

Review of Leicester City's German Expressionist art collection (PAN0384)

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Report 1

An Introduction to German Expressionism

German Expressionism was a major force of the European avant-garde during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Although its definition remains disputed and elastic, its reach and impact on subsequent global art historical styles and movements has been undeniably extensive. Within the history of art its influence ranges from the shift of Impressionist naturalism to colourist abstraction in Europe in the period immediately prior to the First World War, to the dynamic canvases of Abstract Expressionism in America from the late 1940s onwards, to the more recent manifestations of the *Junge* or *Neue Wilde* from the 1980s and 1990s and major post-war and contemporary artists like Georg Baselitz, Joseph Beuys, Jörg Immendorf, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lüpertz, A.R. Penck, Franz Ackermann and Julie Mehretu, amongst others. Yet of all the European avant-garde modernisms of the pre-First World War, German Expressionism occupies the most complex and paradoxical of political and historical positions. More than simply an innovative formal style for the distorted description of the external world, German Expressionist art also communicated a particular sensibility towards the perception of the world beyond physical appearances. Informed by the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, the art of the Middle Ages and the 'primitive' art of alternative traditions outside the Western classical tradition, Expressionism in Germany came to be seen as embodying a metaphysical quest for spiritual renewal that was driven by passionate idealism and the search for intellectual adventure.

The term was first used in Germany by the painter and Director of the Berlin Secession, Lovis Corinth, in April 1911, to describe an exhibition of French painting by artists associated with the Fauves, (André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, Albert Marquet, Othon Friesz and Georges Braque) whom he referred to as 'Expressionisten.' In his review of the exhibition, the critic Max Osborn commented that the 'Expressionisten' had broken with Impressionism, were ultramodern and demonstrated significant influence from both Gauguin and Cézanne. As such, he regarded them as important examples of the new art to whom German artists should also turn. The influential German theorist Wilhelm Worringer

also referred in 1911 to the 'new Parisian Expressionists.'¹ However, although the term was not initially associated with German art, it quickly became retrospectively co-opted as a description of new tendencies in German art that had already been developing since the turn of the century, with the artists from **Die Brücke** in Dresden and Berlin and **Der Blaue Reiter** in Munich and Murnau in particular. *Künstlergruppe Brücke* (Artist's Group Bridge) was formed in Dresden on 7 June 1905 by four young students, Fritz Bleyl, **Erich Heckel** (1883-1970), **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner** (1880-1938), and **Karl Schmidt-Rotluff** (1884-1976), all of whom were committed to working as a communal artists' group. Their name, Die Brücke or The Bridge derived from their common appreciation of the writings of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1892) Nietzsche's prophet Zarathustra declares that 'what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal.' For artists of Die Brücke, Nietzsche's diagnoses of the decadence of contemporary culture combined with his exaltation of the creativity of the artist as the only possible salvation, proved irresistible to the young artists. Their manifesto, carved in wood and circulated the following year clarified their aims:

'With a belief in continuing evolution, in a new generation of creators as well as appreciators, we call together all youth. And as youth carrying the future, we intend to obtain freedom of movement and of life for ourselves in opposition to older, well-established powers. Whoever renders directly and authentically that which impels him to create is one of us.'

A crucial aspect of Die Brücke's philosophy was their focus not just on 'creators' but also 'appreciators' of art and they were extremely successful in generating a market for their work through their 'passive members' scheme and annual print portfolios. Although focus on a return to nature and 'authenticity' of practice comprised their Dresden years, by 1911 the lure of Berlin began to appeal. In 1910 Herwarth Walden had already set up his new *Sturm* gallery and associated *Der Sturm* journal in Berlin and he was soon the leading promoter of Expressionism in the pre-war era, promoting Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter in particular. Kirchner, Schmidt-Rotluff and Heckel were also keen to embrace the new dealership and networking opportunities offered by the growing metropolis, although Bleyl remained behind to focus on his teaching. As is well recorded, it was not long after their arrival in the city that the communal ideals of the Brücke's Dresden days soon gave way to a

¹ William Worringer 'The Historical Development of Modern Art' from *The Struggle for Art: The Answer to the 'Protest of German Artists' 1911* in Washton Long, R. (ed.) *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1995), 9.

fractured individualism in the competitive environment of the big city and the *Künstlergruppe Brücke* disbanded.

In addition to the figurative Expressionism developed by Die Brücke in Dresden and Berlin, a shared interest in the writings of Nietzsche, combined with those of Schopenhauer and Goethe characterised the development of a more abstract Expressionism by the artists of Der Blaue Reiter in Munich. **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944) had arrived in Munich from his native Russia in 1896 to pursue his goal of becoming an artist at the famous Munich Academy of Fine Arts. He was not alone in his choice of Munich as a base and was soon joined by Russian compatriots Marianne von Werefkin and **Alexej Jawlensky** (1864-1941). Jawlensky established contact with Matisse's circle in Paris and significantly bridged the gap between Fauvism and Munich-based Expressionism. All of these artists settled in Schwabing, together with Kandinsky's erstwhile student, **Gabriele Münter** (1877-1962). In 1909 the four of them, together with a few other German and international artists founded an avant-garde exhibiting group, the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (Munich Artists' Association or NKV) through which Kandinsky made contact with **Franz Marc** (1880-1916), August Macke and Paul Klee amongst others. In late 1911 however, following a number of disagreements, Kandinsky, Münter, Marc and Alfred Kubin seceded from the NKV to form the Blaue Reiter (the Blue Rider). Werefkin and Jawlensky joined them a year later but the activities of the group were irreparably disrupted by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Significantly, none of the artists directly involved in either Die Brücke or Der Blaue Reiter, nor any of the so-called 'independent Expressionists' such as **Max Beckmann** (1884-1950), **Ludwig Meidner** (1884-1966), **Lyonel Feininger** (1871-1956), **Ernst Barlach** (1870-1938), and **Käthe Kollwitz** (1867-1945), (to name but a few of the most significant represented in the Leicester collections), self-identified with the term Expressionism. In a 1912 essay for **Der Blaue Reiter Almanac**, Franz Marc preferred to refer to himself, his fellow Blaue Reiter editors and members of Die Brücke, all as the 'wild beasts' (*Die Wilde*) of Germany, in direct alignment with the Fauves. Nevertheless, at the major Cologne *Sonderbund* exhibition of contemporary art in 1912 organisers used the term 'Expressionism' to refer to both international artists and the newest examples of German painting. Critics like Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, Paul Fechter and Hermann Bahr, who subsequently used it as a convenient label to cohere some fundamentally divergent artists and styles, frequently emphasised its northern-European tendencies in an attempt to

disassociate it from the French. These tendencies were understood to be derived from the works of the Northern Renaissance Old Masters, the Netherlandish traditions of Rembrandt, a variety of vernacular and folklore traditions and the late nineteenth century influences of artists like van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Ferdinand Hodler.² They also emphasised a focus on spirituality, expression and an irrationalist, metaphysical philosophy of 'the German soul'. Tensions between the critical reception of French modernism and the German avant-garde had originated in 1871 with Germany's defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war and its concomitant formation as a nation-state. As a late entrant to unification, Emperor Wilhelm II emphasised a national political imperative to establish a distinctly German cultural heritage and identity, rather than the continued dominance of regional variations. The ways in which this was achieved, however, were hotly contested between promoters of the German avant-garde and conservative defenders of academic tradition, supported by the Emperor. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, German Expressionism shocked and delighted its public by turns, drawing on an eclectic mix of influences from both western and non-western sources, applying paint to canvas in a vibrant, expressive, deliberately 'distorted' and abstracted manner and producing mediievally-inspired graphic woodcuts as an economical means of direct expression. Its supporters vigorously established its significance for a patriotic public by emphasising its Nordic origins, its debt to Northern artists like Cranach, Dürer, Holbein, Grünewald and Baldung-Grien and its metaphysical, transnational and universal appeal. Major differences from art that had immediately preceded it included the shift away from Impressionism and external 'reality' towards a focus on 'inner necessity', the pursuit of pure painting, the expression of subjectivity and a representational 'violence towards the sensible world' (Hermann Bahr *Expressionismus*, 1916). A *Sonderweg* or 'special path' for German culture was constructed in the critical discourse of the period as a means of distinguishing the particularities of German art from the rest of Europe, in particular France. Both Bahr and Fechter, writing after the outbreak of the First World War, identified Expressionism as the first modern art from which German-speaking artists had made a vital contribution. In 1914 Fechter singled out **Max Pechstein** (1881-1955) 'as the purest example and strongest representative of extensive Expressionism,' in contrast to Wassily Kandinsky(1866-1944) who was said to 'experience the essence of reality only by focusing his attention on his own self, his inner

² See Paul Ferdinand Schmidt 'The Expressionists' published in *Der Sturm* 2, no.92, January 1912, Paul Fechter *Der Expressionismus* (Munich: R. Piper & Co Verlag, 1914) both cited in Washton Long (ed.) *ibid.*, 13 & 81 and Hermann Bahr *Expressionismus* (1916) cited in part in Harrison and Wood (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-1990*.

being.’ By highlighting two very different artists under the same umbrella of ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ expressionism, Fechter helped to codify subsequent binary definitions of modernism as falling along the lines of either figuration (Die Brücke) or abstraction (Der Blaue Reiter), poles that Kandinsky had also recognised and which became increasingly important in subsequent historiographies of modernism.³ Other artists central to Fechter’s account, many of whom are represented today in the Leicester collections included **Franz Marc**, **Oskar Kokoschka** (1886-1980), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, as well as the influence of Northern Renaissance masters, ‘above all Grünewald.’ By 1916 Bahr reaffirmed Expressionism’s role as indicative of the ‘despair, misery and distress of the age.’ By 1919 supporters of Expressionism like Herbert Kühn, saw Germany’s defeat in the First World War as an opportunity to rebuild society ‘against materialism, against the unspiritual, against machines, against centralisation’ and ‘for the spirit, for God, for the humanity in man.’⁴ Yet it soon became apparent that the Expressionist’s focus on personal ‘strivings’, ‘spiritual renewal’ and the ‘inner necessity’ of the artist were a wholly inadequate political platform from which to launch a critique of the harsh new realities of Weimar Germany. Expressionism in the visual arts was extinguished as its erstwhile supporters now became some of its harshest critics. Berlin Dadaists like Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, **George Grosz** (1893-1959) and **Otto Dix** (1891-1969) who had previously admired Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, turned against Expressionism as a bourgeois pre-occupation irrelevant to the class struggle of the proletariat. Nevertheless, although Expressionism was largely deemed to have run its natural course within the modernist avant-garde, it found new outlets and continued to flourish within film, advertising, literature, music, mass media and popular culture during the 1920s and early 1930s, perhaps most successfully in films such as Robert Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), F.W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), as well as with the development of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance) by Mary Wigmann and her contemporaries, and the plays of writers like Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller.

By 1934 however, the persistence of the aesthetics of Expressionism within the mass culture of the Weimar era, its inflammatory yet ultimately solipsistic politics before, during and immediately after the First World War and its initially positive embrace by the National Socialists, led the pro-Stalinist Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács to vehemently condemn it.

³ For more details on this see Rose-Carol Washton Long ‘Brücke, German Expressionism and the issue of modernism’ in Weikop, Christian (ed.) *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism: Bridging History* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), esp.19-30.

⁴ Herbert Kühn ‘Expressionism and Socialism’ *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, May 1919.

Although recognising that Expressionism was initially ‘directed against the political right,’ Lukács argued against it from the perspective of a staunch advocate of Stalinist socialist realism.⁵ For Lukács, the Expressionists’ bohemianism betrayed a lack of ‘economic understanding of the capitalist system.’ He attacked the heightened subjectivism of their art and dismissed their focus on ‘abstraction’ as naïve in its disavowal of ‘concrete social determinations.’ For a staunch Stalinist like Lukács, the Expressionists were therefore deemed to occupy the same ideological terrain as fascism. This was inevitably an extremely damaging accusation in the subsequent post-war evaluation and reception of Expressionism. The context for Lukács’s essay had been prompted in part by Joseph Goebbels’s initial early embrace of Expressionism whilst the Nazis were still in disagreement about the direction of their cultural policies. By 1937 however, with the opening in Munich of both the ‘Official German Art’ exhibition on 18 July and the ‘Degenerate Art’ (‘Entartete Kunst’) exhibition one day later, there was no doubt about their dismissal of modernism and Expressionism in particular in favour of the official style of flaccidly executed neo-classicism. The ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition included over 650 paintings, sculptures, prints and books that had been forcibly seized from public art museums in Germany which were later destroyed or auctioned off to the highest bidder. It included important works by all the major members of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, as well as works by Otto Dix, George Grosz, Max Beckmann and other members of the modernist avant-garde. Anti-semitic slogans and denunciations by Hitler, Goebbels and other Nazi party ideologues were painted on the walls where modern artworks were described as racially and morally degenerate or ‘diseased.’ The exhibition subsequently toured Germany and Austria where it attracted almost three million visitors – a figure never matched since for any exhibition of modern art. The left-wing intelligentsia were galvanised and a vigorous oppositional counter-debate to Lukács’s arguments were played out in the pages of the left-wing émigré journal *Das Wort* (*The Word*) in 1938. Ernst Bloch in particular offered the most trenchant defence of Expressionism as a legitimate form of social protest. He argued that as a critical reaction to the progressive elimination of the role of the subject in modern society (and especially under fascism), the Expressionist emphasis on the subject’s inner life constituted a valid form of resistance. Many of the artists whose work had been labelled ‘degenerate’ by the Nazis were forced to flee the horrors of 1930s and 1940s Germany and Expressionism in exile transformed as artists re-examined their cultural identities in the new contexts of their

⁵ Georg Lukács ‘Grösse und Verfall des Expressionismus’ (‘Expressionism: It’s Significance and Decline’), in *Internationale Literatur*, Moscow 1934.

adoptive countries. The earlier divisions between figuration and abstraction now took on specific importance in as American art institutions increasingly favoured abstraction. Whilst artists like Kandinsky and Klee were seen as legitimate forerunners, the figurative elements of Expressionism were largely forgotten and ignored; the controversies begun by Lukács took a long time to disentangle in the post-war climate of suspicion fostered by the culture of the Cold War and a divided Germany.

The art historian Jason Gaiger argues that rather than seeing Expressionism as an articulation of 'pure' and 'timeless' individual expression, artists of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter should be seen as having responded to a specific historical moment.⁶ Thus although a vastly contested term, German Expressionism can at least stand for a generic grouping of German avant-garde artists, writers, performers and filmmakers working within the first three decades of the twentieth century as members of a radical avant-garde in all its forms – the visual arts, literature, music, performance and film. The specific importance of German Expressionism remains to this day bound up in discourses around German politics, history, identity and nationalism. So why should German Expressionism be interesting to the UK? Popular interest in modern art has never been greater. The global growth of large dedicated museums and galleries of modern art during the 1990s and 2000s (for example the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Geneva 1994; the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao 1997; Tate Modern, London 2000; Istanbul Modern, 2003 to name but a few) combined with the concomitant surge in blockbuster survey exhibitions of modernism and modern artists are testament to the enduring fascination that modernism exerts on continued generations of art lovers, tourists and the general public at large. Although due to the complexities of its political history, German Expressionism has been slow to recover its world-wide position on the global stage as a foundational moment in the histories of modern western art, that is now fundamentally changing. With the increased perspective of time and distance from the horrors of the Nazi regime, and our readiness to face uncomfortable truths about the ideological biases of post-war art history, German Expressionism can now once again take centre stage within debates about the development of modern art. The German Expressionist collections at Leicester Museum and Art Gallery New Walk offer an unparalleled opportunity for UK audiences to learn about, appreciate and enjoy one of the most important episodes within the history of modern Western art.

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⁶ Jason Gaiger 'Expressionism and the crisis of subjectivity' in Edwards and Wood (eds.) *Art of the Avant-Gardes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and the Open University, 2004), 56.