



QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Expressionism emerged simultaneously in various cities across Germany as a response to a widespread anxiety about man's increasingly discordant relationship with the world, his lost feelings of authenticity and spirituality. In part a reaction against Impressionism and academic art, it was inspired most by the expressive and Symbolist currents in late nineteenth century art. Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and James Ensor proved particularly influential on the Expressionists, and encouraged them to distort forms and employ strong colors to convey a variety of anxieties and yearnings. The classic phase of the movement lasted from approximately 1905 to 1920, and spread across Europe. Its example would later inform Abstract Expressionism, and its influence would be felt throughout the century in German art. It was also important for the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s.

Key Points

- Perhaps the most important group to spread the ethos of Expressionism was *Die Brücke*, founded in Dresden by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and others. Their move to Berlin in 1910 prompted a new confrontation with the modern, urban world, and led them to develop powerful social criticism.
- The Expressionists gathered around the Munich-based *Der Blaue Reiter* group were also significant in lending a mystical and spiritual cast to Expressionism. This was important in shaping the work of Franz Marc and Alexej von Jawlensky, and led to the development of pure abstraction by Wassily Kandinsky.
- The Expressionist artists often employed swirling, swaying and exaggeratedly executed brush strokes in the depiction of their subjects. In part these techniques conveyed the emotional state of the artist, though they might also offer comment on modern

the world.

- The arrival of Expressionism announced new standards in the creation and judgment of art. Art was now meant to well up from *within* the artist, rather than deriving from a depiction of the visual world, and the character of the artist's feelings became the standard for assessing the quality of a work of art, rather than the composition of forms.

DETAILED VIEW SECTION

Beginnings

In 1905, a group of four German artists, led by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, formed *Die Brücke* (the Bridge) in the city of Dresden. This was arguably the founding organization for the German Expressionist movement. Along with Fritz Bleyl, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel (all students of architecture and art history), Kirchner established *Die Brücke* as a youth-oriented art movement that would challenge the traditional academic styles of fine art, which by that point included Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The group published their manifesto in 1906, using as their template a relief wood carving; the wood-cut artistic medium would go on to become very popular with the group, whose jagged expression and inclinations to primitivism were well served by the stark, crude forms that the wood elicited.

The term "Expressionism" is thought to have been coined by Czech art historian Antonin Matejcek, in 1910, who intended it to denote the opposite of Impressionism. Whereas the Impressionist sought to express the majesty of nature and the human form through paint, the Expressionists, according to Matejcek, sought only to express inner life, often via the painting of harsh and realistic subject matter. It should be noted, however, that neither *Die Brücke*, nor similar sub-movements, ever referred to themselves as Expressionist, and in the early years of the century the term was widely used to apply to a variety of styles, including Post-Impressionism.



A few years later, in 1911, a like-minded group of young artists formed *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) in Munich. The name came from Wassily Kandinsky's *Der Blaue Reiter*

painting of 1903. Among their members were Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Franz Marc and Auguste Macke. The group's formation was sparked by the rejection of the Kandinsky oil painting *The Last Judgment* (1910) from a local exhibition. The painting contained swirling abstract forms and apocalyptic suggestions, and was deemed too obscene for public display. Although *Der Blaue Reiter* never published a manifesto, its members were united by their high regard for medieval and primitivist art forms, as well their love of **Cubism** and Fauvism. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Franz Marc and Auguste Macke were drafted into German military service, and were killed soon after; the Russian members of the group - Kandinsky, Alexej von Jawlensky and others - were all forced to return home. *Der Blaue Reiter* immediately dissolved.

Concepts and Styles

Historians have often linked Expressionism with the writing of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche differentiated between two distinct yet interrelated forms of aesthetic experience: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Expressionists were clearly from the Dionysian mould: they were impulsive beings who indulged themselves in the passions and desires of the world, behavior that would inevitably lead to feelings of emotional despair and doubt. The Dionysian viewed the world as being in a constant state of flux, but rather than try to assign meaning or order, the person simply attempted to enjoy his brief time on earth.

The term "Expressionism" has been traced to various sources. It may have been coined by Czech art historian Antonín Matejcek, in 1910. Whereas the Impressionist sought to express the majesty of nature, the Expressionists, according to Matejcek, sought only to express inner life, often via the painting of harsh and realistic subject matter. But the term was always an easy one to use loosely, and many did so to denote the various reactions against Impressionism in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, neither *Die Brücke*, nor similar sub-movements, ever described themselves as Expressionists.

The term's elasticity has meant that many artists beyond Germany's borders have been identified with the style. Georges Rouault, the French artist sometimes described as an Expressionist, may have influenced the Germans, rather than the other way around. He learnt his vivid use of color and distortion of form from Fauvism, and, unlike his German Expressionist counterparts, however, Rouault expressed an affinity for his Impressionist predecessors, particularly for the work of Degas. He is well-known for his devotion to religious subjects, and particularly for his many depictions of the crucifixion, rendered in rich color and heavy layers of paint.

Chaim Soutine, the Russian-Jewish, Paris-based painter, has also often been described as an Expressionist. He seems to have found his own way to the style, from within France, though critics have always appreciated him for his expressionistic qualities. As **Clement Greenberg** put it, after viewing a Soutine retrospective at MoMA in 1950, "Soutine used impasto for the sake of color alone, never sculpturally or to enrich the surface. His paint matter is kneaded and mauled, thinned or thickened, in order to render it altogether chromatic, altogether retinal." While this was far from a resounding endorsement of Soutine's work, the artist's expressive style has proved highly influential on subsequent generations.

Other non-German artists, such as Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, were indeed directly inspired by the style, and maintained strong links to the country. For both, Berlin was a city of the future and the paradigm of the corrupt metropolis, and it was inevitable that many artists would be swayed by the city's reigning style.

Later Developments and Legacy

After WWI, although Expressionism continued to inspire many more artists throughout Germany, the movement began to lose impetus and fragment. Already, by 1918, the Dada manifesto could claim that "Expressionism.. no longer has anything to do with the efforts made by active people." But its ethos would have a vivid afterlife: it was crucial in the early formation of artists as different as Otto Dix and Paul Klee. And, in the 1920s, it continued to inspire ambitious forays into abstraction: Kandinsky continued to create completely non-objective paintings and watercolors that emphasized color balance and archetypal forms, rather than anything remotely representational or figurative.

Expressionism would have its greatest impact in Germany, and it continued to shape its art for decades afterwards: the emergence of Georg Baselitz in the 1960s, and later Anselm Kiefer, signalled an important and influential revival of the style, which would culminate in a global Neo-Expressionist movement in the 1980s. But the original movement also found adherents in Russia, Belgium, Austria, France, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United States. Its ideas about expression, spirituality, primitivism, and the value of abstract art, would all also be hugely influential on an array of unrelated movements, including Abstract Expressionism. The Expressionists' metaphysical outlook, and their instinctive discomfort with the modern world, impelled them to antagonistic attitudes which would be characteristic of various avant-gardes throughout the century.

Quotes

"With faith in progress and in a new generation of creators and spectators we call together all youth. As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against the long-established older forces. Everyone who reproduces that which drives him to creation with directness and authenticity belongs to us."

- Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, from a woodcut broadsheet that accompanied the *Die Brücke* exhibition at the Seifert factory, Dresden, 1906



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Key Artists:



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Kirchner was the leader of the first major German Expressionist group and is credited by many for writing the manifesto of the Die Brücke artist group.



Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky was an Expressionist painter in early twentieth-century Germany. He associated his gestural and geometric motifs with particular spiritual meanings, and is often considered the first nonobjective painter.



Karl Schmidt-Rottluff

A part of the Die Brücke group of early Expressionists, Schmidt-Rottluff was a revolutionary that utilized intense and pure primary colours.



Max Beckmann

Max Beckmann was a German artist, writer and philosopher commonly associated with the Expressionist movement of the early 20th century. Two of his prints were among the initial purchase made by the Museum of Modern Art's acquisitions committee when the museum was first started.



Paul Klee

The Swiss-born painter Paul Klee worked in a variety of styles, including expressionism, geometric abstraction, and collage. His most famous works have a mystical quality and make use of linear and pictorial symbols.

Major Works:



Title: *Street, Berlin*

Artist: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Description: Kirchner was renowned for his many Berlin street scenes, and this

particular work is perhaps his most well known from that category, if not his entire catalog. His jagged, angular brush strokes, acidic colors and elongated forms all charge the street atmosphere on the canvas and achieve something very rebellious for its time. As a founding member of *Die Brücke*, Kirchner set out to establish a new order of painting, one which visibly renounced Impressionistic tendencies and the need to accurately portray figurative forms. In *Street, Berlin*, Kirchner created a stunningly askew rendition of a street procession. Without regard for realistic depiction of form, he bent and contorted his narrow figures like they were blades of grass in a meadow. Another uniquely modern feature of *Street, Berlin* was Kirchner's choice to position a prostitute (identifiable by their signature plumed hats) as the painting's (somewhat off-center) focal point.

Year: 1913

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Title: *Der Blaue Reiter*

Artist: Wassily Kandinsky

Description: This breakthrough canvas is a deceptively simple image- a lone rider racing across a landscape- yet it represents a decisive moment in Kandinsky's developing pictorial language. Here, the sun-dappled hillside reveals a keen interest in contrasts of light and dark as well as movement and stillness. Constituting a link between post-Impressionism and the burgeoning Expressionist movements, Kandinsky's canvas became the emblem of the Munich avant-garde.

Year: 1903

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Private collection



Title: *Mad Woman*

Artist: Chaim Soutine

Description: Soutine painted two known versions of *Mad Woman* (using a different woman for each), and this was unquestionably the darker of the pair. His violent brush strokes and contorted lines communicate an almost unnerving tension, but nevertheless

do not deny his subject a rich depth of character. Soutine invited viewers to observe the subject closely, to gaze into her eyes and study her asymmetrical face and form. In many ways this painting embodies the essence of the Expressionistic style: *Mad Woman* visibly vibrates, contorts, shifts, pushes and pulls. In part it redefined the medium of portrait painting. Simply by painting this mysterious (and possibly dangerous) woman up close rather than from a distance, Soutine established himself as an empathetic figure, but also as a daring visionary.

Year: 1920

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo