

Rudolf Steiner: The Artist

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Fig. 1. Rudolf Steiner with model of first Goetheanum, 1912.

Rudolf Steiner was a person who, from an early age, had spiritual experiences not unlike those of the traditional shaman, in which nature spirits, souls of the dead, and other spiritual phenomena appeared before the eyes of his soul. However, he learned very quickly that the adults around him did not share his experiences and had no wish to hear about them from a child. It was not until he discovered geometry as a student that he was able to find validation of his spiritual experiences. The young Steiner realized that "...geometry was something that only the mind by the exercise of its own powers could grasp."¹ This was a spiritual activity that the rest of the world recognized and it ultimately led him to his view that the spiritual world is accessible by enhanced powers of thinking. This was the justification he needed to speak years later of the spiritual world worthy of methodical, "spiritual scientific" research, no less so than natural science researches the natural world. He received his doctorate in philosophy with a dissertation on "The Fundamental Problem of the Theory of Knowledge: the Reconciliation of the Philosophical Consciousness with Itself."

So what does a seer and philosopher have to do with the arts? As a young man, Steiner had no training and little talent in any of the arts, except perhaps writing. However, what he did have was vision, "second sight." Besides the modern Western discipline of philosophic thinking, which he trained in technical college and university, he possessed "seership," an ability associated with the mystic East. He combined scientific method and spiritual revelation to create a contemporary spiritual science that recognizes the human condition as being that of an artist standing between the inner and outer worlds of religion and science, subjectivity and objectivity, spirit and matter. Steiner's entire worldview, called Anthroposophy ("awareness of one's humanity"), points to this creative condition of the human being within a living, creative universe.



Fig. 2. The Munich Congress, 1907, with rented Hall decorations, seal and column designs.

Steiner wrote numerous books and gave thousands of lectures during his lifetime, only a fraction of them dealing directly with the arts. However, the artistic was an essential theme throughout his life and work. At the age of twenty-seven he shared his ideas on art for the first time with the Vienna Goethe Society, presenting the foundations of his theory of art that would be the starting point for all of his own artistic pursuits. In this lecture, "Goethe, the Father of a New Science of Aesthetics," Rudolf Steiner suggests that art is not the bringing down of spiritual ideals and the clothing of them in physical material but the redeeming and raising of the material world, lifting it to the spiritual: "...not the embodiment of the supersensible, but the transformation of the sense-perceptible..."²

Along these lines Steiner makes it clear that the inner lawfulness of an object and how this interior aspect is made visible is through its outer form and gesture. The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, who attended lectures and read Steiner's work, called this the "inner necessity" of art. All of Rudolf Steiner's work emphasized the outer form expressing its inner meaning. "In the artist's work the whole exterior must express the whole inner nature. Thus the laws with which the artist goes to work are none other than the eternal laws of nature, but pure, uninfluenced by hindrances. Artistic creation rests not on what is," according to Steiner, "but on what could be; not on the actual but on the possible..."³

Steiner's first major artistic endeavor was as the organizer of a Theosophical Congress in Munich, in 1907. Rudolf Steiner had been lecturing to the Theosophical Society on spiritual themes for many years and had even become the General Secretary of the German section, though he never became a member of the Theosophical Society himself. He agreed to this arrangement on the condition that he would not be expected to adhere to any party line or preach theosophical doctrine, but would be free to speak out of his own spiritual vision and research. In 1907 the German section with Steiner at its head, hosted an international conference in Munich, and he took on the decoration of a rented auditorium, arranging the program in order to include the arts as much as possible (Fig. 2). This created a schism between those who connected themselves

to an esoteric stream that sought only the pursuit of spiritual development and those wishing to link their striving to a concern for the earth and earthly substance. At the Munich Congress, Steiner virtually drew a line on the ground declaring the arts to be an essential vehical in realizing the effectiveness of a truly esoteric life integrated into daily life in a modern world. This, he declared, would require the artistic transformation of one's environment: "Man can only experience true harmony of soul where what his soul knows to be its most valuable thoughts, feelings and impulses are mirrored for his senses in the forms, colors and so on of his surroundings."⁴

It is not known for certain if the Munich Modern artists attended this milestone event, but it is likely that artists such as Kandinsky and Jawlensky, who were familiar with Steiner's work, knew it was happening.



Fig. 3. The Malsch Building, 1908, in southern Germany.

It was for this conference that Rudolf Steiner developed a series of seven seals intended to be sculpted capital reliefs on columns. The forms of the capital motifs were each unique in themselves but related to the next motif in the series through the principle of metamorphosis. In 1908, a twenty-one-year old artist named Karl Stockmeyer, who had attended the Munich Congress, asked Steiner what the building would look like that had such columns. Steiner enthusiastically described an elliptical space supported by two rows of seven columns, fourteen in all. These columns were to support a triaxial ellipsoid cupola with a central axis running from west to east. Stockmeyer set about constructing a model of this building in his hometown of Malsch, Germany (Fig. 3). Measuring on plan only about 2.5 by 3.5 meters, the crypt-like structure, which still stands today, is large enough to accommodate small gatherings of less than two dozen people. This was a first attempt by Steiner to establish an organic relationship between the longitudinal character of an axial building, such as a cathedral, and the circular character of a central axis building. Rudolf Steiner laid the foundation stone for this building on April 5, 1909, reciting the words:

"With the laying of this foundation stone of the Malsch building we entreat the blessings of the Masters of Wisdom and all high and highest beings of

the spiritual hierarchies that are connected with earth evolution. We entreat that all of your power of spirit may stream through in harmony all that is brought, felt, willed and done here. On this building may there shine the light of the Spirits of the East; the Spirits of the West may they reflect this light; the Spirits of the North may they strengthen and the Spirits of the South warm it. So that the Spirits of the East, West, North and South may stream through this building. In pain and suffering our Mother Earth has become materialized. It is our task to once again spiritualize her, to redeem her, in that through the power of our hands we fashion a spirit-filled work of art. May this stone be a first foundation stone for the redemption and transformation of our planet Earth, and may the power of this stone work a thousand-fold."⁵



Fig. 4. The Stuttgart House of the Theosophical Society, 1910.

Shortly afterwards a larger rendering of this interior space was constructed as a meeting room in the Stuttgart House of the Theosophical Society (Fig. 4), but was later destroyed by the National Socialists in the 1930s when Steiner's work was outlawed in Germany.

Following the construction of these two buildings, plans were being made for a large scale theater in Munich, called the Johannes Building, after the biblical figure, John,⁷ and the central character in a play written by Steiner. This



Fig. 5. The First Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland, 1913-1923.

building was denied permission by the city council of Munich, but the setback allowed a change of venue to a hilltop site outside of Basel, Switzerland. There the building was renamed the Goetheanum, after the German poet-scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and featured not an elliptical space but two interpenetrating domes of different sizes (Fig. 1, 5). It proved to be a completely new direction in architectural design as far as the way it combined the principles of central axis and axial space as well as unique aspects of sacred geometry.

In the first Goetheanum, Steiner initiated a new type of stained glass window. A dentist's drill was used to engrave thick slabs of single-colored glass in order to allow images of lighter color shine through the darker color (Fig. 6). No fragmented pieces of glass were held together with dark lines of lead. Each window was a single continuous whole of etched monochrome figures and images depicting the progressive path of inner development. This medium was used again in the second Goetheanum but with a new etching technique that Steiner had developed with the assistance of the Russian artist Assia Turgenev. In order to avoid contour drawing, cross-hatching, pointillism and other techniques that were felt to cut off the image from its surrounding environment or in some way make the images artistically "untrue," Steiner applied a slant-line style to the etched glass renderings. This promoted a kind of *breathing* between the image and its surroundings, thus establishing a more *living* relationship between object and surroundings.



Fig. 6. The carved glass, west Red Window of the Goetheanum.

Steiner believed significant discoveries would be made in the future by way of color research in painting. "We can see a time before us--if we immerse ourselves fully in the perceptions and feelings which can proceed for us out of the spiritual-scientific world conception--a time when the path to the artistic will be in many respects different than in times gone by, when it will be much more full of life. That which is the medium of artistic creativity will be experienced much more intimately by the human soul than in times past; colour and tone will be much more intimately lived through, lived through morally and spiritually; and

in the creations of artists we shall confront at the same time the tracks of artist-souls in the cosmos...In this respect human beings will make significant discoveries in the future. They will really unite their moral-spiritual being with what sense appearance presents us. An infinite deepening of the human soul can be foreseen in this domain."⁷ Numerous schools of painting have evolved from his original pupils.

Steiner planned largescale murals to be painted on the interior domes of the first Goetheanum, and developed his own plant-color pigments for this task. Made entirely from natural plant substances, these colors were intended as an alternative to synthetic pigments that were just beginning to be massproduced. Themes based on Steiner's sketches were painted on the ceiling of the Goetheanum by artists from America, Russia, and all over Europe. The sketches included scenes of *Creation by the Elohim*, *The Formation of the Senses*, *Paradise*, *Lemuria*, *Atlantis*, *Ancient India*, *Persia*, *Egypt* and *Greece*, as well as portrayals of the guiding Time Spirits who inspired more recent events (Fig. 7). All of the flowing transparent washes of color and imagery unfolded toward the figure of Goethe's character *Faust* holding a child. Above the child appears the only word in the painting, "Ich," the German word for the human "I" or individuality.



Fig. 7. Sketch of the Formation of the Senses for the First Goetheanum cupola painting.

The images move on to culminate in the central motif of the ceiling painting, *the Representative of Humanity*. This figure Steiner intended to be seen in all freedom and divorced from any religious associations as the Christ being, the Logos, bearer of the universal "I" (Fig. 8).

Below this painted motif of the *Representative of Humanity*, at the back of the stage area, was to be placed a nine-meter tall, carved wood sculpture of the same theme, referred to as *The Group* (fig. 9, 10). Perhaps the largest wood sculpture in the world, this statue is comparable to Michelangelo's *David* in its cultural significance as a spiritual imagination for its time. Because it was incomplete at



Fig. 8. Mural painting of the central motif in the cupola of the First Goetheanum.

the time of the first Goetheanum's destruction it was not in place and was saved from the fire. It depicts the human being striding between the spiritual beings that influence and tempt the free human soul in one direction or another. Below, in his subterranean cave is Ahriman, the inspirer of cold, calculated, mechanistic intelligence. He works towards the reduction of man and universe into a complex super-machine. He is fashioned as a concave, angular, sclerotic figure, pointed and critical, exuding fear and loathing. Above the central figure's left arm is Lucifer, "the Light Bringer," who, inspiring heated passion and overflowing enthusiasm, desires that human beings become gods with no interest in earthly things. When this being's influence penetrates the physical body, fever and inflammation are the outcome. He is rendered as a fallen angel, full of himself, in rounded, convex forms. To the left of the central figure, both Lucifer and Ahriman appear again, working this time together in a concerted effort against humanity. One might see the three temptations of Christ in such an arrangement--Lucifer, Ahriman, and Lucifer and Ahriman together.



Fig. 9. Rudolf Steiner working in his studio on the carved wood sculpture *The Representative of Humanity*.

The ultimate significance of this work lies in its portrayal of human destiny. As Michelangelo's *David* and Albrecht Dürer's *Knight, Death and the Devil* were for their time, *The Group* is an imagination of the modern human being meeting the world without and the world within, in freedom. Whatever one thinks of Steiner's philosophy, there can be no denying that this wood sculpture is truly one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century art. The same is true of the painted cupolas, the sculptured capitals and the organic architecture of the first Goetheanum, all meant to form one integrated work of art. The second Goetheanum, entirely different from the first building, is an example of the initial building impulse metamorphosed to suit a later time, a different building material, and an expanded purpose.



Fig. 10. *The Representative of Humanity*.

During the planning and construction of the first and second Goetheanum buildings, Rudolf Steiner also designed numerous residential dwellings, artist's studios, and utility buildings for the area surrounding the main structures. All of the smaller structures were based on the principle of outer form following the purpose and inner function of the building. Such thoughts concerning architectural forms were entertained by other architects of the day. In America, Louis Sullivan said that "...each part [of a building] must so clearly express its function that the function can be read through the part."⁸

Frank Lloyd Wright, a pupil of Sullivan, said: "By organic architecture I mean an architecture that develops from within outward in harmony with the conditions of its being as distinguished from one that is applied from without."⁹ Steiner's utility structures strikingly demonstrate the principle of outer form arising from the function of the building. Especially in the case of the Heating House, one can see how the architectural forms have been sculpted in such a way as to demonstrate the process of boiling and rising steam. Compare this with the Transformer House, where electric cables come in underground and transfer electricity to individual house lines above as was customary in the early twentieth century. The electric quality is expressed right into the angles cut in the doorway and window frames (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. The Heating House and the Transformer House.

As mentioned above, Rudolf Steiner was a playwright in that he created a series of plays he called mystery dramas. They were intense, lengthy productions in the sense of Greek cathartic drama that take the better part of a day to perform. *The Portal of Initiation: A Rosicrucian Mystery* was first produced in Munich in 1910 and three successive plays, in a burst of energy, followed in 1911, 1912, and 1913.¹⁰ The central figure in the dramas is a young painter named Johannes, who, together with his circle of acquaintances, goes through the trials of a



Fig. 12. *The Portal of Initiation*, 1910.

modern spiritual seeker (Fig. 12). The plays describe the characters in varied situations that give rise to supernormal encounters. Spiritual beings and elemental spirits appear as well as flashbacks dealing with karmic relationships in former incarnations. Steiner's entire worldview is cast in artistic form in these dramas.

During rehearsals for the second mystery drama, *The Soul's Probation*, well before the first Goetheanum was in its building stage, the actor playing Johannes asked Rudolf Steiner what the painting would look like that this character was pretending to work on during the third scene. Steiner immediately took up a brush and tempera paints from backstage and created there on the spot his first painting entitled *Light Weaving*. The picture represents spiritual beings--the Elohim, at the moment of creation, fashioning and forging the world with streaming light (Fig. 13). The painting is almost entirely abstract apart from some primitive faces and wing-like forms in white, blue and red. This was the first of many pictures--pastel sketches and watercolor paintings (Fig. 14)--through which Steiner would indicate what he called "painting out of the color."



Fig. 13. *Light Weaving*, Steiner's first painting, 1911.

His insistence that color is the essential language in the art of painting is apparent from his lectures on color: "If we were to speak more deeply of painting, the significance of the connection between the inner soul-life of the universe and color would reveal itself. It would be meaningless ever to paint with colors, if colors were not something very different from what they appear to be to outer physical perception...Color is the language of nature's soul, the speech of the soul of the universe."¹¹ He was fifty years old when he painted his first picture and he declared it would take him forty more years to become an artist.



Fig. 14. Paintings Light and Darkness and Easter by Rudolf Steiner.

Besides working nonstop as a lecturer and author, Steiner also designed his own book covers and logos, bringing a new impulse to the graphic arts. He pointed out that the printers ink on the cover of a book suggests weight that can either restrict easy opening of a book or can offer an invitation to open the book, depending on design placement. He regularly created his and other author's book covers with a leading form, usually abstract, and inwardly expressive of the book's content, on the upper left corner so that the lower right corner would be free of imagery and would in effect create light to draw the hand to it for opening the book (Fig. 15). "The place where we touch or take hold of an object [or book] should be made lighter than the rest of it." So Steiner suggested: "It is as though the human being were radiating light...books bound [and designed] in such a way that the cover does not tell one that it is supposed to be opened, are sins in the world of appearance, which is the domain of art."¹² In the same way that he used leading forms to introduce the subject of a book in purely graphic terms, he also created closing vignettes that graphically summed up and punctuated a body of text. One is reminded of the art nouveau and William Morris movements and their attempts to revitalize the art of book design.

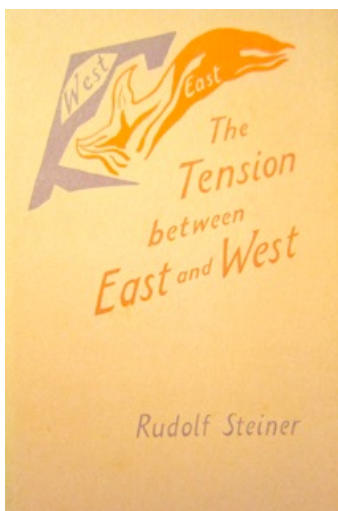
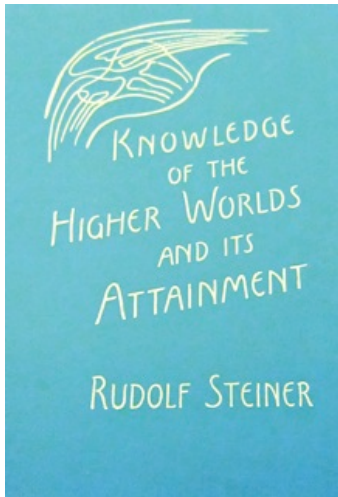


Fig. 15. Rudolf Steiner designed numerous graphics for book covers and posters.

An off-shoot of this graphic arts work, Steiner revived the linear design work known in Latin as *ars lineandi* ("the making of lines"). This form drawing is used therapeutically, pedagogically and artistically in medical clinics, curative communities, Waldorf/Steiner schools, as well as in art academies. An example of this art form can be seen in the planetary and Mystery Drama seals, mandala-like linear designs (Fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Graphic designs by Steiner included the Planetary (Saturn) and Mystery Drama seals.

Directly upon the destruction of the First Goetheanum by fire, Steiner began designing a completely new direction for a second building. This one would utilize and push to their limits the most modern building techniques and materials. Opened in 1928, three years after Steiners untimely death, the Second Goetheanum was made of reinforced concrete and now serves as the international headquarters for the General Anthroposophical Society (Fig. 17). A renovation in the late 1990s completed the interior auditorium based on artistic motifs borrowed from the original building (Fig. 18).



Fig. 17. The Second Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland.

In the performing arts, Steiner gave a speech and drama course that became the basis for numerous drama schools, stage groups, and director trainings. Michael Chekov, one of Steiner's pupils, went on to teach in England and the United States, acting on stage and in film with pupils of his own that included celebrities Gregory Peck, Marilyn Monroe, and Yul Brynner. Steiner's indications to opera singers have been developed into several schools of voice training. And he indicated directions in music that have likewise been taken up by composers.



Fig. 18. Second Goetheanum (interior).

A form of creative movement Steiner named eurythmy was developed just before the First World War. In eurythmy movements make visible the sounds of speech and the tones of music (Fig. 19). Eurythmy schools and professional eurythmy stage groups are recognized by the international dance community for their unique contribution to the performing arts throughout the world.



Fig. 19. Eurythmy, a creative movement that makes music and speech visible, was developed by Steiner around the same time as the building of the First Goetheanum.

Rudolf Steiner's poetry set a standard that can only be described in terms of mantric or sacred verse. He wrote hundreds of verses, often for particular people or events. For instance, he gave the English sculptor, Edith Maryon, the following verse:

Healing is only, when
In the mirror of the human soul
Is pictured the entire community
And in the community
Lives the individual soul's strength.¹³

It is interesting that in recent years the Contemporary Art scene has become aware of Rudolf Steiner's influence on avant garde art of the twentieth century, especially with regard to "social sculptor" Joseph Beuys. This latter artist who did numerous performance and installation pieces in the 70s and 80s utilizing blackboard drawings established a direct link to Steiner who left over 1,000 blackboard (chalk on large black paper) drawings as a result of his lecturing. Many of these drawings have been exhibited in prestigious galleries and museums throughout the world in recent years. Although Steiner's painting and sculpture is generally looked at askance by critics his blackboard drawings, intended for lecture audiences and not for gallery viewing, are interestingly highly acclaimed (Fig. 20, 21).

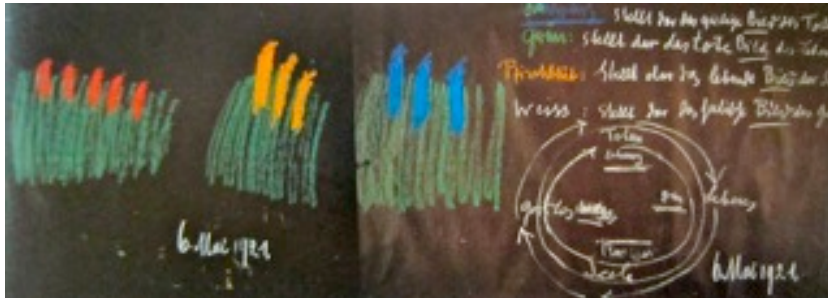


Fig. 20. Rudolf Steiner's blackboard drawings, included themes dealing with almost every subject, from color theory to science and art (above).

When we think of a "Renaissance Man," Leonard da Vinci comes immediately to mind. Rudolf Steiner was surely the quintessential Renaissance man of the twentieth-century, a modern master capable in all the arts and sciences. Generally known as a philosopher, scientist, and educator, this remarkable individual of our era has had an influence on the arts that, has yet to be fully realized and acknowledged.



Fig. 21. Here, the threefold human being is pictured in its relationship to the planets.

Notes:

1. Hemleben, J. *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 16.
2. Steiner. Cited in Seddon, R. *Understanding the Human Being*, p. 155.
3. Steiner. Cited in Seddon, p. 156.
4. Steiner, *Lucifer-Gnosis*, No. 34, 1907.
5. Steiner, R. *Bilder okkultes Siegel und Säulen*, p. 112-113.
6. The name Johannes points to the biblical figure of John, the only apostle present at the crucifixion and "the one whom Jesus loved." Steiner refers to this figure in lectures on Christology as the first Christian initiate. In his last address, a lecture given on September 29, 1924, Steiner describes a special link between John the Apostle/Evangelist and John the Baptist, indicating a reason of greater significance for the name Johannes Building.
7. Steiner, R. August 25, 1919. Cited in Wagner, G. and E. Koch, *Individuality of Colour*, p. 85.
8. Sullivan, L. *Kindergarten Talks and Other Writings*, 1909.
9. Wright, F.L. *In the Cause of Architecture*, 1914.
10. *The Soul's Probation*, *The Guardian of the Threshold*, and *The Soul's Awakening*.
11. Steiner, R. January 1, 1915. Cited in Wagner, G. and E. Koch, *Individuality of Colour*, p. 11.
12. Steiner. Cited in Hauck, H. *Handwork Indications*, p. 41.
13. The author's translation.



The First and Second Goetheanum buildings in Dornach, Switzerland.