

E. Vietinghoff

General Impression, Subjects and Style

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The General Impression and the Details

At a normal viewing distance, in the pictures there is balance of the components brought together with classically proportioned compactness. Without losing himself in details, Vietinghoff leads the spectator's eye through the spectrum of color nuances and finds a successful equilibrium between intensity and cautious silence. The observer gets the impression of unity with coherent interaction of the object and the background, of the lights and shades, of the forms and colors, and of the details as well as the whole, all from close proximity and from varying distances.

The refinements in his painting technique become visible when observing details or in photographic enlargements. He imbeds delicate suggestions which seem amazingly precise from a certain distance within generous color landscapes. Important parts are clearly emphasized to create three dimensionality but they do not jump out at the observer. Although he creates figural paintings he gives to the beholder's eye liberty enough to discover inexpressible and indescribable aspects. The details of his picture language are highly imaginative while the focus on the essential is dominant. The technique of his mature and later years is amazing and his artistic aspirations were high.

Almost solemnly with simplicity, Vietinghoff presents his still lifes as if on a stage and sets the focus of attention on single fruits, breads, mushrooms and other subjects like individuals. The often rather dark background is subdued although not neglected. He structured his compositions without eccentric ideas but simply and naturally. Upon one velvet piece he places the objects, with a second he creates a background.

In the mature paintings of the last 20 years of his life work we do not observe any more the continuing experimentation of the earlier paintings the struggles for the best technique and for the pure materials. Cautiously he applies the paints in his multilayer technique, letting the picture gradually grow and reveals a view to nature rich in subtle details. In his works, we see the successful synthesis of artistic vision with the manual skills of representation. The inner calmness of his paintings provides an agreeable atmosphere of warmth and tranquility in the rooms in which they hang. For many people these works bring a feeling of confidence and of connectivity to natural phenomena. One can hardly escape the strength and the stillness with intensity of these paintings.

Subjects and Style

During the very first years of his painting career, Vietinghoff seeks experiences with Cubism but quickly stops, feeling Cubism was only as a temporal phase. Among others, the painters Piet Mondrian, Delaunay Maurice Vlaminck und Massimo Campigli stopped their Cubist phase as well. The last pictures with Cubistic influence from 1923/24 have not survived. Some of his first pictures, only preserved as black white photos, show rather amateurish exercises using random objects (*Milk pot and ink bottle*) or somewhat awkward representations of “unordered” items from his bachelor life (*Little fishes, eggcup and color tubes*).

Soon afterwards, we see the progressive application of his rediscovered techniques although still with the recognizable elements of the periods of contemporary style such as portraits and female nudes with broad eyelids and the flair of the Parisian scene and fashion. Other common topics of the first two decades of the century included the guitar and boats on the shore. Works from that time which survived his own judgment and therefore he did not delete were sold occasionally or destroyed by consequences of World War II or simply lost.

Egon von Vietinghoff uses the known painting media: he works with tempera colors and at first in gouache as well as with pencil, charcoal, ink, and etching needle. Later on he uses tempera only to provide the sketch over the prime coat as a preliminary stage before adding colors. Some exceptions show monochrome works in the manner of Camaieu or Grisaille paintings but only for imagined figural works. When doing so, he partly highlighted the brownish reddish tempera with a little white oil-based paint and emphasized the shadows by a few black strokes. Early on, he concentrated almost exclusively on the multilayer oil resin painting technique. In his portraits however, he often uses red chalk.

From the 1940s to the 1970s he drew some dozens of red chalk portraits, among them many of children. When he did not portray his wives or his son in those drawings it is because they were often commissions. We have preserved several drawings with nude models, presumably from the years approx. 1940 to approx. 1952; some of them are complete while others are just tenderly sketched.

His subjects contain all classic categories: flowers, still lifes, landscapes, nudes, and portraits. He also included figural scenes from the Bible or mythology and the impressions from his youthful walks through Spain and Morocco. In his earlier years he seeks landscape motifs from his surrounding region and from his journeys. Regularly he visited the fruit and vegetable market or asked his wife Liane for meadow flowers or wild fruits because he needed a real model for every picture. The exceptions were for scenes with many human figures or with single women who originated from his imagination.

Vietinghoff examined the old masters both technically and intellectually, and learns from them. Nevertheless, he does not imitate nor quote them but finds his own style. There is only a handful of pictures which directly show or we can deduce the connection to certain famous paintings. He technically compared these works. Through his intensive studies of favored painters, he had internalized certain composition sets and elements of motifs to such a degree that they also appear in his picture world too.

For instance, the powerful density in some flower bouquets could vaguely be associated with Jan Bruegel the Elder and his contemporaries. The dwarf on the left margin of Vietinghoff's *Witches' Sabbath* is related in form and color to some grotesque figures in Goya's works. A knife with yellowish handle occasionally appears in his still lifes. This, a white wine glass and pewter plates are all props in the iconography of the Old Masters.

Although he feels appreciated of qualities in a hanging duck of Sustermans, the partridges and rabbits of Chardin, the *Golden rain of Danae* of Titian and the *Battle of the Amazons* of Rubens, he dedicated none of his more than 2700 pictures to any of these topics. He does (did) not leave any painting with real town views, pictures with ships or a train, even though he was an admirer of van Goyen, Turner and Guardi.

Future historical art analyses may lead to more scientific conclusions; however, it is definite from past conversations with the artist lasting decades and from the knowledge of his personality that he certainly never intended to paint in the style of one of his studied masters. Even though iconographic associations to these masters may be noticed, they should be more unconsciously driven rather than as imitations or quotations.

He was indifferent to the choice of the subject because he valued art works exclusively according to the existence of a spiritual vision and the painter's skills to render it on the canvas. He was interested neither in the real object nor in the narrative content of a scene but solely in the successful transformation of an artistic imagination. He neither judged the level of the art according to historical, biographical, anecdotic, and allegorical content or even the psychological motivations of the artist.

Rarely did he paint according to customer wishes. Some pictures, nevertheless, show ham, bacon and fishes which were sold to restaurants by a broker. Apart from occasional still lifes with fishes, crawfish or prawns, he did not like dead animals such as rabbits or pheasants in front of his easel while painting. Among the commission works, there is a unique subject to be mentioned: *Coffee grinder with coffee set and Gipfeli*. This picture is in the possession of the Johann Jacobs Museum ("coffee museum") in Zurich.

He often replaced a purchased picture by a new one with the same subject – after all, he needed to feed his family. Therefore, sales steer the frequency of some subjects. Pictures with flowers and fruits make up the greatest part to the entire work. In particular, the repeatedly replaced fruit still lifes created a rich variation during their 70 years of being painted.

We specially observe a high degree of variety in the presentations of the velvet peach skin, the highlights on cherries, the color play of opened oranges, the irregularity in walnut shells, the specific strawberry pores, and in the translucency of white grapes as well as in the dull surface of blue grapes. Over the years, he became swifter in artistically grasping the nature of the phenomena. His executions became more expert while also appearing in new variations.

Vietinghoff sets up a stage with the simplest objects of nature and opens them to us with a new view. His paintings stand out with fascinating plasticity and virtuously placed highlights. The surface of the subjects is not photographically but characterized in essence. His personal quiet strength and life intensity influenced the pictures.

The brighter the colors the more thickly the paint is applied. Thus, the highlights are more intense on a reflective surface. This effect is specially shown in still lifes and partly in figural subjects where it is increased contrasting to the usually rather dark background.

With the thriftiest of means Vietinghoff caused a virtuously high effect. He does not grasp the objects by simply copying but by understanding the essential nature of the form, the colors and the light in a vision, and then converting it with astonishing naturalness. The exceptional plasticity and inner brightness of his unmistakable paintings is based on his profound knowledge of the properties of colors and on his own color production with the most natural of possible ingredients.

Neither the objects nor the paintings are loud but have a conspicuous radiance. With powerful quiet and freshness of color they give the observer a feeling of confidence and of attachment with the timeless phenomena of our world. Their naturalness makes them comprehensible and therefore accessible to everybody. By focusing on the human love of seeing, he drew our attention to the small and great wonders of nature and invited us to be touched by the sensuality of the familiar objects.

After the two serious heart problems in 1987, in his two last years of creation, some of the most mature works were done – often within a few hours. In addition to his masterly brush-work (which he perfected long time ago), he now viewed world differently. He was self-aware that his career of 70 fertile artistic years was ending soon, but he summoned his energies) in two surges. During these surges, he reduced his presentations once more to the essential. His physical strength hardly sufficed to climb the stairs, his heart and his lungs were weak. In summer 1989, his wife Liane drove him by car to the studio a distance of 200 meters and picked then him up after 2 to 4 hours, often he had already fallen asleep.

During his last two precious years of productive life one of his artistic highlights was, the *Three Plums*. In a meditative immersion, he captured the last depictable moment of the ripest fruits. With a few accentuations and some almost “cheeky” strokes he created a master-work shortly before the fruit’s decomposition. The thin skin is already in the process of dissolving and once again he takes the phenomenon somehow “literally” by partly dissolving the outlines. The disintegrating form fades out into the background like a parable about its own state. In this picture of only 18 x 27 cm the cosmos reveals itself.

He repeatedly was drawn to some scenic archaic themes such as the verdict of Paris, the visit of king Salomon by the queen of Saba, the dance of Salome, the Crucifixion, the witches' Sabbath, and carnival scenes. The Golgotha motif was not his expression of religious beliefs but was a visual and pure color drama like viewing a field n summer, a red pepper or a flowering twig. In his imagination, Mount Olympus is home for the mystics of all religions and about two dozen demigods of European painting history. Vietinghoff embraced the Crucifixion as a classically occidental topic not because of the contents but because of the challenge of presentation. Perhaps there was also a playful competition for him with his beloved Old Masters in an inner dialogue with them.

With exception of these archaic themes, his representations were simple and their content was unspectacular. As a result, Egon of Vietinghoff was not in the limelight of public attention and the international art market. This at least this gave him the advantage to create his work in calmness. Sometimes it hurt him to see how easily the audience could be bluffed by the flashy art of many contemporary painters and how certain of his “colleagues” got great recognition with considerably less effort.

His compositions almost always take the picture's limitation into consideration. According to his art philosophy of *Transcendental Painting*, it is an enforced and conscious compromise to the aesthetics that a picture needs a frame. Anyway, pleasing moments in art he less valued because they displace the important aspects of art with marginal ones. They only deserve a decorative status but the beholder mistakes the superficial elements are the real ones (similarly to the naturalism or historical, anecdotal and intellectual messages).

Vitinghoff took the term “still life” literally. He staged them in the traditional way of “natura morta” (i.e. “dead nature”) and without ulterior motives more or less in the center of the picture. Among the 2.750 paintings there are only extremely few where the subject is cut or leaves the picture limitation with the exception of figural scenes. Partial peripheral figures occasionally appear in these scenes to give the impression of a wider event. However, this is not to compare with the view and the representation of an Edgar Degas whose works show this as his dominant characteristics.

One of these rare exceptions is a still life with green walnuts. The composition frame of the casually spread nuts is livened up by the little branches and leafs without disintegrating the main subject. The left margin is interrupted by two missing leaf ends and the right margin by a thin twig. The artist miscalculated the subject's size; it was not his conscious stylistic intention. Nonetheless, it creates the impression of a fall breath of wind which blows crosswise over the picture – despite the resting aspect of a still life. Cut ends of leafs occur occasionally also in other still lifes with leafs both with fruits and with flowers.

Sometimes, the center of the picture is particularly color intensive (e.g. at the *Figs* from 1980), sometimes it is – the opposite – an uncertain rather dark spot for contrast (e.g. in the background of the *Watermelon with cherries* from 1987), and sometimes the center is exactly at the inconspicuous boundary between two or more objects forming a group.

Vietinghoff's modesty and with his diminishing strength (due to his advancing age), over the later years his paintings tended towards smaller formats. The smaller rooms of modern buildings and his increasing prices also favored smaller works.

Both as a man and as an artist, he was like a monolith within the stream of passing fads and fashions of the time. The subjects, his technical ability and his inner independence also resulted in rejection, astonishment or envy in the era of Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, Constructivism, Pop Art and other trends. The nature of Vietinghoff's artistic attitude and his style are still not generally recognized. To faithfully work in accordance to his conviction meant he was a lonesome but devoted painter.

In philosophy and practice Egon von Vietinghoff stood out against the predominantly abstract and provocative art. All his life he remained an outsider, incorruptible in his judgment of art. He followed uncompromisingly his artistic conscience, his meditative perception and his impulse to render his visual experience by painting. He did not work in a contemporary style and did not fetch high prices. He persistently developed his technique, his artistic expression and his philosophy of *Transcendental Painting*.

His art attests to the tradition of European painting culture of the multi layer oil-resin technique which was believed to have been lost. It is a specific European cultural heritage. Vietinghoff's style is newly and unmistakably born from the tradition of European painting excellence.

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Available at the first page of each chapter or at the chapter *Downloads*.

Partly in process or to be reviewed (2016)

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, Subjects 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