

Soul Man

What didn't Rudolf Steiner do? Douglas Brenner takes stock.

By age 12, I had a rote reply for grown-ups' quizzical looks when they heard I went to a Waldorf school: "It's based on the ideas of Rudolf Steiner." Blank stare. "He was an Austrian philosopher who believed in teaching the whole student — mind, body and soul." Luckily no one ever asked me to elaborate, because I'd have been at a loss for words — except to say that we students got to do lots of drawing and painting, which I loved, but we couldn't skip eurythmy class (yuck). Any serious discussions of pedagogic method and what Steiner called his "spiritual science," anthroposophy, took place out of earshot in the teachers' room. My only mental picture of Steiner (1861-1925) came from a dim black and white photo showing a stern mouth and X-ray eyes that made me glad this guy wasn't our headmaster. Oh, well, I reasoned, as soon as I enter the real world after graduation, it's Goodbye, Dr. Steiner.

In fact, decades later, I keep bumping into him, and each encounter makes me want to deepen our acquaintance. A gardener I met praised the ecological marvels of biodynamic farming, a Steiner innovation. An art historian introduced me to the Goetheanum, a templelike edifice that Steiner — an expert on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theories of natural metamorphosis and the physiology of color — designed to anchor the anthroposophical colony in Dornach, Switzerland. An English professor pointed out that Saul Bellow had been a Steiner devotee. These were mere hints, though, compared with the insights I expect to gain from "Rudolf Steiner: Alchemy of the Everyday," a traveling exhibition organized by the Vitra Design Museum in collaboration with the Kunstmuseums of Wolfsburg and Stuttgart. When it opens on May 13 in Wolfsburg, Germany, it will be Steiner's first major retrospective ever staged outside the anthroposophic community.



Towering figure Rudolf Steiner at work on a sculpture in 1919.

The images that Vitra's chief curator and deputy director, Mateo Kries, sent me promise a vivid portrait in the round. Watercolors and sculptures, furniture and architectural models, stage sets and eurythmy robes, lab instruments and maps will flesh out Steiner's ideas on (among other topics) prenatal existence and child development, environmentalism and economics, medicine and reincarnation. This polymath and mystic also found time to fit the design of necklaces, headache-remedy labels, stained-glass windows and radiator covers into his cosmic *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

"Today, design and architecture have become very focused on technology, removed from spiritual or social questions," Kries said. "It is fascinating to examine how Steiner dared to develop this overall vision that included everything from metaphysics and natural science to art."

I would never have dreamed that "hands-on" could apply to the remote Dr. Steiner of my boyhood. But there he is in a 1919 photograph, dressed in a workman's smock and grasping a chisel as he contemplates the gigantic wooden statue "Representative of Man" that he was carving for the Goetheanum, then under

