

How far is it to Daler, Ms. Göhring?

Christian Seeger talking to Uta Göhring-Zumpe



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Daler is a small village in Denmark close to the German border between Tønder and the North Sea. Daler is around 500 km from Berlin. If I think back forty years to the time that I lived on the German island of Föhr, in Nieblum, Daler was a long way off for me. Quite a journey, and today it is, so to speak, 'just around the corner'.

The painter Morten Ravn Martinsen lived in Daler. How did he become your teacher?

My mother knew Morten Ravn. I can't remember exactly when it was, maybe in 1958, when he was introduced to me at the Passat-Café, which was owned by my parents. I plucked up the courage to ask him whether I could show him my paintings. I had all sorts of reservations. But did anyway, secretly, hesitantly and trembling—back then I was very shy and full of uncertainty. Try and imagine my situation at that time: my ambition to become a painter did not coincide with the expectations and ideas of my parents in the least. When Morten Ravn encouraged me to continue painting, I was more than happy. It was Morten Ravn who provided me with my first intensive lessons. After I had taken my higher school leaving examination, I had tried and failed in a number of vocations that lived up to my parents' expectations. However, it very soon became clear to me that all I wanted to become was a painter. I then went to London. I returned to Germany in order to earn money and met my husband Rainer Göhring. We were married in 1967 and moved to Berlin together where he worked at the Technical University.

What remains from that time, what still lives on in you today?

Morten Ravn encouraged me to respect the naive approach to a painting just as much as the intellectual one; in 1968 this was an affront to the claim that art has to be political. Morten lived with a very different awareness from the one I had known until then. Literature, politics, technology, environmental issues—he was interested in everything. He had a very modest lifestyle to enable him to devote himself to painting. It was from him that I learnt that painting is disciplined daily work and that the muse only inspires you, if at all, when you are working. I also felt encouraged in my critical attitude towards passing fashions. My motifs today are the same as they were then, namely the things that play a role in my life and are important to me. This may be a naive approach; however, the intellect then decides the rest. Who knows what else I will be confronted with.

You studied at the HdK university of the arts in Berlin and at the City & Guilds of London Art School. What was different in London; who influenced you?

In London I mainly trained in drawing and in the technique of engraving. Professor Henry Wilkinson, who loved Dürer's work above everything, was an authority and very demanding. The drawing had to be accepted by him and only then were we given the copperplate so we could transfer the drawing in front of the mirror. Compared with Berlin, teaching was somewhat like being at school. Anyway I kept going and I'm still grateful to him today for the opportunity of having been able to work in the large hall with my 17 fellow students. At the university in Berlin I would like to make mention of Professor Bruno Merbitz and Professor Dr. Robert Kudielka. Professor Merbitz instructed me in building colour surfaces as a mesh, that the figure is to be seen spatially and the tension lines of a body have to be understood, etc. etc. Making brushstrokes consciously was also important to him, a kind of culture of applying paint. Kudielka's influence is of a different kind. A student of sculpture persuaded me to attend his lectures. Professor Kudielka taught 'Aesthetics and Theory of the Arts' at the HdK. For me, he is the person who has had the greatest lasting influence on my intellectual attitude towards art generally and towards painting in particular. And continues to do so today. His lectures and seminars have remained an integral part of my daily work, including the follow-up "homework". The way he reveals and illustrates the diversity of relationships between fine art and philosophy, and extends the view of things is fascinating. This 'enlightenment', thinking in abstracts and in ever new relationships, has moulded my awareness and my position as a painter.

Your painting is figurative. How do you select your motifs?

What interests me are the situations. In the case of landscapes these are certain impressions that I record in the form of sketches. For still lifes, I arrange them. What interests me about people is their personality, their poses, their individual expression.

Your paintings stand out by their use of colour. What is the secret that enables the diversity of the colour of your paintings to meld and form a harmonious whole?

This cannot be explained by the intellect. The diversity of colour is undoubtedly primarily intuition, but it is intellect that guides the way I approach it. When I paint, I don't make any preliminary drawing on the canvas, which is then coloured in. I create the colours on the painting's surface and don't see the object or the model before me separately but always in the context of its surroundings. This includes the contrast; contradiction and consensus are always a unity for me. A colleague who I often worked with once said that I fight with the painting like a lioness. There is something true about this impression. I constantly have to make decisions. But at least you have to decide when the painting is 'finished'. There is always a point in time when I have to move out of the way and accept the product the way it is. Whether everything I do is just right is something I don't know. But that is not actually what matters. Ideally, the painting captures the attention of the beholder anew over and over again.



Do you work using models or objects?

I mainly work with a model or object; learning to see, painting in the awareness that I am creating a painting and cannot portray nature but only its impression on me. The painting is its own expression of nature; nature itself cannot be copied. Drawing and sketching serves as practice in expressing my way of thinking; it leads to finding new picture compositions, new lines of tension and proportions. Hence, when actually working with the subject, things then develop in a very different way from the one envisaged. Each area of colour develops its own dynamism.

You come across as being very vivacious, perhaps even a bit forward. And then there is another side of you, the concentrated tranquillity that your paintings convey. Do the two go together?

Both are indeed part of my nature. Perhaps that has something to do with the way I work—this takes place with my subjects in the seclusion of my studio. It is working in a place of tranquillity and with concentration. Creation and structuring of the colour begins each time afresh. What matters to me is pushing my limitations even further. In this connection, too, some things that were important to me, things that I felt worked go by the way. They must, whether I like it or not, be sacrificed mostly to preserve the painting's unity. When I am working, I don't think about the expression of the painting at all; this either does or doesn't come about. And this applies to all subjects no matter whether a woman or a fan.

It seems to me that painting fulfils you entirely; do you still have time for other interests?

When working in my studio, I am usually on my own; but I also enjoy the company of other people and am thankful that I have a wonderful and supportive circle of friends. Music and dance play a major role in my life. Dancing is my hobby, practicing together and 'all that goes with it' are very important to me.

You became a Berliner, have you still an attachment to the island of Föhr?

With all my heart. After I had lived in Berlin for ten years, in 1977 I persuaded by husband to build a house in Nieblum. Föhr gives me a feeling of home. I had the opportunity to exhibit my paintings annually at the Dörpshus in Nieblum. I still like to think back to the major exhibition that I had with the 80-year-old painter Gustav Mennicke. In 1987 I then first exhibited in the building shell in Josiaskoog. This has developed into the annual summer exhibition that starts with an opening event held in July. It now takes place on a larger scale and for me it's a wonderful experience to spend a few hours once a year with people from Föhr and visitors to the island, even though individual conversations are sometimes often all too brief. I am also delighted that many of the summer guests arrange their travel plans in a way that enables them to attend the exhibition's opening event. The people of Föhr are wonderful hosts and I would like to see myself as one of them. Anybody who has time and interest in visiting the exhibition at Josiaskoog 9 is welcome.

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