



QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Many artists have practiced and revived aspects of the original Expressionism movement since its decline in the 1920s. But the most famous return to Expressionism was inaugurated by Georg Baselitz, who led a revival which dominated German art in the 1970s. By the 1980s, this resurgence had become part of an international return to painting, in which very different artists, from Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente to Jean-Michel Basquiat, turned in expressionistic, primitivist and romantic directions to create work which delved into history and myth, and affirmed the redemptive power of art.

Key Points

- In Germany the return to Expressionism was part of a more general shift in society towards addressing the country's troubled modern history. In connecting with a style that pre-dated WWII, artists such as Georg Baselitz, Eugen Schonebeck and Markus Lupertz seemed to be trying to overcome the legacy of the Nazis.
- Supporters of Neo-Expressionism, and the larger return to painting in the 1980s, argued that Conceptual Art, Minimalism, and Pop had neglected art's ability to activate the imagination, to invent myth, and to give vent to human emotion. However, some critics charged Neo-Expressionism with pandering to right wing politics and the tastes of the art market.
- Taking their lead from German Neo-Expressionists, who turned inward to examine national themes, many other painters of the 1980s revived national styles. In Italy, in particular, artists associated with the *Trans-avantguardia* movement, such as Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi, returned to the type work done by Italian painters of the 1920s and '30s.

DETAILED VIEW SECTION

Beginnings

Neo-Expressionism arrived in Germany with great controversy when Georg Baselitz opened an exhibition in West Berlin in 1963. The contents of the show were quickly confiscated by the State Attorney on the grounds of indecency - one picture contained a figure masturbating, another had a male figure with an erection. His later exhibitions wouldn't attract such extreme reactions, but the iconography of giant, primitive "heroes", and the use of expressionistic figuration in his early pictures, soon drew notice in an art world that seemed to be moving away from such imagery, and even painting in general, and into Pop art, Fluxus, and Minimalism.

By the late 1970s, Baselitz was at the head of a loose-knit group of German artists known as *Neue Wilden*, (the 'New Fauves'). Associated with the label were artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lupertz, Eugen Schonebeck, and AR Penck. Taking as their inspiration the early Expressionist works of Georg Grosz, Ernst Ludwig-Kirchner and Edvard Munch, the action paintings of Willem de Kooning, and the late quasi-abstract figurative paintings of Pablo Picasso, they together found a new vitality for figurative painting.

In 1980, Baselitz sparked another controversy when he exhibited his first sculpture, a huge wooden figure, apparently delivered a Nazi salute, in the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennial. His co-exhibitor in the pavilion was Anselm Kiefer, and Kiefer's exhibit also helped launch him to world-wide success and notoriety in the 1980s. This period also saw the beginnings of a widespread return to painting, particularly in Europe, but also in the United States. For many, it was considered liberating to create art in this traditional manner, combining abstract and figurative forms, and drawing on a range of earlier styles.

But the movement eventually became very broad, and the artists who came to be associated with it ranged widely in their interests. Some older artists such as Francis Bacon were claimed as predecessors. While others associated with American trends of the 1970s, such as 'New Image Painting', were also linked to Neo-Expressionism. Other artists, with more political interests than most, such as Leon Golub and Philip Guston, were also seen as exemplars. Guston was particularly influential: in the late 1960s he had become disenchanted with abstract painting and developed a style shaped in part by cartoons, and in part by social realism. Throughout the 1970s and up until his death in 1980, he constructed strange painterly combinations of enigmatic and figurative forms.

Concepts and Styles

Since the advent of Abstract Expressionism, painting had become increasingly less focused on subject matter, and more concerned with form. Pop art had re-introduced a concern with subject matter of a popular kind, but Neo-Expressionism inaugurated a new return to romantic subjects. Some drew on myth and history: Anselm Kiefer became well known for his preoccupation with myths of German identity. Others drew on primitivism and natural imagery such as Francesco Clemente's *Scissors and Butterflies* (1999).

Another anomalous trend associated with Neo-Expressionism was the arrival of graffiti art in the galleries. This was particularly significant in New York, where Jean-Michel Basquiat became known for his aggressive brush strokes, broad splatters of paint and emotionally-charged subject matter. In many respects, Basquiat - alongside Julian Schnabel - became the poster child for the Neo-Expressionist movement of the 1980s: a self-styled primitive who was eagerly welcomed by the decadent and upscale art world. The 1980s was a time of great affluence and unabashed consumerism, when the New York art market grew exponentially and the selling prices for contemporary art reached seemingly absurd heights. Rather than reject this environment of commodification, or isolate themselves from the art world, as had many Abstract Expressionists, Basquiat and Schnabel embraced the glitter and the noise fully.

Later Developments

Through the artwork of Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente and others, Neo-Expressionism has become synonymous with conservative trends in the art of the 1980s rather than the avant-garde. Even though many of the movement's artists incorporated political and cultural content, few were interested in the leftist politics associated with a contemporary trend, critical Postmodernism. They did not feel obliged to glorify the world or "tamper with reality," as Clemente once put it, but simply work with form and depict the world as it existed, in all its harshness and ugliness. This led to a vibrant debate about the value and purpose of painting, in which Neo-Expressionism was often held up as an example of all that was wrong with the medium. Nevertheless, this criticism did little to dampen the style's success, and its decline had more to do with the collapse of the market at the end of the 1980s than any shift in values.



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Key Artists:



Georg Baselitz

Georg Baselitz is a 20th-century German painter and sculptor, and was an originator of the Neo-Expressionist group "Neue Wilden," which focused on subject-based painting and the importance of color. Much of Baselitz's work is noted for its provocative subject matter, often sexual or overtly dark in nature.



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat was an American painter who rose to fame in the 1980s, and was the first African-American artist to gain international acclaim. His emotionally-charged paintings gave rise to graffiti art

and the Neo-Expressionist movement, and are still considered among the most avant-garde artworks of the late-20th century.



Francesco Clemente

Francesco Clemente is an Italian painter commonly associated with the Neo-Expressionist movement, otherwise known as Italian Transavantguardia. Much of his work fuses sexuality with an emotional rawness and brutality. Clemente's paintings also contain visual elements of Surrealism.



Philip Guston

Philip Guston was a Canadian painter during the 20th century. Initially associated with the New York School of abstract art, Guston famously abandoned pure abstraction in the 1950s and turned to figurative art and quasi-abstract cartoon imagery. His later work, for which he is best known, was a major influence on the development of Neo-Expressionism in the U.S.



Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer is a German painter and sculptor, and was a pioneer of the late-20th-century movement Neo-Expressionism. Kiefer's mixed-media art typically incorporates straw, clay, lead and shellac, in addition to traditional paint and canvas. The themes of his work often focus on the atrocities of the Holocaust, as well as the occult, cosmos, and mythology.



David Salle

David Salle is a contemporary American artist whose work uses imagery from the world of advertising and consumerism. His paintings, installations, and found photographs often deal with voyeurism, sex, and the gaze.



Julian Schnabel

Julian Schnabel is an American painter, interior decorator and filmmaker. In addition to being a major figure in the Neo-Expressionist movement, he is most well known as the director of such films as *Basquiat* and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

Works of Art:



Title: *Mona Lisa*

Artist: Jean-Michel Basquiat

Description: This provocative painting is both a satirical homage to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and a work of political commentary on the converging worlds of art and money. Basquiat's depiction of a warped *Mona Lisa* smile fixed within a dollar bill frame was the artist's way of saying that, even though art and money are essentially different things, they are both forms of currency. Like most of his paintings, there is a visible urgency to Basquiat's brush strokes and thick oil stick lines, as if he were applying these fleeting mental images onto the canvas before they vanished altogether.

Year: 1983

Materials: Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

Collection: Collection Ambrous T. Young



Title: *Zim Zum*

Artist: Anselm Kiefer

Description: Kiefer's Neo-Expressionist works are marked by a dark, almost post-apocalyptic bleakness; topographies that have been ravished and fractured by war. With *Zim Zum*, his forms are enigmatic, yet at the same time eerily recognizable, as if he were imagining these quasi-abstract scenes for the viewer and creating fields of tone, form and destitution.

Year: 1990

Materials: Acrylic, emulsion, crayon, shellac, ashes, and canvas on lead

Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Title: *Scissors and Butterflies*

Artist: Francesco Clemente

Description: Clemente was one of the few Italian painters who was a part of the international array of Neo-Expressionist artists. Employing a highly sensual style with quasi-abstract forms combining human and animal figures, Clemente mixed elements of erotica with red-hot anger in this 1999 work. As was typical of his work, a metamorphosis takes place. *In Scissors and Butterflies*, these metamorphoses occur between human and animal, the feminine and masculine, the violent and the sexual. These inner conflicts of existential expressiveness are often found in Neo-Expressionism.

Year: 1999

Materials: Oil on linen

Collection: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York