Sebastian Jüngel

A harsh Flavour like tobacco

This section for visual arts and the section for natural science are supporting Robert Wroblewski in a research project to enhance the quality of plant colours and their fastness to light.

When Robert Wroblewski entered the laboratory for crystalisation, he was happy to get going again. The painter had busied himself with plant colours already as a student from 1998 to 2003. Since October, 2015 he has been assigned the task of continuing research and developing methods of production of plant colours, by the leader of the visual art section, Marianne Schubert. Robert began at point Zero and started building up his kitchen, gathering utensils and chemicals out of which he could let the plant's colour pigments come to the light of day. Some things were given to him, but Robert bought most of the stuff he needed with money from other assignments.

His main questions were: how can the quality and especially the fastness of light be enhanced? Something that bothered him since his student days was, that some plants colours where not transparent enough, the layers needed had to be too thick. Robert was at the same time working at the ‚Begegnungszentrum' parallel to his studies and there he met some interesting people visiting the Goetheanum, like Eduard Najleprzy. It was he, who had been working together with Günther Meyer in the years 1986 to 1988. Meyer at that time led the colour plant laboratory which he had built up since 1960. Early research in anthroposophical plant colours go back to Mieta Waller and William Scott Pyle.

Art and science are working together.

Eduard Najleprzy became Robert Wroblewski's first teacher in the production of plant colours. „We worked together for a year in the kitchen of the plant laboratory", which was directly attached to the ‚Kepler-Warte' on the Goetheanum Grounds, „ and we showed our results to our fellow students." Afterhis training course, he went to Mexico for eight years. He didn't have the money to busy himself more intensively with plant colours, even though he was asked one day to create an indigo blue. On returning to Europe, Robert Wroblewski was asked by his former teacher, Caroline Chanter, if he could introduce the students to the development of plant colours. Because it was necessary, if one was following the anthroposophical art impulse, to paint out of colour in order to deepen one's understanding of the life forces, which meant observing plants. Or in Rudolf Steiner's words: „ when I become aware of the living forces of the plant, I will find the source for creating my colours." GA 291 and 349. 21 February 1923.

The cooperation between art and science.

How do you notice the difference between a synthetic colour the mineral colour and one that is based on plants? „ Chemical colours are quite pure in the spectrum, the plant colours have a wider spectrum, the eye is more deeply moved", says Robert Wroblewski. When the chemical industry was growing in the 19 century, the knowledge about natural colours found in minerals or in plants, quickly disappeared. In April 2016 Robert demonstrated his methods for creating plant colours in the seminar, to re-awaken interest in the research of plant colours. The painters naturally want to discover how the known palette can be enhanced and point to a possible direction of research.

„ For me it is very important that people work together in a group, because when people just work for themselves, there is the danger of their knowledge getting lost, when they die."
In 1994 Günther Meier had laid down the principles of his work is little booklet called plant colours, research, production and use. Robert Wroblewski contacted the section for natural science in order to bring science and art together. „Torsten Arncken was immediately enthusiastic about working on plant colours. I asked him: ‚how do I start?' and he answered, start planting, get the taste of it, and observe the plant." To start planting was something new for Robert Wroblewski. „ we really began

planting and watched the growth. And I hope we will gain new insights.“ By starting with planting, ourselves, we discovered that the basic substance of plants van be very different in quality. „ When we receive dried plants as crude material we don't usually know whether the plant has been fertilised chemically or biologically. Later we will need a larger area for our planting. But our work has not got that far yet.

Hard as slag, as wine red as bricks.

The fastness of light is a challenge. Safran will display a beautiful yellow, but it fades very quickly. Robert Wroblewski observed that in Italian Safran, the fastness of light seemed to be stronger. But a lot more is possible: you could add silk. „We can add what we know from anthroposophy: day and night processes, the constellation of the planets, and even factors the ordinary chemist doesn't know about. Then perhaps the pigments could develop more vitality.

We need more ingredients for the recipe of a plant colour: we often use wax emulsions, linseed oil, resin and …Garant.“ He lets me smell a bottle with milky like viscous liquid, having a fragrance of lavender and looking like bathing milk. Besides that there are mixtures of gum arabic. These substances seem to influence the refraction of light.

I look into bucket full of a substrate of madder root, dried and ground. The substance smells earthy, like tobacco and has a harsh flavour. The colour is a reddish brown. When we start cooking, it changes into a red-orange coloured brew. After that it is passed through a chemical process using diluted sulphuric acid. We see the colour pigments emerge. Robert Wroblewski shows me an intensive melon red. Similar to the creation of coloured light („Das Goetheanum“ Nr 41/2015) „Sulphuric acid, heat and time is important for the process of producing the quality and the final tone of colour.“ „ Indigo blue really comes into being when it breathes in the oxygen from the air.“

Then he shows me dried reseda leaves. The furry-like salvia. Their shape reminds me of verveine, but they have no smell. The colour of the leaves is green. After working on it, it becomes yellow. „When matter goes through a process with alum, soda or potash as a basic solution, the pigment is shed out. The filtered substance is then hard slag and as wine red as bricks. If you pulverise it, you get a pink coloured powder. The grain size of the pigment defines the tone of colour as well as the extent of fastness of light.“

Together with Torsten Ancken („Das Goetheanum“ Nr 4/2015) Robert Wroblewski is investigating how fertilisers based on metal salts influence the quality of other colour pigments. Does copper support the colour green, lead and zinc the colour blue? Does iron sulphate create a black pigment with logwood? Does copper salt lead to green instead of yellow? For Robert Wroblewski it is important that the plant is influenced homoeopathically. After all it is a living being.

To round off my visit Robert Wroblewski showed me pictures that were painted with different plant colours. In busying myself with the process of plant colours one thing is most important: painting.

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