

MY TEACHER MAX PEIFFER WATENPHUL

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It was an easy test. You just had to draw something. The teachers had been instructed to accept as many people as possible. The famous school, the Folkwang School, Essen, needed pupils.

The old brick building on Rüttenscheider Strasse resembled a district town hall, but the school facility itself was—in 1929—hypermodern. Since 1911, the school had a director: architect Alfred Fischer—industrial buildings! The main course of study at the School of Arts and Crafts of the Ruhr coal region: commercial art! Also architecture, set design, woodcuts, sculpture, goldsmithing, and every kind of expressive technique was taught, and pupils were required to make use of all available means.

But to what end? No one told us. No relationship was produced to the age. The question was not present for those who did applied work; they went into industry. But those who aspired to the free arts were given no answers unless they came into conversation, beyond artisanal and formal matters, with one of the teachers. That seldom happened since, with a few exceptions, the instructors kept their distance.

The obligatory courses in the first semester were free-hand drawing and general artistic design. Both were unpopular. The pupils disdained the basics and wanted to get straight to the masterworks.

General artistic design was taught by Max Peiffer Watenphul, painter, aesthete, and Bauhaus student, and like all singular phenomena, revered, disputed, and despised.

According to plan, I was to attend general artistic design twice a week, but the master was tarrying in Morocco, and had a substitute. During that time, contradictory statements were made about him, from mocking verse to a hymn of praise, and I prepared myself for a very strange bird.

One morning, a relatively young man walked in, athletically slender and somewhat taller than medium height. He stood emphatically upright, with his neck extending out of a silk scarf. His eyes blazed, examining us from the top down, with an expression on his face as though he didn't belong in this class at all, in this school or in this city, and he was only here by coincidence, passing through and needing to set off once again to Paris, Mexico, Rome, or Berlin, in where he

had already lived and had influential friends. He seemed exceptionally self-assured, cosmopolitan, and nonchalant. With his hands in his jacket pockets, thumbs out, he paced with the shoulder and leg on a given side of the body advancing together, like a camel. At the time, I'd never seen anything like that! I immediately changed my plan—general artistic design four times a week, all of Max Peiffer Watenphul's teaching days, Monday through Thursday, from 8 o'clock until 2 o'clock.

The teaching itself was insignificant. Shortly after 8:00 in the morning, the teacher entered the auditorium and gave around forty students tasks and guidelines, then vanished—to return after breakfast, when he would meander through the rows of students to see whether we were on the right track, and then, at the end of the morning, offer somewhat more detailed corrections, except in hopeless cases, which he passed over. He was concerned with color combinations, pictorial construction, and fundamental forms, but each pupil, after completing the obligatory exercises, could work independently and submit drawings, photo montages, and watercolors—every kind of artistic product or what one thought to be such. The qualities of the teacher were determined by the pupil. The pupil teaches the teacher how to teach! Now and then, I asked Peiffer Watenphul naive questions, which he answered in most instances with a single sentence, like a pistol shot. That was my school. I asked him, for example, whether art demands feeling or understanding. Peiffer Watenphul: "But that is what distinguishes the great master, the balance between feeling and understanding!" And walked off to the next pupil. And I stood there with his wisdom. Feeling and understanding complementing one another; in fact, permeating one another. I sought to elaborate on the thought. So *that* was how it was.

I submitted a watercolor that he praised. "Now is that art already?" I asked rashly. "And when is something art?"—"Everything an artist spits out is art," he quoted, and named his source, Kurt Schwitters, whereby he pronounced the word "artist" with regard to me, at once doubtingly and as a challenge! There were never lectures. Always aphorisms—like arrows that struck and stuck, and yet, uttered in passing, incidentally, never a word too many. And never one too few.

Now, what is almost a scene from the theater. Peiffer Watenphul came into class and saw a pupil leaning out the window and watching people go by in the street. "What are you doing over there? Why aren't you working?" The teacher asked in a very high tone, and stayed standing at the door. "I'm finished!" the pupil said proudly. "Finished?" Asked Peiffer Watenphul, and looked utterly aghast, as though he hadn't heard right and found himself in an unfathomable world. "An artist is never finished!" He whispered with indignation, as though personally insulted. Shaking his head, he turned around, left the classroom and was not seen for the rest of the day.

Another time, when I submitted a sketch to him, he said: "Listen! When you draw a house, it must be a typical house, not just something or the other. First,

you have to comprehend your object!" Aha! So that's how it's done. First comprehend! The character of the subject. Its obligatory essence.

Over time, I tracked down paintings by Max Peiffer Watenphul in magazines, galleries, and museums. Southern park landscapes and still lifes: jugs, vessels, and vases with and without flowers. It seemed that immediate nature did not inspire him. The flowers must be picked and placed in vases, and the landscape preformed into a park. But he made independent visual works out of these things, delicate in color and bold, true gems.

1929! The economic crisis was not yet threatening, and the Nazis were still ridiculous figures at the political extreme. It was a time of discoveries for me. A day was lost when I discovered nothing new in art and literature. The prospects of knowledge were not yet obscured.

Although I visited the Folkwang-Museum often, I was still unsure in my judgment. I asked Peiffer Watenphul if he might not explain the paintings there to me sometime. He was ready at once, and taught me in a few words, keywords, to appreciate the beauty and meaning in the works of Emil Nolde, Marc Chagall, Henri Matisse, Franz Marc, and early Oskar Kokoschka. Standing before the paintings of Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne, he was eloquently silent. He taught me to see through Ferdinand Hodler's artificiality, and the artistic breakdown of Max Pechstein and other German Expressionists after World War I. All of a sudden, we stood in front of a Peiffer Watenphul: Flowers in a vase on a tablecloth!

"I find this painting very beautiful," I said. "I do too, naturally," he said. "Did you really always know," I asked, fatuously, "that you would become a great artist?" "Ah, you know," the painter said, looking somewhat bashfully to one side, "from the beginning it was clear to me that what I do is only a little craftwork matter." I protested. "That matter," he added, "I seek, within my limits, to carry out consistently!" I was still unsatisfied. How could someone say of himself that he was not a very great man? I learned self-effacement.

My lesson in diligence came in the form of an anecdote. Peiffer Watenphul related that his friend had just visited Picasso in Paris, in the morning. How did he find Picasso? In his underwear, standing in front of his easel. Picasso had not allowed himself the time to finish dressing. On the easel, about twenty spread-out newspaper pages had been nailed one atop another, and Picasso was drawing the same object over and over again with charcoal, tearing off the pages one by one. He was seeking to find a final form for his subject. Finally, Picasso was all but drowning in crumpled newspapers and broken-off bits of charcoal. "How these people work!" Peiffer Watenphul sighed, as though he had some self-accusation to make in that respect.

I attended his beginners' class for four semesters, twice a week by the end. At the conclusion of the fourth semester, I spread out my latest works in front of Peiffer Watenphul and asked him whether I should continue attending the school. He took a look at the pages and remarked: "What you can learn here you have

learned. Now, see to it that you become a great man, too!" and walked off. There I had my lesson. Become a great man. Not more and not less! How did one do that, for heaven's sake!?

We had a true teacher-student relationship that did not end with my last day at the school. I visited Peiffer Watenphul a number of times in Hattingen an der Ruhr. To the astonishment of us all, he was a doctor of jurisprudence, and had even completed a law clerkship. He had no choice in the years before his father, the schoolmaster, permitted him to devote himself entirely to painting. In his parents' villa, he resided in two rooms, and there, surrounded by traded objects, paintings by Paul Klee, Schwitters, Otto Dix, André Derain, and Marie Laurencin, he embroidered his still lifes and park landscapes, and planted and tended countless fields of flowers proliferating in the garden outside his windows.

At the time, I was already writing a bit and wanted to go to Berlin. Peiffer Watenphul believed he had to warn me against that "coldest city in the world." There, he said, friendship and collegiality were unaffordable luxuries. Everyone whom one met there asked himself only: "Of what use can he be to me?" I had not expected that. I was startled. I wanted to meet Bertolt Brecht, Caspar Neher, Herbert Ihering—to join that circle. Peiffer Watenphul told tales of Paris—of Laurencin, the first person ever to buy a painting from him, and of Salvador Dalí's sensational interior, where he [had] been compelled to take a seat on a lip-shaped sofa! But he was not drawn to Paris. He was in love with Italy, with the sunny and the museum-like. Peiffer Watenphul was drawn to Rome—and he had made his dream come true. He had already spent decades commuting back and forth between Rome and Salzburg. But I stayed in Germany. Rome's Forum and Dalí's lip settee did not seem as important to me as the Berlin of Brecht.

I encountered the painter again in Berlin. He was coming from Rome. We were all miserable. Economic crisis, no money, and the Nazis in power. The Nationalgalerie Unter den Linden had bought a painting of his. A painter could achieve nothing greater than to have art hang in the Nationalgalerie, he asserted. But how long would the painting hang there, I asked. Peiffer Watenphul had taken photographs in Rome and was now traveling through Berlin from publisher to publisher, offering them his photographs, which was certainly tiring and, here and there, perhaps even humiliating. Yet, I heard not a word of complaint from his mouth.

The central lesson that Peiffer Watenphul disseminated was that of himself, as a person. Never ill-humored, never self-pitying, always courteous, helpful, kind, spiritually awake and superior, he was and he remained Max Peiffer Watenphul, self-contained and true to himself even on bad days. This was an aesthete to whom one could not come with philosophy, world-weariness, and spiritual scolding. He had a horror of Friedrich Nietzsche's mustache. All of the pessimistic spitting-in-the-soup he knew well, but found intolerable. Sensual immediacy, not reflection! When reading Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, he skipped over the ideological and

political debates between Naphta and Settembrini, and enjoyed all the more, the ironic narrative sections, indeed, multiple times in succession. That said, he was quite familiar with politics, was always informed of the latest developments, reviewed the contexts, and recognized the backgrounds—to then parade the whole nightmare out of himself. An engagement with social contradictions would have challenged and obligated him to undertake a different kind of painting, and he could not allow that.

I met him for the last time in Berlin with a painter who showed us photographs of his flower paintings, an insignificant painter. I never heard his name again. Was it 1935 or 1936? Central Europe was full of oppression and war cries. The gentlemen conversed for hours about flowers! That conversation got on my nerves. I was close to a nervous breakdown—the fascists were pulling the rope ever tighter around our necks—and now, nothing but tubers and roses! Today, I think back less severely to that chitchat on the eve of the collapse. It was, after all, an indispensable part of the consistent attitude of the aesthete.

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