



WHISPERS IN THE PAINT

BRUSHING AGAINST DESTINY

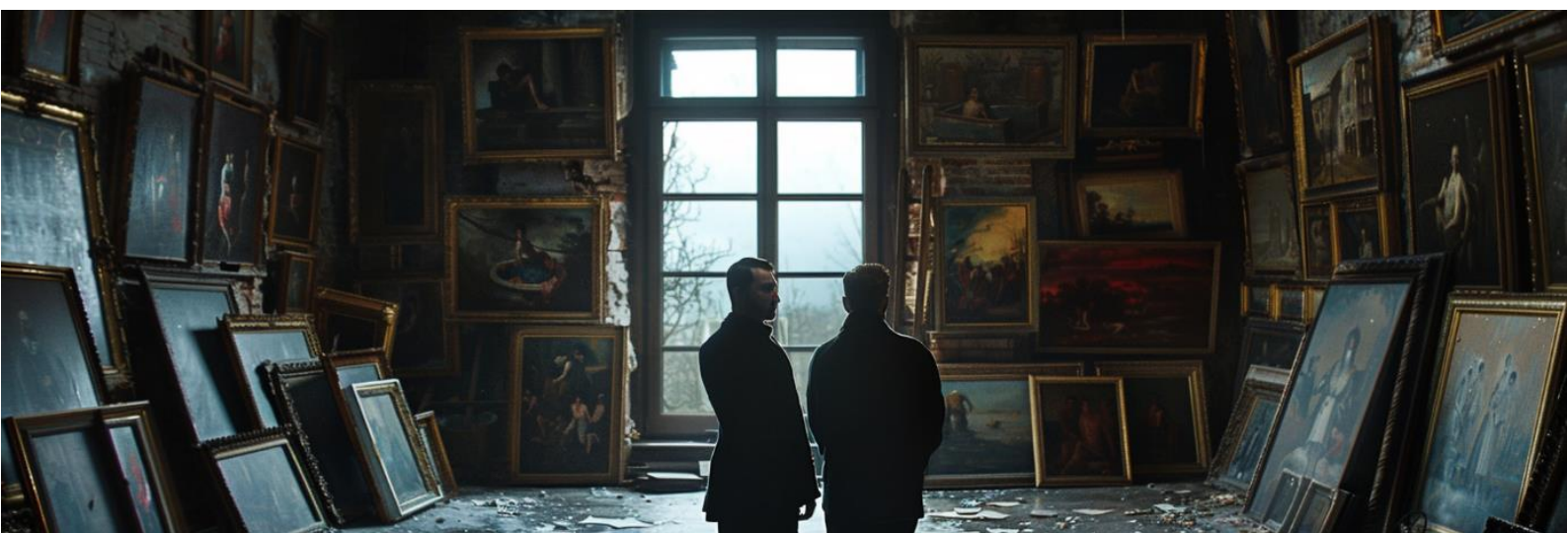


Whispers in the Paint
A film proposal by Mart Sander
Short introduction

The film is set in Italy in 1859, during the Second War of Italian Independence. It revolves around a castle near Milan under Austrian occupation. Two young Estonian painters, Johann Köler and Julie Hagen, meet at this castle. Johann has just received a scholarship from the St. Petersburg Art Academy and is travelling to study in Rome, while Julie, a successful portrait painter in Rome, returns to Estonia after receiving news of her sister's death, to marry her widowed husband.



The castle is owned by a declining noble family, including a grim Count and his elderly, wheelchair-bound mother, who claims the family is cursed. The Count has a peculiar request for passing artists – they must paint his son, who drowned years ago near a little stream. The castle's portrait-filled room, showcasing failed attempts by various artists over the years, reveals the Count's desperation to find a satisfying likeness of his deceased son.





Johann and Julie, while developing a friendship that turns into a doomed love, embark on unravelling the secrets within the castle. As they paint, they become suspicious of the Count's unusual obsession and start to uncover grim mysteries buried in the history of the castle. As the pressure builds to satisfy the Count with their paintings, so does the unease about their imminent parting. The story weaves together themes of art, love, and the haunting past, creating a complex narrative set against the backdrop of historical and emotional turmoil.



Johann Köler and **Julie Hagen-Schwartz** have etched their names into the annals of Estonian art history, becoming iconic figures. The film is a fictional account of their meeting, a Gothic story of forbidden love and mystery in the atmosphere of dread and foreboding. Commemorating the bicentennial of Julie Hagen's birth in 2024 and the upcoming celebration of Johann Köler's bicentenary in 2026, their artistic legacy remains profound. We aspire to unveil this film to the world on the anniversary of Johann Köler's birth, a fitting tribute to these legendary figures and their enduring impact on world art.



Left: self portrait of Julie Hagen-Schwartz

Right: self portrait of Johann Köler



WHISPERS IN THE PAINT unfolds as a Gothic love story, weaving together forbidden passion, ominous surroundings, and dark secrets of the past into a tale of bittersweet romance. Set against the backdrop of a fictional castle, where two prominent figures of 19th century art history converge amidst the looming threat of war, the film creates a moody and sizzling atmosphere that resonates universally.

THE CHARACTERS: Johann Köler and Julie Hagen transcend their historical roots to resonate in the modern world. Johann, a self-made man of humble origins, becomes an esteemed academician and art teacher to the Czar's family, while Julie, born into the echelons of gentry, briefly basks in the limelight as a daring society painter in Rome, defiantly challenging norms. Yet, she eventually yields to the societal expectations imposed upon Victorian women, navigating the intricate web of prospects and obligations that defined her era.

LANGUAGE: The film delves into the linguistic intricacies of the time, with characters seamlessly switching between Estonian, German, and Italian. Against the backdrop of a Victorian era setting, where societal norms dictate their destinies, Julie and Johann's love story unfolds in a tapestry of languages.

APPEAL: Designed to appeal to a diverse audience, the film navigates between the allure of a sweeping love story and the macabre, Gothic elements of its setting. The Italian backdrop provides a universally enchanting stage, while the looming war backdrop resonates with contemporary audiences. The film is poised to captivate a diverse audience, striking a delicate balance to satisfy both romance enthusiasts and aficionados of horror and mystery.

CAST: Featuring an ensemble cast, including legendary actress Barbara Bouchet as the dowager Countess, the film promises narrative depth and emotional resonance. Bouchet's cult status in vintage horror adds a unique layer to the project.

LOCATION: Set in a medieval castle in Italy, devoid of modern additions, the film seamlessly transports audiences to the 19th century. With its picturesque location, *Whispers In the Paint* promises a captivating visual experience that brings the Gothic love story to life.



Whispers in the Paint

By Mart Sander

Logline:

Forbidden love ignites between two artists in the ominous atmosphere of an Italian castle.

Short synopsis:

Whispers in the Paint delves into the intertwined fates of Johann Köler and Julie Hagen, two artists of different social backgrounds who meet at a castle near Milan in 1859. Commissioned to paint by a brooding Count obsessed with capturing a mysterious likeness, they uncover the castle's dark secrets while navigating a forbidden love. As they unravel the mysteries within its walls, they confront betrayal, curses, and tragic histories, culminating in a haunting climax where truth and redemption collide.

Longer synopsis:

Set amidst the turbulent backdrop of Italy's Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom during the Second War of Italian Independence in 1859, *Whispers in the Paint* unravels a haunting tale within the walls of a castle near Milan. The narrative draws inspiration from the real-life stories of two prominent figures in 19th-century art history.

Two aspiring painters, Johann Köler and Julie Hagen, find themselves drawn together in this enigmatic castle. Johann, a humble son of Estonian peasants, earns a prestigious scholarship from the St. Petersburg Art Academy, leading him to Rome to pursue his studies. Meanwhile, Julie, an esteemed portrait artist from an upper-class background, reluctantly returns to her native Estonia after the tragic loss of her sister. Persuaded by her father, she agrees to marry her sister's widower, despite her burgeoning career in Rome.

Both Johann and Julie are lured to the castle by the promise of lucrative painting opportunities, recommended by fellow artists who caution them of the castle's mysterious and foreboding atmosphere. Owned by a fading Austrian noble family, the castle is inhabited by a brooding Count and his elderly, wheelchair-bound mother, who harbours tales of a family curse.

The Count imposes an unusual request on visiting artists – to paint near a secluded pond in a nearby grotto, capturing whatever visions they may encounter. It is believed that haunted by the tragic loss of his son who perished at the grotto years ago, the Count seeks solace in the paintings, desperate to glimpse his son's likeness once more.

As Johann and Julie immerse themselves in their work, a deep bond forms between them, blossoming into a forbidden love. Together, they venture to unravel the mysteries shrouding the castle, uncovering a tapestry of betrayal, vengeance, and long-buried tragedies. Caught in the web of cruel manipulation spun by the dowager Countess, Johann and Julie find themselves entangled in a sinister game of deception.

The Count, consumed by superstition and tormented by his fractured mind, clings to a desperate belief in a cursed fate. Haunted by the memory of a long-deceased village maiden and driven by the delusion that only his son's return can break the curse, he obsessively commissions countless paintings, each stroke a fervent plea to capture his son's likeness and avert the impending doom.

As the Count becomes increasingly obsessed with Julie, he demands her hand in marriage. Yet, as Johann and Julie complete their paintings, believing they have captured the essence of the Count's son and the ghostly maiden, the Count's fragile sanity shatters, culminating in suicide.

As Johann and Julie prepare to depart the castle, more secrets come to light, revealing the true identities depicted in the paintings – the Count's own wife, whom he murdered in a fit of jealousy together with her illicit lover on the other painting, who was the true son of the Dowager Countess. The Count himself is revealed to be the illegitimate offspring of one of the late Count's mistresses.

The Dowager Countess, who has upheld the mask of bitterness and vitriol, is revealed to be a woman tormented by years of resentment towards the man who took her son's life and title. After a lifetime of being trapped in a loveless, abusive marriage, she sees divine justice in the tragedy, feeling the curse has been lifted and her son vindicated.

With the grim puzzle finally solved, Johann and Julie part ways, their paths diverging as they embark on separate journeys – Johann to Rome and Julie to Estonia – destined never to meet again.



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Written by Mart Sander, © 2024

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