

Light-Filled Color:

Translucent Colors and their Use in the Waldorf School

By Kevin Hughes

When one enters a Waldorf school for the first time and walks through the halls and looks into a classroom or two, one of the strongest impressions (in addition to the children, of course) might well be the abundance of color. The walls are painted in luminous colors that little resemble the flat, opaque colors that most of us are used to in schools, offices, and homes. Children's paintings in flowing colors are displayed on these walls, and often there are colored transparencies on windows, as well as baskets of dyed woolen yarn for knitting, and displays of colored beeswax that has been modeled. The impression may be intriguing and may raise questions in the viewer's mind about the use of color in a Waldorf school, particularly in the paintings the children do, and in the painting of the classroom walls.

One of the aims of Waldorf Education is the development of students who have exercised a wide range of their inner capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. The whole curriculum seeks to nurture that development through intellectual study, artistic practice, and practical activity. Artistic activity is closely related to the feeling life, and thus the arts play a central role in a Waldorf school. As tone is the crucial element in music, and form is the foundation of sculpture, color is the essence of painting. The world of color is a world unto itself, critical for the healthy development of the human soul.

Color is something of a mystery because it is both a measurable physical phenomenon and an inner experiential one that is primal and direct. Modern science holds that color is simply different wavelengths of reflected light, and that color is a secondary quality of objects. It considers the inner experience of color to be subjective and gives little consideration to the objective qualities of color.

The view of color that informs Waldorf Education differs from this view. It understands color as having objective, intrinsic qualities and dynamics that deeply affect the inner life of the human being. We respond to color with our feelings. A bright day with a clear blue sky has a much different effect on us than a gray day with muted colors. Walking into a red room affects us differently than walking into a blue room. Our language even describes inner states of being as colors: "I was so angry I saw red," or "I'm feeling blue." Color arouses an inner response from us. It speaks to, refines, expands, and develops our inner life.

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The approach to color in Waldorf schools is based on Rudolf Steiner's views about color. Steiner himself based his work on the seminal research of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Goethe is known as an important figure in world literature, but it is interesting that he considered his most important and significant work to be his research in the natural sciences, particularly his research on plants and on color. Not only was Goethe interested in the physical manifestation of color, but he was also interested in the qualitative nature of color—the nonphysical aspect of color that is intimately connected with human inner life. In his theory of color Goethe describes the individual colors and their feeling content. He recommended surrounding oneself with color in order to experience its inner qualities:

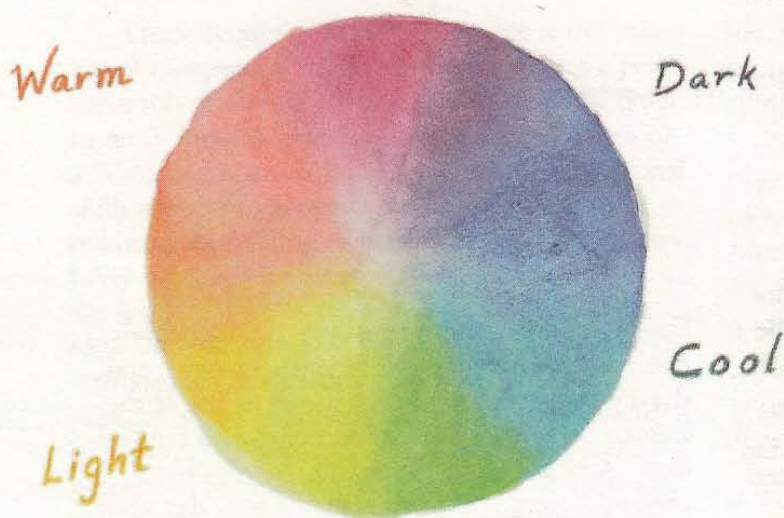


Illustration I: Goethe's color circle.

Experience teaches us that the individual colors induce particular moods. . . . In order to experience fully these important individual effects, the eye should be entirely surrounded by one color; we should be in a room of one color, or look through colored glass. We are then identified with the color; it induces both eye and mind to be in unison with it.¹

Goethe was also interested in the phenomenon of the "afterimage," a physiological response in which the complementary color of any given color is seen as a residual image after the given color has been looked at. If you gaze for a few moments at a red patch of color, then look at a white sheet of paper, a ghostlike image of the patch will appear—but in the color green, the complement to red. Goethe saw in this phenomenon our inner need for a complete and whole color experience. The eye produces the "opposite of the single color thrust upon it, thus forming a satisfying whole."²

Wholeness is a theme in Goethe's ideas on color. Instead of conceiving of color as a linear spectral band, Goethe imagined the colors of the spectrum forming a circle, which expresses wholeness and balance, and in which the complementary colors lie across from each other

on the circle (Illustration I). One can experience in this circle the inner dynamic of various colors and the relationships between individual colors and between groups of colors. For example, in yellow and blue we can experience a polarity of light and dark mediated by greens and reds that lie between them on the circle. Another polarity can be experienced between the warm side of the circle (reds through yellows) and the cool side (blue greens through blue violets). Further, one might experience the colors of the circle as associated with different inner activities (contemplation, anger, joy, sorrow, the activity of will, and so on), or see relationships between the color circle and the circle of the year with the four seasons. Goethe's contribution to our knowledge of color is in his objectifying the inner dynamics and laws of color. The ability to

live into the qualities of a given color and make our inner responses to color conscious was also important to Rudolf Steiner:

We must again make it possible not merely to look at colors and to apply them outwardly, but to live with the color, to share its inner vitality. . . . We can only do it if we immerse ourselves in the flowing life of red or blue, for instance, so that it becomes really living for us.³

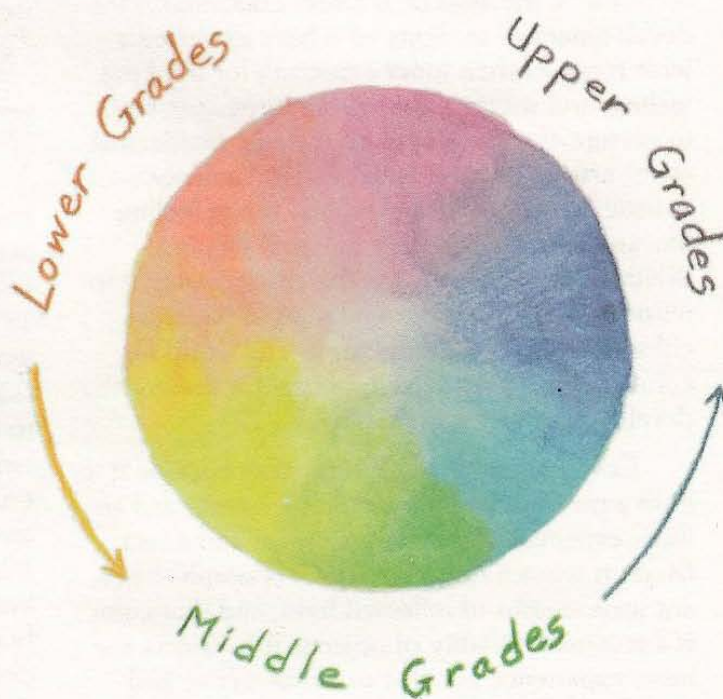
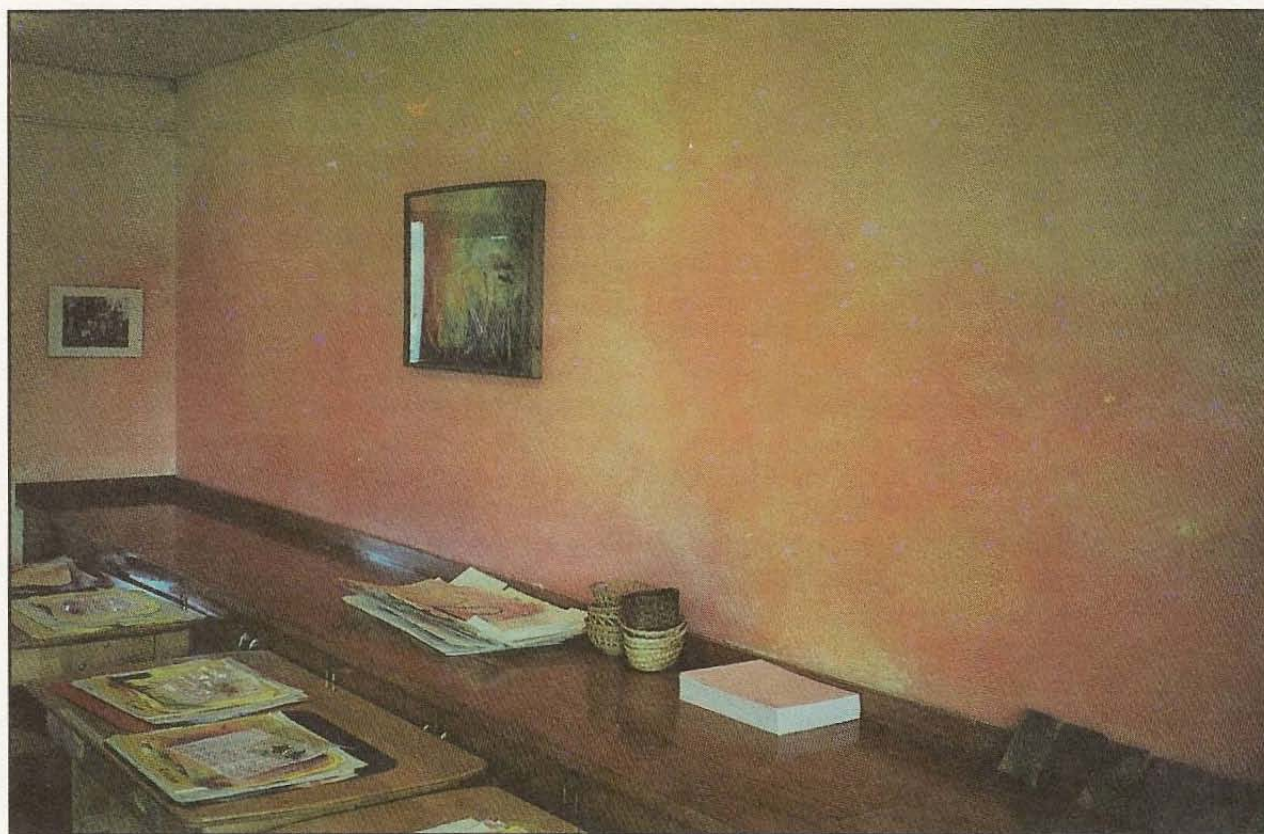


Illustration II: Color circle through the grades.



Lazured classroom wall at the Kimberton Waldorf School.

This advice to steep oneself in color experience is not only meant for painters. Steiner made color experience an important part of the Waldorf school program out of his concern for the development of the healthy inner life of children. He was concerned that a purely mechanical view of color, lacking any sensitivity for the inner qualities of color, would have an unhealthy effect on developing human beings. Humanity would risk being cut off from the living world of color.

Waldorf Education seeks to balance a mechanical view of color by immersing children in the qualities of each color, slowly and patiently, over time. This process is especially pronounced in the painting lessons in the early grades and is supported by the colors of classrooms. From kindergarten through grades two or three, the painting lessons focus on transparent, flowing colors freed from form. The child is able to experience the color in itself, not as a secondary quality of an object or form. Children in the Waldorf school first learn to speak (paint) color "words" (individual colors by themselves) and then color "phrases" (combinations of colors together). A first grader, then, may do a number of paintings using only red, or blue, or yellow, fully experiencing the language of that individual color. Later, the children explore the dynamics and relationships between colors.

All these explorations in the early grades are not approached intellectually, but experientially, and are clothed in lively images from the teacher that may take the form of color stories or conversations between color. These help convey the inner quality of each color and the dynamics of their relationships. The use of transparent, flowing colors allows the children to experience color in its pure state, free from the weight of matter, in a form similar to the colors we experience in the interplay of light and dark in the atmosphere: sunrises, sunsets, rainbows. These atmospheric colors present themselves to our senses, but we experience them as almost immaterial, and they make a strong impression on our inner life.

It follows that the less density a painting medium has, the more closely it will correspond to the essential nature of color. The purest painting would be a kind of painting in light, such as nature continually conjures up before our senses.⁴

Watercolor, then, is the medium that best supports these color studies in the early grades. The methods and materials used in the painting lesson help us to achieve the goal of an intensive experience of color for the children, an experience that helps them to speak the language of color.

In the painting lesson, the child experiences color through his own activity. But activity is not

the only important aspect of the Waldorf program. The environment that the child learns in is also important, and Waldorf teachers often take great care to make the classroom environment supportive of the learning experience. In order to strengthen the possibility for the child to live with color and to share its inner vitality, Waldorf school classrooms are usually painted in translucent water-based colors.

The technique used, called lazure painting, is based on the same principles that underlie the use of translucent watercolor in the painting lesson. The technique was introduced by Steiner for the painting of the first Goetheanum⁵ and was adopted for the Waldorf schools and for other types of buildings—homes for the aged, hospitals, homes for the handicapped, private residences, offices, and so on. It involves the layering of translucent washes of color on a white surface (wall or ceiling) until the desired effect is achieved. Because the medium is translucent, light can shine through the colors, and the mixing and weaving of the layers becomes visible. The result is a surface that is no longer

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dead and flat but one that has an inner glow and movement. Through lazuring, colors regain an inner vitality, and an architectural space can be transformed.

In most Waldorf schools, each grade level has its own classroom color theme, so that the children have a strong experience of a color, the inner qualities of which meet their particular stage of inner development. Steiner made recommendations on classroom colors for the grades for a few early Waldorf schools. Although each recommendation was particular to the school in question, they all followed a similar pattern in moving through the color circle from red in the first grade through the oranges, yellows, greens, blues, to—by the end of high school—violet. Steiner did not give

indications for the kindergarten in these early schools, but typically Waldorf kindergartens are painted in a light rose or peach.

Reds are used in the earliest grades for a definite reason. As mentioned earlier, contained within the color circle are a number of dynamics and polarities. One is the polarity between yellow (light) and blue (dark), with greens and reds as mediators. Another is the polarity between the warm colors (reds) and the cool (blues). In the reds we experience vitality and inner force. Red is not a particularly restful color, but is a color of action, purpose, willfulness, and warmth. These qualities meet the predominance of will-full activity in the inner life of the young child, who learns by doing and imitating, not intellectually or through abstraction.

On the other side of the spectrum, blue, in its quiet, contemplative mood and coolness, forms a polarity to red. Thinking is an inner activity that requires a degree of coolness (detached objectivity) and quiet stillness. The head needs literally to be still to think. Imagine using your head as a tool, as an animal does, and thinking, at the same time. The qualities that live in blue are also the qualities that we need for thinking. It is an ideal color for the period of a child's development from about the twelfth year, when thinking begins to blossom. Here, then, the polarity of red/blue (warm/cool, active/contemplative) corresponds to the polarity of will activity in the earliest grades and thinking in the later grades.⁶

In between this polarity, however, lies a process of mediation, a balancing of opposites and extremes, and a development of the child's middle sphere of feeling. Likewise, during this period, the classroom colors are those that mediate between red and blue, moving from warmth to coolness through the oranges, yellow, and greens. Green, in particular, is a color of balance. It mediates between the polarity of yellow and blue, and it forms the complement to red. It is a good color for the fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms because the ten- and eleven-year-olds are experiencing the coming into balance and harmony of their breathing rate and their heartbeat. It is a moment of balance before the children move into adolescence. We know that in adolescence the development of thinking comes to the fore, but in Waldorf schools we strive to balance the coolness and detachment of thinking, which unchecked can become calculating and cold, with a healthy and engaged feeling

life and with ample opportunity for exercising of the will.

The high school curriculum still strives to balance intellectual activity with artistic and practical activity. The artistic helps to nurture a healthy and refined life of feeling, while the practical allows ideas and ideals to be expressed in action. It is interesting, then, that Steiner's indications for classroom colors for the adolescent do not end in the relative coolness and darkness of blue. Rather, they move into shades of violet with some red added to blue to bring a touch of warmth and vigor back into the color experience. This reflects the educational goal of a thinking warmed by the heart and fired by the will.

The journey from kindergarten through twelfth grade is an epic journey toward wholeness that is fostered by the curriculum and supported by the color experiences of the painting lessons and the classroom colors. On this journey toward wholeness the child travels full circle through the color wheel (Illustration II), experiencing the individuality of each color as it relates to his or her stage of inner development. Over time, the child thus experiences the wholeness and balance of the color circle. This is a reflection of the wholeness and balance of the human being that we strive to nurture and protect through Waldorf Education. *

ENDNOTES:

1. Hilde Boos-Hamburger, *The Creative Power of Colour* (London: Michael Press, 1976), 3.
2. Ibid., 11.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Margrit Jünemann and Fritz Weitmann, *Drawing and Painting in Rudolf Steiner Schools* (Stroud, U. K.: Hawthorn Press, 1994), 3.
5. Ibid., 7.
6. Steiner described the physiological effects of red and blue on blood chemistry and circulation and on thinking. See Daniel van Bemmelen, *Rudolf Steiner's New Approach to Color on the Ceiling of the First Goetheanum* (Spring Valley, N.Y.: St. George Publications, 1980), 31.

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Kevin Hughes was raised in the arts. His mother is a painter, and his father made his life in the theater. Kevin received his undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan in environmental science and filmmaking, and did postgraduate work in filmmaking at the University of Colorado. He trained to be a Waldorf teacher at the Waldorf Institute of Sunbridge College and has studied at the Tobias School of Art in England and at Rudolf Steiner College in California. Kevin Hughes has taught for thirteen years at the Kimberton Waldorf School, both as a class teacher and as a drawing and painting teacher in the upper grades. He is a painter and lazure artist. Kevin and his wife, Erin, a drama teacher at Kimberton, have two sons.