Waldorf Misunderstandings on Art

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Veteran Waldorf teacher and former leader of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum in Switzerland, Christof Wiechert, coined the expression *Waldorf misunderstandings*. He was pointing to practices that have become associated with Steiner-Waldorf education but have little or nothing to do with the underlying principles of the education, to original indications, or to child development. In other words, less than "best practices" that have become habits have sometimes found their way into schools with little or no foundation in Waldorf pedagogy.

I would like to address several of these Waldorf misunderstandings that I have observed over my thirty-five years in the teaching of visual art. They include the banning of black as a color, the drawing of beautifully prepared and finished chalkboard art without the student's involvement, the introduction of slant-line shaded drawing in the early elementary grades, and the question of formless watercolor paintings in the grade school. None of these practices will severely damage the resilient child but they do present a *misunderstanding* with regard to teaching methods and one's approach to child development.

The Use of Black

The use of the color black has been a question of great debate among Waldorf teachers and parents of young children for many decades. It is now a matter of practice that a fair number of Waldorf kindergartens and grade schools exclude the color black from the crayons offered to children. Black paint is also avoided in the early grades. Although there is no direct indication that Rudolf Steiner, as initiator of Waldorf education, suggested such a policy, it is worthwhile considering the nature of this color and its absence from many Waldorf classrooms.

Because black—considered by some theorists not to be a color at all but the very absence of light and color—is the most lifeless of the hues, free from color-emotion, it is therefore extremely powerful. Together with red it was the first color used in prehistoric visual art and is still the primary color choice in most indigenous art works. Children often gravitate to it because of its strong character and appearance. Some teachers feel black is too strong for young children and restrict its use in drawing and painting. There is some justification for this, as the color specialist Faber Birren pointed out. His studies concluded that children will be more inclined to depict inanimate objects—vehicles, machines and buildings—when given the color black. "When the same children were given colored crayons, their fancies were more inspired to attempt human beings, animals and plants."[1]

However, what probably happened in one of the early Waldorf schools was that a particularly sensitive kindergarten teacher noticed a boy in her class who was drawing only with black and so she hid that crayon from the boy the next time he drew. This likely had good results. Word spread throughout the school and other teachers in the grades made the black crayons disappear from their classrooms. Eventually, the ban on black crayons spread to other schools. What was actually a good pedagogical move on the part of this hypothetical kindergarten teacher for a particular situation was misapplied to other situations.

Steiner's color research led him to state that "Black represents the spiritual image of the lifeless."[2] And further: "Black shows itself alien to life, hostile to life… But the spirit flourishes; the spirit can penetrate the blackness and assert itself within it."[3] So, although black is a quality we can feel as devoid of life, it nevertheless allows the individuality to thrive. This is why adolescents and city dwellers often choose this color for their clothing above all others. The approaching "I" of the teenager experiences a sense of freedom within the lifelessness of black, a freedom from the emotive range of spectrum colors, and therefore it is a natural color choice at this age, a color in which the yet-to-be-realized self can shine. It can be a kind of protection. In one of his notebooks, Steiner wrote, "Black = Freedom."

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1 Faber Birren, *Color and Human Response* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1978), p. 66.

2 Rudolf Steiner, *Color* (London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Company, 1935), p. 21.

3 *Ibid.*

Figure 1a-b. Curative educator Joep Eikenboom points out that "Black can indicate that the child perceives areas in his physical body that he needs to work on… A teacher can notice the use of this color and can observe whether the work she is doing with that child is bearing fruit."

As an "image of the lifeless," black is related to the inanimate mineral kingdom and the carbon-based element to which the human being belongs. In us, the "dead" element is the solid, mineral nature of our bones and physical skeleton. If a child draws with black it may be an expression of the physical body's hardening process. Curative educator Joep Eikenboom notes: "Black can indicate that the child perceives areas in his physical body that he needs to work on, which he has not yet penetrated sufficiently… A teacher can notice the use of this color and can observe whether the work she is doing with that child is bearing fruit. After a while the use of the black crayon will disappear. Children will then be able to apply black in the right proportions and in the right place (for instance, a black cat, crow, or chimney)."[4] The late Audrey McAllen, founder of the Extra Lesson work in British Waldorf schools, was quite clear that black was an important color to allow children to use. From her many years as hands-on learning support and of special education work, she stressed the need for exposure to all of the colors, including black.[5]

Black is important to the child's color palette of experience just as the witch in the fairy tale is necessary to the further development of the other characters and the outcome of the entire story. Without the witch no transformation would take place in the story. The lessons to be taught by black as a color are too important to be excluded from use by the child. Although the restricting of black during the first seven year period of the child's life may be considered an appropriate choice by parents and kindergarten teachers under certain circumstances, the limiting of this and any other color from children after the onset of first grade (and the change of dentition) should be carefully considered by teachers and parents. The black crayon and colored pencil should certainly be a part of the first grader's drawing kit in order to provide the whole story of color. In painting one may wish to wait for a later stage of development, after the 10th year, before introducing a premixed black to the watercolor medium. But the complete and permanent removal of the color black from the child's range of available colors would be the real Waldorf misunderstanding.

Chalkboard Drawings

It is in the first grade that the teacher has an opportunity to help guide a further unfolding and refinement of the child's learning skills, drawing and painting included. One area where this takes place is with the teacher's chalkboard drawings, seen by the child every day at the front of the classroom. Oral lessons and story telling presented by the teacher are complemented with colorful visual images provided regularly on the classroom blackboard. In this way, what is practiced is an oral and visual teaching that follows an approach described by Rudolf Steiner as musical (audible) and sculptural (pictorial).

Over the past century, another Waldorf misunderstanding has evolved in connection with the class teacher's practice of retreating into her classroom every Sunday evening and drawing a beautiful, finished picture on the blackboard to awe the students with the next day. Many hours are often spent on these dazzling renderings of fairy tales, legends, historical events and natural phenomena. However, Steiner warned that presenting finished pictures and concepts can act as a "lead

4 Joep Eikenboom, "Qualities of Colors that Appear when Working with Extra Lesson Exercises," in *Reading Children's Drawings: The Person, House and Tree Motif* (Fair Oaks, California: Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2004), p. 68.

5 From a personal conversation between the author and Audrey McAllen (1998) at the Rudolf Steiner Institute (Thomas College), Waterville, Maine.

weight" in the soul of a young child. Drawing in front of the students is actually a far more helpful practice and a much greater learning experience for the children.

Figure 2a. Rudolf Steiner suggested: "As much as possible allow the children to see the drawing proceeding from the moment—allow them to see each stroke as it is born."

This latter approach is what Dr. Steiner suggested in a lecture of 1923:

> I have made drawings before your eyes that arose wholly out of each moment. You could see what I meant by every stroke. You could think along with me without any mediation. This is another thing to be included in teaching of children today. As far as possible avoid finished drawings. As much as possible allow the children to see the drawing proceeding from the moment—allow them to see each stroke as it is born. In this way, the child becomes inwardly involved in the work and we encourage them to become inwardly active… What matters is to lead the children to independence.[6]

By observing the gradual development of a drawing before one's eyes, a stronger level of engagement takes place than is possible when one is just looking at a finished picture. A deeper learning experience occurs by taking part in the unfolding of the image-event. Too finished a picture can bring about the danger of discouraging some children when it comes time for them to draw the awesome picture they see on the blackboard. Practical and simple visual steps performed before the child can be the most helpful way to lead students into drawing or painting a picture, just as a step-by-step teaching of math, writing, reading or any other subject is taught.

Chalkboard drawings appear to emerge from the mysterious night-like darkness of the blackboard as colorful star-like-pictures shining into the classroom. One might imagine the origins of oral tradition taking place around the magical setting of a campfire, under the dark backdrop of the star-strewn night sky. The imaginative tales, woven in and out of these storied pictures, telling of great deeds that illustrate the original myths, legends and historic tales of humanity are brought into visual-pictorial form on the classroom blackboard. But like any good telling of a story the drawn picture should be experienced by the child as taking place stage-by-stage over time with a beginning, middle, and conclusion so as not to become another Waldorf misunderstanding.

Slant-line Drawing

The diagonal stroke or slant-line drawing technique, often referred to as shaded drawing, was introduced into the first Waldorf high school as a valuable technique for the developing adolescent. However, this approach to drawing has over the years been brought down into the elementary grades for drawing with younger children.

The diagonal stroke drawing is directed from the upper right to the lower left, always in parallel, thin, thick, short and long strokes. It allows a *breathing* through the form and a drawing against the form, and is completely free from boundaries created by linear edges as in contour drawing. The Russian artist Assia Turgeniev, together with Rudolf Steiner, consciously took up this method as a way to express the potentials of the art of black and white drawing and also as an etching technique for colored glass.

Although this technique was brought into the early grades of many Waldorf schools, it was intended as most appropriate for the high school-aged student and not the younger child. Max Wolfhügel, the first specialist art teacher in the first Waldorf school in Germany, said that this drawing technique was "introduced in the main lesson as an exercise for Class 9," and was used in the high school grades, "following Rudolf Steiner's indication on the diagonal direction of the strokes."[7]

Steiner said of this technique: "The stroke should not follow the contours of the form; [the stroke] must have little to do with it… You must learn to shade quite independently of the form… otherwise they become

6 Rudolf Steiner, Lecture given June 22, 1922, cited in Rinder, *Knowledge of Higher Worlds: Rudolf Steiner's Blackboard Drawings* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), p. 23.

7 Max Wolfhügel, *Erziehungskunst*, May/June, 1952. Cited in Michael Martin, *Educating Through Arts and Craft: An Integrated Approach to Craft Work in Steiner Waldorf Schools* (Steiner Waldorf Education, 1999), p. 142.

[contour] lines. And in art the line is an untruth. You may, of course, use the line for constructing a drawing, but no more than an architect uses a scaffolding to build a house. When the house is finished the scaffolding is taken away. In the same way the line should only be your starting point, and when the drawing is finished every trace of outline must have disappeared."[8] This is not an easy directive for trained artists to follow, let alone for high school students. To dismiss the spontaneous gesture of contour drawing defies the way we think about our hard-edged reality; it challenges our way of separating ourselves from a direct experience of the actual phenomena. But the line, having only length and no width, is only a concept, not a physical reality. Because of this it is an age-appropriate drawing technique and learning experience for the adolescent.

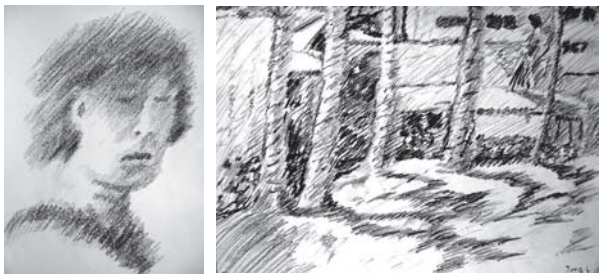


Figure 3a-b. Here are examples of slant-line, shaded drawings by a 9th grader (portrait) and an 11th grader (landscape).

The artist Assia Turgeniev addressed the contrast of working with black-and-white shaded drawing: "If anyone tries to feel this duality in himself, and to analyse it, he becomes aware that the left half of his body is more related to the expanding forces, and the right half to the forces of contracting. The inner gesture which sets up a relationship to these two forces—the gesture of a living, mobile equipoise—reveals in man himself the diagonal direction from the top left-hand to the bottom right-hand side."[9] Thus, according to Turgeniev, we place this stroke outside of us in a mirrored diagonal direction that our own organization resonates with. In its counter action the slant-line stroke acts as an incarnating activity, a powerful method of drawing appropriate to the post-puberty adolescent.

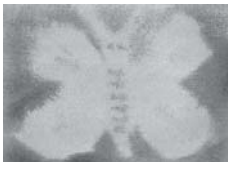
Here again, a careful consideration of when to introduce the various drawing techniques (contour outline drawing, pointillism, crosshatching and the diagonal stroke drawing) can prevent us from engaging in a Waldorf misunderstanding.

Painting in the Early Grades

Something that I have observed in many Waldorf schools is the lack of form in wet-on-wet watercolor paintings in the first three grades. The overly wet and formless kindergarten-like use of color should easily move to greater articulation of shape in first grade. Proper instruction in blotting wetted paper and wiping the dipped brush on the edge of the paint jar to get excess fluid out of bristles are essential factors for this. But the introduction of elementary figurative pictures is also important.

"Right from the start," says Steiner, "we give our young pupils the opportunity of working artistically with colors, not only with dry crayons but also with watercolors. In this simple way, we give the child something from which the forms of the letters can be developed."[10] This description is pretty clear that first grade painting should be the starting point for pictures that will take on distinct forms. "When introducing writing to the children we must communicate in the form of pictures. This is possible, however, only when we do not begin by introducing the alphabet directly, or 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 color 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."[11]

For instance, perhaps we tell a story about a *big, beautifully bright butterfly* (step 1). Guided by their teacher, the children then bring color to their pages (step 2), painting simple growing and changing forms that ultimately arrive at a big, beautifully bright butterfly shape, the wings of which suggest the letter B (fig. 4a-b). The butterfly is then drawn with crayon into a lesson book (step 3) and the letter B is written (step 4) alongside the picture as part of the story. Eventually, the children write-out the little story (step 5) and read their own writing aloud (step 6) to complete a cycle that goes from oral story to painting, drawing, writing, reading, and retelling of the story.



8 Rudolf Steiner, cited in Anna Turgeniev, *The Goetheanum Windows* (London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Company, 1938), p. 10.

9 *Ibid,* p. 17.

10 Rudolf Steiner, *What is Waldorf Education?* (New York: SteinerBooks, 2003), p. 75.

11 *Ibid,* p. 111.

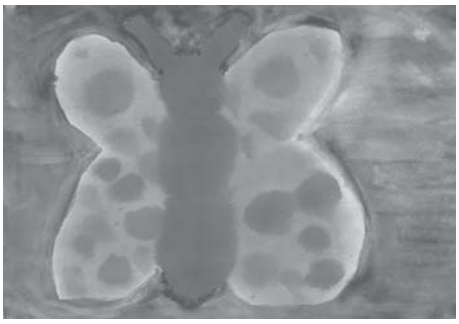


Fig. 4a-b. Painting the letters of the alphabet in first grade can start from a brief story that is then painted, then drawn. From the picture a letter is abstracted out and written down in story form and then read by the child.

Rudolf Steiner gave several letter-pictures as examples of this process, including: B for bear, F for fish, and M for mouth. However, he encouraged teachers to make up their own picture-to-letter figures, saying they needn't be anthropologically factual but should be original in order to be fully alive and connect directly to the children. "Don't rely on what other people have done in the past. Set your own free but controlled imagination to work, and have faith in what you find out for yourself…"[12] Further: "It will always give you joy, albeit a quiet joy, to transfer to a letter the shape you have yourself made out of some animal or plant. And this joy that you yourself have will live in what you make out of your pupil."[13] We should not underestimate the powerful effect that the teacher's own pictorial imagination and originality can have on the student.

The point here is that the painting of plants and animals, even if quite simple in shape, is clearly indicated for use in the early grades. Yet many teachers continue to direct their children to remain in formless, swimming colors. I have encountered Waldorf teacher training professionals who have told their student teachers to just skip the painting of letter-pictures and other forms in painting and continue formless pictures throughout the first three grades. So Waldorf misunderstandings can be on various levels, from parents' misunderstandings, to teachers' misunderstandings, to even teacher trainer misunderstandings.

Abstract concepts and symbols such as numbers and letters are best brought to the child first by way of practical, concrete learning and an artistic, creative process. This is because one can best reach the child by educating through the will and feeling life, which in turn informs a naturally developing thinking process. In early childhood, thinking is virtually untouched by means of a direct approach to the intellect by way of rote learning and memorization. Only by instructing the will, engaging the limbs by way of rhythmic activity, and activating the feeling life, by way of enthusiasm and pictorial imagination, can one stimulate the child to awaken his or her own thinking. "We shall allow writing to arise gradually out of painting and drawing. Step by step the forms of writing will arise out of the forms of our drawings, and then we shall move on to reading," Steiner said in a lecture to English educators.[14]

The above examples are just a few of the misunderstandings that overlook or misinterpret the unique power of art, the language of color and form and the timeliness of certain teaching methods and artistic techniques. As a teaching artist in a Waldorf school, I have encountered these misunderstandings numerous times and regularly seek to correct them. They demonstrate how the sources of Waldorf education need to be continually researched and regularly reviewed, relearned and even revised in some cases if we are not to lose many of the significant gems of this educational movement.

In conclusion, to avoid Waldorf misunderstandings:

1. Think twice about excluding the black witch from the banquet of color choices.

2. Reconsider presenting finished pictures and ideas.

3. Let the materials and techniques be appropriate to the age, place and occasion.

4. Return to the source whenever possible and be especially attentive to the needs of the child.

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12 Rudolf Steiner, *Discussions with Teachers* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1967), p. 22.

13 Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1964), p. 37.

14 Rudolf Steiner, *What is Waldorf Education?*, p. 112.