

THE ASCLEPIOS SERIES

The series of new paintings fusing art-health-hope

2019-2021- ...

For many years various fields of science substantiated my interest to understand why humans need art and the potential impact of art on our health. In 2018, I met Dr. Johannes Merk, a cancer surgeon and scientist specialized in research and applications of viruses in healthcare. His awareness of the psychological challenges for patients coping with serious health threats motivated his interest in methods additional to pharmaceuticals.

My own focus seeks to define and apply to art contemporary knowledge about perception provided by neuroscience and art history, and fuse this with pragmatic knowledge from my own long experience in painting and sculpture, to create artworks that by their sheer visual presence may appeal to another person. The strong visual appeal that focuses the viewer is often experienced as an enhancement of an individual's well-being.

After various dialogues about the Renaissance and Baroque, periods of time during which grand artworks provided hope when general health was threatened, Dr. Merk encouraged me to find the subject that could have a comparable purpose in our time. I thus became aware of the additional value of selecting the right narrative in art as second layer providing a sense of hope. Here I have recognized how our eyes and brain or mind/body work: complex visual appeal comes first, the alignment with recognizable figures second, the multi-layered narrative third.

In 1575-1576 Tintoretto painted his magnificent *The Brazen Serpent* as ceiling painting for the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, providing hope for overcoming the Plague (Black Death). For centuries Venice was an important trading center for many countries around the Mediterranean, including Byzantium, Syria and Egypt. Venetian ports also connected Italy and Europe with India, China and Japan. There was trade not only in spices or silk but also in cultural artifacts, which included Chinese porcelain, scrolls and Japanese folding screens. Tintoretto's art fuses elements of various cultures. The image of a snake curling around a rod has meaning in Jewish, Islamic and Christian narratives. The snakes are Asian dragons. The vertical and swirling composition of persons and landscape is Taoist. Several bare-chested figures with turbans are Indian. The fusion of so many cultural aspects into a typical European artistic transformation comes astonishingly close to the globalism of our own time. The conviction of the ability to endure a pandemic by providing hope, builds on the ideas of Hermes Trismegistus, a mythical Egyptian supposedly of Moses' time and popular in the Renaissance, who stated that to overcome evil one has to capture it in a sculpture.

In late 2019, I started my first paintings with this motif as idiosyncratic transformations, of course, I was not aware of the upcoming global COVID pandemic. As time and work went on, I became fascinated by the strong visual appeal, the multi-layered and multi-cultural meanings of this composition and the extraordinary relevancy to our own time.

Though nowadays often the use of digital projecting and printing technologies are applied as foundation for painting, I would like to stress here that I do not use any such mechanical projection methods for my work but with a small image in my hand I translate and manually enlarge the motif, on purpose using rough conte crayons, guaranteeing my own transformation and avoiding mere reproduction. To me the personal physical interaction and struggle of the artist with the translation of the subject is basic for finding the right artistic expression.

Fré Ilgen