

Egon von Vietinghoff

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Egon von Vietinghoff

Creative artist – Author of specialized books – Art philosopher

Born: February 6, 1903 in The Hague, Netherlands

Died: October 14, 1994 in Zurich, Switzerland

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A Life Consecrated to Art

The painter, Egon von Vietinghoff, author of a technical painting handbook and art philosopher, grew up in a house of artists who welcomed international visitors. His father was a pianist of German-Baltic origin and his mother of Belgian and Dutch ancestry was a writer of philosophical books. He spent his childhood in France (Paris) and Germany (Wiesbaden) and lived in Switzerland after 1913 (Geneva, Zuzwil and finally Zurich). Born a Russian subject, he became a Swiss citizen in 1922, together with his parents and his brother. From 1922 to 1937, he lived in Germany (Munich), Italy (on the isle of Capri), France (again in Paris), Spain (on the isle of Majorca), Argentina (Buenos Aires), and Uruguay (near Atlántida). In 1937 he settled down in Switzerland, first in Zollikon and then in Zurich, where he lived until his death in 1994.

He went on numerous trips (even on foot and by bicycle) through Morocco, Europe and Turkey, mostly in search of cultural sites and works of art. The first half of his life was marked by an innovative, enterprising, sports-loving and social spirit. From the 1950s he led a rather withdrawn life, concentrating on his main work of painting and writing, while remaining mostly hidden from the public eye.

Vietinghoff can be seen to be a real European when one considers his ancestors and his four wives who were natives of Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. In addition, his fluency in many European languages and his extensive knowledge of European literature all combined to form a truly European mentality. With his research into painting techniques, he resurrected a forgotten treasure of the European painting tradition; with his creative power he contributed in his own manner to the diversity of 20th century painting.

Egon von Vietinghoff started his career as an artist at age 17 and decided to finally lay down his paint brush at the age of 87 years. In the studio at Ostbuehlstrasse 17 in Zurich-Wollishofen, Switzerland, he worked for 45 years. Here, he produced 90 % of all his works. This housing estate “Neubuehl” was an ambitious project of the thirties. It was one of the first modern housing estates in Switzerland and is still unique, with its Bauhaus style.

In 1954, Vietinghoff married his fourth wife, Liane, from Salzburg, Austria. After his three failed marriages, she decisively helped him and his son Alexander to new beginnings and with her great commitment and optimism enabled him to focus even more fully on his artistic calling. Liane von Vietinghoff loved to walk and was an enthusiastic gardener. Both fields of interest procured for the painter welcome models for the bouquets he liked to paint; on the other hand, he went himself to the market to buy the fruit for his still lifes. Liane patiently typed the manuscripts of his technique and philosophy of painting which he revised repeatedly, and helped him to sell his paintings to private collectors.

All his life he remained an outsider, unerring in his artistic judgment, and content to find his own path in life. He uncompromisingly followed his artistic conscience, his visual perception and the urge to translate that perception into painting. He did not work in a certain style just because it was fashionable and encouraged. Usually, von Vietinghoff’s artistic attitude and the nature of his painting style are not recognized. In order to paint true to his convictions, he created in solitude but with devotion. Both in his life and art, he was like a rock which the stream of time flowed over and around, but did not change.

In winter, when daylight was insufficient in his studio, he read thick volumes of world literature or tended to his growing stamp collection. In summer, he liked to sit on his balcony drinking tea, smoking and pursuing his favorite past times: correcting his manuscripts, writing humorous poems, playing chess with neighbors, or feeding titmice, chaffinches and his beloved doves to whom he spoke lovingly over the top of the book he was reading ...

Transcendental Painting – A philosophy of painting

Ways out of crisis

Amidst the general radical change happening at the turn of the 19th century, painters such as Kandinsky, Malevich, Delaunay, Mondrian, Klee, and Itten were also searching for the origin of artistic expression and strived after “pure reality”, “pure energy”, “pure vitality”, and “pure colors”. They advocated for distance from the object, the importance of pure colors and surfaces, and a move towards abstraction. With his *School of Pure Vision*, Egon von Vietinghoff shared their ideas and freed himself from naturalism in his way. But like Mondrian, Delaunay, and Vlaminck he turned away from cubism after a short period of time.

But despite common dissatisfaction and concurring fundamental ideas, his logic led him to opposite conclusions. For him, the visual arts were a language needing objective forms in order to be understood. Since colors are always related to objects (except in the case of light refractions), painting had to be concrete for him. While his contemporaries turned more and more to planes and coolness, his own works became more plastic and warm. Independent of current trends, he began to study the originals of the Old Masters and daily traveled between the Louvre Museum and his studio in Paris to experiment with his observations and working materials. Thus he discovered not only the technique of mixing oil and resin, but also the necessity of the spiritual aspect to true works of art. In his terminology, the way of looking at things was called “vision” and painting based on this “vision” was called *Transcendental Painting*.

Transcendental Painting

In order to perceive the world, he opened up to the phenomena of nature. However, it was not the surface of things he painted but their disintegration into color interactions, taking place before his eyes. He reproduced a world of colors in which he was immersed, rather than a collection of individual narrative observations. Since the play of colors and light emanated from existing things, his *Transcendental Painting* is concrete, but inasmuch as it reproduces sensations and not measurable characteristics of things, it is the opposite of naturalism.

His aim was neither the natural representation of the exterior of his objects nor the restructuring of nature in accordance with intellectual concepts. On the one hand *Transcendental Painting* does not copy, and on the other hand it does not invent anything by construction. It looks for the nature of the world and by way of its sensations it reaches metaphysical insights. Thus Vietinghoff found an alternative to the extreme poles of naturalism and abstraction or of copy and construction. Looking exclusively at the play of light and colors, he let the observer see the simple miracles of life. In doing so even his art provoked in periods of abstract and politically committed painting.

Departing from a philosophical and mystical concept, he understood imagination in the sense of creative ability as the possibility of the human spirit to perceive transcendently. In artistic intensification, intuition – a sort of “sixth sense” – leads to inspiration and uses imagination as an organ of perception of the irrational, absolute reality which we can only divine temporarily with our limited view of the world. Imagination is therefore no original thought, no speculative dream-world, no willful reconstruction and no alienation of phenomena.

The School of Pure Vision

The road to transcending painting goes by way of a certain type of seeing, an “abstract” vision of things. As children, we had to learn to see spatially. When projected on the background of the eye, pictures are displayed as planes, just as on the canvas of the painter. Concrete seeing occurs only by the interaction of the eye and the touch. It results from many small experiences and is mixed with the knowledge of the material world, which originally is not of visual nature, i.e. has not reached consciousness by way of the eye, but is based (for instance) on the touch and cognitive reflection as well.

Vietinghoff consistently understood “abstract” and “pure” as related only to color, produced on the basis of nothing else but the visual function of the eyes, but not as abstract in the sense of geometric, plane-based or symbolic. Purely visual means based on purely sensual perception, unaltered by addition, alienation or mental intention – or in other words free of acquired knowledge.

In years of meditative visual exercises, he opened himself to unintentional perception of the objects as color surfaces existing side by side; thus he prepared himself for inspiration. In this “School of Pure Vision” earlier understandings and assumptions of the materiality of things fade out : they disintegrate into individual color areas and the painter solely follows the inner dynamics of light and color to be realized as the only facts. The three-dimensional things are temporarily translated by the artist into color planes placed side by side. The observer has no trouble retransmitting them into spatial seeing, since human beings are used to seeing concretely.

Vietinghoff compared the transcending artist and his meditative concentration of pure, unintentional perception with an archer in Zen Buddhism: both eliminate will and thinking in meditation and open up to experiences differing from the usual ones needed for the management of day to day life. The world appears as nothing more than the interaction of hues and shadings in a color context, i.e. as symphony of colors or as “drama of color, light and form”, showing the observer an aspect differing from the one he knows already.

Technical Aspects – The rediscovery of a European cultural heritage

Autonomous studies and experiments

During 35 years of autonomous experimenting, from about 1923 until about 1958, Egon von Vietinghoff rediscovered the knowledge not taught in technical handbooks and academies. Since the impressionists had broken away from this tradition, some 150 years ago, and had developed their own kinds of painting based on different theories, the knowledge of multi-layer mixing of oil and resin had been lost.

This technique was reconstructed by him in mid-life only, after many setbacks. It was the basis of the style practiced in his later period of creative work. His unique mastery, his unmistakable style and his competence as an author were based on his intensive studies of Old Masters and his long years of experimentation and testing.

Multi-layer oil-resin technique

When painting in several layers, two or three colors are spread separately one upon the other. In order to keep them separate (unlike wet-on-wet painting), the lower coat of color must be dry or both layers must contain a separating binder. For this purpose, specific methods serving as prerequisites to a painter's skill have been developed in various European countries. They are based on resins and oils as carriers of the color pigments.

Several liquid layers of color (glazes) can be applied, either thick, semi-opaque or translucent, one on top of the other. Different steps of light reflection bring about depth and color differentiations not possible in one-layer painting. The plasticity thus obtained does not need any conspicuous construction of perspective. This knowledge is the basis of the color depth and the luminous power typical of Vietinghoff's paintings.

Own production and craftsmanship

At an early stage, Vietinghoff realized that he could not satisfactorily reproduce his inner pictures and his artistic intentions when using industrially made materials. His differentiated transcendental (meditative) way of seeing required painting techniques which could only be realized by means of first-class, mainly natural substances produced with great care – besides some indispensable colors from chemical origin.

He therefore produced himself the colors he needed. Even the necessary solvents and binders were prepared by him. He stood at his work bench for hours grinding the pigments with a heavy stone on a glass plate. On the positive side, the sometimes heavy and strenuous work kept him fit for a long time. He boiled natural glue and canvas, which he tacked on frames (stretcher) or stuck on chip boards sawed by himself to measure. This was followed by up to seven prime coats plus the grinding down, tinting and isolating of the grounding. Usually at least half of his time went into this manual preparation before he could start to paint.

By carrying out all the steps of producing the grounding, the paint and the varnish, his spirit was in every phase of preparation occupied with the effect the raw material would have on the general impression of the painting. Without this effort, the painting would lack its convincing freshness, its depth of color and its natural brilliance. His pictures are a successful synthesis of his artistic vision and his manual power of representation. Together, craftsmanship and artistic intention led to well-rounded works of art.

Naturally grown raw materials

Another essential contribution to the natural effect of his paintings is made by the main use of natural substances which are as pure as possible for the production of colors and binders. For this he used organic raw materials such as egg, casein, linseed and poppy seed oil, leather glue, wax, gum Arabic, cherry tree resin, larch turpentine, fossil resin and different earths.

Thus, Vietinghoff produced characteristic colors which he mixed to give the exact desired effect and which had the characteristics and durability he could rely on. For some colors, however, he needed chemical pigments as well.

The Handbook of Painting Technique

His *Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei* (*Handbook of painting technique*, in German only) is a compendium of all his work experiences, and was published by the well-known Editions DuMont in 1983 (2nd edition 1991). Here, Vietinghoff wrote the sum total of his life-long observations, defined the translucency of color (a property which had previously gone unnoticed in literature) and tackled the theory of chromatics as seen by the creative artist.

Among other things, he gave practical ideas concerning color production, brushwork and picture composition, including examples of pictures of well-known masters and also his own work. He thus made available to future generations the lost knowledge of the traditional multi-layer oil-resin painting technique.

The Work of Egon von Vietinghoff

The main body of works consists of 2,750 oil paintings. In addition, he left about 300 graphic works.

Media

Egon von Vietinghoff used pencil, pen, crayon, etching-needle, and brush. His most expressive paintings are in oil and resin, although he worked also in tempera and made outstanding portrait drawings in ruddle (red chalk). Later on, he used tempera just to outline the subject on top of the prime coat.

Subjects

The immense work of Egon von Vietinghoff includes all classical motifs: flowers, still lifes, landscapes, portraits, and figure paintings. Due to the large demand, more than half of his total work consists of fruit still lifes.

Composition

The beholder's normal distance to the picture produces a balanced representation and self-contained calm of the object. Without losing himself in details, Vietinghoff leads the eye through the whole spectrum of nuances of color and finds the medium between intensity and gentle peace. Thus, he creates the impression of unity and harmonic interaction of object and background, light and shadow, form and color, detail and totality. Frequently, in his still lifes, a dark velvet back-ground forms the small stage on which the objects are depicted, in natural freshness and collective calm.

Style

Technically and mentally, Vietinghoff confronted the Old Masters and learned from them. However, he did not imitate or “quote” them and found his own “handwriting” as a painter. His pictures convey naturalness and – without showy perspective – attract attention due to their fascinating plasticity, inner luminosity and masterfully placed highlights. His paintings are the successful synthesis of his artistic vision and his workmanship.

Exhibitions

Already as a young artist, Vietinghoff showed paintings in the museums of Zurich and Winterthur (Switzerland), and in several places in Paris (France). The dominating position of the abstract painters in the art market, as well as the Second World War, prevented the continuation of these promising beginnings. Later on, occasional exhibitions in different towns of Switzerland and southern Germany, as well as one more in Paris and one in New York, brought him personal but not official recognition. In the course of time and in spite of the attacks coming from “art promoters”, he was able to live on the proceeds of his paintings as he became more and more popular among private art lovers. Thus, he sold many of his paintings privately to visitors coming to his studio.

The Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation

A non-profit organization founded in 1989 at Zurich, Switzerland

Objective

The Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation presently manages a representative collection of 82 paintings and graphic works never offered for sale. It aims at preserving the memory of the painter and at spreading his spiritual legacy: the concepts of *Transcendental Painting* and of the *School of Pure Vision*. In addition, it encourages the transmission of buried knowledge of the European painting technique as a specific cultural heritage. The Foundation’s website documents seventy years of creative work by an extraordinary painter and human being.

The vast life work of Egon von Vietinghoff is to be made accessible to the large public. For this purpose, the foundation is looking for short- and long-term, temporary or permanent venues for the exhibition of its collection of paintings in Switzerland and abroad.

Publications

Already published: brochure*, catalogue of paintings held by the Foundation**, lithography of a drawing, artistic greeting cards, video based on an audio-visual show*.

* German language only, ** 4 1/2 pages introduction in German

The *Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei* (DuMont 1983/1991 – German language only) is out of print but available as a free download on the website. The translation of the title: Handbook of Painting Technique. (See also the chapter about the technique.)

The Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation encourages students of art history to write scientific papers on the artist. There is extensive material available, and the access to originals is possible. The entire work is quite well documented. Supportive collaboration may be counted on.

The translation of the unpublished manuscript *Das Wesen der bildenden Kunst* (translation of the title: *The Nature of Visual Arts*) would also be welcome. The manuscript in German language is shown on the German version of the comprehensive web site of the Foundation.

For more downloads, please look at the website.