

NOTES FROM A PAINTING COURSE WITH DORIS NIXDORFF (BERLIN)
GIVEN AT THE TOBIAS SCHOOL OF ART, EAST GRINSTEAD, IN JULY 1987

The course consisted of an exploration of technique, rather than a detailed exposition of the curriculum.

Wet painting: Exercises were given making circles and surrounding them with a different color. Then a fairy tale mood was created with the story of Star Child.

Animals were developed out of the circles or ovals for Farming and Man and Animal; the rooster arose out of an "egg" and was painted in many colors with mixed and blended. Then came a sleepy hedgehog from a blue oval painted on blue. A red vermilion horse ran over a yellow field which was later changed to green. With this painting, as in many others, a color wash covered the whole paper first before any attempt was made to paint the animal. A distinction was always made between drawing and painting: we worked in surfaces and not in outlines. A sleeping donkey was painted on a blue surface which was later turned into green. If we compare these two paintings we can see color perspective at work, but nothing of this is mentioned to the children: this will only be spoken of in the High School.

Wet on Dry: Boards were stretched and allowed to dry. We were not told what we were about to paint, just to make a blue wash and leave some white circles in the upper part of a vertical paper. We painted dandelion leaves below and yellow and puff-ball seedheads above, once we were told what we were to do. The technique used very small touches of color and used a veiled technique, but it was not as rigid as the technique used for crystals. Steiner said to paint the plant's leaves darker than life, then put a wash of yellow over it, and it will shine. Paint animals lighter than life and put a blue wash over.

Dry veil painting: We went on the the more conventional type of veil painting, using blue. This is the easiest color to handle for beginners. It needs to be mixed very thin at first. Triangular veils are painted near the edge of the paper on all four sides, large veils reach almost to the center, but as there are more veils nearer to the edge the outside becomes darker than the center.

Then we made veils in two colors (red and blue, or yellow and blue) and were allowed to use curved forms also if we wished. Mrs. Nixdorff felt that this kind of veiling should be saved for the 8th class and not be begun before.

Charcoal: We drew on large sheets of paper enlargements of the either the Dürer Melancholia or Hieronymus (St. Jerome) as examples of Class Nine work. Many preliminary exercises are done in Class 9 to prepare for this culmination of the year: a sphere in a stream of light, a candle, various objects and the shadows they cast in various lighted situations. We had to observe proportions and vanishing points, and we all found the exercise a strain. Once we had completed our charcoal version we proceeded to the Class 10 work of painting it in colour. We could choose any basic colour, and began with the usual pale wash. We again used the dry veiling technique which allowed a lot of work to be done before the board was saturated and had to be dried with a hair dryer.

We were not able to complete the full High School curriculum, but we did paint two of the Nature Moods which are the theme for the year in Class 11: different landscapes at different times of day, seasons, weather changes, different zones of the earth, moonlight, sunlight, etc.

We began with a November tree on a gray wash. For this it helped to mix various shades of gray on a test paper, and simply blend them, after they were mixed, on to the paper. This gave a misty effect, with yellows, blues and violets interweaving. On top of this an almost leafless tree was painted.

Then we painted 3, 5 or 7 trees in sunlight and then later in storm. The number of trees allows for a good composition. Some were in the foreground and some in the distance. The sun shines on to one side of the trees and shadows are cast on the branches and on the ground. Begin the sky with yellow and the ground with blue, then add the trees.

In the storm picture we made one side of the picture very stormy and the other had yet to be reached by its fury.

Mrs. Nixdorff was a very quietly encouraging teacher; most of us were all at different stages with the paintings and she would give us our instructions individually about the next painting; sometimes she demonstrated with chalk on the board, but there was actually little group instruction. One could see her strength in working with Upper School students who need constant encouragement and constructive criticism which has to be very gentle.

Postcards of the Melancholia and Hieronymus can be obtained from Staatliche Museen (Berlin), Arnim Allee, D-1000 Berlin 33. It is good for each student to have their own copy.

Herr Weitmann of the Ulm school made a poster-size version for his students to copy.