

# E. Vietinghoff

## Egon von Vietinghoff - Biography -

February 6, 1903 – October 14, 1994

Comprehensive version, reviewed in February 2016

### Who was Egon von Vietinghoff?

- A creative artist
- An author of specialized books
- A philosopher of art
- The creator of a foundation

Was Egon von Vietinghoff a Dutch Master? No! He was a **European painter** who reestablished the Old Dutch and Flemish painting technique through 35 long years of experimentation. He rediscovered its special creative possibilities in his unique artistic expression himself and applied it brilliantly to his work.

Egon von Vietinghoff left a vast opus of **2,750 paintings and two written works** (both available in German only): the *Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei*, a primarily practical **handbook of painting technique**, and the more theoretical philosophical manuscript *Das Wesen der bildenden Kunst* (*The Nature of Visual Arts*) dealing with the **School of Pure Vision** and the **Transcendental Painting**.

**The Hague**, Netherlands, **the place of his birth**, was an international crossroads of conservative and liberal forces and of the worlds of society and fine arts. The year of his birth was exactly midway between the two peace conferences held in The Hague (1899 and 1907), marking the radical political, social and cultural changes occurring in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These different energies decisively influenced and determined the life of Egon von Vietinghoff.

Egon's childhood was not only marked by frequent moves and the consequences of World War I, but also by the strong effects of the **artistic atmosphere reigning in his parents' house**, where prominent guests from all over Europe were welcomed. His father was an extraordinary pianist and his mother was an author with a remarkably charismatic personality (see the subchapters at the website *Jeanne von Vietinghoff* and *Conrad von Vietinghoff* or the PDF download *Vietinghoff's relations – Ancestors, parents and Marguerite Yourcenar*).

Egon von Vietinghoff rightfully saw himself as a **European**. His ancestors were German, Belgian, and Dutch. He lived in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland, and he fluently spoke the languages of these countries – as well as some English and Flemish. At age 19, he was granted **Swiss citizenship**, as he was a **Russian subject** at birth and thus became stateless upon the collapse of the Czarist Empire. He married four women originating from four different European countries! Consequently, he communicated with his parents, wives, children, and grandchildren in four different languages.

However, Egon von Vietinghoff found his true homeland in art at an early age. He was **self-taught**. When **preparing his own paints from the purest products, natural if available, he was a uniquely specialized craftsman**. In his unswerving approach to the *Transcendental Painting* formulated by himself, he was a solitary creative artist. **Transcendent experiences and the interior certainty of an invisible world**, in which he had a part, were both source and support of his inspiration and his unerring judgment of art.

As many before him, as well as his contemporaries, he sought a **way out of the artistic crisis** of his time. He agreed with most of his painter colleagues, who later became famous due to their “modern” way of painting, that naturalism and impressionism were dead-end roads. But instead of moving towards abstraction, he came to the opposite conclusion and remembered the **importance of the long-lost painting technique of the Old Masters**. Through meticulous self-studies, he rediscovered the lost skill of **multi-layer oil-resin painting**. By reviving this tradition, he developed a unique mastery of this technique and proved the timeless value of these techniques for future generations. He devoted himself to maintaining the continuity of the traditional art of painting as a **specifically European cultural heritage**.

And this in the twentieth century when the history of art was marked by provocative changes in the current artistic style and by making art a political statement! By keeping his distance from these tendencies and **following his own meditative way**, he was as provocative as other contemporaries, but did not fit into the current trends. He was therefore disregarded or even consciously ignored by art dealers and critics. Over the course of time, he nevertheless succeeded in leading a financially independent life for his family – due in no small part to sales to private patrons.

While in his earlier years he enjoyed sports and hosted boisterous studio parties, he settled down in the second half of his life, retired from social life and lived without personal pretensions. All his energy was now turned towards his artistic vocation – he painted with admirable discipline and intensity. **His tremendous creative urge and his artistic idealism manifested themselves in an inspired life of 70 artistically active years** full of struggle, creation and revelation. Up to the last year of his life, he devoured world literature, took pronounced positions in politics and economics, and wrote humorous poems.

To overcome the fact that he is not represented in any museum, he created a foundation possessing a collection of his paintings in his late years. The **Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation's** aim is to promote the legacy of *Transcendental Painting* and to make his work as an artist accessible to the public (on the Internet look at [www.vietinghoff.org](http://www.vietinghoff.org)).

## Childhood (1903-1920)

**Baron Egon Arnold Alexis von Vietinghoff** was born on **February 6, 1903, in The Hague, Netherlands**, shortly before midnight, in the house of his grandmother on Javastraat 28. His place of birth is of symbolic importance. The Dutch capital is the royal residence and the seat of international organizations where peace conferences were held in 1899 and 1907. It stands for liberality, openness and cultural tradition. **Scheveningen**, the popular nearby sea resort, was and continues to be the meeting place of the high society into which Egon was born. Less than a mile as the crow flies from the house of his birth stands the **Mauritshuis, Royal Cabinet of Paintings**, housing a world-famous collection of paintings of extraordinary quality, mostly of Dutch, Flemish and some German Masters: Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Goyen, Rubens, Bruegel, van der Weyden, van Dyck, Hals, and Holbein. They would later be his models and the objects of his studies.

During the first years of his life, Egon grew up with Alexis, his younger brother, in **Paris, France**, where their parents had been previously residing in a modern apartment located in the 17<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement for a few years. His love for the fine arts was instilled in him from birth. **His German-Baltic father, Conrad, was an out-standing pianist and his Belgian-Dutch mother Jeanne was a philosophical writer.** They kept a house open to many artists and cultivated friendships with prominent people of their time including the Nobel Prize winners for literature, Romain Rolland and Maurice Maeterlinck, the writer Guy de Pourtalès, and the musicians Carl Schuricht and Pablo Casals, with whom Conrad von Vietinghoff played music and corresponded for more than 50 years.

In **1907**, the family moved to **Wiesbaden** in Germany and took up lodging in the *Villa Violetta* with a large garden. The villa was situated near to the central parks of this fashionable, booming town. Since they were citizens of the recently extinct Russian Empire, any international border crossing became a major bureaucratic undertaking. All four needed a visa for any entry, transit or return, be it for vacation or for visits to friends and their widely ramified family. They travelled to Livonia (belonging now to Latvia), Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and around Germany. In November **1913**, they moved to **Switzerland** and took up residence in **Geneva** due to the town's international flair, the conflicts looming in Europe, and the proximity of the mountains to improve Egon's health after suffering from what was thought to be tuberculosis. It is here that they witnessed the outbreak of World War I. During a journey abroad, Egon's father actually left on the last departing train out of Holland to join his wife and children in Switzerland.

Tutored until then by house teachers and governesses, Egon now attended his first public school establishment, a well-known boarding school in **Zuoz** in the Swiss mountains. After his parents moved to **Zurich**, he attended classical secondary school there from **1917**. Already at that time, Egon had made his first painting attempts; we do not know about their results. The sale of two of his pictures to a teacher may have encouraged him. However, **at the age of 16, even before graduating, Egon left school with the strong desire to start a career as an artist and the intention to pursue it wholeheartedly.**

As he later reflected:

*“As my way of experiencing life had always been visual and I was lacking a verbal or practical talent, it seemed obvious to test my pent up creative urge on the visual arts, on sculpture and painting.”*

*“The question as to how I became a painter can only be answered in connection with my particular way of experiencing life. For artistic creation is nothing else but a form of expressing the vital instinct seeking to affirm itself by means of creative activity.”*

He went to a **sculptor's workshop** for practical work experience but soon **realized that he preferred painting**. Besides the usual apprentice pieces with bottles, jars and apples, he received **portrait orders** at an early stage. Already in the first year, at the age of 17, he had participated in a **collective exhibition in the Kunsthaus Zürich (Museum of Fine Arts in Zurich)** and two and three years later in galleries in **Ticino** (the Italian speaking part of Switzerland) and in **Düsseldorf (Germany)**. We do not know how he managed this at such a young age, without training and without the technique he would have acquired much later. May it have occurred based on his promising performance and his own initiative? May the social connections of his parents have helped? He may also have convinced others by his personal intensity and earnestness. Later, when he possessed multiple skills, the doors of the galleries were not as open to him. Once, the owner of a well-known gallery in Zurich frankly confessed him: *"Your paintings are excellent but I cannot allow myself to show your paintings and therefore let the press spit on my belly. I would risk my gallery's reputation as modern"*.

### Beginnings alone (1920-1923)

Egon began by leaving Switzerland and following his own self-determined way. He **adventurously traveled by foot** with the juvenile dream destination of India and Java. He felt an affinity towards this direction as he had learned some Malay as a child in order to talk with his brother in a "secret language". He also may have been inspired by the name of the street of his birth, Javastreet. But events unfolded differently... He roamed through **Spain** and **Morocco** for nine full months. Simultaneously magical and dangerous, this trip became a formative experience for him, both as a person and as an artist. During nights passed under the open sky, in smoky taverns and in Bedouin tents, impressions of experiences far from that of the usual of a well-bred young man were fixed permanently in his memory. Until the end of his active creative life – 70 years later – he would incorporate them into his paintings.

Gentle beauties and hot glances over black fans, monotonous songs and exotic dances awoke his fantasies. He watched the play of light over the Sierra, was enchanted by the jumping dolphins during his passage to Africa and practiced the drawing of clouds and spray-crested waves. Between oriental poetry and liberation war, the young man, not even fully adult, wandered through sleepy villages and timeless deserts. Due to the revolt of the Rif population against the Spanish colonial powers in Morocco, he wore Arab dress for security's sake and learned by heart the first verse of the Koran, which came in handy in many situations. He met columns of soldiers of the Foreign Legion and mounted warriors with turbans and drawn bayonets. On his return he was suspected of being a spy and was unjustly imprisoned in Cadiz, Spain, for 9 days. There he studied the faces of sinister characters and profited from the boxing training he had taken in his earlier years...

In **1922**, Egon von Vietinghoff, his parents and his brother were granted **Swiss nationality** with citizenship in Zurich. However, he seemed to consider this as possibility for easier travel rather than an invitation to stay in Switzerland. For he was now of age and had a recognized passport instead of the large, folded paper issued by the former Russian Empire with the obliterated Czarist emblem. He would not settle down in Zurich until 1940. He lived in **Munich** (Germany) for some months, where he went to a **drawing school**. Simultaneously, he frequently visited the Alte Pinakothek and embarked on an endeavor that would fascinate him for years: the **study of the Old Masters**. He minutely analyzed their works, passionately searching for the secret of their technique, their colors and the composition of their pictures. After this period, he moved to the isle of **Capri, Italy**, painting and drawing from nature.

*“In the beginning, my desire to do great things in these arts was without limits: I modeled life-size groups in clay and had them cast in plaster; I designed giant figures extremely hard to place in the available rooms. But I soon had to admit that my plastic and pictorial knowledge was not good enough to test my ideas on these objects and that I lacked the drawing skills needed as basis of both arts. With ardent zeal, I now started drawing after nature, worked doggedly and for weeks on the curvature of an olive tree’s trunk, tensed in the exact reproduction of the contours of a flower vase and thus lost the easy capacity of absorption and the distance from the object indispensable for any artistic activity.”*

(Egon von Vietinghoff)

## Paris (1923-1933)

**Paris** attracted him. In September **1923**, he arrived in this mecca of the fine arts. In the **quarter of Montparnasse**, he bought a live-in studio (with the help of his parents) and remodeled it according to his requirements. At that time, Paris was the uncontested center of the art world and meeting point of the avant-garde. In the coffeehouses (mainly in the *Café du Dôme*), Egon von Vietinghoff held spirited discussions about the essence of art and the artistic tendencies of the time with painters and sculptors such as Braque, Gris, Picasso, Utrillo, Delaunay, Chagall, Derain, Pascin, Ernst, de Pisis, de Chirico, Campigli, van Dongen, Masereel, Kisling, Ray, Calder, and Brancusi. During these years, the Swiss Le Corbusier, Varlin, Bänninger, and the Giacometti brothers were also in town. Vietinghoff’s earliest paintings were influenced by the spirit of the time, but neither the intellectual constructs nor the results of his very **brief interest in cubism** left him satisfied. He rejected them and none of his paintings in this style have survived.

His response was to **turn away from the modern artists’ scene** and instead study the originals of his models, the Old Masters. At that time, Egon von Vietinghoff saw very clearly his intended path: **to follow traditional painting in the spirit of the Old Masters but also in his own manner.** To accomplish this, he had to learn their painting techniques and methods which had been neglected or consciously repudiated since the birth of impressionism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But he did not find any teachers for his endeavors; the avant-garde attached no importance to this tradition. He therefore started from scratch, as a **self-taught person.**

He was guided and accompanied by the works of the Old Masters themselves. For months on end, he spent whole days in front of individual paintings of Goya, Velazquez, Raphael, Guardi, Titian, Dürer, Rubens, Rembrandt, Hals, van Dyck, Chardin, and Delacroix in the **Musée du Louvre**. He commuted between museum and studio and attempted glazes and brushwork which he discovered in the works of his models. In addition, he **experimented** with colors, binding materials, primers, and varnishes, which he mixed anew each time. He would face **another 35 long years of testing, experimenting and rediscovering, as well as many setbacks.** It was only by the middle of his life that he would have developed the painting technique required for his expression.

*“On the other hand, it has greatly benefited my drawing that for many years I sat daily in the academies of Paris drawing nudes without letting people interfere with well-meant instructions. The changing of the model’s position at short intervals forced me to take in forms and proportions at a glance – an exercise which came in handy later on when I wanted to capture the essential details of a movement on the spot and reproduce them with just a few strokes, instead of blurring the paper with repeated corrections. I also resolved, when drawing portraits, not to make a single stroke before being convinced that it was correct. This unfailing control precluded uncertain trials and accustomed me to a disciplined way of working which I also applied when deciding what colors to use.”*

(Egon von Vietinghoff)

The **death of his beloved mother**, when he was just 23 years old, was a great shock for him. She was admired by many people and he felt most familiar with her. From then on, he had to do without the emotional and spiritual support of his mother; in the future, he would have “nothing but his art”. In **1929**, Egon von Vietinghoff married his **first wife at Rome, the Italian Marcella Chiaraviglio**, a woman from an influential Roman family of liberal upper middle-class tradition. Her mother was the daughter of Giovanni Giolitti, who was several times minister and five times prime minister of Italy (the *Giolitti Era*). The family was one of the first patrons and sponsors of Maria Montessori as well. In **1931**, from this marriage, a **daughter was born whom he called Jeanne, after his mother**. He was an enthusiastic father and the child brought new hope to the passionate but difficult marriage.

This momentum is mirrored in his works; he painted the first pictures he ever considered acceptable, though only temporarily. Word spread of his **portraits** among art lovers due to his natural manner in painting the skin of his subjects. His progress enabled him in the period from **1928 to 1933** to show his paintings in collective exhibitions five times in the **Salon d’Automne** and the **Salon des Tuileries**, together with those of future well-renowned painters. Yet, the dominance of modern art, especially the abstract style, along with World War II would prevent him from continuing this successful public debut. However, the interruptive break of his years in South America was probably not beneficial either.

In Paris, he was looking for **casual jobs**, and eventually devoted his time to producing large frescoes and photomontages as advertisements for big companies. Unfortunately some of them, such as Air France, presumed upon his good nature and did not pay for weeks of work. He traveled to Italy several times to visit his wife’s family and the museums, also taking part in the animated social life of **Rome**. He gave exuberant parties for colleagues from all over the world at his studio in Paris. His years in France gave him the opportunity to spend summer vacations in **Saint-Tropez** and at the holiday home of his mother at the Côte d’Azur in **Roquebrune-Cap-Martin** (dep. Alpes maritimes, between Monaco and Italy), including some visits to the nearby casino of **Monte Carlo**.

At that time, his wife, Marcella, attempted to earn some money as a photographer and hat maker but spent more on expensive equipment than she made in profits. In addition, the financial situation of the artists in Paris had rapidly worsened due to the wave of immigrants from Nazi Germany. The available work was shared with too many artists of all genres, thus those who resided in Paris lost their main source of income. Also, the cohabitation of two so highly autonomous and emotional personalities in the live-in studio continued to be problematic. In **1933**, Egon and Marcella were only 30 and 26 years old; they were curious as to what life had to offer and looking for a new beginning. After a little less than **ten years in familiar Paris**, Egon von Vietinghoff left with his family. In this city he had spent a decisive period of his life but he would return for regular visits.

### Fresh start as a couple (1933-1937)

In **1933**, Egon von Vietinghoff traveled first alone and then later with his wife and daughter to **Majorca, Spain**, followed by a year later to South America. For a couple of months, he worked in **Buenos Aires, Argentina**, in a metal factory belonging to his brothers-in-law in order to make ends meet. He was deeply involved with **etching and pen-and-ink-drawing** but unsatisfied with the seeming **stagnation of his artistic development** in oil-painting.

The moves did not solve his **domestic difficulties with his wife**. Both husband and wife were strong characters and came from wealthy families. The lifestyle to which they were accustomed could not be supported with the money Egon von Vietinghoff earned from painting. Their prob-

lems absorbed his attention, exhausted his energy and kept him from his inner mission as an artist. Finally, he lived – separated from his family – in a solitary log cabin near **Las Toscas (Atlantida), on the banks of the Rio de la Plata in Uruguay.**

This period also enriched his collection of stories which he sometimes told with a lively mimic, roguish eyes and almost Latin gestures: of the torn sail on the Rio de la Plata, of the involuntary taming of the black panther on the jungle border by his neighbors, of the fisherman's wife who needed to ask her husband's reminder of how many children they had (or was this an anecdote from Capri?), of the hundreds of tarantulas darkening the window at night, of the self-invented exercises to heal his shoulders and ribs broken in a car accident, the reason for his bald spot, and of his hallucinations due to caffeine poisoning brought about by excessive mate consumption.

### Zurich (1937-1994)

In **1937**, Egon von Vietinghoff returned to **Europe** without his family, through life threatening storms, on board of a Belgian freighter. He went to his father's home in Switzerland, in **Zollikon**, and rented a **studio in Zurich**. In order to save money, he walked each day many miles to his studio and back. Financially started from scratch and was forced to sell one painting in his last frame, thus being able to buy two frames.

On December 1937, he was conscripted by the Army: height 5' 10½", weight 176 lbs., and assigned to auxiliary local service. During **World War II**, he did an average of 49 days per year of military service in the **Swiss army**, mainly as a sentry in barracks or at the military airfield of Dübendorf, near Zurich. **Emotionally, this period was very trying for him, despite the success of sequential exhibitions** organized by the art gallery Neupert in the best location (Bahnhofstrasse 1). In **1938**, his wife and child joined him from South America; they lived together again in the old town of **Zurich** (Kirchgasse 21). They visited his relatives in Saxony and Silesia, Germany. But soon he moved back to Zollikon and his wife and child went back to Argentina. The marriage with Marcella consisted of alternating separations and magnetic attraction until it finally ended. The loss of his daughter Jeanne was extremely painful.

He had to take legal responsibility for his father who lived removed from reality and for his brother who died after a long and serious illness in 1942. In addition, the war terminated promising offers of exhibitions from respected German galleries; from the North of Switzerland he saw the glare of fires from the bombed city of Munich in the night sky and remembered his relatives; he talked to his cousin through a barbed wire fence on the German-Swiss border in Constance but was unable to provide any practical help. Also, his paintings were refused by the *Swiss National Exhibition*, the exhibition of the *Swiss Association of visual artists*, and the *Museum of Art in Winterthur*. His admission to the *Association of Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects* was rejected as well.

Egon moved from Kirchgasse to Spiegelgasse, within the old town of Zurich, but did not remain alone for long. He married again to the **Swiss Heidi Howald** from the Canton of Berne, who worked as a photographer, earned her livelihood with various bread-winning jobs and helped him to keep his artist's household in shape. Yet, this relation lasted only a couple of years.

In **1944**, there was a **turn of the tide**, and Vietinghoff finally settled down. He moved to **Zurich-Wollishofen**, to the cooperative **housing estate Neubühl**. At first, he took only a studio and lived there in the middle of his paintings and tools. Here, on Ostbühlstrasse 17, he worked until 1989. Ninety percent of his oeuvre was created in this studio, except the landscapes. The housing estate built by the *Werkbund* was a committed project of the thirties which would be known as one of the first modern housing estates in Switzerland and is still unique in its style. The white rows of build-

ings in the style of the Bauhaus (covered by flat roofs) are built along the hillside marking the green outskirts of the town. The emphatically functional flats are very practical for the tenants. The avant-garde architecture, a series of studios, the living comfort and the quiet surroundings attracted actors, stage-managers, writers, architects, musicians, painters and sculptors – many of them having emigrated from Germany to Switzerland. Arthur Koestler, Leopold Lindtberg, Ernst Ginsberg, Kurt Guggenheim, Julius Zerfass, Hannes Meyer, Trudi Schoop, and Hans Albert Einstein (the son of Albert Einstein lived there.

Although the end of the war was an ambivalent experience for Egon von Vietinghoff, the Swiss citizen half descending from German ancestors, for the European and strict pacifist it was the end of an indescribable nightmare. In a relative's house he met the eighteen year old **German Maria Juliane (Maritta) Foerster**, who was trying to recover in Switzerland from her flight from Silesia (refugee trek in early 1945 from the East to the West when the Soviet Army approached) and the hunger period in the war-stricken British occupation zone of Germany. Maritta, whose mother was also born a Vietinghoff, became his third wife. Divorce from his second wife was a mere formality; a subsequent love affair had perhaps separated them. In **1948**, they moved to an apartment in the housing estate Neubühl, just a minute on foot from his studio. But the marriage with the mother of his **son Alexander**, who was 26 years his junior, was as passionate as it was short-lived and the divorce-suit was terrible. Egon was a domineering partner focused single-mindedly much on his artistic progress. Nevertheless, he received custody of their son.

In **1952**, his daughter Jeanne came from Argentina for three years. That same year, Egon met the **Austrian Liane Charlotte (Lilo)** from Salzburg, and his eventful life presented him with yet another marriage (**1954**). During this year, he experienced an **all encompassing new beginning** reflected in his work stylistically and quantitatively – as well as sales-wise! In **1953**, they moved for the last time, within the same housing estate, to Westbühlstrasse 40. They would stay here together, another 41 years until his death.

Liane was an active partner, who loved to walk in the mountains, to bind some of his favorite books in leather (Kant, Schopenhauer, Goethe, Grimmelshausen, Bjørnson, Lagerlöf, Hebel, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gogol, Tagore, and those of his mother Jeanne de Vietinghoff), weaved fabrics and shawls, typed his manuscripts, took pleasure in travelling with him and gave him decisive supports in the sale of his paintings. From her excursions and visits to her garden, she brought him wild fruit and flowers serving as models for his still lives and flower pictures. He needed the immediate perception for every picture – except for his figure paintings which were created from imagination.

After the adventurous years of his youth, the grievous human and material losses due to deaths, divorces, and after-effects of the war let him quiet down. After the new beginning with Liane his daily life became more stable. **The orderly family life during his son's school years provided him with the basis and framework he needed in order to fully concentrate on his oeuvre.** Working with equal intensity and discipline, he spent his days in the studio with canvases, in the middle of pigment pots, pieces of velvet fabric used as backgrounds of his motives, frames and bottles, bowls, jugs, and plates appearing again and again in his paintings.

**In spite of his newly settled life style, he still loved to travel** – in the beginning by train, by bicycle or by motor scooter, and after 1959 by car within Switzerland as well as to France, Belgium, Holland, and Portugal, looking for cathedrals, castles and town halls as well as for the joys of wine and the menu card or tracking baroque buildings in Austria and southern Germany. He was especially attracted by the legendary sites of European culture and the impressive places remembered from his youth. In Greece, southern Italy and Turkey, he admired the temples and statues dating from antiquity as special highlights of mankind. Ever since the days he first encountered it in Morocco, a country he visited once more after 60 years, he had a continuing fascination with the

Arabic world. In memory of his wandering years, he returned three times to Spain. For a long time, he traveled to Italy almost every year, his love of art and his enthusiasm drew him to Roman churches with their wealth of frescoes and to the wide places which corresponded so well to his generous nature.

He saw the beauty of landscapes with the eye of the visual artist. He never missed an opportunity to see anew the works of his beloved Old Masters in museums, be it in Winterthur or Vaduz, in Kassel, Berlin, Munich or Vienna, in Antwerp or Amsterdam, in Florence or Rome, in London or Madrid – and he came back innumerable times to the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

His hunger for visual impressions was neither appeased in the hours of leisure – in a movie or in coffee houses where he loved to sit and watch people. When he did not watch or observe, he read world literature in German or French (some in Italian as well), devoted himself to his extensive stamp collection, planned new travel itineraries, played chess with neighbors or invented jokes and puns...

Due to his technical expertise, he was occasionally asked to **restore old paintings and icons** or to teach young painters. Good-naturedly, but not always enthusiastically, he accepted such tasks even when they kept him from his own creative work. Between 1946 and the 1980's, he had **ten private students**: patiently he shared his knowledge with them and at the same time honed his own didactic methods. His tutelage also benefited the clarity of his **manuscripts** on painting techniques and painting philosophy on which he worked for decades. His last three students even helped him to complete the manuscripts.

After almost 50 years(!) of note-taking and correcting, the big day came in **1981**: the manuscript was completed. Its second part appeared in **1983** in the renowned publishing house DuMont under the title *Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei*, i.e. *Handbook of painting technique* (available in German only). It is the sum total of his unique working experience and his many decades of experimentation. Here, he defined a long neglected color characteristic, probably for the first time: the transparency of color. Thus, **he again made available the lost treasure of the traditional European oil-resin multilayer technique (which is a specific European cultural heritage) to generations of subsequent painters.**

The first part of his manuscript *Das Wesen der bildenden Kunst (The Nature of Visual Arts*, in German only), has a **philosophical message**; it clarifies art terminology, uncovers misunderstandings and explains the nature of pictorial art. Vietinghoff separately defines intuition, fantasy and imagination, as well as decorative art and kitsch. He contrasts naturalism to the resemblance to nature and was strongly critical in his analysis of both naturalistic and abstract painting. His way derived from spontaneous transcendental experiences and led him to his *Transcendental Painting* concept by the meditative way of looking postulated in his *School of Pure Vision*.

This latter one is created neither by painstakingly accurate object descriptions nor by intellectual ideas or political or psychological motivations, but on the sole basis of visual, sensual perception presupposing a radical separation from any previous knowledge and a suppression of conscious thoughts. If this is achieved, the painting is not the representation of the physical object or the illustration of an idea but **the interiorly realized transformation of the rhythm of color, a spectacle of light and shadow opening up a transcendent world.** He thus followed his great examples (the Old Masters) in whose best works he recognized this deep understanding of art and his **own transcendental experiences and insights** from their intuitive and inspired brushwork – irrespective of their subjects.

This never printed manuscript is published only on the German Internet homepage of the Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation under the heading *Philosophy/The Nature of Visual Arts* (please visit [www.vietinghoff.org](http://www.vietinghoff.org)). One can consider him as a **painting mystic** who meditatively penetrated the outer appearance with his sense organs, i.e. as a painter with his eyes, in order to comprehend their essence. This painting solely emerges from visual impression, only using color to be expressed. Egon von Vietinghoff was not interested in the categories of “old” and “new”, historical or progressive, but in the capacity of an artist to be visually deeply moved due to a metaphysical experience. This refers to the purely intuitive imagination, focused solely on color play, and to the skillful transformation on the canvas. Thus, he searched as far as possible for a third view whose criteria were not bound by time. Yet, as a humble man and absorbed by his work as a painter and author he never claimed himself to be a mystic although his experiences provided him a **transcendental and timeless** standard which is expounded in his **philosophy of pure painting** (see chapter *Vietinghoff – the mystic and his contemporaries*).

Since the nineteen sixties, the **interactions of theoretical knowledge and technical know-how** showed an increasing effect. Every-day life in the studio brought practical and meditative experiences leading to the differentiation of former definitions while the philosophical reflections in their turn were tested in the painting process. This synergetic process accelerated the way he was painting and concentrated the artistic content of his works: he painted more and better. And he had financial successes which in their turn lent wings to his creativity.

**Occasional exhibitions** in various towns of Switzerland and Southern Germany, once more in Paris and once in New York brought him personal but not official recognition. At best, the name Egon von Vietinghoff is mentioned in short, incorrect compulsory notes in painters' lexicons. He was neither supported nor officially exhibited (though he would have the right to do so according to the bylaws) – none of his paintings are shown in a museum. His requests were either refused or ignored. Semi-publicly accessible pictures hang in several restaurants and hotels; all other ones are privately owned. But in spite of all attacks he was gradually able to live off the proceeds of his paintings as he received an increasing number of **mouth-to-mouth recommendations by private art lovers**. Often he sold his works by himself in his studio, sometimes directly from the easel even when not completely dry. Therefore he was more independent of galleries.

Taking into account his demands, he realized long ago that he had to **produce his own colors, binders and his own base coats** in order to obtain the required quality and the desired effect. The industrial products offered on the market were not suitable for his brushwork. His pictures, fascinating due to their **unmistakable warmth, natural freshness and genuine luminosity, were created by him at every stage and by the use of materials which were the most pure and natural available**.

Although **he spent at least 50% of his energy on manual preparations**, experience and virtuosity allowed him in his most creative years (1964-1974) to realize a performance of an average of 75 pictures per year! And this including the purchase of fruit and materials, as well as color production, writing manuscripts, hobbies, friend's visits, and vacation. He always impressed through his enormous intensity, even if completely engrossed in reading a book, when speaking with the birds on the balcony or while pondering the daily tasks during a spaghetti dinner.

Mastering his painting technique, Vietinghoff created three quarters of his opus during the second half of his life. At age 86, he made a conscious decision to **lay down his paintbrush after nearly 70 years of artistic activity**. He would then spend another five years at home in astonishingly good health – and this despite the fact that for some 75 years he had smoked between 10 and 50 cigarettes per day and that most of them were without a filter! His advanced age even let him see some

of the fruits of his life work: in **1989**, the establishment of the ***Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation*** (see below); in **1990**, the publication of the excellent catalogue of pictures owned by the Foundation, which he paid out of his own pocket; and in **1991**, the publication of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his *Handbuch der Technik der Malerei (Handbook of painting technique)*. At his death a few months prior to his 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday, he left a **life-work of 2.750 paintings – witnesses of a painting culture believed to be lost, based on a specific European culture heritage, works of timeless value.**

In his obituary notice we read:

Egon von Vietinghoff has left this world, through his works he continues to live.

### Biographical data

1903	He was born on February 6 in <b>The Hague, Netherlands</b> , Javastraat 28, in the house of his maternal grandparents. With his parents, he lived in <b>Paris</b> (France), 14 rue Cernuschi, in the 17 <sup>th</sup> arrondissement (near the subway station <i>Malesherbes</i> which was opened not until 1911). Officially they were <b>subjects of the Russian tsar.</b>
1904	His <b>brother Alexis</b> was born in The Hague. Visit of his grandfather Baron Arnold Julius v. Vietinghoff to Salisburg Manor situated on the Salis river in <b>Livonia</b> , the house of his paternal grandparents, a place presently known as Mazsalaca on the Salaca river in <b>Latvia</b> (near the Estonian border and the Baltic Sea).
1905	First feelings of love upon meeting the daughter of his mother's friends, Marguerite de Crayencour (later writer <b>Marguerite Yourcenar</b> , 1903-1987) playing on the beach of <b>Scheveningen</b> , Netherlands. Egon's parents inspired her to some extent in several of her books.
1906	Second visit to his grandparents in Livonia. Probably 2 <sup>nd</sup> visit of Marguerite de Crayencour (Yourcenar) and her father at Scheveningen.
1907	They moved to <i>Villa Violetta</i> with a large garden in <b>Wiesbaden, Germany</b> , Gartenstrasse 2-4 (today named Steubenstrasse) next to the spa parks.
1909 to 1913	Governesses, private teachers, piano and violin lessons, which he found hard. Travels to <b>Austria, Italy, Paris</b> and several times to <b>Switzerland.</b>
1913	They moved to <b>Geneva, Switzerland</b> due to the town's international flair, the Swiss neutrality in the European conflicts and the proximity of the mountains to improve Egon's health suffering a tubercular infection.
1914 / 1915	During the summers they vacationed in Chambésy (today a suburb of Geneva) on the Lake Geneva. Learned some Malay language to speak in a "secret language" with his brother. Surgery of the throat.
1916	Family moved to Zurich (Switzerland). Visit to first public school, the Lyceum Alpinum <b>Zuoz</b> , a boarding school in the Canton of Graubünden, Switzerland.
1917	His parents bought a self-contained house at Böcklinstrasse 18, <b>Zurich</b> . Admission to the high school <i>Freies Gymnasium</i> in Zurich. <b>Egon started to paint.</b>

1919	Sold his first two pictures to a teacher who recognized Egon's talent. Left the Gymnasium voluntarily in order to become an artist. Studied in a <b>sculptor's studio</b> in Zurich for some weeks; yet <b>decided for painting</b> .
1920	Together with a friend, departure for a 9 month trip on foot through <b>Spain</b> and <b>Morocco</b> with paper and pencil. Dressed as a Bedouin because of the Rif War otherwise it would be too dangerous for a European.
1921	Spent 9 days in prison in Cadiz, Spain when arriving from Morocco as a white man during the Rif War, being suspected of spying. Showed three paintings in a collective exhibition in the <b>Kunsthaus, the Museum Of Fine Arts in Zurich</b> .
1922	All four family members <b>obtained Swiss nationality</b> with citizenship of Zurich. Egon went to <b>Munich, Germany</b> for drawing lessons at the Hoffmann Academy and simultaneous beginning of his <b>self-taught studies of the Old Masters</b> at the <i>Alte Pinakothek</i> .
1922 / 1923	Egon spent several months on <b>Capri Island, Italy</b> , painting in nature.
1923	Arrived in <b>Paris</b> ; bought and remodeled a studio at rue Gager Gabillot 1 (15 <sup>th</sup> Arrondissement), located near to <b>Montparnasse</b> the community of avant-garde painters and writers who met in all the famous cafés. <b>Brief interest in cubism</b> (none of these paintings remain), then intensive studies in the museums, mainly in the <b>Musée du Louvre</b> , and <b>systematic experiments</b> in painting technique in his own studio.
1924 to 1932	Intensively <b>drawing nudes</b> after models. Moved in the circles of the avant-garde and <b>discussed art mainly in the coffeehouse Le Dôme</b> with painters and sculptors such as Braque, Gris, Picasso, Utrillo, Delaunay, Ray, Chagall, Derain, Pascin, Ernst, de Pisis, de Chirico, Campigli, van Dongen, Masereel, Kisling, Foujita, Calder, Brancusi, Le Corbusier, Varlin, and the Giacometti brothers. Several journeys to <b>Saint-Tropez, Monte Carlo</b> and to <b>Roquebrune (Alpes Maritimes)</b> where his parents owned a summer house ( <i>Villa Mélisande</i> ).
1926	His beloved <b>mother passed away</b> (only 50 years old); the house on Böcklinstrasse 18 was sold.
1928-1933	Some of his paintings were displayed in collective exhibitions, five times in the <b>Salon d'Automne</b> together with those of future well-renowned painters. Success in portrait painting. Several trips to <b>Italy</b> .
1929	Married his <b>first wife, the Italian Marcella Chiaraviglio</b> , in Rome, Italy. She was from an influential Roman family of liberal bourgeoisie and the grandchild of the important politician Giovanni Giolitti (the <i>Giolittian Era</i> ).
1931	His <b>daughter Jeanne</b> was born in Paris (first child, named after his mother). Technical and stylistic progress. Some of his works were shown in a collective exhibition in the <b>Salon des Tuileries</b> .
1932	Painted the first pictures he considered acceptable. Participation in both of the mentioned salons.
1933	He stayed on <b>Majorca, Spain</b> (sometimes with his wife and daughter); painting in nature; suffered from severe fish poisoning. Once more, some works were shown in a collective exhibition in the <b>Salon des Tuileries</b> .
1934	Moved with wife and daughter to <b>Argentina living in Buenos Aires</b> . Penniless. Worked in the metal-factory of his brothers-in-law. No success in painting and artisan preparations; unsatisfied. Repeated marital troubles.
1935	Financial and domestic crisis. Deeply involved with <b>etching and pen-and-ink-drawing</b> . Eleven paintings were shown in a collective exhibition at the <b>Kunstmuseum in Winterthur, Switzerland</b> .

1936	Because of his unsolved marital problems, he lived mainly alone in a log cabin on the river bank of the <b>Rio de la Plata near Las Toscas (Atlantida), Uruguay</b> . Serious car accident
1937	Separated from his wife. Got caffeine poisoning from excessive mate tea consumption. Extremely stormy <b>Atlantic crossing</b> on a cargo ship upon returning alone to Europe. Moved to his father's flat at Bahnhofstrasse 35, <b>Zollikon</b> , close to Zurich; rented a studio in Zurich. Sold the villa of his mother in Roquebrune (France) near Monte Carlo (Monaco). Financially started from scratch, sold one painting in his last frame and thus was able to buy two frames.
1938	Two trips to <b>Berlin</b> . His wife and daughter came to Zurich. They visited his relatives in <b>Saxony and Silesia</b> (Germany). Beginning of <b>successful exhibitions</b> in a row in Zurich. He settled doctor invoices for his family with paintings and gives pictures away after having spent holidays in friend's houses (as he did previously and would also do later).
1939	Moved temporarily to the old part of Zurich to be with his family living at Kirchgasse 21, and then returned to Zollikon. His works were refused by the <i>Swiss National Exhibition</i> .
1940	<b>Divorced his wife Marcella</b> , who moved back to Argentina with her daughter; he moved again to Zurich, to Spiegelgasse 13 (in the house Spiegelgasse 1 the Dadaism was born in 1916). Was levied by the <b>Swiss Army</b> and did an average of 49 days of active service per war year, in a security company (several times at the military airport Dübendorf, near Zurich).
1941	<b>Married his second wife, Heidi Howald</b> , origin from the Canton of Berne, Switzerland; moved to her flat Münsterergasse 9, Zurich. Much of his furniture and early paintings in his studio in Paris were destroyed during the war or were lost due to irresponsible tenants.
1942	His <b>brother Alexis passed away</b> after a very long illness. <b>His paintings were refused</b> for the exhibition of the <i>Swiss Association of visual artists</i> and by the <i>Museum of Art in Winterthur</i> . Admission to the <i>Association of Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects</i> was rejected as well.
1943	First separation from Heidi.
1944	Moved his studio to Ostbühlstrasse 17 in the <b>housing estate Neubühl</b> , on the outskirts of Zurich, where he now lived most of the time in the midst of his paintings, paints and tools. This studio would be his creative place until his energy left him in 1989. Here he created more than 90% of his oeuvre (except the landscapes). While sitting unconsciously near a bunker, painting a landscape, arrested by soldiers suspected being a spy.
1944 / 1945	Intensive love affair.
1947	Egon met the German Maria Juliane (Maritta) Foerster. Formally <b>divorced his second wife Heidi</b> .
1948	Moved his private quarters to Nidelbadstrasse 79 (1 minute walk to his studio). <b>Married his third wife Maria Juliane Foerster (called Maritta)</b> from Silesia. Trip together to northern Italy. His <b>son Alexander</b> was born.
1951	Maritta and Alexander moved to another apartment, one minute walk.
1952	<b>Dramatically divorced Maritta</b> but received child custody. His daughter Jeanne came from Argentina for three years. He met <b>Liane Charlotte Lenhoff</b> (called Lilo) from Salzburg, Austria. Alexander came back.

1953	<b>A total new beginning.</b> Last move to Westbuehlstrasse 40 in the same housing estate, together with Liane and Alexander. Changed from his bicycle to a motor scooter. Suffered from a series of children's diseases starting with mumps (as private tutoring until the age of 13 had prevented any contamination by other children)
1946 to 1975	<b>Trips</b> to Italy, France, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, and once to England (London).
1946 to 1990	<b>Individual exhibitions</b> in Germany (Munich) and in Switzerland (Zurich, Berne, Basel, Horw, Küsnacht, Eglisau, Lichtensteig). In the course of time, his paintings were shown in galleries of most bigger towns in the German- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland, in Mannheim and Baden-Baden (Germany), once more in Paris, and once in New York.
1954	<b>Married his fourth wife Liane Charlotte Lenhoff.</b> She would accompany him another 40 years until the end of his life. After the new beginning with Liane his daily life became more stable
1955	His daughter Jeanne returned to Buenos Aires.
1956	His pictures for the <i>Swiss Art Exhibition</i> in Basel were refused.
1957	His <b>father passed away.</b> His son Alexander was severely sick, and he almost died from a viral pneumonia that occurred simultaneously with the measles.
1959	Bought his first second hand car, thus new destinations became possible.
as from 1960	<b>Sales successes and intensive work on his manuscript.</b> The interaction of theoretical knowledge and technical know-how became increasingly effective. Every-day life in the studio brought practical and meditative experiences leading to the differentiation of former definitions while the philosophical reflections in their turn were tested in the painting process itself. The successful translation as a confirmation of his insights and a certain measure of material success inspired his creative activities.
1968	After 35 years of subleasing, partial expropriation and a process, he could finally sell his studio in Paris. His son Alexander started studies and moved away.
1969	He destroyed approx. 100 paintings of the last 30 years which did not please him.
1970	Thorough <b>revision of his manuscript.</b> Starts friendship with Bartel van der Waerden, the well-known mathematician, born in the Netherlands as well but 4 days before Egon. The friend's wife was an Austrian, as was Egon's. <b>Emotional crisis</b> due to romantic feelings of love
1972	Trip to <b>Argentina</b> with Alexander visiting his daughter after 17 years, met her husband and three children for the first time. Short reunion with his first wife, Marcella, after 32 years. Journey by car through the North and the valleys of the Pre-Cordilleras of the Andes.
1973	He vacationed in <b>Sri Lanka</b> to celebrate his 70 <sup>th</sup> birthday. A youthful dream became fulfilled. Year of best selling.
1974	Dramatic love affair. Highest income by selling paintings.
1976	2 <sup>nd</sup> visit to his daughter and her family in Buenos Aires, together with Liane. Journey to the north-eastern part of <b>Argentina</b> as far as the Iguazu Falls.
1977	Fall on the frozen street to his studio. Two <b>hip surgeries</b> on the same hip.
1978	Operations of cataracts on both eyes. Afterwards again highly creative and industrious.
1980	Last annual trip to Paris.

1981	<b>Completion of his manuscript</b> after almost 50 years and separation in two volumes: <i>Die Technik der Malerei (The technique of painting)</i> and <i>Das Wesen der bildenden Kunst (The Nature of Visual Arts)</i> .
1982	Two visits to Alexander and the museums in Berlin; last time in Germany.
1983	Holiday in Morocco to escape the celebration of his 80 <sup>th</sup> birthday. Met <b>Marguerite Yourcenar</b> for the first time after some 75 years again in Amsterdam (The Netherlands). The first volume of his book appeared in DuMont Verlag (Cologne) as <i>Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei (Handbook of the painting technique)</i> . He cannot find a publisher for the theoretical and philosophical volume with critical sections on naturalism and abstract painting.
1985	Long visit of his daughter Jeanne in Europe (the first after 1953) and later of his three Argentinean grandchildren.
1986/87	Marguerite Yourcenar was visiting him in Zurich. From a exhibition of his work he gave her a present of a still life painting with peaches which can still be seen in her former residence <i>Petite Plaisance</i> in Maine (U.S.A.) which is a small museum today. Two heart attacks.
1989	Creation of the <b><i>Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation with its own collection of paintings</i></b> (never offered for sale) for future exhibitions and documentation of the continuity of the European painting tradition. In spring health crisis; in summer, <b>last intensive working phase. After 70(!) years of artistic creation, he stopped painting</b> in September due to problems with his health and decreasing concentration.
1990	Printing of the self-financed <b>catalogue of the Foundation's collection</b> .
1991	Second edition of the <i>Handbook of the painting technique</i> appeared.
1993	<b>Exhibition in Zurich-Wollishofen to celebrate his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.</b>
1994	In September, concussion following a bad fall. He was tired but still very entertaining spending three weeks in bed. On October 14, after three days in a coma under morphine, he <b>died peacefully</b> in his flat of pneumonia, already having wished for his own death for a while.

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#### Encyclopaedias (the first five containing several mistakes)

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#### The Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation

Officially recognized non-profit organization set up in 1987 with seat in Zurich, owning the artist's only publicly accessible collection of presently 67 paintings not offered for sale. Aiming at making these paintings accessible, the Foundation is looking for periodical or permanent possibilities of exhibition in Switzerland and abroad, and to circulate and promote the artist's legacy: the philosophy of *Transcendental painting*, the method of the *School of pure vision*, and the traditional European painting technique of multi-layer oil-resin painting. The Foundation encourages students to write art historical and scientific papers on the work of this extraordinary and creative artist. Documentation and presentation of the extensive life oeuvre of the founder can also be found under [www.vietinghoff.org](http://www.vietinghoff.org)

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### **Overview**

- Brief illustrated introduction
- Leaflet in three columns (without illustration)
- Text of the Concise Website

### **Biography**

- Biography, Chronology, Bibliography
- Egon von Vietinghoff's Memories
- Anecdotes about Egon von Vietinghoff
- Jeanne de Vietinghoff (mother)
- Conrad von Vietinghoff (father)
- The Vietinghoffs and Marguerite Yourcenar

### **Technique and craftsmanship**

- Technique and Craftsmanship of the Multilayer Oil-resin Painting – A European Cultural Heritage.
- The Translucency of Color – The decisive phenomenon
- The Handbook of Painting Technique (out of print)
- The Genesis of a Painting and the Different Brushstrokes

### **Philosophy – Transcendental Painting**

- Resemblance to Nature contra Naturalism – The big misunderstanding.
- The School of Pure Vision – The contemplative way to an artistic vision.
- Vietinghoff – The mystic and his contemporaries.
- The Nature of Visual Arts (only the table of contents of the manuscript)

### **Work**

- General Impression, Motives and Style
- Phases of his Work
- Statistics

### **Gallery**

- Illustrated Painting Descriptions of 30 Works
- Each of these painting descriptions can be separately downloaded directly from the Gallery

### **Foundation**

- The Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation – Objectives, Publications, Board members

### **Sale of Works**

- Works for Sale – Present status, Prices, Cooperation