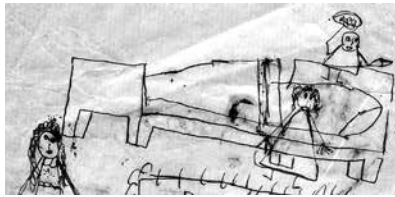




Dorthe Kærgaard. Photo: Leif Bech

**Dorthe Kærgaard**

## **An Umbrella Full of Dreams<sup>1</sup>**



Once upon a time there was a little girl. She loved to make drawings. Her drawings sometimes became stories. In one of the girl's stories, Ole Lukøje appears with his dream umbrella sitting on the bed.

When children became sleepy, they were told: "It is Ole Lukøje who has sprayed sand in your eyes". Ole Lukøje's umbrella was full of dreams. Lovely dreams if she had been a good girl. But if not, the umbrella gave creepy dreams.

When the girl was a little older, she went to dance school. Each season ended in a great performance with all the pupils; a performance that illustrated dance dreams.



The girl refused to take part.

The girl's mother suggested that the girl could be Ole Lukøje and just hold the umbrella with all the dance dreams. That's how it turned out. The girl then stood peacefully, content with just looking at what was going on around her.

When I prepared this Transit 'talk', I came to think of the little girl who didn't want to dance, but just wanted to be 'the invisible' Ole Lukøje. That's how I feel about giving talks. I'm here. With my umbrella: my paintings.

When I was older, I said I wanted to be a painter/artist. But that's no way to go for a girl, people said at that time.

I kept drawing. Turned eighteen and went to Rome as an *au pair*. Why Rome? As a teenager I had become very interested in Greek/Roman history and archaeology. And I had seen the film *Roman Holiday* with Audrey Hepburn.



One day the lady I worked for took me to the Borghese Museum. She wanted me to see an important painting. She didn't say which one. We passed a lot of paintings. And there it was. Painted by Titian. Two women sitting on a sarcophagus.

One was dressed. The other was naked. The title of the picture was *Heavenly and Earthly Love*.

1. Transcript of a talk given by artist Dorthe Kærgaard at the Mini Transit Festival, Poetry in Space, in Denmark on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2023.

Dorthe Kærgaard



The lady looked at me and asked: “Which do you think is heavenly love and which earthly love?” A very tricky question for an inexperienced young girl from a small Danish village. I got confused. I couldn’t answer.

From that moment, that lesson, I began to think about the content and meaning of images in a completely new way.

Then in another room I met Gian Lorenzo Bernini in his sculpture *Apollon and Daphne*. I was told about the myth. Art and myth go very well together. I began to understand, but fortunately not everything. Because understanding can make the brain lazy, I think.

## Something

Some people might wonder what my pictures represent. I can say that at least they are imagining something. That something is most often something of importance, a problem, a dilemma that provokes thoughts, considerations and questions.

When I look at my paintings from the past thirty to thirty-five years, I have no doubt that the motifs are primarily about: Choices either/or; Motherhood; Relationships between people; Dilemmas; Power/ Being powerless; Hope. When I paint, the paintings are mostly about me. When people see the paintings, they are mostly about *them*.

## Poetry



I have always read poetry. Preferably poems that are a little incomprehensible. It is not important for me to understand a poem immediately. It is beneficial to sense an atmosphere that I can carry for a long time. It could be the breeding ground for what grows from the ‘seeds’. Painting is silent poetry. Poetry is painting that speaks.

## Painting and composition

I almost never start painting the motif spontaneously. The idea must be translated so that it becomes universal. The main motif is added first. The other elements are then built on to that.

I don’t have a compositional scheme, very rarely think about ‘The golden ratio/cut’, but use my intuition for how the subject can keep the balance.

Every element usually has a symbolic meaning. Paintings are wordless. That's one of the reasons I use symbols. They are not random decoration. But some elements are added to make the 'puzzle' fall into place.

### About perspective

Earlier I was very careful to make the perspective as correct as possible. To create space and depth in the image. I've moved away from that a bit.

### Colours

Golden and blue colours dominate. The golden colours come from my stay in Italy. I was so taken with early Renaissance paintings. All the little Bible stories painted on a golden background. And the colours of the houses in Rome.

I have collected many colour 'examples', covers and photos from magazines, which can be used as a kind of guideline or road map for the colour composition. I put them close to the easel so that I have them in mind throughout the painting process.

When I stand at the white canvas and have to add the first strokes, I become a bit frightened. I paint several canvases at a time. Because oil dries slowly and because I like working that way.

### Nude figures and extra-large figures

I have often been asked why my figures are naked, and, especially at the beginning, very corpulent. As you can see here in paintings from the beginning of the 1990s:



One reason is that 'perfect' bodies make me think of War Memorials with their outstretched, imploring arms. I had to disrupt the perfect, and Baudelaire clarified my choice: "That which is not just a little deformed seems insensitive and cold. It follows that the irregular, i.e. the unexpected, the surprising, the amazing is a decisive part and the characteristic part of the beautiful." If the figures wear clothes, they might belong to a certain period or social context. But gradually, I have chosen to give the figures clothes. To be able to work with colours.

### Age

I have not chosen an age. The figures just come ageless. Children are children. The adults are younger people. Why? I cannot answer that clearly. I'm still thinking about it... When looking at art history many/most artists paint figures "... nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita...", unless it is a specific person.





### Where do the motifs come from?

“This is going to be a painting!” I think when I see something that strikes me. As, for example, when the TV news in the early 1990s was full of horrifying stories about the war in Yugoslavia.

One of them showed a man playing the cello in a park that had been converted into graves for war victims.

The sound of the cello was achingly beautiful. “This is going to be a painting”, I thought.

The picture was finished two years later. The impression and thoughts had to be filtered.

### How to depict war without showing its atrocities?

To show the evil, I used a wild boar playing a flute inspired by a fresco in a Danish church. I was thinking of a cartoon in the English magazine, *Punch*, in which Hitler was depicted with a flute and with an entourage of Nazis following him. Like the story of the Pied Piper or Ratcatcher from Hamelin, who lures children to follow him.

The withered leaves on the woman’s eyes symbolise darkness and hopelessness and her attempt to shut out misery and evil. The small bright things in the water are from a Japanese ritual I saw many years ago in a film. Small paper boats are put in the river to remember the dead loved ones. How to paint the cello’s beautiful and magical tone? I did it with a blue iris. I have called the picture *Vita in Memoriam - Memory of Life*.

### Family Trees

The idea came at a school party at my grandson Peter’s school. The party was over. Many children were scattered around the school. I was looking for Peter and his little brother, Thomas. I opened the door to the gym, where there had been a disco. It was hard to see anything. The room was dark, but a glitter ball rotated slowly under the ceiling. Like stars. On three of the gym’s ropes hanging from the ceiling, were three small boys. Completely silent, curled motionless around the rope like little knots. The ropes swung quietly back and forth in the dark. Seeing it immediately gave me an association with the Greek myth about the Goddesses of Fate who spin the thread of man’s life. I knew right away: “This is going to be a painting”.

### First sketch

I felt from the beginning that there should be trees in the background. But it was only when I found a photo in our family album that ‘the story/motif’ fell into place.

I sometimes use drawings on transparent paper, to check where to place the 'objects'...



Drawings from left: "small boys"; "family album"; "transparent paper".

Final result: *Family Trees*.



## Flashes

This is what I call it, when I see something and sense that it probably can be used in a painting but still miss the 'big idea'.

For some time, without knowing exactly how I could use them, I had been sketching birds, especially herons, which are often seen where I live, close to the fjord. Then one day, when walking my dog along the fjord, scouting for herons, the motif with a woman hanging between two herons suddenly popped up in my mind, as if in a flash. Now I knew how to use the herons.

I sketched. Thought it lacked dynamism. Then I let the two herons fly in different directions. The game of opposites. It helped. I gave the two birds a snake in the beak. The snake's tail around the woman's arms.

The motif is about choice. The woman was caught up in the difficult agony of choosing.

Often choosing can be so difficult that you become paralysed and do nothing. Meanwhile time and life go on. I have illustrated this at the bottom of the picture. The trees, from spring to winter. *Waiting for a Miracle* is the title.



## Theme

When an exhibition has a specific theme, the motif must be invented and there is a deadline.

In 2005, the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen was the theme of a group exhibition. Andersen had spent long periods in Rome; that's why I chose a Roman scene. The actions were taken from his stories, diaries and drawings. And from my own sketches from Rome. *The Little Mermaid*, *The Little Match Girl*,



*The Nightingale*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *Ole Lukøje*... among others. In his memoirs, Andersen explains that as a child he took part in a school play, as an angel. So, I placed the angel Andersen at the top of the picture with his hand outstretched, the Michelangelo-way, towards the rainbow, in which the heads of countless children appear. Ole Lukøje walks with his magic umbrella on the rainbow.



The title is "Adventurous Stories".



From left: The mother; The hand

## Love

Love was the theme of another group exhibition. I participated with two oil paintings. For one, *Pastorale*, I used the Greek myth of the nymph Daphne, who





is pursued by Apollo. She pleads with the gods for help. Her prayer is heard, and she is transformed into a laurel tree. Only ribbons and flowers from her hair remain. Apollo ends up empty-handed.

Cupid sits in the foreground watching those of us who are witnessing the scene. He has caught a butterfly, symbol of Psyche/the soul. He holds it as if he wants to crush it. Naughty boy!

A scene from the film *Death in Venice* inspired me for the second theme motif *Serenata Inwano*.

In the film, an elderly writer arrives in Venice. A gondola, rowed by an old man, takes him to the hotel. The scene made me think of Charon, the ferryman who, in Greek mythology, sails the dead to Hades, the underworld.

The author is attracted to a young boy in the hotel and in a very intense scene he reaches out to caress him, he hesitates and withdraws his hand without touching the boy. I did not perceive it as an erotic desire, but rather a sad realisation of the unattainable. Like when you stand on the ground looking longingly at a flock of migratory birds crossing the sky.



At the time I was working on the painting, there were countless refugees crossing the Mediterranean in small boats. Many of them drowned. That's why I put the boat in this scene.

I am not illustrating myth or film. The painting is not about the author, about Charon, the young boy or the many boat refugees. My motifs can be rooted in a particular story I remember or in many stories, but I have always processed them so that they can become a mental picture of our life/existence.

What these two paintings could say about Love is: You can't *take* love, you can only *give* love. That wasn't my starting point for the paintings, but that's what I saw when I reached the final stage.

### Insistent motives

Finally, there are the kinds of motives which just insist on being transformed into paintings. Like for example *Somewhere in the World*: a mother and child motif in a world where people have to leave and go on a journey to get to safety somewhere. Perhaps someone will think of the biblical family, which has clearly been an inspiration. But just as in my other pictures, I don't want to illustrate the fate of

certain people, but to depict people who find themselves in precarious life situations. *Somewhere in the World* is contemporary reality, seen through my glasses.



In the beginning.



The result.

The next watercolour, *Stories to be Told*, is, among other things, about choices/decision-making. A dilemma.

The inspiration was the myth of Pandora, who received a box from the God Zeus, and was told not to open it. But she did. The contents, anything that could harm mortals, escaped and spread into the world. Pandora slammed the lid back on. The only thing left in the box was Hope.



The Nine Muses are on the front of the sarcophagus. They represent different arts and knowledge/science. Something I find tempting to spend time on. Time I don't have, which makes me frustrated and sad. The woman cannot make choices. Instead, she just lies down with her eyes closed, hoping. The birds above her are a reference to Emily Dickinson's poem *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*.

### A title

A title can appear long before the first sketching steps are taken. An idea came about twelve years ago. An incident I witnessed. A quite ordinary everyday scene, but one of those "This is going to be a painting" moments.

I wanted it to be a big painting and a canvas 135cm x 100cm was made. But everything was still only in my head and, little by little, also some sketches. The idea, where 'my heart' got really involved, was missing. It occurred a few years later in quite another situation. Here came the 'revelation'. It made me decide that the painting should be called *Requiem*.

The rest of the 'story' exists hidden somewhere. It just needs to be found and put-together, composed. I've really come to like looking at the big empty canvas waiting in my studio. So many intriguing motifs appear on it.

All, I have said now, has been explained in another way by the Argentinian writer Borges. It's about poetry. I think it goes for paintings too.

*... one of the effects of poetry is to give us an impression. Not to discover something new, but to remember something forgotten. When we read a good poem, we think that this poem already existed within us...*

*I have a feeling that beauty is a physical sensation, something we feel with the whole body. It is not the result of a judgement, we do not arrive at it by means of rules; we feel the beauty or we don't feel it.*

Jorge Luis Borges

On poetry in the book *Seven Nights* (*Siete noches, La poesía*), p. 105 - 121, Biblioteca Borges, Madrid, 2000.

*The rose has no why,  
it blooms because it blooms.*

Angelus Silesius

Why?