

Painting Problems: Making Aesthetic Sense of Colour

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*(This is a longer version of an abridged article that originally appeared in *Renewal – Journal for Waldorf Education*, November, 2010, pages 8-12 with permission.)*



Fig. 1. In kindergarten and pre-school children paint for the sheer enjoyment, without the need of a structured painting "lesson."

Have you ever heard the complaint, "Why do all the children's paintings look the same?" If you've asked yourself this question after having viewed the work of students in the lower grades of a Steiner-Waldorf school (the question rarely arises with regard to the work of the upper grades) you're not alone. Why is it that particularly in grades one through four the artistic work done in painting classes often appears so similar, so uniform? And, is this a problem?

In the early grades of a Steiner-Waldorf school a class of children is asked to copy-down the same stories off the chalkboard, add and subtract the same arithmetic problems, reproduce the same study examples into their main lesson books, recite the same poems, and sing the same songs. Yet painting the same picture somehow goes against our sense of free artistic expression. In painting, perhaps more than any other art, we expect to see the unhampered self-expression of the individual — their unique artistic style.

However, imagine a singing class in which

seven to ten year old children are allowed to sing their own songs at the same time. This would of course be total chaos. Choosing one song for the children to sing together gives them the framework within which they will gradually develop towards creative musical expression and find their own voice. Just as tones are learned by the regular practice of appropriate musical compositions, sung together in a group, so too can children learn the colour tones by repeated simple pictorial compositions. The painting lesson should be a quiet colour-choir where each child's picture sounds forth within the harmony of the whole class.

What at first appears to be a class of all the same pictures reveals very different worlds when looked at more closely. The teacher can learn to see not only the temperament of each individual child but also various emotional conditions and certain learning differences. Imbalances in the child can then be worked on in a gentle, artistic manner by directing the child's attention to simple questions of technique: weakness or strength of pigment, lightness or darkness of tone, warmth or coolness of hue, wetness or dryness of paper, swiftness or slowness of working, mixing or separating of colour, and so on.

Although our passing glance might see the painting lesson as producing hopelessly similar work, the teacher who knows his or her students finds striking visual evidence of the developing individualities and their needs.

If the children aren't having painting lessons to express themselves or to produce unique and individual works of art, then why are they taking painting as a weekly discipline? This question is perhaps best approached by looking at the very first lesson suggested for first grade painting. (Kindergarten painting consists of setting an appropriate mood, instruction in the use of materials by example, and seeing that a picture is not overworked. No formal lesson as to picture

content is given before class one in a Waldorf-Steiner school.)

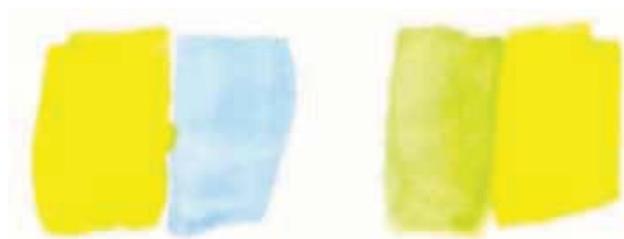


Fig. 2: Yellow and blue, and yellow and green, is the first painting class in grade one of a Waldorf-Steiner school, done as a group exercise.

In *Practical Advice to Teachers*¹, Rudolf Steiner recommended that the class teacher put up a large sheet of white paper at the front of the classroom. The teacher then paints a small “patch” of yellow on the white surface and invites each child, one after another, to come up to the front of the room and paint a small patch of yellow as well. (Presumably a verse and short story would set the appropriate mood within the class, preparing the children for entering into this lesson.) Once the students have all placed their yellow spots distinctly and with space between each of them, the teacher then paints a swatch of blue next to her yellow. The children come up, one by one, and do the same. When about half of the children have completed this procedure the teacher exchanges the blue paint for green, letting the remaining children place green next to their yellow. The end result is a page full of yellow patches, half of which have a patch of blue next to them, the other half have adjacent patches of green (fig. 2). Steiner then suggested that the teacher says something like the following: “Now I am going to tell you something that you may not yet understand, but one day you will understand perfectly: What we have done up there, where we put blue next to yellow, is more beautiful than what we did down here where we put green next to yellow. Blue next to yellow is more beautiful than green next to yellow.”²

Although Steiner speaks of placing the blue and green “directly next to” the yellow, the experience would be equally effective, if not enhanced, by

surrounding the yellow with the blue and the green. This would also lead more naturally into the next painting lesson where one could have the children do individual paintings of yellow surrounded by blue. Also, in order that every child may experience both combinations the exercise can be arranged with two large sheets of paper and a repeating of each child painting yellow on each sheet and then surrounding one with blue and one with green. This allows each child to fully engage in both colour combinations.

I have known a number of teachers both in England and America who have, in teaching this first painting lesson, been unable to say to their classes that “blue and yellow is more beautiful than green next to yellow.” After all, this is quite a startling thing to say in contemporary western society where it is taken for granted that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” Beauty has become a subjective experience when art museums and galleries can display splattered canvases and piles of debris as a new gold-standard in art. It is part of our era to behold beauty even in the ugly. How dare the teacher claim that “blue and yellow is more beautiful than green and yellow!” However, it is not that one is saying green and yellow aren’t beautiful—certainly not. But can we perceive a distinction between one colour combination and another that can be called “more beautiful?”

Supposing we do this first painting exercise for ourselves, as adult students of aesthetics—the science of heightened sense experience. Paint two yellow spots and surround one with blue, the other with green (fig. 3). If we use a cool (lemon) yellow and a cool (cobalt) blue we will notice how brightly the yellow shines within its setting. Look carefully at the same yellow surrounded by green! It doesn’t appear to be quite as radiant (especially if we place it within a very yellow-green surrounding). In fact the lemon yellow not only appears slightly duller in this setting, it also looks a bit flatter and warmer, as though it leans more towards the active colours of the spectrum, toward warm yellow and away from green. It

1. Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, Lecture IV, pp. 59-60. Rudolf Steiner Press, 1976.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 60-62.

is as though the green sucks the brilliance and shine out of the yellow, and in a very real sense, this is exactly what happens. Simple observation reveals a slightly curdled yellow when surrounded by green, but why?

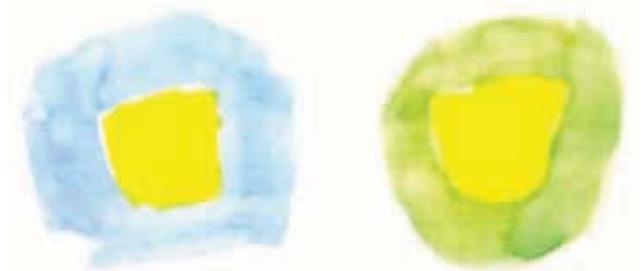


Fig. 3: Yellow surrounded by blue and yellow surrounded by green can help us experience the aesthetic lesson at the root of this painting exercise.

Green is a secondary colour composed of two primary colours, yellow and blue. Because green has yellow in it already it fails to show as strong a contrast to the pure yellow as blue does. Blue being further away in the spectrum from yellow than green, presents a striking contrast and actually enhances the yellow's individual character, as the yellow likewise enhances the blue's character, both being primary colours. Goethe referred to colours next to each other such as yellow and green as "non-characteristic" combinations and those a step further away, such as yellow and blue as "characteristic" combinations. In a Goethean sense, Steiner is saying that this first grade painting lesson demonstrates how yellow and blue are a more characteristic combination than yellow and green, the latter being a non-characteristic combination.

Colours opposite one another on the colour circle, that is complementary colours, Goethe referred to as "harmonious" combinations, meaning that they embody more of the totality of the entire colour circle (fig. 4). From this we could say that yellow and violet are more harmonious than even yellow and blue, which are simply characteristic in their pairing. In his *Theory of Colours*,³ Goethe also described the principle of polarity as it appears in the colour circle. Besides the polarity of warmth and coolness in red and blue there exists the polarity of light and darkness

exemplified by yellow and blue. Goethe had arrived at his theories from direct observation into the phenomena of colours as we also should do. What concerns us with regard to the first painting exercise is:

- 1) colours adjacent to each other are "non-characteristic," lack lustre, and are one-sided or narrow-range combinations—as seen in yellow and green;
- 2) contrasting colours are more "characteristic" in that they express a fuller range of the colour circle, enhancing and expressing a more individual character of each colour quality—as with yellow and blue;
- 3) additionally, yellow and blue express the polarity of light and darkness within the colour circle, while green and yellow do not.

Steiner was well aware of Goethe's observations



Fig. 4: The colour circle can be divided into three distinct groupings of colour combinations: non-characteristic, characteristic, and harmonious—as described by Goethe.

on the combinations of colours for he edited Goethe's scientific writings over the course of thirteen years. So why does he use the word *beautiful* in connection with colour relationships? After observing the more subdued character of yellow with green, one might be inclined to say that yellow and blue are "truer" to each other because they fulfill each other more than yellow and green do, but why more beautiful? This leads us to the question of 'what is beauty in the art of colour?' Steiner certainly did not intend to say that yellow and blue are prettier or that we should like one pairing more than another. He somehow suggests that beauty is an objective fact, which can presumably be experienced and learned.

Consider the definition of beauty as formulated by the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas: "For

3 Johann W. von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*. M.I.T. Press, 1970.

beauty there are three requirements:

First, a certain wholeness or perfection, for whatever is incomplete is, so far, ugly;

second, a due proportion or harmony;

and third, clarity, so that brightly coloured things are called beautiful.” We may not exactly agree with such an antiquated characterisation today, but it is interesting to see what Aquinas comes to: wholeness, harmony and clarity. The Greek philosopher Aristotle described beauty in a similar three-part characterization of order, symmetry, and clarity. Don’t these characteristics agree with what can be observed in the example of the first painting exercise? The yellow-blue relationship represents more of a *wholeness* of the colour circle, especially since it is a combination of primary colours (colours that can not be arrived at by mixing any other colours together but are unique in themselves). Yellow and blue also have a *harmony* of both colour tone and light and dark balance. Yellow and blue, through their relationship, reveal a higher level of *clarity* or brightness of colour as well. Certainly Thomas Aquinas would, by definition, agree with Steiner that yellow and blue is more beautiful than yellow and green.

In the end, the question we are left with is, does an objective beauty really exist? Is there an objective occurrence of the beautiful when we relate one phenomenon to another? If the teacher answers no to this, then it is obvious that she would find it difficult to say one combination is more beautiful than another. In this case, the class can enjoy the encounter with colour and the creative process of painting without any conclusion being drawn from the exercise. However, if we can say “yes” to this question because of what we observe to be true in the actual phenomena of colours, then we introduce the first lesson in aesthetics at the same time as giving the first painting class. This plants a seed for a *sense of beauty*, completely within the realm of the feeling life, and prepares the children for true aesthetic judgment to unfold later in adolescence. “This will sink deeply into the child’s soul,” said Steiner of this painting exercise.⁴

What is noteworthy here is that children have

no problem with the statement: “Yellow and blue are more beautiful than yellow and green.” It is only to our adult thinking that this smacks of preference and prejudice. The child will accept what the teacher knows to be true, providing the teacher can see it for herself.

One class of first graders, upon completing this first painting lesson and being told that one day they would understand that yellow together with blue is more beautiful than yellow next to green, promptly responded, “Oh, we know that! Yes, we know that. It is like the sun in the blue sky.” After a brief pause, looking at all of the yellow and blues and yellow and greens at the front of the room, one little girl chimed-in, “Yes but yellow and green is beautiful too, like flowers in the grass.” This led to wonderful discussion and was truly a first lesson in aesthetics!

Something that we as adults, as teachers, often have difficulty with is helping children to live into pure colour in the first, second and third grades. In these early years, the children should not be drawing with paint (except in the case of introducing the alphabet, mentioned below), but painting with colours, producing colour forms rather than illustrating things or objects with lines. They should be true abstract expressionists, non-objective, non-figurative colour purists. Painting should be a playful immersion in colour. This playing with colour is difficult for our adult consciousness to consider as substantial enough to be a contribution to actual learning. We like to see the things of the world clearly focused and in all their detail and outline. However, the young child does not necessarily need, nor is he nourished by exacting details of the physical world. If first and second graders practice the painting of simple coloured areas, patches of colour side by side, surrounding and overlapping each other, they will be developing their colour-sense and their aesthetic sensitivity. However, this free-form approach to painting does not mean the children will not arrive at recognisable forms, such as simple plant-like, animal-like shapes, and letter forms.

“Right from the start, we give our young

4 Rudolf Steiner, *Practical Advice to Teachers*, Lecture IV, p. 61.

pupils the opportunity of working artistically with colours, not only with dry crayons but also with watercolours. In this simple way, we give the child something from which the forms of the letters can be developed.”⁵ This description by Steiner of how one arrives at the letters of the alphabet is part of a process that begins with the teacher telling a story—perhaps of a *big, beautiful butterfly*. The children then bring colour to their pages, painting simple changing forms that ultimately arrive at a big, beautiful butterfly shape whose wings suggest the letter B. The letter B is then drawn separately and written as part of the story of the “big, beautiful butterfly.”(fig. 5) Finally, the children read their own written story aloud to complete a cycle that goes from oral story, painting, drawing, writing, to reading. A similar thing can be done with a story of a “silent, slithering serpent,” perhaps in a reversal of the same colours—that is, demonstrating the use of positive and negative shapes. It is important to grow the forms gradually, slowly arriving at the finished form as though magically.

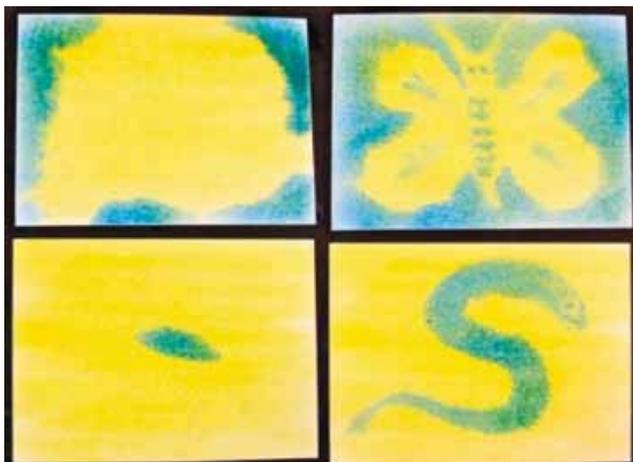


Fig. 5: Painting the various colour combinations, such as the non-characteristic pairing (here yellow and green), can be used to bring forth pictures that will introduce the letters of the alphabet in a living imagination for the class one children.

“When introducing writing to the children we must...” says Steiner, “communicate in the form of pictures. This is possible, however, only when we do not begin by introducing the alphabet directly, nor reading as a subject, but when we

start with painting. As teachers, we ourselves must be able to live in a world of imagery. First a form of drawing with paint (leading the child from colour experience to form), out of which writing is evolved. Only then do we introduce reading... One finds that between the second dentition and puberty one has to approach all teaching pictorially and imaginatively, and this is certainly possible.”⁶

Colours are a living language of nature and the equivalent expression of emotions in sentient beings. The painting lesson is an opportunity to develop the organs of perception that can unfold directly out of the feeling life, the capacity for cognitive feeling and emotional intelligence. It is primarily via the feelings that relationships of colour meeting colour are encountered and savoured. By this means faculties for qualitative measuring, weighing and balancing develop new soul capacities. This is an educating of our feeling life for the moral sphere, for moral imagination. An aesthetic sense for colour is a capacity of the heart for weighing-up, being ethical about what is beautiful. In mathematics an equation that is beautiful is considered more likely to be true. Is it not so that in painting a colour relationship, a colour equation, that is true is more likely to be beautiful?



Fig. 6: Another type of colour combination, according to Goethe, is the characteristic, here showing a sunny yellow surrounded by a sky blue, and in reverse a lonely cloud of blue being cheered up by a sunny surround of yellow.

Steiner was very direct in regard to his position on the importance of painting for young children: “It is very damaging for later life if we impart perspective to a child before he has had a kind of intensive colour perspective. The human being is inwardly alienated in a terrible way when he

5 Rudolf Steiner, *What is Waldorf Education*, p. 75. SteinerBooks, 2003.
6 *Ibid*, p. 111-112.

becomes accustomed to quantitative perspective without first acquiring the intensive, qualitative perspective which lies in colour perspective.”⁷ This “intensive, qualitative colour perspective” must be provided for in the early grades before the children develop a longing to capture three-dimensional space in their pictures, following the nine-year change. Colour dramas, colour conversations, can easily engage the children, without figurative illustrations, if the teacher presents them by way of imaginative story content. This is not to say that children should remain in kindergarten painting of wishy-washy, single colour or unformed pictures—this is the opposite danger, and all-too-often the case in class one and two.

The “reversible exercises” are particularly directed to unfolding the faculties for colour perspective. These are the painting exercises recommended by Steiner where one colour is surrounded by another, and then in the next painting a reversal of the colour placement takes place. In this way one can go through all of the two colour relationships that are possible over the course of first and second grade: non-characteristic combinations (fig. 5), characteristic combinations (fig. 6), and harmonious combinations (fig. 7)—for all are beautiful in their own way.

The arrangement of one colour in the center and the other colour forming the periphery is also significant for this age. It reinforces, reassures, and encourages the gentle experience of “me” and the “world,” “I” and “thou.” It is an expression of point and periphery, head and limbs, and as such is the archetypal composition before up and down, left and right, foreground and background come into play. These reversible, two-colour combination painting exercises should not be missed out in class one and two but ought to form the basis of the colour studies for this period in the child’s education.

Numerical relationships are often referred to as problems and every colour combination should likewise be regarded as a problem in the sense of relationship, ratio, harmonic measurement, and aesthetics. Colour problems are also social

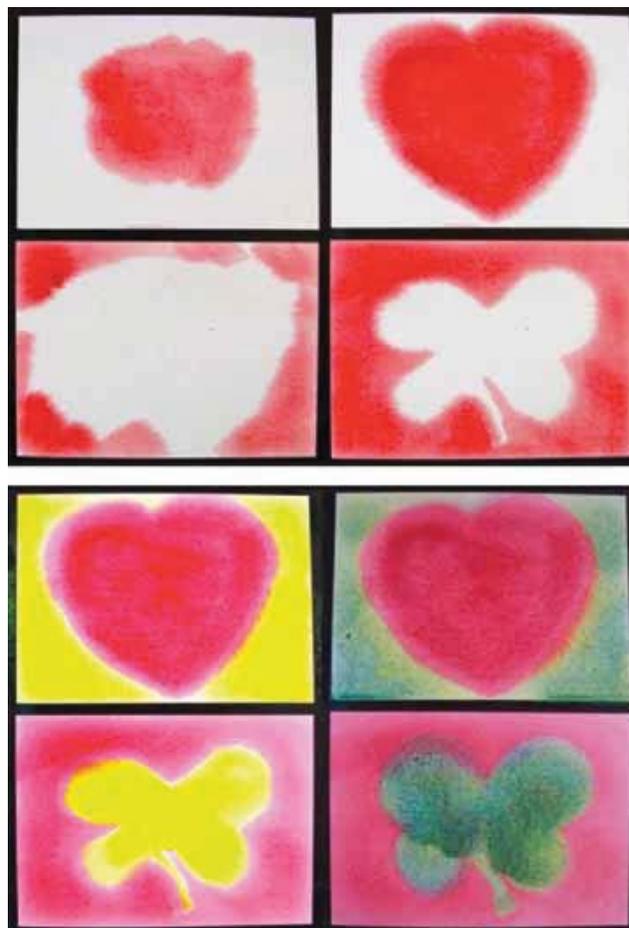


Fig. 7: The “reversible exercises” might be used, as here in this harmonious combination, to bring seasonal themes out of the colour. The harmonious combinations require three colours in order to achieve the two colour combination.

problems for they deal with the interaction of elements, qualities, sensations and ‘beingness’, that act in definite ways upon each other. The painting lesson should be a time for colour problem solving. In this way, it can be a place for learning the speech of nature, the language of the soul, and a time for nurturing the great potential for one’s aesthetic sense of colour.

Colour is the soul of nature and of the entire cosmos, and when we experience colour we participate in this soul.—Rudolf Steiner⁸ ♦

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7 Rudolf Steiner, Kingdom of Childhood, Rudolf Steiner. Lecture IV, p. 83. Rudolf Steiner Press, 1964.

8 Rudolf Steiner, lecture given on July 26, 1914, cited in The Individuality of Colour, by Gerard Wagner, p. 117. Rudolf Steiner Press, 2009.