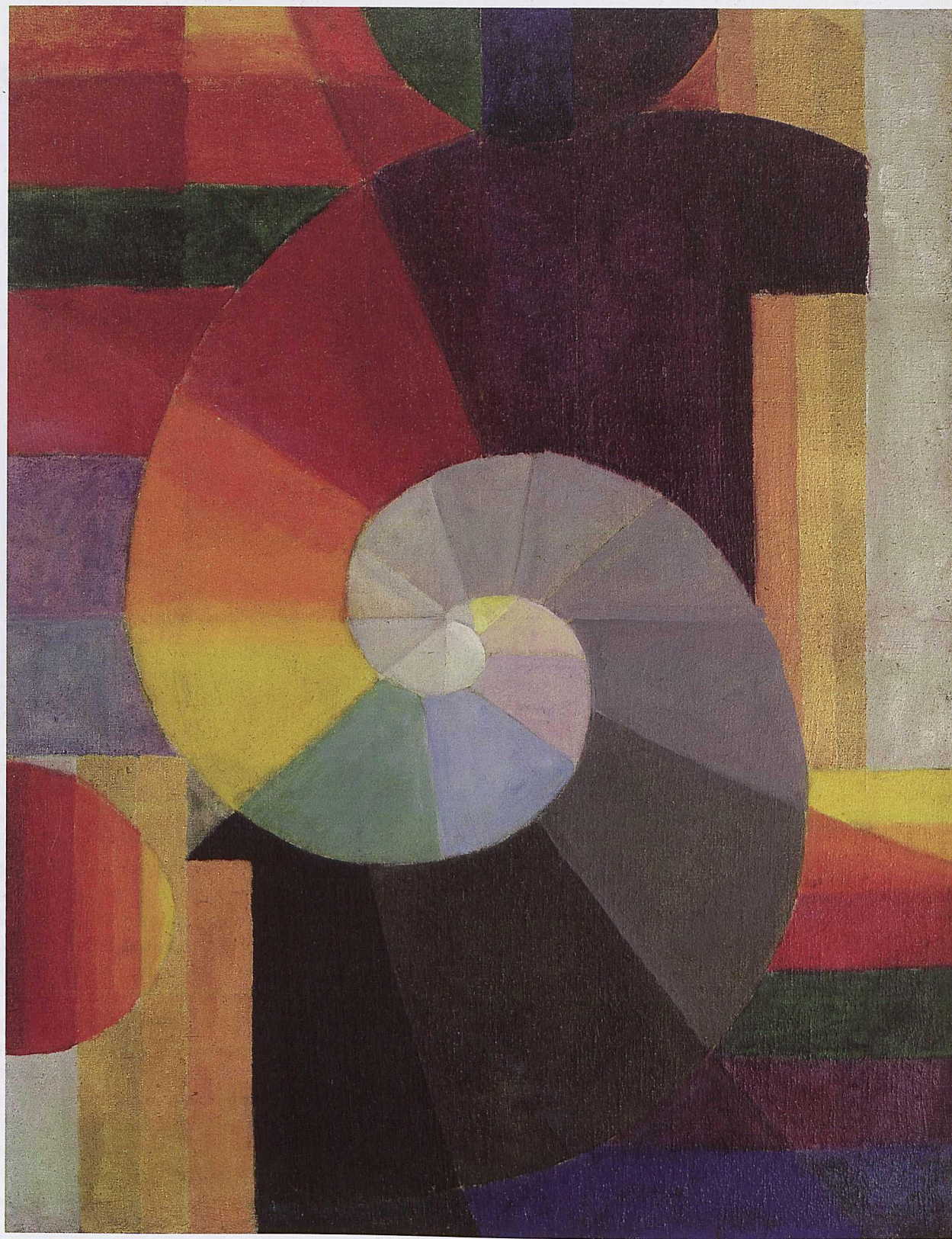
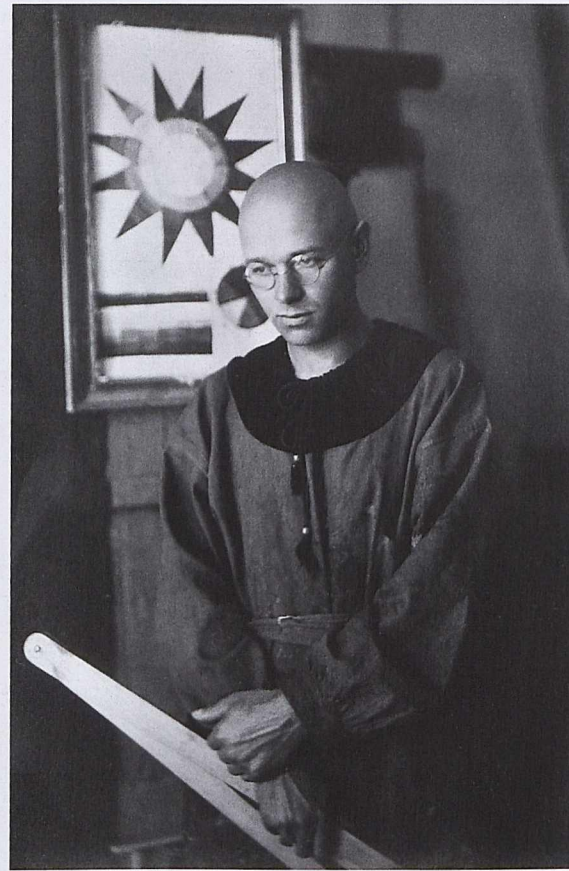
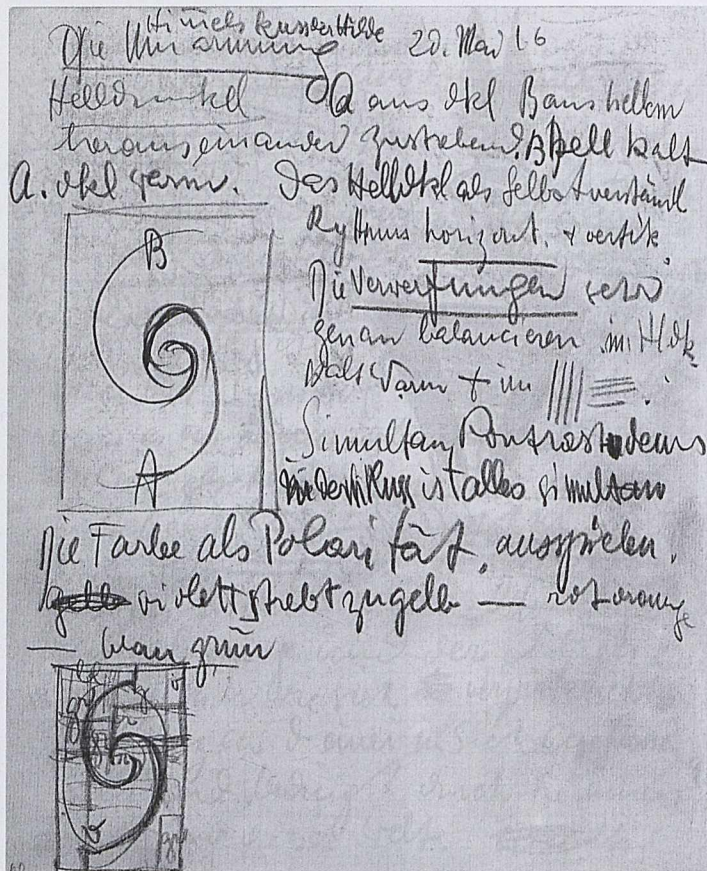


ORIGINAL TITLE: *Die Begegnung*
YEAR OF EXECUTION: 1916
MATERIAL: oil on canvas
FORMAT: 105 x 80 cm
LOANED BY: Kunsthau Zürich, 1964/5

The Encounter
Johannes Itten





A few years before his appointment at the Bauhaus, first in Stuttgart, then in Vienna, Johannes Itten made a series of abstract paintings that might be considered as models of Bauhaus painting *avant la lettre*: *Horizontal-Vertikal* from 1915, *Tiefenstufen* (Gradients) from 1915, *The Encounter* from 1916, *Das Entzweite* (The Divided), and *Die Kreise* (The Circle) from 1916. If the use of the term “avant-garde” to describe utopian designs of aesthetic principles in the period before their establishment was ever valid, then, with a view to the Bauhaus, it fits well to this group of works by Johannes Itten. These paintings are characterized by an abstract geometric style, in which rectangular and circular or spiral shapes are combined with paradigmatic color constellations. In each of these paintings, Itten appears to test in an exemplary way fundamental principles of the form and color system of his abstract pictorial vocabulary: rectangle, square, circle, spiral, gradations of light and dark, and color contrasts. Each of these pictures has an exemplary character, without Itten having added further variations or even series to this form and color canon. In the painting *The Encounter*, a horizontal structure of stripes of bright chromatic colors, which traverses the color scale from yellow via orange, red, green up to purple and blue, is flanked on both sides by vertical stripes of metallic colors—silver, gold, brass, and bronze. Toward the center, this orthogonal structure of colored stripes breaks dynamically into a double spiral. In a rhythmic arrangement, gradations of light and dark interlock with

Bauhaus Before the Bauhaus? Johannes Itten's Painting *The Encounter*

Christoph Wagner

gradations of chromatic colors to end in the middle in a whitish gray and the palest pastel yellow. In this painting, the totality of the colors almost seems to be combined with the axiomatic claim of a model, as if Itten wanted to situate himself with his own color system in a long tradition of color theory that includes Aristotle, Franciscus Aguilonius, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Philipp Otto Runge, or Adolf Hölzel. A few years later at the Bauhaus as part of the almanac *Utopia*, Itten did in fact publish a “color globe in seven gradations from light to dark and twelve hues” that was spread out to form a color star.

Due to the constant movement between different locations and contexts that took Itten within just a few years from the Stuttgart Akademie, to Vienna and his contacts with the Vienna art scene, and finally to the Weimar Bauhaus, this historical constellation contains the danger of an anachronistic overlapping of the different stages. Therefore, the question of the historical context of the picture *The Encounter* should be examined more carefully.

When writing in 1962 about his preliminary course at the Bauhaus, Itten noted that Walter Gropius, through the intervention of Alma Mahler, had visited him in his private art school in Vienna in 1919, “to look at the abstract pictures and the works of my students. On leaving, he said: ‘I don’t understand your pictures and the works of your students, but if you want to come to Weimar I would be very pleased.’” The historico-critical analysis of the sources confirms by and large this version of the events. If Gropius is to be believed, then it appears to be another of the many paradoxes in the history of the Bauhaus that at the beginning of 1919, the first Bauhaus director still didn’t “understand” the painterly geometric abstraction that, only a few years later, would play such a crucial role in the identity of the Bauhaus.

Alma Mahler’s attitude to Itten’s abstract pictures, however, was quite different. In a letter from 1917 to Erika Tietze-Conrad, Alma Mahler, still strongly affected by works such as *The Encounter*, noted enthusiastically: “We didn’t go wrong with Itten. He’s a marvelous chap. I was in his studio and saw his earliest works and the most recent, and there is such a consistency to the whole that I shall no longer be persuaded otherwise. Itten as a person may have faltered—but not the artist.” It seems to have been during a summer visit to Alma Mahler in 1918 that the friendship was cemented—not least due to their common interests in theosophy. Against this background, Alma Mahler brought Itten and Gropius together with the following words that have been passed down by Itten: “If you want to have any success with this idea of the Bauhaus, then you have to appoint Itten.” Accordingly, the painting *The Encounter* should indeed be understood as one of the exemplary key works concerning “the encounter” with Gropius on Itten’s path to the Bauhaus.

Itten’s art-theoretical diary entries allow a more precise classification and understanding of the work *The Encounter*. A preparatory study from May 20, 1916, is directly linked to a traumatic biographical event: the suicide of his Stuttgart girlfriend Hildegard “Hilde” Wendland in the spring of 1916. It was probably this event that Alma Mahler hints at when in 1917, looking back on this, she mentions that Itten “as a person may have faltered.” In the first version of the painting *Auferstehung* (Resurrection), Itten gave this event a moving epitaph with a combination of figurative and abstract formal elements. This picture, which has only survived in photographs, is inscribed with the date April 1, 1916. *The Encounter* was made about seven weeks later. In the title, the biographical reference that could still be made out in the diary entry has entirely disappeared. Compared with the “Embrace” and the “Heavenly Kiss with Hilde,” the title *The Encounter* is more



Johannes Itten, draft sketch of May 20, 1916 (Diary III, p. 60), Johannes-Itten-Stiftung, Kunstmuseum Bern

Johannes Itten in a painter's frock with a golden-section compass and color star, Weimar 1920–21 (photo: Paul Stockmar), Johannes-Itten-Stiftung, Kunstmuseum Bern

Johannes Itten, *Auferstehung* (Resurrection) (first version), 1916, lost

Johannes Itten (at the piano) and **Oskar Schlemmer** in Itten's Stuttgart studio, 1915, Johannes-Itten-Stiftung, Kunstmuseum Bern

generalizing. However, the connection shows clearly that Itten's painting *The Encounter* should not be understood as merely an abstract experiment in form and color. In Itten's pictorial vocabulary, the color spiral clearly has a symbolic function with a metaphysical background—one that he went on to explore further through his esoteric speculations. In his preparatory drawing, Itten made a precise plan of the composition and the color scheme of *The Encounter*. Without doubt, his ideas about the rhythm, contrast, and balance of the colors draw heavily on Adolf Hölzel's theory of contrasting colors, which would have been still fresh in his mind from his studies in Stuttgart. Itten remained committed to the basic principles of Hölzel's theory of contrasts until the end of his life. Under these impressions, added to which were encounters in the Hölzel circle with Ida Kerkovius, Oskar Schlemmer, or Willi Baumeister among others, Itten began with an astonishing rigor to carry out the transition from his prior "Cézannism" to the geometric abstraction of paintings such as *The Encounter*. A photograph taken in 1915 on the occasion of Schlemmer's visit to Itten's Stuttgart studio shows Itten playing the piano under one of his earliest chessboard compositions, which was doubtless directly inspired by Hölzel's classes. The scene depicted here has a programmatic content. Itten is shown as an artist who is attempting, on the model of music, to push the limits of painting in order to create analytically resolved, "pure" proportions and harmonic color constellations. Before his arrival at the Bauhaus, Itten's artistic studies in Vienna would also have drawn inspiration from the twelve-tone method of musical composition developed by Josef Matthias Hauer. A curious contradiction concerning Johannes Itten's artistic development is that during his three years at the Weimar Bauhaus—between October 1919 and October 1922—he no longer made a single painting in an abstract geometric style. The few pictures made in this period, such as the *Kinderbild* (Portrait of a Child) from 1921–22, returned to a figurative, objective approach. Only in his sculptural works of this period such as the *Tower of Fire*, also called "Tower of Light," or in single prints did Itten develop the abstract geometric potential of his art. During his time at the Bauhaus, philosophical and conceptual problems concerning the artistic creation of a "new man" seem to have become more important than the propagation of a particular "Bauhaus style" in painting. Only at the beginning of the 1950s, three decades later and at a considerable distance to the Bauhaus, did Itten return to abstract geometric compositions in his paintings, after a body of work that had been dominated by figuration. He partly even drew on his own early compositions such as *Horizontal-Vertikal* from 1915, which he then varied from memory.

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