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# “My soul must live with the colour”

## The Transformative Potential of Colours Described by Rudolf Steiner

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The article focuses on the transformative potential of colours described by Rudolf Steiner. Steiner’s colour definitions are approached through the aesthetics of religion, investigating religion as a sensory and mediated practice. The goal is to clarify the identifiable features of the anthroposophical use of colour and how the Steinerian conception of colour relates to the anthroposophical worldview. Steiner’s conception of colours was strongly influenced not only by theosophy but also by J. W. von Goethe’s theory of colour and his ideas of metamorphosis. Steiner’s colour definitions are discussed both through his published lectures and through his own drawings and paintings. These pictures were intended to function as models for artists working with anthroposophical art, and they can be understood as specific sensational (i.e. sensory) forms that many later artists have produced variations of. Steiner’s use of colour is approached particularly through his Nature Mood sketches (1922) and his painting *New Life (Mother and Child)* (1924). The analysis of artworks made in the anthroposophical tradition can deepen our understanding of Steiner’s conception of colours and its transformative potential.

This is the entry, the door that leads into the spiritual world. Colour descends into the surfaces of physical objects but it also raises us from the purely material and leads us to the spiritual. (Steiner 1992/2012, 42)

### Introduction

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) frequently described colours as doors or windows that lead from the purely material to the spiritual world. His ideas about colours have connections with both theosophy and German *Naturphilosophie*. He gave numerous lectures on colours and made sketches, drawings and paintings in which his ideas on colours were further clarified. His twelve key lectures on colours, given between the years 1914 and 1923, have been published in *The Collected Works of Rudolf Steiner*, volume 291 (*Das Wesen der Farben/Colour*, Steiner 1992/2012). There are also numerous other lectures and publications by Steiner in which colours are discussed as a part of other themes. Colours played an important role in his thinking, although his ideas about colours were not presented in the form of a cohesive theory because they were constantly evolving.

I focus in this article on the transformative potential of colours in Steiner’s thinking. The idea of the transformative potential of art and colours can be most comprehensively grasped through Steiner’s lectures, “Goethe as Father of a New Aesthetics” (1888/1909, see Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 3–23) and “The Creative World of Colour”

(1914, see Steiner 1992/2012, 63–79). Practising art was regarded as an important part of anthroposophy. According to Steiner, the artist's task was to bring forth the spiritual aspects that exist in everything sentient. Both making and experiencing art could open opportunities to make contact with different parts of one's being – the physical, ethereal, astral body and ego – and communicate with the cosmos (e.g. Boguslawski and Westerlund 2018, 57–58; Mahlamäki 2018, 73). The pictures made by Steiner himself were intended to function as “picture seeds” or models for the artists working with anthroposophical art and teaching it to art students. Steiner's use of colour is approached in this article through his Nature Mood sketches and his Madonna motif, both of which open up different perspectives on his ideas of the transformative potential of colour.<sup>1</sup>

The colours in the Steinerian tradition can be approached through the aesthetics of religion. Anthroposophy has sometimes been understood as a philosophy of life rather than as religion, although it has also been shown to contain many elements typically associated with religion (e.g. Swartz and Hammer 2022, 19). The aesthetics of

religion is a framework that studies religion as a sensory and mediated practice, and it aims to understand the role of religion in the interplay between sensory, cognitive and socio-cultural aspects of world construction (Grieser and Johnston 2017, 1–2, 22). Essential questions to ask when approaching Steiner's conception of colour through the aesthetics of religion are what kind of identifiable features does the anthroposophical use of colour have, and how does the Steinerian conception of colour relate to the anthroposophical worldview?

Birgit Meyer's concept of sensational form also reveals an interesting perspective on the use of colour in the anthroposophical context. Meyer has defined sensational forms as relatively fixed models that invoke and organize access to the transcendental by offering structures of repetition. These forms are shared and transmitted: they can create and sustain connections between believers of particular religious regimes, and they contain particular practices of worship (Meyer 2011, 29–30). The model pictures made by Steiner can also be understood as specific sensational forms. Variations on the motifs of these pictures have been made by many later artists in the context of anthroposophical art.

Arianna Borrelli and Alexandra Grieser have discussed the problematics of the aesthetic formation of knowledge in science and religion. They state that the aesthetic aspects of knowing cannot be confined to rational and abstract thinking, but it is important to create awareness of how we use images, what imaginative domains rule our work, and what aesthetic ideologies are supported. Furthermore, an aesthetic critique can add the quality of academic analysis if it is seen as a comparative tool and as reflecting epistemological and methodological rigour (Borrelli and Grieser

1 Numerous books relating to Steiner's own visual artworks have been published in recent decades, but it is worth noting that many of these books have been written and edited by insiders of the Steinerian tradition (e.g. Bamford 2017; Lord 2017; Stebbing 2008, 2011, 2017, 2022; Wagner-Koch and Wagner 1980/2009). These writers may have created too coherent an image of Steiner's thinking. However, only through these publications has it been possible to construct insights into Steiner's visual works and his therapeutic ideas related to colour. These publications can be understood as first steps towards a deeper understanding of anthroposophical art and its use of colours.

2017, 16). The analysis of Steiner's artworks deepens understanding of his conception of colours and their transformative potential and also enriches our understanding of anthroposophy in this way.

### **Play, metamorphosis and the third realm of art**

Rudolf Steiner was baptized in the Catholic church, but there are also traces of Eastern religions and German *Naturphilosophie* in his thinking. Steiner was actively involved in theosophy from the turn of the twentieth century, and he became the head of the newly founded German section of the Theosophical Society in 1902. However, there were disagreements between Steiner and the leading figures of theosophy, who emphasized the importance of Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Christianity represented the highest stage in the evolution of religion for Steiner, although his interpretations of Christianity were in line neither with the Catholic nor the Reformed Church. Steiner therefore left the Theosophical Society in 1913 and founded the Anthroposophical Society (e.g. Boguslawski 2020, 149–53; Boguslawski and Westerlund 2018, 51; Zander 2020, 71–75).

Numerous visual artists contributed to the building works of the Goetheanum, the world centre of the Anthroposophical Society in Dornach, Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The first main building was opened in September 1920, but it was destroyed by fire on New Year's Eve in 1922. The second main building of the Goetheanum was not completed until 1928, three years after Steiner's

2 As in the case of the building works of the Goetheanum and also in other contexts, Steiner's plans were often carried out by numerous helpers (e.g. Ikkala 2021, 21; Zander 2007, 1065).

death. The importance of colours could be seen in both the art and architecture of the Goetheanum, as well as in other objects and furniture and in actions such as eurythmy and mystery dramas (e.g. Steiner 1915–20/2017; Stebbing 2011, 2017; Ikkala 2021; Mahlamäki and Westerlund 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Steiner was well acquainted with the thinking of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832); he worked as the editor of Goethe's writings on the philosophy of

3 Eurythmy is a form of movement art practised in Steiner schools and Waldorf schools. The word eurythmy originates from Greek and refers to beautiful or harmonious rhythm. Steiner developed eurythmy in collaboration with his wife Marie Steiner (1867–1948), the dance student Lory Maier-Smits (1893–1971), and a few others who were enthusiastic about the subject. Movements and gestures were precisely defined in Steinerian eurythmy. All the gestures were considered either as light or dark, all moods of one's soul were felt to be coloured, and the subtleties of colour metamorphosis play an important role. Eurythmy was based on Goethe's idea that the entire plant could be perceived in each individual leaf. In eurythmy, the invisible could become visible through specific movements of the body. Steiner described eurythmy as "moving sculpture" (e.g. Ikkala 2021, 21, 192–93; Mahlamäki 2020, 213; Mahlamäki and Westerlund 2020, 41–44). Mystery drama has its roots in medieval Europe. Mystery plays, frequently accompanied by music, have traditionally represented the stories of the Bible. Rudolf Steiner wrote four modern mystery plays between 1910 and 1913. These plays follow the initiation journeys of fictional characters. The plays' titles were *The Portal of Initiation (Die Pforte der Einweihung (Initiation), 1910)*, *The Soul's Probation (Die Prüfung der Seele, 1911)*, *The Guardian of the Threshold (Der Hüter des Schwelle, 1912)*, *The Soul's Awakening (Der Seelen Erwachen, 1913)*. The Goetheanum's main buildings were designed for presentations, eurythmy and mystery dramas (e.g. Ikkala 2021, 30, 34).

nature. Steiner also published a study of Goethe's epistemology in 1886 (Steiner 1886/2021). His lecture "Goethe as Father of a New Aesthetics" (Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 3–23) illustrates Goethe's and Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) ideas that were essential later in anthroposophical aesthetics. Steiner deals with the dualities of sense and form, or nature or spirit, in this lecture and states that these distinctions have been difficult in German *Naturphilosophie*.

In this context Steiner also mentions Schiller's work, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), where a distinction is made between sense-drive (*Stofftrieb*), form-drive (*Formtrieb*) and play-drive (*Spieltrieb*). Schiller, as described by Steiner, assigns freedom to the art realm by making an analogy between art and a child's play. The player, the poet or the artist arranges things according to what pleases her or him. Nature becomes spirit and spirit becomes nature, nature is raised to the spirit and spirit sinks to nature when the separated activity of sense-drive and form-drive ends. Nature is ennobled, while spirit is moved from its invisible heights into the visible world. As formulated by Steiner, the play-drive produces artworks that satisfy our reason and whose intellectual content is simultaneously present as sensory existence (Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 14–15).

Steiner also paid attention to the role of art in Goethe's thinking. Art was needed to bridge the senses and reason to build a third realm. Steiner explained that aesthetics should focus on this third realm, and the artists' task would be to implant the divine in natural things and, thus, to bring God's realm onto the Earth. The artist should find the point in an object out of which it can develop its most perfect form. No individual plant can bring the concrete idea to life completely, so by focusing on different

aspects of individual plants the artist strives to go beyond nature and its tendencies to understand nature's potential, its laws and means. Therefore, the object depicted by the artist is more complete than it would be in nature (Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 11, 17–18.) According to Steiner, "beauty is truer than nature, for it represents what nature wants to but cannot be" (p. 18).

Steiner's lecture on aesthetics emphasizes Goethe's will to see the world as a great whole with a unitary developmental chain of beings in which the human being is its highest member. Goethe proceeded to uncover the unchanging laws of nature and understand nature's eternal transformations – its becoming and movement. He aimed to reach the archetype through the particular and proceeded from archetypal plant to archetypal animal and finally to human being. Just as Goethean archetypes are driving forces behind phenomena, so it was necessary to return to the state of becoming and eavesdrop on nature in its creativity to grasp an archetype. Only by focusing on the laws of nature, not solely on individual events, could the universal be reached (Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 4, 8–11).

In his lecture, "The Sensory-Supersensory in its Realization through Art: 1" (1918) Steiner states that Goethe's theory of plant metamorphosis proceeds from the idea that a plant's petals are just transformed leaves, and the same is true regarding all natural forms. Nature strives in every detail – not just abstractly but also perceptibly and concretely. It will transform into something very different from what it presents to our senses (Steiner 1888–1921/2021, 69–70). Goethe's ideas of metamorphosis and transformation are important for understanding Steiner's ideas of art and colours.

## The appearance of colours on the border of light and darkness

Goethe's theory of colour, *Zur Farbenlehre*, was published in 1810. Goethe criticized the colour theory of Isaac Newton (1642–1726/27), in which all colours are seen as contained in sunlight. His own investigations with a prism led Goethe to realize that the appearance of colours presupposes both light and darkness and that the colours can be observed on the border of these two opposites. Goethe emphasized the perspective of the perceiving subject and the importance of physiological aspects of colours as a part of his theory (e.g. Sällström 2020, 199–200, 203–07). He also described allegorical, symbolic and mystical uses of colours, and even associated them with sensual-moral effects (Goethe 1810/2019, 276).

Steiner describes his thoughts on Goethe's theory of colours in his autobiography, as follows:

Despite all objections by physicists against Goethe's theory of colour, my own experiments drove me increasingly toward Goethe's views and away from merely reconstruct[ed] facts "about light" – to use Goethe's expression – and not experiments "with light" itself. I told myself: Colors do not, as Newton believed, come from light; colors appear when light encounters obstacles to its own free development. It seemed to me that this could be seen directly from the experiments. This proved to me that light does not belong to actual physical entities. It presents itself as a stage between reality that is tangible to the senses and reality that is spiritually perceptible. (Steiner 1923–25/2005, 48)

As interpreted by Pehr Sällström, the point that Goethe, in his *Farbenlehre*, understood colours primarily as a quality, aroused interest among theosophers, Steinerian anthroposophists and artists like Wassily Kandinsky (1844–1966).<sup>4</sup> Goethe saw the colours not as purely physical but still as undeniably real, and he showed Steiner a method for studying such phenomena. Goethe's *Farbenlehre* became a cornerstone for anthroposophy when Steiner proceeded to approach the spiritual phenomena or entities scientifically. However, Steiner carried the study of colour even farther than Goethe had done (Sällström 2020, 203). When Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, edited by Steiner, was published in 1890–91, Steiner stated that it would be the most gratifying life task "to write a Goethean theory of colour that could do justice to the modern advances of natural science" (Steiner 1992/2012, 2). Steiner probably intended to write his own theory of colours, although he never published an integrated theory on this subject. He described his relationship to Goethe's thinking and his theory of colours as follows:

In Goetheanism we find a way of knowledge that embraces the realm of soul and spirit but which needs to be developed further. ... We must follow Goethe's approach in a living way in our thinking so that we can continually go further. This can only be done through spiritual science [*Geisteswissenschaft*]. (Steiner 1992/2012, 59)

4 Sixten Ringbom, in his *Sounding Cosmos* (1970/2022), has shown that Kandinsky referred to the texts of both Steiner and the theosophists, for example, in his *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911), in which a discussion of colours plays an important role.

Steiner's conception of colours shared some threads with Goethe and other threads with theosophically oriented writers, such as Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934). Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (1903) and Besant's and Leadbeater's *Thought Forms* (1905) were eagerly read among both theosophists and artists at the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Ringbom 1970/2022). Both of these books contain a colour chart that connects the meanings of colours to feelings and modes of thought, such as high spirituality, sympathy, religious feeling, love for humanity, intellect to anger, fear, deceit, pride, depression and malice. Theosophy understood the colours as tools in spiritual perception for receiving knowledge of the higher worlds.

Steiner discusses thought forms and the human aura with different colouring widely, particularly as a part of his *Theosophy* (Steiner 1904/2018, 110–19). In his book *How to Know Higher Worlds?* (1904/1994) Steiner introduces practices for developing the ability of spiritual perception, such as meditation on colours and chakras. Steiner's book *Anthroposophy* (1910) also contains examples of colour symbolism (Steiner 1910/2021, 251–53). In Steinerian anthroposophy colours are frequently described as windows “through which we can ascend spiritually into the spirit world” or “through which the spiritual world enters our physical world” (Steiner 1992/2012, 93). Human beings can, therefore, actively proceed towards the spirit world, or the spiritual world itself can enter their surroundings.

### **The creative world of colour**

Steiner stressed the dynamic aspects of colour and the importance of colour experiences. For him the world appeared as interweaving of colour, and colours were

seen as constantly in movement (Steiner 1992/2012, 40, 43). The dynamic aspects of colours were discussed particularly in Steiner's lecture, “The Creative World of Colour” (1914), presented to those participating in the building activities of the first Goetheanum. Steiner here describes colours as flowing and living elements and uses expressions such as “the flowing sea of colour”, “the living sea of colour” and “the moving waves of colour”. According to Steiner, “a time will come when we will recognize the living connection between the flowing world of colour and the coloured objects and creatures around us” (Steiner 1992/2012, 68, 69, 70–71). Steiner stressed that one should learn to think and live in colours and forms as one thinks in concepts and ideas (pp. 68–71; Ikkala 2021, 205).

When stressing the dynamic aspects of colours Steiner simultaneously criticized colour symbolism: “We must bring to life what is in the colour, not by practicing colour symbolism, which is the worst possible thing” (Steiner 1992/2012, 70). There is an interesting conceptual distinction between Steiner and Goethe in this context. Whereas Goethe emphasized the living aspects of symbols, Steiner emphasized the living aspects of colours and saw them as elements leading human beings from the material to the spiritual (cf., e.g. Hoch 2019, 38). However, there is a clear difference between Goethe and Steiner in how they understand the concept of symbol. Steiner states in his lecture, “The Creative World of Colour” (1914), that “Art will never arise out of scientific concepts nor out of abstract theosophical concepts, at least nothing but empty allegory and formal symbolism” (Steiner 1992/2012, 67).

Goethe, in turn, presented various symbol definitions as a part of his texts. His final definition of symbol was published as a part of his “Maximen und

Reflexionen” (1823–29): “The use of symbols [*Die Symbolik*] transforms the phenomenon into an idea, the idea into an image, and in such a way that the idea still remains infinitely active and inaccessible in the image so that, even expressed in all languages, it remains inexpressible” (Goethe, in Todorov 1977/1982, 205; see also Sørensen 1972, 135). It thus seems that Steiner understands the concept of symbol differently from Goethe, who made a distinction between allegory and symbol and understood the former negatively as a conventional sign whose meanings are fixed (cf., e.g. Todorov 1977/1982, 198–207; Kuuva 2010, 23–27).

Steiner also emphasized the importance of the colour experience. According to him, colours had to be experienced internally, and it was important to feel the colours to understand their true nature: “We must feel what is in colour if we wish to penetrate into its true nature, bringing insight into our feelings. We must question our feelings about what is living in the colour which surrounds us” (Steiner 1992/2012, 16; see also pp. 18, 50.) The inner life of colours could be experienced by opening our souls to the ways the colours move and speak to us and by feeling their living quality. According to Steiner, it was possible for man to return to a living relationship with colours whereby the soul could live in the flowing sea of colours and experience their inner power. It was necessary to shift from rest to movement to understand colours (pp. 68–71; Ikkala 2021, 203–04).

Steiner stated that the interaction of colours with each other can be understood like the rising and falling waves of the sea. Each colour evokes a different kind of form, and the form does not move without colour. The colour never belongs to one single form alone; it is connected to the environment, to the whole world. It was necessary

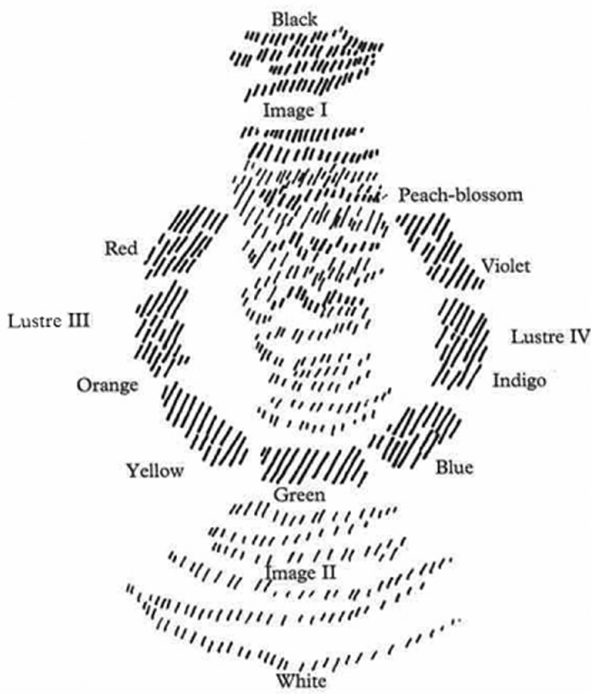
to feel that the colour had a soulful form when colouring the form. According to Steiner, one could feel the change of colour in one’s soul. Artists had to immerse themselves in the life of the elements, air, water and light while painting. New art could only be created through learning to deepen the relationship with the elementary and by living in the world. In this way the human soul and spirit could be connected to the external world. For Steiner, colour was the soul of nature and the entire cosmos, and one could be part of this soul by living in a colour (Steiner 1992/2012, 68–76; Ikkala 2021, 203–05).

As can be observed from Steiner’s notions, colours work as tools through which to experience the spiritual world and communicate with it. However, the key point in Steinerian aesthetics is the transformative quality of colours, which he frequently described as flowing or moving elements whose meanings are constantly changing in interactions with the other elements around them.

### **Image colours, lustre colours and colour perspective**

Steiner wanted to extend the arena of colours from the physical to the spiritual world. He intended new ways of visual expression to be developed when approaching the spiritual world. The most recognizable sensory forms in Steinerian art are bright, transparent and overlapping layers of colour, shining figures and a lack of shadows. The artist named Johannes Thomasius in Steiner’s *First Mystery Drama* (1910) aims to create a form out of a work of colours. This kind of mission was also given to the artists who worked with the paintings of the two cupolas in the first Goetheanum by using plant colours. According to Steiner, the auric colours shine with their own light, and figures should not be illuminated by an





Colour wheel of Rudolf Steiner (Steiner 1992/2012, 38).

external light source when painting spiritual content; rather, they should shine with their own light (Steiner 1992/2012, 2–4). Therefore, the character of anthroposophical painting was totally different from, for example, that of naturalistic painting, because the paintings' lighting and shade follow a different logic.

Steiner's ideas about colours had connections with Goethe's thoughts on metamorphosis. Steiner's lectures on colour combine Goethe's idea of metamorphosis with suggestions of painting technique by introducing a new distinction between image colours and lustre colours (Steiner 1992/2012, 5). According to Steiner, there are four image colours – green, peach-blossom, white and black – that are images or pictures of something. Green represents the lifeless image of the living, peach-blossom represents the living image of the soul, white or light represents the soul's image

of the spirit, and black represents the spiritual image of the lifeless. There are also three lustre colours: yellow, blue and red. As described by Steiner, something shines from the lustre colours – yellow is the lustre of the spirit, blue is the lustre of the soul and red is the lustre of living (pp. 20–26, 32–39).

Steiner also drew parallels between differentiated colour qualities and the kingdoms of mineral, plant, animal and man. In this context, the mineral was associated with lifeless, the plant with living, the animal with ensoulment, and man with the spiritual. The metamorphosis between image and lustre colours formed the basis for the painting technique in which the colour processes correspond to the kingdoms of nature. Steiner also discussed the relationship between matter and colour. For him, anthroposophical spiritual research recognizes the links between earthly existence and the cosmic forces of creation. Therefore, it can show how the different stellar forces, such as the forces of the sun and moon, influence earthly colouring (Steiner 1992/2012, 5–6, 55).

Steiner's lectures also dealt with themes such as colour perspective, light and darkness and colour therapy – in addition to his three key lectures on colour (Steiner 1992/2012, Foreword, 6). Colour perspective refers to the experience of what is near and far on a flat surface. One example of colour perspective is yellow or red when showing that something is aggressive and springs towards the viewer and blue or purple when depicting something peaceful that recedes from the viewer (p. 149). Furthermore, in Steiner's formulation, "Light is the element that shines to us from the past, and darkness points to the future. Light has the nature of thought, darkness of will" (p. 102).

Therefore, as can be observed, Steiner paid plenty of attention to the interplay between the cognitive, sensory and emotional aspects of colours in his definitions of image colours, lustre colours and colour perspective. Steiner aimed in this way to build an objective basis for the spiritual and transformative possibilities of colours. Some visitors to the first Goetheanum reported on the healing effects of Steiner's paintings in the cupola of the building. For example, the artist Maria Strakosch-Giesler describes her experience of Steiner's paintings as follows:

Above the stage arched the cupola painted by Rudolf Steiner himself. Again and again I was able to immerse myself in these figures that formed themselves out of the colors. ... Below lay Ahriman in black, gray-brown and dark violet tones. Above him, fettering him in rays of light, stood the Christ figure in sun-white radiance. On each side were two angels, one blue and one yellow-orange. Red flamed forth from his heart and his left hand pointed to the red of Lucifer, who was enclosed by a most beautiful bluish-green tone above and seemed to incline toward the moon. ... At that time, in repeatedly contemplating this cupola painting, a great feeling of peace came over me. As long as this painting is there for us to see, I thought, with its healing effect, everything would have to turn again and again toward the good and noble. (Strakosch-Giesler, in Stebbing 2008, 9)

It thus seems that the sensory forms designed by Steiner and adapted by later artists in the Steinerian tradition have both transmitted anthroposophical contents visually and aimed to construct bonds between

the members of the Anthroposophical Society.

### The therapeutic potential of colours

Colours have always fascinated the human mind, and their effects on human health have been discussed in various cultural contexts (e.g. Babbitt 1878/1896). Colours have been used to reach a balance between the body and mind, for example, in the traditional Indian health-care system, *Ayurveda*. Chromotherapy, in turn, was a branch of experimental medicine in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Steiner was also interested in the therapeutic possibilities of colours and discussed his therapeutic ideas with Dr Felix Peipers. Steiner also developed a therapeutic method with Peipers using reproductions of Renaissance artworks as tools for meditation (Bamford 2017, 65–86).

Steiner was not a medical doctor, although he was deeply interested in medicine and healing, and he had a vision of the Goetheanum as a centre of healing. His interest in healing and natural medicine was, in fact, generally shared with the esoteric movements of the time, and these interests had connections with the German *Lebensreform* movement. However, the healing mission of anthroposophy was kept

5 Chromotherapy uses colour and light to treat certain mental and physical health conditions. The roots of chromotherapy have often been sought in the writings of Avicenna (980/990–1037). Edwin Babbitt (1828–1905), who presented a broad theory of healing with colour in his book, *The Principles of Light and Color* (1878), was among the pioneers of modern chromotherapy. Chromotherapy also has connections with Ayurvedic medicine with its ideas of the seven chakras or spiritual centres of the body, each of which has been associated with a specific colour. These ideas live on, for example, as a part of New Age thinking.

relatively hidden for a long time. Steiner founded anthroposophical medicine and curative education and established clinics and pharmaceutical and medical research laboratories only during his last five years. He was also asked to prepare a course of medical lectures. According to Christopher Bamford, Steiner's relationship with doctors and the practice of medicine was the same as his relationship with priests and religion, farmers and agriculture, teachers and education. He had passionate and lifelong interests in these fields, and his primary motivation was to heal and bring an anthroposophical perspective to them (Bamford 2017, 144–45; Boguslawski and Westerlund 2018, 65).

Steiner's interests in colour therapy can be observed, for example, through quotations from his first medical course, published as *Introducing Anthroposophical Medicine* (Steiner 1999/2010). He felt that colour and light affect the person from the outside, and the effects of colour should be explored, "by bringing someone into a room where objective colour and light shine upon the entire person or where a specific body part is exposed to the purely objective effect of colour or light" (Steiner, in Bamford 2017, 71–72). Steiner evidently emphasizes the dynamic potential of colours in the therapeutic context and states that the most important part of the therapy is when one shifts from the sphere of one colour into another one:

Whether the room we bring people into is blue or red is less important than whether we bring them into a blue room after first experiencing a red one, or vice versa. This is of crucial importance. If I see a general need to bring about improvement in the rest of a person's system by strongly stimulating that person's head functions, I

move that person from a blue room into a red one. If I want to improve someone's head functions by way of the rest of the organism, I move that person from a red room into a blue one. (Steiner, in Bamford 2017, 72–73)

The therapeutic aspects of colours are also important in Steinerian schools, such as the Waldorf schools, whose classrooms have specific colours for the children of different ages (cf., e.g. Wildgruber 2009/2019; Dahlström 2019; Mahlamäki and Westerlund 2020, 40). Steiner further discusses the health effects of blue and red as well as the effects of sunrises and sunsets in his article, "The Two Fundamental Laws of Colour Theory in Sunrise and Sunset and the Blue Sky. Health and Illness in Relation to the Theory of Colour" (1923) (Steiner 1992/2012, 126–27, 133–34, 140). He also described the meanings of individual colours in his lectures and gave a short meditation of the meanings of colours in 1908:

1. In *darkness* I find the existence of God.
2. In *rose-red* I feel the source of life.
3. In *aether-blue* reposes the spirit's longing.
4. In *life's green* breathes the breath of all life.
5. In *gold's yellow* shines the clarity of thinking.
6. In *fire's red* the strength of will is rooted.
7. In *sun-white* my being's kernel manifests itself. (Steiner, in Stebbing 2008, 12, italics in the original)

All these colours can also be observed in Steiner's visual works, most of which were intended to function as models for anthroposophical artists.



Rudolf Steiner, Nature Mood sketches: *Moonrise* (1922) and *Moonset* (1922) (Stebbing 2008, 98).

### Steiner's training motifs

Steiner produced training motifs for the painting courses arranged in Dornach. Among these pictures there are nine Nature Mood sketches (1922), seven Friedwart sketches (1923–24) and eighteen Motif sketches (1922–24). The painter Henni Geck (1884–1951), who gave painting courses in Dornach, asked in 1922 whether Steiner could give an objective course of instruction for painters. The goal was to lead the students “out of and beyond the all too subjective nature of personal artistic expression” (Wagner-Koch and Wagner 1980/2009, 40; Chanter 2021, 275–76).

Geck has described Steiner's sketches as “picture seeds” that were not meant to be copied or reproduced but further developed. According to Geck, all the training sketches belong together and form an organism (Geck, in Stebbing 2008, 95). As stated by Elisabeth Wagner-Koch and Gerard Wagner (1906–99), who were art teachers later at the Goetheanum, Steiner proceeded from the motifs of nature into the motifs containing human beings, and his sketches “lead us into the inner constitution of the human being, to the stages of human development, to the forces that build up the human being as a spirit-being”

(Wagner-Koch and Wagner 1980/2009, 41). Colour relationships were also essential in Steiner's sketches:

We clearly see how for Rudolf Steiner it was neither a matter of approaching a theme naturalistically nor abstractly, neither impressionistically or expressionistically. Colour relationships in which real forces work bring the human soul into a state of breathing, they cause it to reverberate in unison with a nature- or soul-process that lives in the colours and at the same time in the human being. / It is not so much a matter of “pictures”, as of life-processes. These are capable of leading us into a realm lying behind the outer world of appearances, where colour – free of all materiality – can reveal its true nature. (Wagner-Koch and Wagner 1980/2009, 41)

In Steiner's Nature Mood sketches the sun and the moon are rising, shining and setting, and there are also groups of trees moving, along with quivering air around them. The feature all the pictures share is that something is happening, and the colours, and the main motifs and their

environments, interact. The sun's rays are awakening at dawn, spreading across the landscape and colouring it, and before sliding below the horizon the sun seems to gather its energy. The crescent of a rising moon shifts from left to right, higher above the horizon, while the setting moon grows step by step, and the mist around it fades away when it approaches the horizon. The movements of opening and closing, spreading and gathering energy, are closely bound up with these pictures, and such movements are also essential in eurythmy.

Steiner's original Nature Mood sketches have lost some nuances of tone over the years, although inferences of their quality can be made on the basis of the works of other artists who have worked with these motifs, such as Henni Geck, Gerard Wagner and Elisabeth Wagner-Koch. Their works are dominated by the lustre colours red, yellow and blue, and greenish tones can be observed in parts where overlapping layers of colour mix. The landscape below the setting and rising moons and suns is depicted as brownish. The tones blend softly, although bright colours have been used. The pictures' atmosphere is harmonious, although something mysterious just takes its place. Steiner's training motifs can be understood as specific sensory forms. These forms were shared and transmitted, and they were intended to create and sustain connections between the members of Anthroposophical Society – artists, art students and the audience.

### **The Madonna and the colours of the rainbow**

There are often bright and overlapping layers of colours in Steiner's watercolour paintings. In some motifs such as *New Life (Mother and Child)*, these colour layers create an impression of an aperture in the clouds through which a spiritual revela-

tion can be seen. Steiner's *New Life* further illuminates his idea of the transformative potential of colours, and it also has connections with the traditional imagery of the Madonna and other mother goddesses in Western and Eastern art. Steiner dealt with the Madonna theme both as a part of his Friedwart sketches and in one of his large watercolour paintings, both done in 1924. There are both connections between the compositions of these two paintings and differences regarding the technique, colouring and details of the works. *The Friedwart Madonna*, chalk on paper, is dominated by blue, yellow and rose-red, while the *New Life* watercolour painting contains all the colours of the rainbow.

Steiner was thoroughly familiar with the history of art, which can be observed, for example, in his art-historical lectures given in Dornach (e.g. Steiner 1916–17/2016). His lectures provide numerous art-historical examples of the Madonna motif and plenty of room for the paintings of Raphael (1483–1520). Raphael's painting of the *Sistine Madonna* (1512) was particularly important for Steiner, as it helped him to see connections between religious narratives and the imagery of different cultures, from the mystery of Isis and Horus to Mary and Jesus and the Incarnation. The *Sistine Madonna* was also another key image in the therapeutic sequence of Madonna images that Steiner developed with Dr Felix Peipers around 1908–09. Steiner was convinced of the healing powers of the *Sistine Madonna*, and he treated this subject repeatedly in his lectures (Bamford 2017, 64–65).

According to Angela Lord, the birth of Jesus in Steinerian thinking could be associated with a phase when the ancient religions had lost their deepest connection to the spiritual worlds and the mysteries celebrated in various ways across cultures could not retain their purity. There were complex



Rudolf Steiner, *New Life (Mother and Child)*, 1924 (Stebbing 2022, 42).

orders, various cultic practices and a multitude of gods and goddesses whose voices could not be clearly heard and understood. There were initiates in this phase who were waiting and preparing for a sacred birth by assuming that, through divine intervention, the evolution of humanity could receive a new impulse and it could be renewed and enlivened (Lord 2017, 1). The title of Steiner's painting *New Life* can be associated with incarnation, the word transforming into flesh.

Steiner's *New Life* has clear connections with traditional visual imagery of the Madonna and child, but there are also new themes (cf. Kuuva 2016, 9–14). The

composition of Steiner's painting carries clear similarities to familiar examples of the history of art from the sculptures of Isis and Horus to the compositions of icons. The mother and son are face to face, but they are not looking at each other. Their eyes have turned towards the outside world, but simultaneously they are gazing seriously inside. The figures are near each other, and their hands are tenderly touching. The mother and son seem to be inseparable, the same flesh. Steiner's way of using the colours has its own specific characteristics while the painting's composition has connections with earlier religious imagery.

The figures are surrounded by unspecified space, reminding the viewer of an aperture in the clouds when darkness and light face each other and the colours of the prism appear – as described earlier by Goethe. The work has been painted in such a way that overlapping layers of colour can be seen, and the colours retain their individuality and expressive powers. This technique is known as veiling or veil painting (e.g. Lord 2017, 71). Sweeping and flowing brush strokes can also be clearly observed in Steiner's work. This way of painting arouses an impression of an elliptical, spiralling movement that proceeds from the dark, lower part of the painting towards the lighter tones used in the upper part. The flow of colours starts from violet on the lower edge of the painting and proceeds towards ultramarine and blue, which form the Virgin Mary's veil. The green upper edge follows these, then yellow, orange and red when returning towards the lower edge of the work (cf., e.g. pp. 71, 73). The left half of the painting creates a peaceful atmosphere with its green and blue tones, while the right side of the painting is more dramatic.

The upper right corner of the painting has a curtain-like detail that evokes

associations with the green curtain depicted in the upper corners of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. The colours used in the painting are dramatic, although the details of the figures' faces and hands are clearly at the heart of the composition. The strong red colour on the side of the son evokes associations of blood and emphasizes the paleness of his face. There are connections between Steiner's painting and his version of the colour wheel, whose peach-blossom colour, in some contexts also called incarnat, is the sum of all the other colours. Therefore, the pale skin colour in Steiner's painting can be seen as a symbol of incarnation, in which the divine has taken human form (cf., e.g. Lord 2017, 77). Steiner described this in his lecture on the "Natural Law and Moral Law" (1921):

When we look out into nature, we see all colours of the spectrum, from red at one end to violet at the other, with many shades in between. But if we were to mix these colours together, to make them "colour" one another, they would receive life. They would, when mixed altogether, become incarnat, a colour which represents that which can speak out of the deepest soul of every individual. / When we see the natural world around us, we are in a way looking at an outspread rainbow, a sign and symbol of Father God, the Creator. But if we look at mankind it is not the rainbow, but incarnat that "speaks" out of the inner being. Within a human soul all colours interpenetrate, and do so in such a way as to become alive. If we look at everything which is able to die, whether the physical plant, animal or the physical human being, we see everything which is temporal and which will pass over into dissolution, into the nat-

ural world of the elements, a creation of God the Father. We return, in our physicality, to the world around us, spread out through all of nature like a rainbow. To find the source of what makes the rainbow incarnat, into a living whole, a human being must look within. This inner centre is pure spirit which will create anew, and is eternal. The creation of Father God is given new life by the Son. (Steiner, in Lord 2017, 76)

The traces of Goethe's idea of metamorphosis can be observed in Steiner's *New Life* as well as in his Nature Mood sketches. Eternal transformations take their place in his all works – elements of nature and divine revelations are in the state of constant movement and becoming.

## Conclusion

Colours, for Steiner, were tools through which to approach and communicate with the spiritual world. His goal was to build an objective basis for the spiritual and healing possibilities of colours. The key idea in Steinerian aesthetics was the transformative quality of colours. Steiner aimed to develop new ways of visual expression as he extended the area of colours from the physical to the spiritual world. The most recognizable sensory forms in Steinerian art are the bright, transparent and overlapping layers of colours and figures shining their own light. A similar use of bright colours can be observed in the works of other artists who have worked inside the anthroposophical tradition, such as Henni Geck, Gerard Wagner and Angela Lord. The brightness of works has connections with the use of plant colours developed in the context of anthroposophical art.

When Steinerian art is approached from the perspective of the aesthetics of religion,

anthroposophical aesthetics seems to have its own specific characteristics, particularly the use of colours. By following Birgit Meyer, the anthroposophical use of colour can be seen as a sensational form that aims to invoke and organize access to the transcendental through its recognizable characteristics. A visual analysis of Steiner's artworks provides knowledge of his aesthetic ideas, which essentially enrich his spoken and written language. Art, for Steiner, was a way to bring forth the spiritual aspects that exist in everything that is sentient, and his anthroposophical ideas cannot be fully understood without paying attention to his aesthetic formation of knowledge.

The Steinerian painting tradition was developed in the context of the construction work of the Goetheanum and as a part of the art courses organized there. Important artists in the Steinerian tradition include, for example, Henni Geck and Gerard Wagner, who have made numerous versions of Steiner's motif sketches and used them in their teaching. These motif sketches by Steiner can be seen as specific kinds of sensational forms that were shared and transmitted to unify the visual imagery of anthroposophical contents. The forms designed by Steiner and repeated by later artists in the Steinerian tradition also aimed to construct bonds between the members of Anthroposophical Society.

One important feature in the anthroposophical aesthetic is the absence of shadows: this relates to the idea that the figures are not illuminated by an external source of light but that they shine their own light with their auric colours. There are usually no clear contours around human beings; instead, their colours seem to radiate into their surroundings. Therefore, the pictures made as a part of the Steinerian tradition have a somehow flowing and quivering nature. The works often seem to suggest

that something important, like a divine revelation, is about to happen and we can see a glimpse of it through the opening in the clouds. The illusion of an aperture is created through overlapping layers of colour. A certain kind of revelation can also be seen in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which was an extremely significant work for Steiner, who saw great therapeutic potential in it.

Steiner's conception of colour has connections with both Goethe's theory of colours and theosophical ideas of colour, although Steiner further developed these ideas in his own direction, which can be observed through his lectures and visual sketches. Steiner made distinctions between image colours and lustre colours and emphasized the importance of colour perspective at the expense of linear perspective. Unlike some theosophically oriented artists, Steiner was not striving for abstraction; instead, allegorical figures were essential components in his art (cf., e.g. Zander 2020, 75). Many artists at the turn of the twentieth century had certain interests in theosophy and occultism, although the visual realities they created are often totally different.

Steiner's emphasis upon living colours resembles Goethe's ideas of metamorphosis and the living quality of symbols. The series in anthroposophical art in which the plants, animals and human beings develop from one form to another is important. The idea of transformation is also essential in both Steiner's Nature Mood sketches and his religious motifs. It also relates to his therapeutic ideas, in which the shift from one colour to another one can have a healing effect – either calming or stimulating. More important than the effects of individual colours was the physical and psychological movement created through the shifts between the colours. Living in the



sea of colours can be understood as openness to transformation, which also plays an important role as a part of various therapeutic practices. ■

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