

Egon von Vietinghoff

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Text of the concise web site

Creative artist

Author of specialized books

Painting philosopher

Born: February 6, 1903 in The Hague, Netherlands

Died: October 14, 1994 in Zurich, Switzerland

A Life Consecrated to Art

The **painter, author of a technical painting handbook and philosopher in painting matters**, Egon von Vietinghoff grows up in an artists' house which welcomes international visitors. His father is a pianist of German-Baltic origin, his mother, who has Belgian and Dutch ancestors, is a writer of philosophical books. He spends his childhood in France (Paris) and Germany (Wiesbaden), lives in Switzerland after 1913 (Geneva, Zuoz and finally Zurich). Born a Russian subject, he becomes a **Swiss citizen in 1922**, together with his parents and his brother. From 1922 to 1937 he lives 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 Atlantida). In 1937 he settles down in Switzerland, first in Zollikon and then in Zurich, and lives there until his death in 1994.

He goes on numerous trips (at first 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 is marked by an innovative, enterprising, sports-loving and social spirit. From the 1950s he is leading a rather withdrawn life, concentrating on his main work of **painting and writing**, while remaining mostly hidden from the public eye.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, his four wives who are natives of Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Austria, and in particular his fluency in many European languages, his extensive knowledge of European literature, all of which combined to form a truly European mentality. With his research into painting techniques he resurrects a forgotten treasure of the European painting tradition; with his creative power he contributes in his own manner to the diversity of 20th century painting.

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

In 1954, Vietinghoff marries his fourth wife, **Liane**, from Salzburg, Austria. After his three failed marriages, she decisively helps him and his son Alexander to new beginnings and with her great commitment and optimism enables him to consecrate even more fully on his artistic calling. **Liane von Vietinghoff** loves to walk and is an enthusiastic gardener. Both fields of interest procure for the painter welcome models for the bouquets he likes to paint; on the other hand, he goes himself to the market to buy the fruits for his still lifes. She patiently types the manuscripts of the technique and the philosophy of painting he revises again and again, and helps him to sell his paintings to private collectors.

All his life he remains an outsider, unerring in his artistic judgment, and content to find his own path in life. **Uncompromisingly he follows his artistic conscience**, his visual perception and the urge to translate that perception it into painting. He does not work in a certain style just because it is fashionable and is being encouraged. Usually, von Vietinghoff’s artistic attitude and the nature of his painting style are not recognized. To paint true to his convictions leads him to create in solitude but with devotion. Both humanly and artistically, he is like a rock which the stream of time flows over and around, but not change.

In winter, when daylight is insufficient in his studio, he reads thick volumes of world literature or tends to his growing stamp collection. In summer, he likes to sit on his balcony drinking tea, smoking, correcting his manuscripts, writing humorous poems, playing chess with neighbors, or feeding titmice, chaffinches and his beloved doves to whom he talks lovingly over the top of the book he is reading ...

Transcendental Painting – A philosophy of painting

Ways out of crisis

In the general radical change happening at the turn of the 19th century, painters such as Kandinsky, Malevich, Delaunay, Mondrian, Klee, and Itten are also searching for **the origin of artistic expression** and strive after “pure reality”, “pure energy”, “pure vitality”, “pure colors”. They plead for distance from the object, for letting colors and surfaces talk as such, and move towards abstraction. With his “**School of pure vision**”, Egon von Vietinghoff shares their ideas. But like Delaunay and Mondrian, he turns away from cubism after a short period of time.

But despite common dissatisfaction and concurring fundamental ideas, his logic leads him to opposite consequences. **For him, the visual arts are 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 has to be concrete for him. While his contemporaries turn more and more to planes and coolness, his own works become **more plastic and warm.**

Independently of current tendencies, he begins to study the originals of the Old Masters and daily travels back and forth between the Louvre Museum and his studio in Paris in order to put down his observations experimentally. Thus he discovers not only the technique of mixing oil and resin, but also **the spiritual aspect of genuine works of art.** In his terminology, the way of looking at things is called “vision”, the painting making such visions visible “**Transcendental painting**”.

Transcendental Painting

In order to perceive the world, he opens up to the phenomena of nature. However, it is not the surface of things he paints but their disintegration into color interactions taking place before his eyes. **He reproduces a play of colors in which he submerges, and not a collection of individual narrative observations.** Since the play of colors and light emanates from existing things his Transcendental painting is concrete, but inasmuch as it reproduces sensations and not measurable characteristics of things, it is at the same time the opposite of naturalism.

On the one hand Transcendental painting does not copy, and on the other hand it does not invent anything by means of intellectual construction. It looks for the nature of the world and by way of its sensations it reaches metaphysical insights. Thus Vietinghoff finds **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 lets the observer see the simple miracles of life. In doing so, even his art provokes in periods of abstract and politically committed painting.

Departing from a **philosophical and mystical concept**, he understands 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 road to transcending painting goes by way of a certain type of seeing, an **“abstract” vision of things**.

The School of Pure Vision

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.

Vietinghoff understands **“abstract” and “pure”** consistently in the sense of related 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 opens himself to unintentional perception of the objects as color surfaces existing side by side; thus he makes himself ready 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 leaving **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 to retransmit them into spatial seeing since human beings are used to seeing concretely.

Vietinghoff compares the transcending artist with his meditative concentration of pure, unintentional perception to 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 by 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 and form”**, showing the observer an aspect differing from the one he knows already.

Technical Aspects – The rediscovery of a lost painting technique

Autonomous studies and experiments

During **35 years of autonomous experimenting**, from about 1923 until about 1958, Egon von Vietinghoff rediscovers the knowledge not taught in technical handbooks and academies. Since the impressionists had broken away from this tradition, some 50 years ago, and had developed their own kinds of painting based on different theories, the knowledge of multi-layer mixing of oil and resin has been lost. **This technique has been reconstructed by him** in mid-life only, after many setbacks. It is 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 are based on his intensive studies of Old Masters and his long years of experimentation and testing.**

Multi-layer mixing technique

When painting in several layers, two or three colors are spread separately one upon the other. In order to keep them separate (unlike to 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 of a painter's virtuosity** 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-covering 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 realizes that he cannot satisfactorily reproduce his inner pictures and his artistic intentions when using industrially made materials. His differentiated visionary (meditative) way of seeing requires painting techniques which can only be realized by means of **first-class natural substances produced with great care.**

He therefore produces himself the colors he needs. Even the necessary solvents and binders are prepared by him. He stands 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 keeps him fit for a long time. He boils natural glue and canvas, which he tacks on frames or sticks on chip boards cut to measure. This is followed by up to 7 priming coats plus the grinding down, tinting and isolating of the grounding. Usually **at least half of his time goes into this manual preparation** before he can start to paint.

By carrying out all the steps of producing the grounding, the paint and the varnish, his spirit is **in every phase of preparation occupied with the effect the raw material will 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 lead 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 as pure as possible natural substances** for the production of colors and binders. For this he uses organic raw materials such as egg, casein, linen and poppy seed oil, leather glue, wax, gum arabic, cherry tree resin, larch turpentine, fossil resin and different earths. Thus Vietinghoff produces **characteristic colors which he mixes to give exactly the desired effect** and which have the characteristics and durability he can rely on. Though, for some colors he do need also pigments made by chemical production.

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 appears in the well-known Editions DuMont in 1983 (2nd edition 1991). Here Vietinghoff brings in the **sum total of his life-long observations**, defines the **translucency of color** (a property which have previously gone unnoticed in literature) and tackles the theory of chromatics as seen by the creative artist. Among other things, he gives practical ideas concerning color production, brushwork and picture composition, including examples of pictures of well-known masters and also his own work. He has thus **made available to future generations the lost knowledge of the traditional oil-resin painting technique**.

The Work of Egon von Vietinghoff

The main body of works consists of more than 2,600 oil-paintings. Egon von Vietinghoff uses pencil, pen, crayon, etching-needle, brush. **His most expressive paintings are in oil and resin**, although he works also in distemper and makes outstanding portrait drawings in ruddle (red chalk). Later on, he uses distemper just as a priming coat on top of the grounding.

Subjects

The immense work of Egon von Vietinghoff includes **all classical motifs**: flowers, still lifes, landscapes, portraits, nudes and figurative 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 procures 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 **balance 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.

Style

Technically and mentally, Vietinghoff confronts the Old Masters and learns from them. However, he does not imitate or “quote” them and finds his own “handwriting” as a painter. His pictures convey **naturalness** and – without showy perspective – attract attention due to their **fascinating plasticity, inner luminosity and masterly placed highlights**.

Exhibitions

Already as a young artist, Vietinghoff shows 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 prevent 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 bring him personal but not official recognition. In the course of time and in spite of the attacks coming from “art promoters”, he is able to live on the proceeds of his paintings as he is more and more recommended by private art lovers. Thus, he sells 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 manages a **representative collection of presently 67 paintings** 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 tradition. The vast life work of Egon von Vietinghoff is to be made accessible to a 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 almost out of sale. The translation of the title: Handbook of Painting 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 “Vision und Darstellung” (translation of the title: “Vision and Representation”) would also be welcome. The manuskript is shown on the German version of the comprehensive web site of the Foundation.