Neue Sachlichkeit

*Neue Sachlichkeit* (or The New Objectivity) was an artistic attitude that arose in Germany in the 1920s in reaction to Expressionism.

![Figure 1: The Eclipse of the Sun by George Grosz, 1926](image)

George Grosz exemplified the verist style of New Objectivity.

- *Neue Sachlichkeit* meant to imply a turn towards practical engagement with the world – an all-business attitude, understood by Germans as intrinsically American.
- Leading up to World War I, much of the art world was under the influence of Futurism and Expressionism, both of which abandoned any sense of order or commitment to objectivity or tradition. *Neue Sachlichkeit* was a reaction against this.
- The New Objectivity comprised two tendencies, characterized in terms of a left and right wing: on the left were the verists (exemplified by George Grosz and Max Beckmann) and on the right the classicists (e.g., Georg Schrimpf).

**Note:**

*New Objectivity* (in German: *Neue Sachlichkeit*) is an artistic style that arose in Germany in the 1920s as a challenge to Expressionism. New Objectivity reflected an unsentimental reality instead of the more inward-looking, abstract or psychological, that were characteristic of Expressionism.

**Verists:** the artistic preference of contemporary everyday subject matter instead of the heroic or legendary in art and literature; a form of realism. The word comes from Latin *verus* (true).

**Max Beckmann** (1884 – 1950): a German painter, draftsman, printmaker, sculptor, and writer. Although he is classified as an Expressionist artist, he rejected both the term and the movement. In the 1920s, he was associated with the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), an outgrowth of Expressionism that opposed its introverted emotionalism.
Public Life in Weimar Germany

The New Objectivity (in German: Neue Sachlichkeit) is a term used to characterize the attitude of public life in Weimar Germany, as well as the art, literature, music, and architecture created to adapt to it. Rather than some goal of philosophical objectivity, it was meant to imply a turn towards practical engagement with the world – an all-business attitude, understood by Germans as intrinsically American” (Dennis Crockett, German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder, 1918-1984).

The term was originally the title of an art exhibition staged by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, the director of the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, to showcase artists who were working in a post-expressionist spirit, but it took a life of its own, going beyond Hartlaub’s intentions. As these artists rejected the self-involvement and romantic longings of the expressionists, Weimar intellectuals in general made a call to arms for public collaboration, engagement, and rejection of romantic idealism. The movement essentially ended in 1933 with the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Nazis to power.

Before the First World War

Leading up to World War I, much of the art world was under the influence of Futurism and Expressionism, both of which abandoned any sense of order or commitment to objectivity or tradition. Expressionism was in particular the dominant form of art in Germany, and it was represented in many different facets of public life – in theater, in painting, in architecture, in poetry, and in literature.

Expressionists abandoned nature and sought to express emotional experience, often centering their art around inner turmoil (angst), whether in reaction to the modern world, to alienation from society, or in the creation of personal identity. In concert with this evocation of angst and unease with bourgeois life, expressionists also echoed some of the same feelings of revolution as did Futurists. The New Objectivity was a reaction against this.

The External World: Verists and Classicists

The New Objectivity comprised two tendencies, characterized in terms of a left and right wing: on the left were the verists, who “tear the objective form of the world of contemporary facts and represent current experience in its tempo and fevered temperature;” and on the right the classicists, who “search more for the object of timeless ability to embody the external laws of existence in the artistic sphere.”

The verists’ vehement form of realism emphasized the ugly and sordid. Their art was raw, provocative, and harshly satirical. George Grosz (Figure 0) and Otto Dix are considered the most important of the verists. The verists developed Dada’s
abandonment of any pictoral rules or artistic language into a “satirical hyperrealism,” as termed by Raoul Hausmann, and of which the best known examples are the graphical works and photo-montages of John Heartfield. Use of collage in these works became a compositional principle to blend reality and art, as if to suggest that to record the facts of reality was to go beyond the most simple appearances of things. This later developed into portraits and scenes by artists such as Grosz, Dix, and Rudolf Schlichter. Portraits would give emphasis to particular features or objects that were seen as distinctive aspects of the person depicted. Satirical scenes often depicted a madness behind what was happening, depicting the participants as cartoon-like.

Other verists, like Christian Schad, depicted reality with a clinical precision, which suggested both an empirical detachment and intimate knowledge of the subject. Schad’s paintings are characterized “an artistic perception so sharp that it seems to cut beneath the skin”, according to the art critic Wieland Schmied. Often, psychological elements were introduced in his work, which suggested an underlying unconscious reality.

Max Beckmann, who is sometimes called an expressionist although he never considered himself part of any movement, was considered to be a verist and the most important artist of Neue Sachlichkeit.

Compared to the verists, the classicists more clearly exemplify the “return to order” that arose in the arts throughout Europe. The classicists included Georg Schrimpf, Alexander Kanoldt, Carlo Mense, Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, and Wilhelm Heise. The sources of their art include 19th-century art, the Italian metaphysical painters, the artists of Novecento Italiano, and Henri Rousseau.