the imagery in the coloured glass windows in the main hall and landing of the Goetheanum and showed us Gerard Wagner's murals in the Foundation Stone hall - as well as pointing out buildings of architectural interest and generally helping us to build up for ourselves a sense of the history and current activity of the Goetheanum and its surroundings.

We ended our week together in the Goetheanum with a celebratory tea-party but such was our pleasure at how the week had gone and our delight in each other's company and the landscape around us that Caroline took many of us for an afternoon walk to the Hermitage. Eventually we had to go our separate ways!

But an unexpected element had come into our lives during the last days: the ash cloud had descended on northern Europe and several of us wondered how we would get home. There were to be an extra few days in Dornach for some of us and an overland - or otherwise delayed - journey home. From my point of view all this added to the highly memorable quality of the trip and the work.

The last sentence in the notebook I kept I find to be: '*Colour is the soul of nature and the entire cosmos and we participate in this soul when when we experience colour*', by Rudolf Steiner.

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