



"The reality is the picture, it is most certainly not in the picture."

G. Baselitz

SYNOPSIS

Georg Baselitz was enormously influential in showing a generation of German artists how they might come to terms with issues of art and national identity in the wake of the Second World War. Briefly trained in the officially sanctioned **social realism** of Communist East Berlin, he soon moved to West Berlin, and encountered abstract art. Ultimately, however, he was to reject both options. While others turned to Conceptual Art, Pop, and Arte Povera, Baselitz revived the German Expressionism that had been denounced by the Nazis, and returned the human figure to a central position in painting. Controversial when he first emerged in 1963, and controversial again nearly two decades later when he began to produce sculpture, Baselitz inspired a revival of Neo-Expressionist painting in Germany in the 1970s, and his example gave encouragement to many more who took up similar styles both in

Europe and the United States in the 1980s.

KEY IDEAS

- Many aspects of Baselitz's work represent an attempt to revive symbols of German national identity that were tarnished after World War II. When he was maturing as a painter, the dominant style was a gestural abstraction that looked beyond Germany to international trends, but Baselitz rejected this in favor of Expressionism, a style which is central to his wider efforts. It signalled his desire to connect with a style and tradition that had been denounced by the Nazis. It also affirms his belief in romantic traditions that earlier Expressionists had adopted in protest against aspects of modern life.
- Although the figure has often been central in Baselitz's painting, his approach to it suggests a deep unease about the possibility of celebrating humanity in the wake of the Holocaust and WWII. Among his early series are images of *Heroes*, and *Partisans*, and yet these warriors seem awkward giants, clad in tattered rags. His later strategy of depicting figures upside-down might be read as another recognition of the same difficulty.
- Baselitz presented himself as a romantic outsider in the *Pandemonium* manifestoes he penned with fellow painter Eugen Schönebeck in 1962, and his paintings often present figures who have been traditionally seen as outcasts from society. At a time when German society was rebuilding itself in the image of American consumerism, his painting represented a refusal and a protest. In this sense the figures that inhabit his *Heroes* series might be read as types from an earlier, more romantic era in German history, an era now passed.
- Although Baselitz's embrace of painting was important in encouraging the medium's revival in the 1970s and 1980s, some believe his style betrays an anxiety about its continued viability in world of mass communication. Rather than delight in the lush effects of oil paint, his handling sometimes suggests awkward

scratches and smears, an effect which compounds the anguish of the figures he depicts.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Georg Baselitz was born Hans-Georg Kern on January 23, 1938 in Deutschbaselitz. His family lived in a flat above a schoolhouse where his father taught elementary students. The school was used as a garrison for soldiers during World War II and was later destroyed during frontline combat with the Russians while the family took refuge in the cellars beneath the building. It was in the school's library where Georg discovered pencil drawings made in the nineteenth century. This initial experience with art inspired Baselitz to create artwork himself. In 1949 he assisted wildlife photographer Helmut Drechsler on ornithological photo shoots, which led to Baselitz's later landscapes of the Saxony countryside, and inspired the painting, *Wo ist der gelbe Milchkrug, Frau Vogel (Where is the Yellow Milkjug Mrs Bird?)*, a piece featuring upside-down yellow birds.

Early training

In 1950 Baselitz's family moved to Kamens where Georg attended high school. An original sized oleograph of Ferdinand von Rayski's painting *Interlude During a Hunt in Wermersdorf Forest* hung in the school drill hall, which greatly influenced Baselitz's later work, including his first inverted painting *Der Wald auf dem Kopf (The Wood on its Head)*. Baselitz began to paint during his secondary education, inspired by Neue Sachlichkeit landscape artists. Although he was denied acceptance into the Art Academy in Dresden, he began to study painting under Herbert Behrens-Hangler in 1956 at the Academy of Visual and Applied Art in Weissensee, East Berlin. After attending classes for two terms, Baselitz was expelled on the grounds of "socio-political immaturity". In 1957 he enrolled at the Academy of Visual Arts in Charlottenburg, West Berlin where he became interested in Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, and Ernst-Wilhelm Nay.



Mature Period

Georg Kern adopted the last name Baselitz in 1958 as a tribute to his native Saxony. During this time, Baselitz created a series of imaginary portraits, including *Onkel Bernard (Uncle Bernard)* and the *Rayski Head*. The series focused on German identity in the post WWII era and was inspired by war soldiers stationed near Baselitz's home. The paintings were composed of thick, fluid brushstrokes, the individuals appearing more as caricatures rather than traditional realist portraits. It was during this time that Baselitz married Elke Kretzschmar, his studio assistant, who gave birth to their son, Daniel.

In the 1960s Baselitz concentrated on specific archetypes in paintings and woodcuts, mostly of rebels, heroes, and shepherds. He became increasingly interested in anamorphosis, the distorted or monstrous representation of an image, as exemplified in the proportions and facial features of his figures. At his first solo exhibition in 1963, many of his more grotesque paintings, such as *Der Nackte Mann (Naked Man)* and *Die grobe Nacht im Eimer (Big Night Down the Drain)* were deemed too controversial and were subsequently seized on the grounds of obscenity by the State Attorney. Baselitz continued to reinvent his exaggerated style through experimentation. In an attempt to free style from subject matter, Baselitz created his first inverted (upside-down) painting entitled *Der Wald auf dem Kopf (The Wood on its Head)* in 1969. Through this upending of image, Baselitz intended to produce painted objects rather than meticulously depicted representations of the real world.

Late Period

Georg Baselitz moved to Derneburg, Germany, in 1975, where he worked as a professor of painting at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Karlsruhe and at the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste in West Berlin. He continued to use painting as his primary medium of expressing himself as a post World War II German, continuing to depict inner emotional turmoil through distorted figures and bold, striking brushwork.



Baselitz reinvented his work in 1979 when he began creating monumental wooden sculptures. Similar to his paintings, the sculptures were crude, forceful, and unrefined. He would refrain from "polishing" the work, leaving the surface chipped, scratched, and uneven, adding to the rough hewn appearance. Baselitz's reputation as a visual artist of note was confirmed when he was chosen to represent Germany at the Venice Biennale in 1980. There he exhibited his first sculpture, *Model for a Sculpture*, a crudely carved wooden figure which sparked controversy due to the similarity of its out-raised arm gesture to a Nazi salute. Since the 1990s, he has continued to produce drawings, woodcuts, paintings, and sculptures and has also been an active set designer for operas such as *Punch and Judy* at the Dutch Opera in Amsterdam. In 1995 his first major retrospective in the United States was held at the Guggenheim in New York City.

Georg Baselitz currently lives and works in Munich and Imeria.

LEGACY

Covering nearly every artistic medium, Georg Baselitz has established

himself as a visual artist of international stature. His work confronts the visceral reality of history and tragedy of being German in a post World War II era. Baselitz was best known for his inverted, or upside-down paintings that shift emphasis from subject to the properties of painting itself, creating not just a painted canvas, but a nearly sculptural object. The anamorphic quality of his heroic and rebellious figures has had a powerful and international influence on Neo-Expressionist artists.

*Original content written by **The Art Story Contributors***

ARTIST QUOTES

"I begin with an idea, but as I work, the picture takes over. Then there is the struggle between the idea I preconceived... and the picture that fights for its own life."

"The artist is not responsible to any one. His social role is asocial... his only responsibility consists in an attitude to the work he does."

"I don't like things that can be reproduced. Wood isn't important in itself but rather in the fact that objects made in it are unique, simple, unpretentious."

Major Works:



Title: Die grobe Nacht im Eimer (Big Night down the Drain) (1963)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Description: *Die grobe Nacht im Eimer* or *Big Night Down the Drain* depicts a young boy, perhaps a self-portrait of the artist, holding an exaggerated phallus, and is one of Baselitz's most controversial paintings. It was inspired by an article about the Irish playwright Brendan Behan, who was a notorious drunk, and we might compare it to the many other images Baselitz later produced which depict the figure of the artist. During

his first solo exhibition in 1963, at a Berlin gallery, the painting was seized by the public prosecutor's office for "infringement of public morality." The shocking subject was intended to encourage an awakening that Baselitz thought was necessary in a post-war Germany lulled into amnesia about its recent past. "I proceed from a state of disharmony, from ugly things," he once said, and this confrontation with ugliness was something he believed was necessary to confront the violence of 20th century history.



Title: Rebel (1965)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Tate Modern, London

Description: The *Rebel* exemplifies Baselitz's early portraits. Typical are the distorted proportions and exaggerated anatomical structure. The painting is among many he produced in the 1960s that concentrate on archetypal figures, such as 'heroes', 'rebels', and 'shepherds'. Here, the hero figure appears wounded, bloody, and limping, the body almost transparent as we are offered a glimpse of the viscous, ensnarled entrails. The image draws inspiration from Baselitz's childhood in Saxony, where he was exposed to the violence of WWII firsthand. It also draws on the imagery of German Romanticism, in which nature and the landscape was often used as a focus of patriotic and religious feeling.



Title: Der Wald auf dem Kopf (The Wood On Its Head) (1969)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Description: *Der Wald auf dem Kopf* or *The Wood on its Head* is Baselitz's first inverted painting, in which he upends his subject matter to frustrate recognition of the objects depicted. Its motif, based on a picture by the early 19th century painter Louis Ferdinand von Rayski, is similar to those found in his previous work, but here he makes them secondary to the physical properties of the medium. This radical approach troubles our ability to interpret the picture, leaving us wondering whether we are now looking at an abstraction or, simply, a conventional landscape upturned. We might read it as symptomatic of Baselitz's continuing attempts to find a different path from those that had been dominant when he emerged - the gestural abstraction of Paris and New York, and the Socialist Realism of the Eastern bloc.



Title: Modell für eine Skulptur (Model for a Sculpture) (1979-1980)

Materials: Limewood and tempera

Collection: The Ludwig Museum, Cologne

Description: *Modell für eine Skulptur (Model for a Sculpture)*, Baselitz's first sculpture, typifies his crude treatment of wood in this medium as a treatment analogous to his treatment of paint in his previous work. Similar in its primitivizing tendency to the work of artists such as Ludwig Kirchner, Baselitz found inspiration for the approach in African sculpture, believing it to offer a model for a more spontaneous expression of movement and human emotion. The work was first exhibited in the West German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1980. Baselitz had originally intended to show paintings, but changed his mind at a late stage and sent only this sculpture. The work immediately sparked controversy, since the raised arm gesture of the figure is similar to the that of a Nazi salute; the red and black coloring of the figure has also been interpreted as a reference to the colors of the Third Reich. However, other sources for the sculpture suggest themselves: perhaps the Futurist bronze, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, by Umberto Boccioni; and Baselitz has also said that the work was inspired by an edible souvenir available at a market in Dresden. The gesture of the figure as a figure bound to the ground by a block of wood as might simply communicate frustration.



Title: Head and Bottle (1982)

Materials: Woodcut, 3 blocks

Collection: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München

Description: *Head and Bottle* best showcases Georg Baselitz's vigorous energy as a printmaker: the monumental print is 1000 x 485 mm in scale. Although the work depicts the bust of a man, through inversion the image is confused and hovers on the verge of abstraction. Each layer of color appears to be torn away from the surface, revealing the color underneath. It is similar in approach to some paintings that the artist produced around the same time, one depicting a man drinking from a glass, another showing a figure eating an orange. In a sense, the postures of the figures, and the objects they hold, simply accentuate the viewer's confusion when they appear upside-down, but

some critics have also suggested that these everyday activities take on the character of a sacred ritual when they are depicted at such scale, and in such an unusual manner.



Title: Dresdner Frauen-Karla (1990)

Materials: Wood and tempera

Collection: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen

Description: *Dresdner Frauen-Karla* is one of a series of eleven monumental sculptural busts of women which commemorate the destruction of Dresden at the end of World War II. Baselitz grew up not far from the city, and remembered its destruction vividly. He wanted to pay homage to what he called the "rubble women," who he believed embodied the reconstruction efforts of a broken city. The large block of wood that forms the piece has been hacked away by a chainsaw to create the crude facial features. She appears to be deteriorating, symbolizing the weakened state of Dresden. The intense gaze, enormous proportion, and pulsating yellow hue exhibit a strong emotional presence. Similar in tone to the figures in his *Heroes* series, *Karla* represents a woman scarred by war, yet defiant.