

# The Spiritual Image in Contemporary Art: The Painting of Gerard Wagner

*Van James*



**Madonna Over Crescent Moon, 1941**

At the end of the twentieth century, the end of the modern era one essential characteristic reveals itself in contemporary painting. This fundamental is undeniably the spiritual image or what might be called the spiritual imagination in art. This prodigious aspect of art has always been apparent in the visual arts from the great palaeolithic cave paintings of primal peoples and the royal tomb art of ancient civilizations to the quasi-religious depictions of Expressionism and the esoteric aesthetics of abstract art. Today, just across the threshold of the twenty-first century, well into a Post-Modern era, the spiritual image is at a particularly dramatic stage in its development. This drama is made especially clear when one juxtaposes the work of Gerard Wagner with that of his contemporaries.

Born in Germany in 1906, Gerard Wagner lived in the industrial city of Manchester, England, from the age of seven, studied at the Royal College of Art in London as a teenager, and spent time at the vital artist colony of St. Ives on the west coast of Britain before moving to Switzerland at nineteen. Looking for an alternative to traditional painting, Wagner had wanted to go to France to be “the next van Gogh,” but like a number of young artists of the day, had been introduced to the work of Rudolf Steiner.<sup>1</sup>

However, unlike many of his contemporaries who took up Steiner's work as one of many influences, Wagner pursued a dedicated and intensive, life-long inquiry into the nature and meaning of Steiner's indications concerning painting and the aesthetics of color, making them the single focus of his attention and eventually leading him to his individual and unique path in painting.



**Mysterium, 1956**

Although of an earlier generation than Wagner, Wassily Kandinsky was intrigued to hear Rudolf Steiner lecture on topics concerning the spiritual in art as early as 1908.<sup>2</sup> With a sincere interest in esoteric studies, Kandinsky delved into Theosophy and later Anthroposophy,<sup>3</sup> “as a path of development leading from the spiritual in the individual to the spiritual in the universe,”<sup>4</sup> and heavily annotated his copies of Steiner's books. Piet Mondrian felt that his own style of painting in grids and primary colors, which he referred to as Neo-Plasticism, represented the ideals of the new spiritual direction in art that Steiner was advocating. Mondrian wrote to Steiner on just this point but did not receive the affirmation for which he hoped.<sup>5</sup>

Other artists breaking with tradition in the first quarter of the twentieth century were listening to and reading about Steiner's ideas on color, art and the spiritual --Paul Klee and Alexej Jawlensky, for instance.

Gerard Wagner was equally intent on discovering a valid spiritual direction in art. Unfortunately, the young painter arrived at Steiner's home in Dornach, Switzerland, in 1926, just a year after the master's death. Following a brief study with Steiner's painting pupil Heni Geck, Wagner began over a half-century of color experimentation and painting research. As a struggling young artist in the 1920's and 30's, he dedicated himself to the study of color and the pursuit of the spiritual in art as a path of inner development. He immersed himself in the study of color and Anthroposophy. As

Wagner did not work in Munich, Berlin, Paris or New York, and was not connected with any known avant garde movement, he remained anonymous, receiving no recognition or celebrity in these early years. Wagner, created a painting school in the foothills of the Jura Mountains, where he maintained a productive art studio and painting school with students from America, Russia and numerous European countries.



Night Brook, 1950

Many of the early modern artists who had made a connection with Steiner's ideas concerning color and the spiritual in art had by the First World War gone entirely abstract. The careers of Kandinsky and Mondrian wonderfully illustrate a gradual transformation and dissolution of the natural world into color and form, and a crossing into the realm of pure geometry--a spiritual world of form. However, once this crossing was made, once this threshold was passed, color became subservient to form and at best only a symbol of its own vital nature. This was not what Steiner had in mind when he spoke of the "being of color"<sup>6</sup> in painting. Steiner emphasized that color is the essential, and form should arise "out of the color."<sup>7</sup> This then, was the principle that Wagner inwardly recognized and was determined to grasp--how to cross beyond the threshold of the three-dimensional world of realistic painting and enter, not into the abstract, intellectual realm of geometric forms, but to be carried over on the wings of color, the rainbow bridge of the spectrum, to a spiritual reality where the essential life of color produces spontaneous but lawful forms in the same way that elemental forces create the world of organic forms in nature. This Wagner set about doing in a methodical and disciplined manner producing hundreds of color exercises and painting sketches that

were never intended as finished works of art.

By the end of the Second World War, Wagner had developed a style and a manner of working that could not be categorized either as realistic or abstract. He had clearly crossed the threshold out of realism but had not abandoned the natural world entirely for Abstract Expressionism. Three-dimensional reality is left behind but abstraction does not replace it. Geometric forms do not appear, nature and spirit are both somehow soulfully intact. His themes have an obvious spiritual orientation even when they deal with subjects such as the metamorphosis of plants or a Grimm's fairy tale. All of the imagery is filled with and built-up out of the color.



Plant Metamorphoses, 1965

Perhaps the only contemporary who might compare at this time with Wagner was Marc Chagall. The weightless, dreamlike realms that Chagall created are certainly a parallel world to that of Wagner's. Humanity is not lost, for recognizable figures are common to both worlds and a strength of soul and spirit are tangible. Color is vital and alive. Still, Wagner does not bring drawing into his paintings and the third dimension is not suggested in any form, even cubistically. We pass beyond a worldly dreamscape in Wagner's work and plunge into a spirit world of pure color forms-- a world where sentient, color gestures bring luminous hues into enchanted forms as if out of light, air, water, and mist. One feels color is dealt with naturally and truthfully, not manipulated or forced into symbolic representations or arbitrary self-expressions.





Animal Metamorphoses. 1996

Rudolf Steiner declared that realism ignores the subjective inner life of man, forming only impressions of the outer world, whereas abstraction allows expression of one's inner reality but negates the objective outer world. Steiner claimed that color was, for painting, the fulcrum of a balance between impressions and expressions,<sup>8</sup> between form and substance [meaning],<sup>9</sup> for "color is the soul of nature,"<sup>10</sup> and has its field of action in both the inner and outer world. In Wagner's work one finds not only what Steiner conceptualized in lectures on art and preliminarily portrayed in pastel sketches and watercolor studies, but what appears to be the ultimate striving of modern art in the first half of the twentieth century--to overcome the illusionary painting of spatial depth and perspective on the picture plane, to step beyond strict adherence to outer appearance and to penetrate deeper into the meaning of things, into the microcosmic soul of man. Modern art, to a great extent, left behind the world of nature and entered into the human soul. Wagner's pictures manage to penetrate into this microcosmic soul realm without abandoning the macrocosmic outer world. All of his work is intimately bound up with both man and nature, inner life and outer existence.

In the early second half of the century, Pop Art and pop-culture emerged as an obvious result of materialistic and consumer consciousness as well as an antidote to the rarified aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism. It was at the same time protest art, a deep-seated

reaction to a modern culture racing toward total self-annihilation. As with all avant garde streams in art (ever since the French military term was first applied to new artistic movements that attack the bourgeoisie sensibility), Pop Art was breaking new ground by way of what might now be called in our post-modern era, visual terrorism. This, because it goes beyond the bounds of what James Joyce referred to as “proper art.”



**In Animal Kingdom, 1996**

As author of some of the most avant garde literature of his day, Joyce proclaimed that there are two kinds of art--proper and improper. However, improper art falls into two categories--that which seduces or draws one in and that which confronts or attacks one. The first, appealing to sympathy, Joyce called pornographic because it sells or prostitutes itself promoting desire in the viewer, and the other, arousing antipathy, he called didactic because it attempts to teach one a lesson whether the lesson is wanted or not inducing loathing. Both are improper art because they take one's freedom away, setting one off balance. Longing and infatuation or fear and anger, are the emotions that improper art generate and thrives on. Joyce said that proper art maintains the freedom of the individual so that a state of aesthetic arrest or sensational contemplation may occur and a recognized revelation or “epiphany” is experienced. “The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.”<sup>11</sup>

It is in this sense of proper art that Wagner approaches the spiritual image as it may be painted out of color, neither trying to tintilate and win over the viewer with pretty colors and pleasing forms, or by assaulting the senses for a desperate reaction by allowing a certain spiritual reality to arise. Wagner's color and imagery leave a breathing space, a thin line of quiet for the soul to experience its freedom--an epiphany, as Joyce called it.

The Pop Art movement also saw the refining of staged artistic performance or action pieces, where the visual arts assumed the character of dramatic arts. Installations and earthworks blurred the distinctive characteristics of painting, drawing, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, dance, poetry and the crafts in order to demonstrate that life is art and everything is interrelated. Joseph Beuys was a prominent international figure at this time; a professor of sculpture, brimming with ideas adapted from Steiner on reorganizing society in such a way that the human being might be more truly mirrored in the political, social, and economic spheres.<sup>12</sup> A charismatic performance artist and self-styled shaman, Beuys presented his own interpretation of Steiner's esoteric Anthroposophy in a frame work of the exoteric artistic forms of early Modernism.



**The Gardener, 1996**

Beuys's style and manner, in fact, owes more to the performance and installation art of the Dada movement and anti-art philosophy of the avant garde than it does to Steiner's esoteric view of the arts as the revelation of formative spiritual influences. This could also be said of other contemporary artists who embrace an Anthroposophical worldview and yet choose to work not out of a strict phenomenological approach (or what Steiner called a Spiritual Scientific approach) but connect themselves to other traditional influences. The British artist David Nash and the American James Turrell might be considered worth examples in this direction.

Gerard Wagner's lengthy career spanning almost the entire modernist era, embodies valuable fruits from the past as well as precious seeds for the future for he is a unique example of a purist painter in that he has not been visibly influenced by any of the modern or post-modern schools as one might expect. His single minded pursuit of color in the sense indicated by Steiner has produced a strictly painterly style with no obvious parallels. He has actually succeeded in the realm of painting as an art where spiritual imagery arises entirely out of color dynamics. In this way he is truly a representative of the modern era of painting for he breaks with all traditional schools of painting by not incorporating drawing, foreshortening, perspective, shadows or any illusory effects on the picture plane. He works out of the "inner necessity"<sup>13</sup> or inherent gestures of the color without resorting to symbolism. This aspect of modernist striving is in many ways fulfilled in the work of Wagner. He has gone to the heart of the painting problem of the twentieth century and found a key that does not lead to a dead end, to the death of easel painting, but on the contrary, he has discovered the "eye of the needle" for an entirely renewed art of painting. Renewed in its connection to the spiritual-- not a symbolic intellectual connection to the spiritual, but a deeply experienced artistic-meditative path that unfolds dormant organs of perception. For this reason, the work of Gerard Wagner does not break with tradition but connects itself to the continuous stream of artistic expression springing from the ever-unfolding spirit of human creativity. For even beyond the post-modern era it is the spiritual imagination in art that is the guiding thread and significant influence beyond style, sources, market value, and the like. Gerard Wagner's work, as difficult to place as that of William Blake's of a century earlier, will historically find significant recognition for its having rescued the delicate art of color and renewed the art of painting as a path of inner development and spiritual discipline, which has continued relevance in the world. In this way the paintings of Gerard Wagner stand out in our Post-Modern era as significant examples of the spiritual in contemporary art.



Gerard Wagner 1906-1999



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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), Austrian philosopher, scientist, educator, architect and artist.

<sup>2</sup> Anthroposophy (wisdom of humanity), esoteric-philosophic organization founded by Rudolf Steiner following a split with the Theosophical Society

<sup>3</sup> Sixten Ringborn, *Sounding Cosmos*. Pg. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *How to Attain Knowledge of Higher Worlds*.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Tuchman. *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. Pg. 104

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Architectur, Plastik und Malerei des ersten Goetheanum*, Lecture 3

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> R. Steiner, "The Two Sources of Art: Impressionism and Expressionism." Munich, February 15, 1918.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Pg. 14

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>11</sup> James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Pg. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Heiner Stachelhaus, *Joseph Beuys*. Pgs. 108-9.

<sup>13</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Pg. 45.