

E. Vietinghoff

Vietinghoff – the mystic and his contemporaries

Translated and reviewed in January 2012

Egon von Vietinghoff's birth and artistic awakening belongs to an era of several revolutions, particularly socio-political ones (partly due to World War II) such as the collapse of centuries old monarchies in the short period from 1910 to 1924 in Greece, Portugal and the multiethnic empires in China, Mongolia, Austria (including Hungary, Czech, Slovakia and the Balkan) and Turkey, Syria, Lebanon (Ottoman empire). Last but not least, the revolutions in Germany and Russia were both decisive in the history of the Vietinghoff family.

In Egon's biography, music and literature were already "occupied" by his father and mother, both of them distinctive personalities. Thus, their sensual son found in the fine arts an inviting field for his youthful start to his career. This area was popular among other sensitive and creative people as well because the fine arts were as exposed to fundamental change as the political and social structures. Young Egon was confronted with multiple "isms" with which the present layman is no longer familiar (in alphabetic order): Alogism, Concretism, Constructivism, Cubo-Futurism, Fauvism, Futurism, Minimalism, Neo-Plasticism, Orphism, Primitivism, Projectionism, Rayonism, Simultanism, Suprematism, Symbolism, Tachism, Tubularism, and Vibrationism. In modern general education, there still remains after Impressionism, only Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.

Vietinghoff soon considered these styles, trends, proposals, fragments and ideological fractions as dead ends, fashion or phantasm. Comparing his works with those of his contemporaries, it is hard to imagine a common denominator without describing the atmosphere at that time. The common roots of the mentioned artistic currents and Vietinghoff's individual path lay in their insight that painting needed a fundamental philosophical and creative renewal after the period of Romanticism, academic realism and dogmatized Impressionism of the 19th century. The only question was radical. Only modifying the existing representationalism (for example Cezannenism) or completely opposing it ultimately depends on the single personality.

The somewhat hidden common denominator of Vietinghoff's idea and that of his contemporaries is the demand for origin, purity and relief from academic and conventional ballast which restrained spontaneity and obstructed truth. Kandinsky, Malevich, Delaunay, Klee and Itten spoke about "pure reality", "pure energy", "pure colors", "pure composition", and "pure visions" while Vietinghoff developed his "School of pure vision".

Two issues of equal importance attracted his attention in another direction from the avant-garde at that time. First, with a negative prefix, the attempts to find an escape from the decade old crisis in painting art were completely unsatisfying and confusing in both the debates and the artistic results. Second, with a positive prefix, the fascination with technically highly developed works of a successive genius in the European tradition of painting whose last authorities he considered to be Goya and Turner.

Most beholders, especially the art critics and gallery owners, think Vietinghoff's turn to the Old Masters was only a regression to "good old times". This may be true inasmuch as he was not willing to join the Dadaistic pranks and jokes or to submit to the dictate of any short-lived theory. Yet, it is a great misjudgment as he did not unconditionally dedicate himself to the past and was critical even of the best

painters of any heyday. Certainly, he distinguished an inspired success from a tame commissioned piece, works of the master from workshop productions, the sensibility of a small sketch from an extensive execution, artistic depth of youth from mature individual periods and genuine from ascribed paintings. For example, his unerring sense for transcendental art recognized that the “Man in the Golden Helmet” in Berlin, which was thought to be painted by Rembrandt, could not belong to the oeuvre of this outstanding master, and this decades prior to its deletion (1986) from the working list of Rembrandt only after extensive scientific examination.

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. In all periods of art there appear “deep” and “flat” works, in Vietinghoff’s terms “transcendental” and “non transcendental”. The first of which are “seen from the inside”, flowing from inspiration and highlighted by mystic insights. The second are naturalistic, inane and describe only external characteristics.

In the comings and goings between old and new, Vietinghoff searched as far as possible for a third timeless view whose criteria was (also in general, still today) not bound by time. His transcendental experiences as a painting mystic provided him a transcendental standard which is timeless. With this aid, he revealed the approach and works of many of his somewhat helpless contemporaries to be shallow or – even worse – as consciously deceiving or born from egocentric and mercantile intentions. For example, if titles including the terms “Metaphysics” or “metaphysical” should increase the value of insipid pictures, if collages with newspapers or kitchen cutlery and plasticized human excrements are exhibited as great art works or if the cult of personality of the artist becomes the main subject.

It was not Vietinghoff’s nature to imitate, scandalize, bluff or to pull the wool over the public’s eyes, or in other words to go an easy way. He considered it ridiculous to “dynamo-declaim poet-metalogical records” (text on a poster for a Russian Dada event) instead of recite verses. His standards were different than to attract by alienation or poppycock.

Not all which is called “metaphysical” is really metaphysical; what claims to be “mystical” is often just toying with the idea and rather remains on a mysterious level. A further parallel to another contemporary of Vietinghoff is interesting: the quest for transcendental painting of Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and the subsequent backtrack in his creation. Especially inspired by Arnold Böcklin and Friedrich Nietzsche, he is considered to be a precursor of Surrealism, as he first developed his “Metaphysical Painting” in 1911 and founded the “Metaphysical School” in 1917 together with the futurist Carlo Carrà. It lasted only until 1920 due to a difference of opinion. Can such demanding art solely depend on this? In the time from 1924 to 1932/33, Vietinghoff and de Chirico simultaneously lived in Paris and met each other. We can only guess what kind of discussions on painting and metaphysics they may have had at the artists’ reunions in the famous coffee shops – even considering that the 15 year senior Giorgio de Chirico was already a well-known man at that time, but Egon von Vietinghoff was still in his beginnings.

Despite their shared discontent with the world situation at that time and the desire of both to also reflect on the essential in art, the differences between de Chirico and Vietinghoff are remarkable. The Italian deliberately presented an unfamiliar world with unconventional perspectives, unusual lighting and shadows and a gloomy sky over bleak architecture. Often, he emphasized the “metaphysical” character of the strange and stage-like scenery by enigmatic titles such as *“The nostalgia of the Infinite”*, *“The Enigma of a Day”*, *“Metaphysical Interior”* or *“Melancholy and Mystery of a Street”*. Typically his paintings, if not deserted, show a wooden faceless jointed doll with symbolic objects such as clocks in mysterious, somewhat eerie atmospheres. These figures represent the alienated human lost in the world during and after World War I. The entire effect should recall the metaphysical and transcendental aspect of life.

However, one of the most important characteristics of mysticism is the genuine and in a larger sense cosmic-religious experience (!) which does not result from cognitive intention.

In 1930, de Chirico completely turned away from this path and from other currents in art – like Vietinghoff and others did – and reoriented toward the Italian past. He dedicated himself intensively to still lifes, portraits, mythological scenes and paintings with horses, and even became a strong critic of modern art, as did Vietinghoff. As he could earn enough with these less spectacular representational paintings in a rather traditional style, he copied and sold some works of his former “Metaphysical Art”, which received much more recognition in later times. However, Carlo Carrà continued to develop his “Magic Realism” from their common successful ideas.

From 1919 to 1926, Mikhail Matyushin made experiments of perception which he called “broadened seeing”. He tried to train the eyes to move independently. Then, the artist could simultaneously look in two directions in order to comprehend the “cosmic and directionless nature of space”. He invented instruments to broaden the limits of the visual perception, which would advance to a new experience of spatial depth and movement. This springs from a materialistic conception of the world which attempts to overcome the limitations of the human horizon in a mechanical and physiological way.

In around 1950, Aldous Huxley carried out experiments of perception under the influence of mescaline which he described in his book “The Doors of Perception” (published in 1954). Years later, Vietinghoff read it with great interest and found several important parallels confirming his own experiences. Nevertheless, **he was never inclined to artificially bring about a psychedelic state in order to deepen his view.** Thus, he did not recommend any drugs for heightening awareness. Also this method to overcome the narrowness of daily perception was not in accordance with nature – Vietinghoff found a softer, more natural method and in a larger sense, a meditative one.

Vietinghoff's way led him through a contemplative discipline of seeing, from the “School of Pure Vision” to his concept of “Transcendental Painting”. By doing so, he went through a harmonic and internalized process without external influence. With a certain “relaxed concentration” and trust in the metaphysical foundation of existence, he built an energy field of ready reception. Thus, he put himself in a waiting position, in a quasi-mediumistic attentiveness.

He specifically focused his eyes to dissolve the habitual trivial view without external influence or increased effort and achieved the connection to the non physical (metaphysical) dimension of existence. This view opened due to internal composure. In a reduced and playing frame, we know such visual phenomena when looking at a picture whose image changes after a long, relaxed “contemplation” without any effort of will (this kind of optical illusion is also known as “picture puzzle” or “hidden face”). This comparison is given to show that in both situations only a kind of meditation is the way to see the “hidden message” whereas tension, will, and meticulousness do not help. This kind of picture is invented out of amusement and curiosity to serve as entertainment or a test of perception. However, inspired painters can see the other “hidden” dimension of the visible phenomena when contemplating the subject. **As a truth which is not invented by human beings, this is of superior importance to an amusement or entertainment.** Due to his experience, Vietinghoff clearly recognized in which art pieces this contemplative process was at work.

There are people who have an easy ability to see the hidden images in a picture puzzle. Others do not see the hidden picture even after long time. We know that it is not possible to discover it more easily or quickly with strained will. After a kind of “click”, most people are able to see it sooner or later but the hidden message was always in the image. It was not visible to the normal eye focus, tension or impatience. There are about four possible methods to see such hidden pictures. It may occur spontaneously, by an eye exercise program when learning to change the view, unintentional contemplation until the subject is transformed or someone colors the lines and planes which belong together in order to make obvious the sought picture.

In the case of mediumistic contemplation for the purpose of metaphysical insights, only the first three possibilities are given and they can alternate and complement one other. If the change of the view on the reality to a vision does not occur spontaneously, the artist is not immediately inspired. It helps to make oneself empty, devotedly open and set a view without expectation. This may be accompanied by eye exercises until the intuition emerges from the energy field of relaxed attentiveness and the transcendental view appears. Then, “spontaneous”, i.e. unintentional and quickly following visual experiences arise. At another time, accompanying view exercises may help to maintain and extend a prior spontaneously appeared vision.

Egon von Vietinghoff undertook all possible preparations within his power, from his own production of paints to calming down his mind. By doing so, he “tilled the soil”, as a farmer cannot influence and control the weather and growth of nature. **He did not presume but only established the connection to another side of life.** Then, he received insights through color visions into dimensions which are not created by humans and will never be imagined or invented by them. In this stage of creation, Vietinghoff was only interested in discovering the daily perception and lifting the veil from the eyes. Thus, **the essence of existence appears behind the screen, the “thing-in-itself” as Kant said.**

Vietinghoff refused anything else, including the mentioned “isms”, as the basis of a true art piece. **To dismember and distort existing shapes is an act of mutilation but not of creativity, a kind of crime to nature.** Whether out of ignorance or arrogance it does not matter. It has a blasphemous aspect and solely manifests the problems of the artist.

Thus, the art of Egon von Vietinghoff is not psychological but somewhat cosmic, not focused on the individual and his society but oriented on metaphysics. Therefore, it is timeless but actual at any time due to its existential dimension. This art does not refer to the events of the day yet should definitely not be covered in dust or Vietinghoff be seen as fuddy-duddy.

The reproach of Vietinghoff’s art as outmoded stems from complete ignorance of his mystic approach. This kind of criticism missed his art inasmuch as **cosmic and metaphysic dimensions have a permanent actuality**, if you know or not. **Mystics never were “up-to-date”.** A superior truth, not burdened by mundane information touches the beholder even subliminally. Through mainly simple objects of nature and by means of a comprehensible color language, Vietinghoff was moved by images born in a transcendental vision. Lucid colors, natural warmth, radiating harmony, composed calmness, fascinating three-dimensionality, serene details, and masterful technique – all together is possible to discover and partly verbalize by yourself in his paintings after looking at them for a while.

According to Vietinghoff’s definition, the silent message of a transcendently creating painter, which resonates in varying degrees throughout the work, remains almost always beneath the threshold of consciousness. However, most beholders feel through this message something special: an astonishment or a hunch, a touch difficult to grasp. The other half of the artist’s message is a zest for life and enthusiasm for the phenomena of this world. Life offers both sides! At least, the message is not simply “Look here is an object!” or “Here you see a pretty decoration!”

In Vietinghoff’s philosophy only what is visually experienced on the metaphysical level, matters in fine arts, skillful workmanship provided. **During the moments of mystic insights, he became a tool of the spiritual energy which is the true “essence of life”** (J. W. Goethe). Thus, he penetrated the visible reality in the strictly visual way whereas other inspired people do it through philosophy, music or religion. **In a meditative state of mental composing, he was awaiting to be favored to participate in the miracle of creation.**

He experienced **the manifestation of the metaphysical world in the visible nature through the sense organ of the eye** which in the end is not to judge intellectually and invited him to marvel. The beholder's approach should be eased by artistic adaption, as a nonverbal – but not abstract (!) – color language, the expression according to Vietinghoff's "Transcendental Painting", is not bound to any denomination or intellectual construction but generally intelligible. His "School of Pure Contemplation", in the sense of schooling with the aim of pure detached seeing, is an empirical and neutral way for **visual immersion** but not a devised top-heavy theory. This includes the analogy to the experiences in Zen which is actually used in different religious orientations as a general exercise.

Mystics in times and countries describe, in their respective parables and terms of their world view, similar cosmic experiences and divine insights. The ratio and the everyday mind do not perceive mysticism or look at it skeptically. Since the **border between mystic and mysterious is not always clear** enough and the often misused term mysticism has an unpleasant taste (somewhat with reason), we would like to add some neutral definitions. You may recognize the main characteristics of Egon von Vietinghoff, his manner of work and his philosophy. He was humble enough and absorbed by his work as a painter and author not to call himself a mystic.

What is mysticism?

Wikipedia (December 2011)

Mysticism (from the Greek *mystikos*, meaning 'an initiate') is the knowledge of, and especially **the personal experience of, states of consciousness, i.e. levels of being, beyond normal human perception**, including experience and even communion with a supreme being... The present meaning of the term *mysticism* arose via Platonism and Neo-Platonism – which referred to the Eleusinian initiation as a metaphor for the **"initiation" to spiritual truths and experiences** – and is the pursuit of communion with, identity with, or conscious awareness of an **ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth**, or God through **direct experience, intuition, instinct or insight**. Mysticism usually centers on practices intended to nurture those experiences. Mysticism may be dualistic, maintaining a distinction between the self and the divine, or may be non-dualistic. Many if not all of the world's great religions have arisen around the teachings of mystics (including Buddha, Jesus, Lao Tze, and Krishna); and most religious traditions describe fundamental mystical experience, at least esoterically. *Enlightenment* or *Illumination* are generic English terms for the phenomenon, derived from the Latin *illuminatio* ... and adopted in English translations of Buddhist texts, but used loosely **to describe the state of mystical attainment regardless of faith**. Conventional religions ... have strong institutional structures, including formal hierarchies and mandated sacred texts and/or creeds. Adherents of the faith are expected to respect or follow these closely, so mysticism is often deprecated or persecuted... Since ... **mystical knowledge cannot be directly written down or spoken of (but must be experienced)**, numerous literary forms that allude to such knowledge – often with contradictions or even jokes – have developed...: Aphorisms, poetry, koans, riddles, and contradictions. These can be meant as humorous phrases; or as serious questions with significant mystical answers. Others believe that the most edifying understanding of these riddles is that excessive effort contemplating the impossible can give an individual the opportunity to **stop trying to 'achieve' and start just 'being'**.

Encyclopedia Britannica (11th edition published in 1911)

(Omissions and highlighting by the editor of the Egon von Vietinghoff Foundation's website)

Mysticism appears in connexion with the endeavor of the human mind to **grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things**, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the Highest. The first is the philosophic side of mysticism; the second, its religious side. The first effort is **theoretical** or speculative; the second, **practical**. The thought that is most intensely present with the mystic is that ... of a **supreme, all-pervading, and indwelling power, in whom all things are one**. Hence the speculative utterances of mysticism are always more or less pantheistic in character. **On the practical side, mysticism maintains the possibility of direct intercourse with this Being of beings – intercourse, not through any external media** such as an historical revelation, oracles, answers to prayer, and the like, **but by a species of ecstatic transfusion or identification, in which the individual becomes in very truth "partaker of the divine nature."** ...

Mysticism differs, therefore, from ordinary pantheism in that its inmost motive is religious; but, whereas religion is ordinarily occupied with a practical problem and develops its theory in an ethical reference, mysticism displays a predominately speculative bent, **starting from the divine nature rather than from man** and his surroundings, taking the symbolism of religious feeling as literally or **metaphysically true**, and straining after the present realization of an ineffable union. The union which sound religious teaching represents as **realized in the submission of the will** and the ethical harmony of the whole life is then reduced to a, passive experience, to **something which comes and goes** in time, and which may be of only momentary duration.

Mysticism ... is not a name applicable to any particular system. It may be the **outgrowth of many differing modes of thought and feeling**. Most frequently it appears historically, in relation to some definite system of belief, as **a reaction of the spirit against the letter**. **When a religion begins to ossify into a system of formulas** and observances, those who protest in the name of heart-religion are not unfrequently known by the name of mystics. At times they merely bring into prominence again the **ever-fresh fact of personal religious experience**; at other times mysticism develops itself as a **powerful solvent of definite dogmas**.

In the East, mysticism is not so much a specific phenomenon as a natural deduction from the dominant philosophic systems, and the normal expression of religious feeling in the lands in which it appears... The so-called mysticism of the Persian Sufis ... appears in the 9th century ... as **a kind of reaction against the rigid monotheism and formalism** of Islam... Persian literature ... is full of an ardent natural pantheism, in which a mystic apprehension of the unity and divinity of all things **heightens the delight in natural and in human beauty**...

The **contemplative asceticism** of the Essenes of Judaea may be mentioned... By Plotinus ... the One is explicitly exalted above the vows and the "ideas"; it **transcends existence altogether and is not cognizable by reason**. Remaining itself in repose, it rays out, as it were, from its own fullness an image of itself, which is called *vas*, and which constitutes the system of ideas of the intelligible world. The soul is in turn the image or product of the *vas*, and the soul by its motion begets corporeal matter. **The soul thus faces two ways – towards the *vas*, from which it springs, and towards the material life, which is its own product**...

The appeal is still to the individual, who, if not by reason then by some higher faculty, claims to **realize absolute truth and to taste absolute blessedness**. Mysticism ... appears in the medieval Church as the **protest of practical religion against the predominance of the dialectical spirit**. It is so with Bernard of Clairvaux ... who condemns Abelard's distinctions and reasonings as externalizing and degrading the faith. St Bernard's mysticism is of a **practical cast**, dealing mainly with the means by which man may attain to the knowledge and enjoyment of God. Reason has three stages, in the highest of which the mind is able, **by abstraction from earthly things, to rise to *contemplatio* or the vision of the divine**. More exalted still, however, is the sudden *ecstatic* vision, such as was granted, for example, to Paul...

To lose thyself in some sort, as if thou wert not, and to have no consciousness of thyself at all – **to be emptied of thyself**...

Richard of St Victor declares in opposition to dialectic scholasticism, that the objects of **mystic contemplation are partly above reason, and partly, as in the intuition** of the Trinity, contrary to reason... From the 12th and 13th centuries onward there is observable in the different countries of Europe a widespread **reaction against the growing formalism and worldliness** of the Church... Men began to feel a **desire for a theology of the heart and an unworldly simplicity of life**. ...

In the beginning of the 13th century the foundation of the Dominican and Franciscan orders furnished a more ecclesiastical and regular means of supplying the same wants, and numerous convents sprang up at once throughout Germany. **The German mind was a peculiarly fruitful soil for mysticism**, and, in connexion either with the Beguines or the Church organization, a number of women appear about this time, combining a spirit of mystical piety and asceticism with sturdy **reformatory zeal directed against the abuses of the time**... Meister Eckhart was a distinguished son of the Church; but in reading his works we feel at once that we have passed into quite a different sphere of thought from that of the churchly mystics; we seem to leave the cloister behind and to **breathe a freer atmosphere**. The scholastic mysticism was ... practical and psychological in character. It was largely a devotional aid to the realization of present union with God; and, so far as it was theoretical, it was a theory of the faculties by which such a union is attainable... But in Eckhart **the attitude of the churchman and traditionalist is entirely abandoned**. Instead of systematizing dogmas, he appears to evolve a philosophy by the free exercise of reason... The freedom with which Eckhart treats historical Christianity **allies him much more to the German idealists of the 19th century** than to his scholastic predecessors...

Mysticism did prepare men in a very real way for a break with the traditional system. Mysticism instinctively recedes from formulas that have become stereotyped and mechanical. On the other hand its claim for spiritual freedom was soon to be found in opposition also to the Reformers. The wild doctrines of Thomas Münzer and the Zwickau prophets ... roused Luther to the dangerous possibilities of **mysticism as a disintegrating force**. ... The final breakdown of scholasticism as a rationalized system of dogma may be seen in ... Nicolaus of Cusa ..., who distinguishes between the *intellectus* and the discursively acting *ratio* almost precisely in the style of later distinctions between the reason and the understanding. The intellect combines what the understanding separates; hence Nicolas teaches the principle of the *coincidentia contradictoriorum*. If the results of the understanding go by the name of knowledge, then **the higher teaching of the intellectual intuition may be called ignorance** – ignorance, however, that is conscious of itself, *docta ignorantia*. “**Intuitio**,” “speculatio,” “**visio sine comprehensione**,” “comprehensio incomprehensibilis,” “mystica theologia,” “tertius caelus,” are some of the terms he applies to this **knowledge above knowledge**; but in the working out of his system **he is remarkably free from extravagance**...

The gloom and harshness of these Spanish mystics (St Theresa and John of the Cross) are absent from **the tender, contemplative spirit** of Francois de Sales ...; and in the **quietism** of Mme Guyon ... and Miguel de Molinos ... there is again a sufficient implication of mystical doctrine to rouse the suspicion of the ecclesiastical authorities...

The religiosity of the Quakers, with their doctrines of the “**inner light**” and the influence of the Spirit, has decided affinities with mysticism; and the autobiography of George Fox ... proceeds throughout on the assumption of supernatural guidance. Stripped of its definitely miraculous character, **the doctrine of the inner light may be regarded as the familiar mystical protest against formalism, literalism, and scripture-worship**...

Philosophy since the end of the 18th century has frequently shown a tendency to diverge into mysticism. This has been especially so in Germany. The term mysticism is indeed often extended by popular usage and philosophical partisanship to the whole activity of the post-Kantian idealists. **In this usage the word would be equivalent to the more recent and scarcely less abused term, transcendentalism**, and as such it is used even by a sympathetic writer like Carlyle; but this looseness of phraseology only serves to blur important distinctions. **However absolute a philosopher’s idealism may be, he is erroneously styled a mystic if he moves towards his conclusions only by the patient labour of the reason**... When Recejac defines mysticism as “the tendency to draw near to the Absolute in moral union by symbolic means,” the definition ... is one which would apply to the **philosophy of Kant**...

It is in place where **the movement of revulsion from a mechanical philosophy takes the form rather of immediate assertion than of reasoned demonstration**, and where the writers, after insisting generally on **the spiritual basis of phenomena**, either leave the position without further definition or expressly declare that the ultimate problems of philosophy cannot be reduced to articulate formulas... Schelling’s explicit appeal in the *Identitätsphilosophie* to an **intellectual intuition of the Absolute**, is of the essence of mysticism, both as an appeal to a suprarational faculty and as a claim **not merely to know but to realize God**.

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