

# E. Vietinghoff

## Technique and craftsmanship of the multilayer oil-resin painting – An European cultural heritage.

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### The multilayer oil-resin painting

According to Egon von Vietinghoff, art is not simply a trick to impress. A true work of art is more than a product of specialized knowledge or the result of diligent hours of labor. These skills, however, are fundamental to translating the artistic inner vision into a visible painting. This is the decisive precondition for artistic creation, because without a spiritual component there is only a plain copy of the subject emerging. (See the chapters both about naturalism and mystic)

In the past, the theory and the knowledge of craftsmanship were orally passed from the master to the student. **Due to the radical change made by the impressionists, the knowledge of the multilayer oil-resin technique, which was cultivated for centuries, petered out. Vietinghoff rediscovered it in self-taught studies, applied it masterfully in his own work and recorded it in his handbook. The characteristic vividness and warm luminosity of his paintings are based on it.**

The reason for the long tradition of the multilayer painting technique is the fact that it provides a unique diversity of differentiation. In addition, the variation of the basic process allows the artist to work in a very individual way. Thus, it can be adapted to the particular preference of each artist. In this process, two or three colors are separately layered one over the other. So that they remain separate and are not mixed by running, the first paint must dry or each layer needs to contain binders to separate them. This is the big difference to the “Alla prima” method, the wet on wet technique, which became dominant with the impressionists and has continued to be the most common method in art since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With the multilayer method, the process of creation is divided into single phases of evolution and the final color impression is built step by step. Liquid and very thin layers, called glazes, can be applied several times to give a new color impression. The applied overlying paints can be translucent, semi-covering or thick. Translucent glazes also may be bright or dark and alternate several times, so that there be many layers on the canvas. The painter may start with a rather dark base (grounding), create the forms of the objects with brighter paints and finally shade with darker strokes again. Or on the other hand, after beginning with a bright base, the painter may create dark forms which later can be differentiated and partly lightened by overlying bright spots.

The artist can selectively use this or that method, depending on his visual perception. Each one of the Old Masters suited this method to his artistic vision and to his way of working, either surely and quickly or gradually to slowly develop the picture. The individual way of the paint application is often called the painter's handwriting. Vietinghoff followed the proven principal of the Old Masters to apply the paints in a more "creamy" and generous way, the brighter they are. Thus, the lights appear more intensive and reflect on the surface. This effect increases by contrast to the rather dark but translucent background where the base is shining through. (See chapter "The translucency of the color")

Using the multilayer working process, the painter can better harmonize the different parts of a picture because they emerge gradually from the ground and he can consider the mutual influence of the colors while painting. Each added paint changes its environment due to various interactions and in return) is changed itself. Everybody knows this kind of optical illusion when a red disk on black ground looks different than on a green or white ground.

Also, the texture of the canvas and the reflection of the light on the base can be considered in the creation of the final impression. **The various levels of reflection cause an effect of depth and color differentiation** which cannot be achieved with one layer or wet on wet technique.

For instance, in one part of the painting the light may find its way through three translucent layers to the bright base and is reflected from there, which suggests a feeling of translucency and depth. All these together create a natural plasticity. In the next spot, there may be another part with only two layers but of complementary colors lying over each other. Imagine the light is going through the first one but is reflected from the lower one, without reaching the base. At a third place, an opaque paint is generously applied so that the reflection occurs immediately on the surface. Due to the color interaction, the quality of color and light of the whole picture changes each time one more paint is added.

Such different situations may occur several times in the same painting and even on the same object. They give structure and create the object in a differentiated way. The multilayer technique can also be used in a literal understanding if, for instance, a thin and translucent glaze represents the similarly thin and translucent inner skin of a blood orange, covering the glowing red color representing the flesh below. Just like the real fruit, the strong red color of the flesh is shining through the thin skin which is translucent both on the model and on the canvas.

The light reaching this picture may be reflected on the top paint only by 10%, a further 70% may penetrate the thin skin being reflected from the paint of the flesh and 20% may reach the base. These three levels of reflection give the illusion of true depth as it is inherent in the fruit itself. Therefore, the original plasticity emerges and **the three-dimensionality is credible and comprehensible as it is natural. The complex light reflection, graduated in fractional millimeter increments, is the "secret" of this painting technique.**

This is creation solely with paint and the interaction of colors. No other aid and means of expression are needed, such as relief, collage or vanishing point. Egon von Vietinghoff practiced and formulated the **“pure painting art”** without borrowing elements from other art genres. In his opinion, words and poems, mobile and acoustic surprises, as well as video installations may be interesting experiments but by leaving the category of plastic art, they lead to a misunderstanding of what art is. Many times, by doing so, the genre of plastic art is even completely disregarded. Vietinghoff consequently strived after a creation which is clean of anecdotic and ideological messages, both in theory and his work.

Vietinghoff documented his self-taught studies over decades and lived to see its publishing as the *“Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei”* (Handbook of painting technique). Here, he defined for the first time in writing the phenomena of translucency as an important property of paint and color. Other topics of the lost multilayer technique are systematically described and illustrated with examples.

### **Self-taught experiments**

Egon von Vietinghoff consistently stood alone in both philosophy and his self-taught creation. In 35 years of experimentation, he rediscovered the knowledge which was no longer taught at the time. Since the impressionists broke with the tradition and in accordance to new theories developed their own ways of painting, the skill of the multilayer oil-resin technique had been forgotten.

After some attempts at cubism at the beginning of his career, Vietinghoff recognized his path clearly: traditional art in the spirit of the Old Masters, but in his own manner. For a long time, the avant-garde had not attached importance to the proved technique of the European painting culture. Later, due to the World Wars, the Spanish civil war and nuclear threat, the avant-garde would search for something catchy, striking, shocking or political. While André Breton provoked with the question *“Shall the Louvre be burned?”*, Vietinghoff put forward the exploration and reconstruction of the traditional oil-resin technique, pragmatically and step by step.

During his years in Paris, he met in well-known coffee shops with future internationally successful painters for heated debates. As these discussions were useless to him, he turned away from this scene and started from scratch. His arduous and patient search for adequate means of expression of the *“Transcendental Painting”* (see this chapter) did not arouse public attention and did not bring benefits such as a scholarship or orders. Vietinghoff was always publicity shy, humble and led by his ideals; thus **he followed a solitary path, accompanied by his artistic conscience and the love for his art examples.**

He made systematic experiments with paints, binders, grounding and varnishes, looking for the technical requirements for the realization of his vision. **He solely relied on the observation and analysis of the old masterpieces, and on the continuous improvement of his attempts and results.** During his almost ten years in Paris, he commuted between the Louvre Museum and his studio, where he tried out the glazes and brush strokes he discovered in the art of the Old Masters. However, he needed years and years of testing, rediscovering and setbacks, until he finally mastered the technique and found his style in the mid of his life.

Nevertheless, he continued these meticulous studies during all his later journeys across ten countries. Vietinghoff discovered the effect of **the bright glazes of the Dutch and Flemish art** from the works of Vermeer and the Bruegels, and **the dark glazes of the Venetian art** from Titian. He admired the outstanding skill of the brush strokes of Guardi and his delicate details, as well as the unaffected paint application of Turner and his great superiority in the mixing and handling of the materials.

## Preparation of materials

Still in Paris, Egon von Vietinghoff recognized that he could not realize his world of colors and gratify his artistic demands with industrial, premade paints. His transcendental approach required a technique which was attainable only with the most natural and carefully selected and prepared materials possible. When painting with this technique, many of the ready-to-use oil paints in tubes are not adequate as they do not contain enough pigments, are stretched and too fat, darken or become dull after a while. To be an artist means to be a craftsman as well and Vietinghoff spent more than half of his time in the preparation of his materials only!

In his studio, **he produced his paints from the most pure pigments and his binders from natural, raw materials. They are the reason for the naturalness and inner luminosity of his distinctive paintings.** Thus from time to time, his contemplative studio turned into a real workshop. He boiled used old tablecloths and bed sheets because new linen is impregnated, hard and easily creased. After cutting them in appropriate sizes, he had to iron them and fix on a wooden stretcher frame, ready to be spread with glue, before applying up to seven layers of the base. If he did not stretch the canvas, he stuck it on a board which he sawed from large panels. This process alone needed twelve days, including the drying times between the various base layers. He used these waiting periods to produce the needed solvents and binders which he composed of different oils, resins, wax and emulsions. Also, he mixed the purchased pigments and the self-produced binders, moving with both hands a heavy stone on a glass pane in order to get homogeneous paints. After this, while standing and sweating for hours, he filled the fresh paint into tubes or small glasses. These often strenuous activities brought a temporary change to his sedentary way of working and kept him fit for a long time.

As we saw, Vietinghoff executed every single step of the preparation himself, from the beginning until the end, so he could envision the impact of the materials to the overall impression of a future painting even in the developmental stage. He knew in advance the ratio of a certain yellow, which he would need to paint cherries bought at the market one week later, or to paint a flower bouquet found by his wife, Liane, on one of her many walks. For the shade of yellow of a lemon or fried egg, the ratio perhaps had to be different as he would paint these in winter time when domestic fruit and natural flowers were not available. Also, the consistency of the paint should be different to tone a larger surface than for a precise light reflection, and a translucent brush stroke different from an opaque, doughy or dry one.

## The importance of natural work materials

The organic materials such as egg, casein, linseed and poppy oil, animal glue, gum Arabic, resin of cherry tree, larch turpentine, fossil resin, and various earth pigments are extremely important to the warmth and natural luminosity of Vietinghoff's works. Though, he still needed some inorganic pigments. The red of poppy and the blue of flax flowers still seem to live in his paintings as well as the golden color of the larch trees in fall. **These primitive ingredients were his logical working materials as they were adequate for his timeless subjects, offered by nature as well as his natural view. Intention, materials, technique, form and content were building a multiple interaction.** His artistic imagination was focused on motifs of nature which he approached in a spontaneous manner, like a child, unencumbered by acquired knowledge, according to his method of the "School of Pure Vision" (look at this chapter). Thereby, a vision of colors and light emerged, where the real subject itself was only the trigger of the vision and lost its physical importance.

Vietinghoff painted the subject after it was transformed into a vision; he showed the “drama of color, form and light”, as he called it, in his mind’s eyes and not the real object in front of his physical eyes. Light and color is always connected with an object, except in the fraction of light by glass, crystal or rainbow, for instance. Therefore, by the transmission of a visual experience – even one which occurs in the mind’s eyes – the subject emerges by itself on the canvas, if the perception of the colors is related to forms of real objects, without intellectual or artificial abstraction. The beholder’s eye automatically reconstructs the elements of shapes and colors into the original object and recognizes the artist’s model. In this kind of creation, the artistic act in this is not to produce a copy but to capture the essential of the object in a kind of meditation and the fantasy of the realization of the color vision.

**For this artistic metamorphosis of perception of nature, Vietinghoff had to be dependent on materials of the best quality.** Somehow, the preoccupation with the natural materials has an “ecological” aspect, at least in a larger sense and more or less unconsciously. In his times it became fashion to create with other, even exotic materials, while he was interested in the original on several levels. As a thrifty man, he used even small quantities of substances difficult to purchase. In addition, the oil of a plant, for instance, has to be produced from completely ripe seeds without traces of mold, from the first cold squeeze, and must not be extracted in a chemical process.

Vegetable oils should neither be blended with mineral nor whale nor fish oil. The properties of the oil change, if the seeds are bad, the treatment was wrong, chemical contamination pollute them, they were stored inappropriately or adulteration with cheap surrogates occurred. In such cases, the oil gets cloudy, dark, glutinous or sticky and will not dry or becomes yellowed. Like most fast produced industrial products, they are cheaper but useless to Vietinghoff’s art.

His dispensing from raw materials is essential for the final impression of his paintings, works resulting from nature. **Craftsmanship and artistic intention harmonize together to produce real pieces of art. With his whole personality, Vietinghoff showed complete commitment to the synthesis of spirit and material. His life was like “Pray and Work” applied from transcending insights into nature to the mastery of the materials from nature which allowed him to represent these insights.**

Periodically he struggled with inadequate materials and faced setbacks in his experiments and production of paints and binders. One of the chronic problems was how to procure the irreplaceable white lead in high quality, one of the most important pigments for his way of painting. Mainly, he got it in Paris where he travelled yearly till the 1970s. When desperate, he asked relatives and friends to find it in other metropolises, and sometimes he got the remainders of different natural material during his trips.

It was increasingly hard to find a glue which did not get brittle. Finally he found natural Venetian turpentine in Vienna and he balanced the new materials with the other ingredients, found the dispensing and tested the effect on paintings. Unfortunately, sometimes the quality then deteriorated for the purpose of cheaper production. Or even worse: the supply of some materials was stopped due to a lack of demand. Who else was still in need of such a quality? Who else had this requirement in a period of euphoric syntheticizing and growing mass consumption? These were times when artists began to create with acrylic paints and spray guns. (Over the past few years, it seems there is a kind of return to past values and the quality of some materials is improving again.)

*For more downloads, please look at the website.*

## The handbook of painting technique

In winter time, when there was not sufficient daylight, Vietinghoff was forced to paint less. Then, he used the time to write down his various experiences from craftsmanship and from his introverted meditative painting process. Thus, he became the author of two manuscripts about his technique and philosophy. Over four decades, he documented his continued studies and insights parallel to his enormous creative urge which leaves us some 2.700 paintings from 70 years of work.

His job and his means of expression was the multilayer oil-resin painting. He searched for his technique for a long time, reconstructed it arduously, applied it daily, and wrote it down in gradual steps. And finally, a well-known publishing house released the technical part from the drawer! The total sum of his working experience would be published in German language in 1983 (second edition 1991) under the title of “Handbuch zur Technik der Malerei”. It made again available both his life-long observations and the lost treasure of past artist’s generations and their studios.

“Each budding artist knows how difficult it is to represent with strokes and paints what he sees with his physical or his mind’s eyes, when he misses the elementary knowledge of color properties. Often, even authors in art encyclopedias and academy teachers move in the world of colors as in the thicket of the jungle.” (E.v.Vietinghoff)

In his handbook, Vietinghoff commendably thinned out this jungle. Aside from **chromatics** with some personal accents, he described **the rules of color mixing**, and explained the logic of the **basic properties of colors**. It contains the **gamut of the color values**, as well as the topics of the saturation (colorfulness) and intensity of colors. Most probably, he formulated for the first time the **translucency of paint** and color as the fourth property of color, ignored in former publications. He elucidated the **laws of contrast**, commented on **color systems**, presented the advantages of the traditional multilayer technique and gave a list of pigments, oils and resins, as well as **instructions for their production**. In addition, he gave **hints for the purchase** of oils, dispensing of emulsions and binders, pointed out inappropriate materials and warned beginners of mistakes. He showed the single steps of **the technique of color application and the six different kinds of strokes**, even how to **hold the brush**. He introduced the use and effects of the **glazes** and wrote about the **varnishing** of a finished painting. Finally, he outlined the sensible building of a picture and showed the **development of a painting in the multilayer method**. All these were written comprehensively and in detail.

“When mixing paints, it is not sufficient, to know their basic properties, because the richness of the pigments are very different. For instance, a trace of Prussian blue or titanium white is sufficient to change a paint whereas a considerable quantity of white lead or cobalt blue would be required for the same result. Later, when I taught some students, I definitely recognized how much this knowledge of elementary color properties eases the mixing of paints on the palette. Those who knew it could mix any desired paint quickly and without problems, but others less experienced spent a lot of paint until they achieved the necessary mixture, if successful. Often, their efforts failed due to their uncertainty in estimating the quantity of paints and they needed to add more and more paints in order to correct the color until an indefinable grey-brown color emerged.” (E.v.Vietinghoff)

**The handbook is easy to read and became standard literature for painters of the multilayer oil-resin technique, for teachers and art restorers. It is both theoretical and systematical as an indispensable guide for practice. Vietinghoff described the process of painting from inside as he discovered and proved everything on his own.** It is astonishing that he could collect so much knowledge, concentrated on only 190 pages, in simple language and with several graphics, tables and definitions. Well-known masterpieces and his own pictures illustrate his explanations of different techniques with emphasis on the multilayer oil-resin painting.