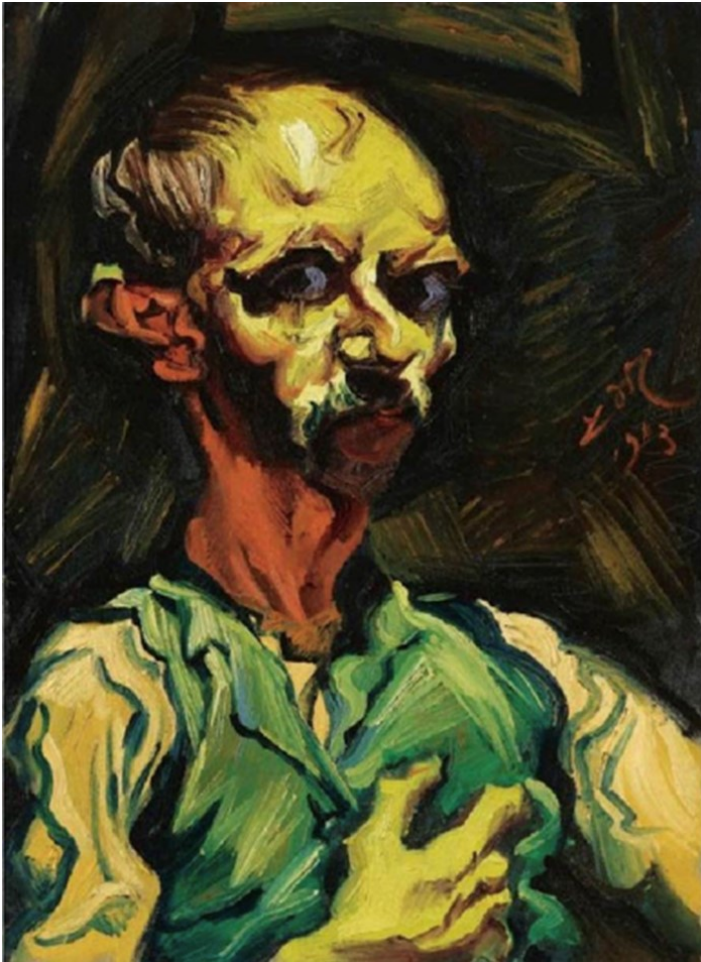


German Expressionist Art

Background Notes

Richard Thomas - 13 January 2021



Ludwig Meidner, *My Night Visage*, 1913,
oil on canvas (66.7 x 48.9 cm)

EDVARD MUNCH OPENING GERMANY TO GAUGUIN AND VAN GOGH

In the 1890s Edvard Munch set the scene for a swathe of artists who between 1905 and 1930 produced the art known as German Expressionism. Many aspects of his career would be mirrored in their later work.

The banning of an 1892 Munch exhibition in Berlin drew attention across Germany. The uproar increased attendance and produced successful ticket sales for his exhibitions in its onward journey to Düsseldorf and Cologne and on its return to Berlin. The charged emotional content that had entered Munch's work excited widespread interest amongst artists. It was Gauguin's work that had made Munch aware of the possibility of achieving such psychological impact. He was also aiming to make parallels with the atmosphere achieved in the theatre by Ibsen and Strindberg with whom he also associated directly.



Paul Gauguin, *Auti Te Pape (Women at the River)* from the series *Noa Noa*, 1893-94,

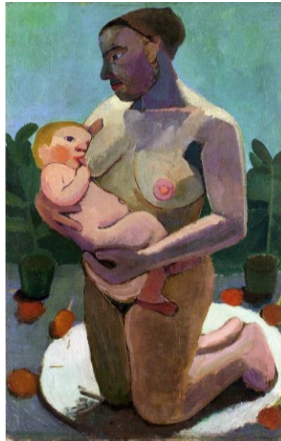


Edvard Munch,

Evening (Melancholy on the Beach), 1896 & *Women on the Shore*, 1898

UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES AND CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Gauguin and van Gogh were also regarded as providing a cultural antidote to the negative psychological and spiritual effects of very rapid urban and industrial expansion. In the Netherlands, Central Germany, France and England, there had already been a proliferation of artists' colonies in rural settings during the 19th century. Gauguin and Van Gogh had also attempted to escape the stifling confines of bourgeois urban culture, and Gauguin had apparently realised a dream of life amongst people whose culture achieved an instinctive integration of thought and untamed inner feeling. He transformed his expressive pictorial language to match that dream.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother and Child*, 1907

During her short life Paula Modersohn-Becker shared Munch's enthusiastic response to Gauguin. She encountered Gauguin's work while studying in Paris before returning to develop her career in the utopian communal rural setting of Worpswede. She was also thrilled by the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche which spurred her on to making images of women that would also impose her own values. She aimed to change how people would look at women in art.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER AND THE DIE BRÜCKE GROUP

An exhibition in 1903 of French Post-Impressionist art was a momentous experience for Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Four fellow architecture students in Dresden joined him in launching the Die Brücke group. Admirers of Munch and steeped in the recently published philosophy of Nietzsche, they declared their will to reform and revitalise the German spirit. They were joined by Emil Nolde, an artist compared with Van Gogh as one who "*painted with the soul of a peasant.*"

NIETZSCHE & ETHNOGRAPHY

Understanding the cultural context requires attention to the reverberations of thought that Nietzsche generated amongst many artists at that time. In 1906 Munch welcomed a commission to paint a posthumous portrait of Nietzsche. The number of books in Munch's library by Nietzsche was equalled only by Dostoevsky.



Erich Heckel,
Friedrich Nietzsche, 1905



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers at Moritzburg*,
1909, reworked in 1926

Nietzsche's libertarian philosophy envisioned an artist-philosopher, adrift without guidance from any external authority, and inevitably at odds with society. Modern urban industrial society was portrayed as a *mélange* of conflicting religious cultures and philosophical attitudes inhabited by displaced people. Sceptical towards socialism and all moralistic doctrines, the challenge Nietzsche set was to accept life fully as it is, without idealisation, and without compensations in an invisible alternative spiritual dimension. Refusing to be a slave, the artist-philosopher would oppose all limitations and find the beautiful and the good here in the gutter of life that is the modern world.

The ethnographic museum in Dresden supplied die Brücke artists with examples of art made to directly stimulate life's rituals. Objects from Polynesia and Oceania were neither detached contemplation nor merely a matter of decorative style. Emulating such a life, and pursuing Dionysian 'joie de vivre' as advocated by Nietzsche, the group plunged naked into rivers and lakes not far from Dresden. They had no need to disappear into Africa or the Pacific and could assert their independence of spirit, without following examples set in Paris. Post-dating their works reveals some insecurity here.

KANDINSKY AND THE DER BLAUE REITER GROUP

The 1903 exhibition that so enthused Kirchner was staged in Munich by a group with Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky playing a central role. Alongside Kandinsky were fellow Russians, Marianne Werefkind and Alexej Jawlensky who had been involved in the artists' colony at Pont Aven in Brittany, a circle that assimilated ideas from Gauguin. After also studying with Matisse in Paris, Jawlensky returned to Munich where he and Kandinsky developed mystical notions from theosophy as set out by Rudolf Steiner and Madame Blavatsky.

The group in Munich expanded to include Gabriele Münter, Franz Marc, Paul Klee and Arnold Schoenberg. Eventually they would exhibit regularly in Berlin and Munich as the Der Blaue Reiter group. All made radical experiments with the structures and vocabularies of expression, verbal, visual and musical, in order to release areas of feeling not previously fully realised. Theosophy gave this project the added historical significance that human spirituality was involved in evolutionary progress. The 20th century would need music that could embrace discord in the face of major conflict and revolution, before an era of spiritual fulfilment would arrive in the 21st century. Alongside such ideas was the fact that Kandinsky experienced synaesthesia, which for him meant seeing colours in relation to musical sounds. This combination of ideas would lead members of the group to an interest in the potential for non-verbal communications through art at a deep intuitive and spiritual level, taking them to experiment at the borders of abstraction. Soon Kandinsky was trying to devise theories of colour equivalent to musical theories.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Cover of Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*, 1911



Arnold Schoenberg, *'Gaze'*, 1910

GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST EXHIBITIONS

- The Four Sonderbund Exhibitions in Düsseldorf and Cologne.☐

These were staged by Karl Ernst Osthaus. Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter were shown in an attempt *“to win this artforsaken industrial region on the Ruhr for modern art.”* The final exhibition in 1912 put Van Gogh and Munch at the centre to indicate Northern European rather than French lineage.

- The Der Sturm gallery in Berlin, opened in March 1912 opened with a show by Der Blaue Reiter, followed by a very successful show in April of the Italian Futurists. Herwarth Walden, the director, who published a Der Sturm journal since 1910, explained that his gallery would host the most extreme examples of contemporary art and the name should mean *“A storm to blast away the complacency of the bourgeoisie.”* The Herbstsalon Exhibition at Der Sturm in 1913 was launched as a rival the avant-garde Parisian Salon d’Automne.

KOKOSCHKA & SHIELE - SHATTERING THE VIENNESE RESPECTABILITY

Viennese architect Adolf Loos introduced Herwarth Walden to the ferociously provocative work of the young Viennese artist Oskar Kokoschka, soon a regular exhibitor at Der Sturm. Egon Schiele also emerged in Vienna as a rival to Kokoschka. Both produced portraits and compositions with a psychological intensity to shatter the usual bounds of respectability, and decorum. Schiele would trespass into angst-laden scenes of sexual intimacy developing an abbreviated language of wiry, angular and fluid forms set in ambiguous space.



Oskar Kokoschka, *Murderer, Hope of Women, 1909*



Egon Schiele, *Self-Portrait with Lowered Head, 1912*

SOCIAL PROTEST



Käthe Kollwitz, *Woman with Dead Child*,
1903



George Grosz, *The Faith-Healers
or Fit for Active Service*, 1916-17

A very dark current of anguish also ran through the graphic work of Käthe Kollwitz, who addressed the injustices and inhumanity of the World War and its aftermath in Germany.

In the post war setting paintings and graphic art incorporated caricature and direct social satire. Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and George Grosz would have their powerfully acerbic contributions put into a new category beyond Expressionism as *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the new objectivity.

POSTWAR SUCCESS CONTINUING DURING THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

German Expressionism was well supported by collectors even during the years immediately after the war. In the Weimar Republic during the 1920s avant-garde art and culture was given official support and recognition. Many of the most prominent figures would see their work enter state funded public galleries, and assumed teaching positions at state institutions. In the cinema, Robert Wiene had a huge success with the 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. The Weimar period saw the arrival of another major film in expressionist style - *Metropolis*, created in 1927 by Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou.

Increasingly the success of Expressionism made it an object of suspicion. Critical voices on the left which approved of Constructivist principles were opposed to Kandinsky and Paul Klee for their subjectivism. The attack in Germany from those on the right was more devastating.

NAZI REJECTION - THE DEGENERATE ART EXHIBITION, 1937

German Expressionist work was exposed to ridicule in the 1937 exhibition Entartete Kunst. Exhibits removed from museums could be purchased, with proceeds going to the Nazi cause or works would be destroyed.

GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST ARTISTS

DIE BRÜCKE Group:

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Max Pechstein, Emil Nolde

ARTISTS OF DER BLAUE REITER Group:

[which originated in DER NEUE KUNSTLER VEREINIGUNG which originated in THE PHALANX]

Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei von Jawlensky, Marianne Werefkind, Gabriele Münter, Heinrich Campendonk, Paul Klee , August Macke, Franz Marc, Arnold Schoenberg

OTHER PROMINENT ARTISTS OUTSIDE THE MAIN GROUPS

Paula Modersohn-Becker - at Worpswede Artists' Colony

Käthe Kollwitz - "The foremost artist of social protest in the movement"

Ludwig Meidner - Apocalyptic visions

VIENNESE ARTISTS EXHIBITING IN GERMANY

Oskar Kokoschka

Egon Schiele

NEUE SACHLICHKEIT

George Grosz

Otto Dix

Max Beckmann

SUGGESTED READING

Voices of German Expressionism - edited by Victor H. Miesel

The Expressionists - Wolf-Dieter Dube - Thames & Hudson - World of Art Series

Expressionism - Shulamith Behr - Movements in Modern Art Series

Concerning the Spiritual in Art - Wassily Kandinsky, translated by Michael T.H.Sadler

The Blaue Reiter Almanac - edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc

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