

Das Blatt

The American Goethe Society's Electronic Newsletter

Barbara W. Alsip, Editor

March 2010

Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

Another electronic newsletter of Das Blatt is on its way to you, hoping to keep you informed as to our recent events and news, and announcing lectures still to come this season.

You may be aware of the fact that my term as president of AGS is coming to an end this June. I have decided not to be on the ballot for a second term as it is my wish to return permanently to England within the foreseeable future, a promise I made to my husband before his death from cancer several years ago, in order to be closer to our family.

You will be pleased to know that your executive committee has come forward with the names of two excellent candidates for president and vice-president for the next term. Both ladies have been regular participants in our activities; they are close friends and have a superb knowledge of German. I have no doubt that they will lead AGS to a bright future using their many skills and talents, as well as their enthusiasm for our organization.

We suggest Judith Henderson as candidate for president and Marian Graham for vice-president. Please read their bios in Das Blatt below.

You will receive ballots in our next mailing during the second half of May. Please be reminded that only those members who have paid their dues for 2010 are eligible to vote. We are delighted that most of you have returned your renewal forms promptly, and I am especially grateful to those who have contributed so generously to our Goethe Prize Fund. If you lost or forgot about your renewal forms, we urge you to contact our treasurer, Pehr Pehrsson, at pehrsson1@cox.net, or 703 893 1670.

As we still have a number of events on our calendar throughout the spring, this is not meant to be a farewell letter on my part. In fact, our next Art Lecture is waiting just around the corner. Please take a moment to read the attachment announcing Dr. Christopher With's forthcoming talk on Wassily Kandinsky, with a brief abstract of his lecture.

We had to make one change in this year's program which pertains to the topic of the Philosophy Lecture in May,

so we would like you to correct your Calendar of Events which was sent to you in our last mailing.

The Philosophy Lecture on May 19 will be given by Prof. Martin de Nys on the German -American philosopher, psychoanalyst and social theorist Erich Fromm. We are delighted to have Prof. De Nys speak to us again - he gave us a fascinating lecture on Nietzsche a few years ago.

Now that we have consigned our snow shovels to the farthest recesses of our garages and garden sheds, we are free to attend not just our own AGS events, but also those offered by the Goethe -Institut, the German Embassy, and the new German - American Heritage Museum. We have also established good contacts with the German Language Society and the Austrian - American Cultural Society in recent months.π

Last not least, we owe enormous thanks to our editor **Barbara Alsip** for producing another edition of Das Blatt. Barbara had a very bad fall just before Christmas which resulted in several fractures. Nonetheless, she remained cheerful throughout much of her ordeal, and as she has almost completely recovered, nothing will stop her from getting on the plane and visiting her old friends in Washington or attending the Kandinsky lecture next week.

With my best wishes and regards to my loyal AGS friends who have given me so much encouragement and support over the past two years.

Sincerely yours,

Erika

AGS Annual Art Lecture Mar 24, 2010, 6:45pm, GI. Wassily Kandinsky (1866 - 1944) and the Rise of Modernism, 1890 - 1930. Abstract of an Illustrated lecture by Dr. Christopher With, Senior Lecturer Emeritus, The National Gallery of Art

Abstract art was the most important innovation of the twentieth century, and the painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was a pivotal part of its evolution. His initial training and first non-objective images were created in Munich between 1896 and 1914. Forced to return to Russia as an enemy alien during the war, Kandinsky returned to Germany in 1922, this time as a faculty member of the Bauhaus. Following the dissolution of the Bauhaus in 1933, Kandinsky moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, where he died in 1944.

Throughout his entire development as an artist and his maturation as a theoretical writer, Kandinsky's central belief was his devotion to inner beauty, to a deep spiritual desire; in short, to the dictates of a personal "inner necessity." In this realm both color and line express the artist's experience of a subject rather than its objective nature. In art works created according to "inner necessity," colors and lines are freed of all narrative obligation and exist in their own right. In a complex rhythmic dance they overlap and interplay one with another in a very free way to form paintings of extraordinary force and visual complexity. This complexity--or internal disjunction--challenges the viewer to participate in the visual imagery and to recreate it according to his or her own radically subjective and purely phenomenological "inner necessities."

Kandinsky likened this experience to listening to music and frequently gave his paintings titles like *Improvisation* and *Composition*. Although the musical notes are ethereal, the listener composes an image in his/her mind according to the auditory prompts provided by the sounds and their notational arrangements. "Color is the key," Kandinsky penned in 1912. "The eye is the hammer. The soul is the piano with its many chords. The artist is the hand that, by touching this or that key, sets the soul vibrating automatically."

Kandinsky's art has had incredible staying power in the decades since his death and it continues to be relevant among a broad array of contemporary painters around the world. This is due both to the art works he created as well as to his explicit tracts on the theory and purpose of abstract art. His art exemplifies his theory and his theory is illustrated by his art. Together they comprise the starting point and directional guide for all artists interested in non-representational painting.

2010 Literature Lecture, E.T.A. Hoffmann

The literature lecture offered by Dr. Francien Marx, Assistant Professor of German at George Mason University, on 27 January, attracted a large and lively audience. With many illustrations, Professor Marx presented the canonic author known as E.T.A. Hoffmann in his three different creative roles: as musician, as artist, and as writer.

Composer and music critic, Hoffmann created an opera, *Undine*, for which the author of the famous romantic tale, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, wrote the libretto. The imaginative music critic, who held Mozart in highest esteem, wrote the tales *Ritter Gluck* and *Don Juan*, where the fantastic intrudes into reality, a feature

of Hoffmann's fictions for ever more. And Hoffmann kept up writing music criticism for journals.

As visual artist, Hoffmann created set designs for operas performed in Bamberg, where he worked at the theater for a few years during the troublous Napoleonic times. He illustrated his own written works and produced many portraits, including some penetrating self-portraits. Some of his caricatures cost him dearly in his professional career in the Prussian legal system.

Hoffmann's lasting fame, however, rests on his literary works, to which he came late. He did not start writing until age thirty-three. Fame was immediate and lasting for the fantastic tales, fairy tales, stories, and novels where the surreal dimension intermingles "naturally" with everyday life. Professor Marx made special mention of Sigmund Freud, who used the tale *Der Sandmann* to illustrate his theories. And there is the novel, *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr*, where a cat (talking and thinking, of course) is the protagonist.

Professor Marx pointed out a peculiar fact in Hoffmann's case: how he and his works served to inspire other arts and artists. The source of the beloved Christmas ballet *The Nutcracker* is Hoffmann's fairy-tale, *Nussknacker und Mausekönig*. The doll/automat figure from Hoffmann's *Sandmann* inspired Leo Delibes' ballet *Coppelia*, and Jacques Offenbach's late opera, *Tales of Hoffmann*, is rooted in at least three of Hoffmann's tales.

Professor Marx concluded with an overview of Hoffmann's brief and crowded life (1776-1822): how could he have created so much in such a short time, with a serious professional career to boot?

-- Irmgard Wagner

February Lunch mit Lyrik

Due to the aftermath of a few blizzards this winter, only a small group of Lunch mit Lyrik faithfuls met on Feb. 20 at Cafe Mozart; another few apparently ventured forth to Cafe Berlin instead (*errare humanum est*).

Everyone present had made a special effort to read aloud a poem on the theme of "Love and Loss."

Irmgard Wagner started with an explanation of Goethe's poem "Es war ein König in Thule," which reads like a Minnesang from long ago but which Goethe purposely wrote as if it were an ancient ballad, sung by Gretchen in Faust I. Schubert composed a setting of this well-known song which we were able to hear by way of a CD on Irmgard's 'boombox'.

As luck would have it, **Kurt Marshall** had brought another poem by Goethe, "Nähe des Geliebte," also in a Schubert setting, to which we could listen with great enjoyment using Irmgard's CD.

Isabelle Daverne was equally drawn to music by giving an account of the declaration of love in dialogue form between the two main characters in Lehar's "Die lustige Witwe."

Sharon Higgins read the story of a double loss of love in Heine's exquisite poem "Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen."

John Loth cheered us up with a rendition of a witty poem on the unsuccessful lover by Eugen Roth, and I added a humorous poem on the shy lover by Detlev von Liliencron.

Joyce Constantine came up with a most unexpected poem, a lament by "Sissi," Kaiserin Elisabeth, wife of Emperor Franz Josef, and cousin of "Mad King Ludwig" of Bavaria. This surprisingly serious and self-critical poem was written under a Hungarian pseudonym and astounded us all.

During lunch it did not go without notice that we had almost unanimously bypassed the salad choices on the menu, and had instead launched into Wurst, Sauerkraut and Rotkohl. Spaten beer added to the enjoyment of our gathering and contributed to a lively conversation on a cold winter's day.

-- Erika Joyce

Dramatic Reading: Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*

With Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the Idea of Tolerance as our theme for Oktoberfest 2009, it was fitting that we should read one of his plays for our dramatic readings at Pimmit Library. The drama chosen by Irmgard was Lessing's famous comedy, *Minna von Barnhelm*, or *The Soldier's Fortune*, written at the close of the Seven Years' War in 1767. It tells the story of Major von Tellheim, sensitive and proud officer down on his luck, out of a job and in debt, and of his love Minna von Barnhelm, rich and resourceful heiress, generous and crafty.

The play was a sensational success at its first performance in Hamburg. It was also the first "contemporary" play in the German language, focusing on problems in society relevant even today. As Irmgard guided us through the play with her signature teaching skill, she reminded us of the central conflicts Lessing highlights in this drama: The problem of war versus peace; friend versus foe (Prussia versus Saxony); civilian versus military life; the ever-present problem of money and lack thereof; the temptation of easy gain by corruption; and the difference between the sexes with regard to their value perception of honor and love.

To this day, Lessing's *Minna* belongs to one of the most important and beloved comedies in German literature.

Apart from a few archaic expressions, we agreed that the language was entirely accessible to the modern reader and even sounded remarkably modern. We were astounded at Lessing's balanced view regarding the relationship of men and women, a view that must have been revolutionary to an 18th century audience.

It goes without saying that after our drama reading exercises we proceeded directly to Ledo's for beer and pizza and much "Geselligkeit".

-- Erika Joyce

Dramatic Reading: Horvath's *Kasimir und Karoline*

Our meeting in February had to be cancelled due to the monster snowstorm, but we started with gusto on our new play in March. This time around we moved from the 18th to the 20th century with Ödön von Horvath's comedy *Kasimir und Karoline*, a play of ironic realism written at the height of the Great Depression in Germany, and set in Munich at the Oktoberfest of 1931. From the beginning, it was clear that the author intended this play to be one of social criticism and irony. By contrast to Lessing, who clearly wanted his audience to identify with the main characters, i.e. men with Tellheim/Werner, and women with Minna/Franziska, Horvath asks us stand back and refrain from identifying with any of his characters.

We have two more sessions to follow this spring - and a few more highly anticipated visits to Ledo's Pizza.

-- Erika Joyce

In Memoriam Traude Theurer-Maier

Traude was one of the earliest and most loyal members of the resurrected American Goethe Society. After our first Book Conversation in January 2004 she joined the small circle of committed friends of German literature for dinner in Chinatown. She was a particularly active participant of book conversations over the years. Traude had grown up in Tübingen and she and I would reminisce about our common native region – the Swabian heartland between Waiblingen and Tübingen, where I was a university student for many years. Together with her husband, Dr. Wolfgang Maier, she had offered to serve as refreshment hosts at our January literature lecture. But a return of her severe illness prevented that, and she succumbed to it after a brave battle on 23 February. Her radiant smile and ready helpfulness will be sadly missed.

--Irmgard Wagner