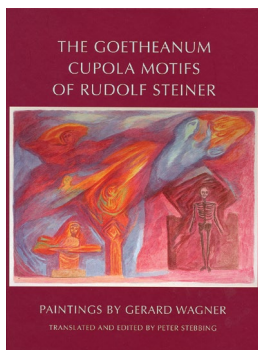


The Goetheanum Cupola Motifs



Peter Stebbing, ed. & trans., The Goetheanum Cupola Motifs of Rudolf Steiner: Paintings by Gerard Wagner. Great Barrington, Mass.: SteinerBooks, 2011. 246 pages, 208 illustrations.

Review by David Adams

This large-format, hardbound book is a most significant publication for anthroposophical art in the English-speaking world, and once again we have Peter Stebbing to thank for putting together a finely crafted tome presenting a stellar collection of paintings and complementary texts. The book is beautifully laid out with intelligently selected photographs and artwork relating to passages in its texts.

We are given not only high-quality colored reproductions of all of Rudolf Steiner's original motif-sketches for the paintings on the two cupolas of the first Goetheanum and the colored photographs that were taken of his painting on the small cupola, but also all of Assya Turgenieff's colored engravings of each of the Goetheanum windows – and other vintage photographs and artwork as well. Most of this visual material has appeared in English-language publications before (especially in Hilde Raske's *The Language of Color in the First Goetheanum* [1983] and the Wilhelm Rath/William Mann publication, *The Imagery of the Goetheanum Windows* [1976]), but what particularly distinguishes this latest work are the juxtaposition with several lectures and excerpts of lectures by Rudolf Steiner and, especially, the colorful and impres-

sively executed collection of glowing watercolor paintings on many of these same motifs by Gerard Wagner. Wagner's multi-decades creative occupation (apparently beginning around 1977) with Steiner's Goetheanum motifs reveals something of the abundance of expressive possibilities still contained within the organic "living entity," as Wagner puts it, in each of these motifs.

Aside from Wagner's own short explanatory essay about his painting work ("practice and study") with the large cupola motifs, Stebbing wisely does not include further analysis or discussion of the specific paintings but lets the gallery of Wagner's work on each motif speak for itself. In his essay Wagner suggests that the Goetheanum motifs "can be experienced as if *one motif* were to wander through the various colors of the rainbow – extending over the large cupola space in great waves of color – undergoing in this way a transformation corresponding to the influence of the particular background color." His painting research with the motifs then explored both the sequential development of the different colors within each motif that would "lead into the formative forces giving rise to this motif" and the

varying effects of specific background colors on the metamorphic development of that color-sequence within the organic whole of the motif. It is a method aimed at patiently gaining free access to the original spiritual "archetypal sources of the motifs, out of the color." Perhaps most astonishingly, as a result of this painting research Wagner further relates his felt intuition that the various motifs "are all in fact metamorphoses of each other. It is as though *one motif*, were to manifest itself again and again in different ways, as determined by the various background colors...."

As Stebbing comments in his preface, these paintings by Wagner "cannot be separated



Gerard Wagner: *IA O Motif*, 1976, watercolor using plant colors

from the Goetheanum itself and the art impulse for which it stands. They can be fully understood only in the context of anthroposophical spiritual science, of which the Goetheanum is, in Rudolf Steiner's words, a 'true emblem.'" Thus, there is a variety of material presenting the original Goetheanum work as well, including a short foreword by Sergei Prokofieff and an appendix of biographical sketches and photographs of the original cupola painters (with an earlier section listing who was assigned which motifs), as well as a somewhat longer biographical presentation on Wagner himself. There is even a short section describing and picturing some interesting 1982 experiments by Wagner for metamorphosing the large cupola motifs and color scheme within the context of a new second Goetheanum ceiling structure and color base

("slightly subdued background colors, i.e., 'broken' with black"). Most significant, I would say, is the inclusion of two related lectures, an essay, and a number of brief excerpts from lectures by Rudolf Steiner on specific motifs, most of which have not previously appeared in English (although a manuscript trans-



Gerard Wagner: *Eye & Ear Motif*, 1975, watercolor using plant colors

lation of the last lecture has been available from the Rudolf Steiner Library). I only found missing one very suggestive Steiner quotation on the large cupola paintings, which he gave in his lecture of Dec. 29, 1918 (in English, on p. 112 of *How Can Mankind Find the Christ Again?*).

I found the most interesting and important lecture to be the first one, "The Renewal of the Artistic Principle" from October 25, 1914. In it Steiner begins by noting that the art in the Goetheanum building embodies something new in human evolution that is now essential for humanity's further development. He characterizes this as calling something that had been at rest into life, into motion. One example is the metamorphosing forms of capitals and architraves in the Goetheanum.

Another follows changing motifs from below upwards. Another in the realm of painting is a movement from imitative, local-color painting that tries to record what is static and on the surface of things to a new living within the flowing, creative element in colors that of itself can give birth to form in painting. In this way painting, too, can be freed and set into motion.

The lecture also covers differences between drawing and painting; thinking, feeling, and willing aspects in the design of the Goetheanum; humanity's need to discover the "spiritual America"; the future end of both material and spiritual evolution; learning to think not only with the physical brain; the creative language of the distant future common to all humanity; and how the Goetheanum cupola is "an expression of the Mys-

tery of Golgotha in architecture." Here are a few telling quotations from the lecture: "Only they are true artists who live to an extent together with things out there in the cosmos and for whom artistic activity is but the occasion for reproducing their life within the cosmos." "If one releases color from objects and lives with color, then it

begins to reveal profound secrets, and the entire world becomes a flooding, surging sea of color." "The form will be born out of the color... Indirectly, by means of color, one will thus enter into the creative element in the world. Only in this way can it happen that painting not only covers the surface, but directs us out into the entire cosmos, uniting us with the life of the whole cosmos." "What is to be created in our building, however, will not be there in order to be looked at, not in the least! ... But what is done here is not only there to be looked at, but to be properly *experienced*." "The material substance of what is painted should be forgotten. Rather should it be as though transparent. In looking out beyond what is painted on the surfaces, one then looks out into spiritual distances."

The second Steiner piece is a shorter essay titled “Goethe and the Goetheanum,” which points out that Goethe “introduced into knowledge the spiritual activity by which he was effective as an artist. He sought the path from artist to knower and found it.” Out of Goethe’s worldview Steiner was able to lead his idea of metamorphosis over into artistic work, thereby approaching inwardly the creativity of nature. In the process, one can also realize that each soul power (thinking, feeling, and willing) is a metamorphosis of the others. By living into and together with sense appearances, thinking can become objective, as Goethe discovered. If one further adopts and applies the metamorphosis idea in the realms of soul and spirit, one’s thinking becomes “spirit-enlivened” or “spirit-bearing.” As Steiner puts it, “It undergoes a metamorphosis to become ‘seeing’ and has then become free of the body.”

The final Steiner lecture, “The Paintings of the Small Cupola: The Goetheanum as a True Emblem of Anthroposophy” of January 25, 1920, is Steiner’s only sustained coverage of the cupola motifs within a lecture. In the process he also says some important things about the nature of color and its relation to our human experience (as well as to elemental beings). One sample: “Anyone able to immerse themselves in the world of color will be able to rise to the feeling that out of this mysterious world of color, a world of ‘being’ sprouts forth. By means of our inner forces, color wants of itself to evolve into a world of being.” Stebbing helpfully illustrates this lecture with the original black-and-white details of the small cupola paintings (although it must have been tempting to use colored examples). At the conclusion is attached another only slightly jocular quotation from Steiner linking the two centaur-like creatures in the “Germanic Initiate” motif to Ameri-

can President Woodrow Wilson and his influential wife (especially telling today when one sees what has become economically and socially of the direction Wilson launched then with his 14 Points). Stebbing even managed to find a suitable photograph of the Wilsons to juxtapose amusingly with the detail of the centaurs!

Two further quite interesting written pieces follow. One is a study by Stebbing (especially following the work on this by Daniel van Bemmelen) of Steiner’s instructions to complete the painting of the north

side of the small cupola in the “counter-colors” (vs. complementary colors) to those he had used in painting the south side and also the relationship of this to the Steiner’s “twelve-color color circle” (vs. Goethe’s color circle). The second essay is “Indications of Rudolf Steiner for Engraving the Window Motifs” by Assya Turgenieff, describing her various interactions with Steiner in developing her etchings of the Goetheanum window motifs and the technique of black-and-white shaded drawing.

Finally, in the appendix is Stebbing’s translation of another essay by Wagner on the development of his approach to painting out of Steiner’s motifs and training sketches, titled “A Path

of Practice in Painting.” Let me close this too-long review by reminding again how pleasurable it is just to look through this book visually. I count 152 color illustrations, most of them full- or half-page in size and tastefully presented, as is the book layout in general.



Gerhard Wagner: *Goetheanum Red Window Middle Motif*, 1974, watercolor using plant colors

David Adams (ctrarcht@nccn.net) teaches art history at Sierra College in California, is the Secretary of the Council of the Art Section in North America, and co-edits the Art Section Newsletter. — In regard to the paintings, David notes that it’s important to not forget Steiner’s initiatives to develop the plant colors which give the “glowing” quality to Gerard Wagner’s paintings.