Australians Studying Abroad

German Expressionist Painting 1905-1914

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Background to German Expressionism

> Man is crying out for his soul, the whole period becomes a single urgent cry. And art cries too, into the deep darkness, crying for help, crying for the spirit. That is Expressionism
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> (Hermann Bahr, *Expressionism*, Munich, 1916)

The revolutionary art produced in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century is generally known as German Expressionism. The above definition, by Bahr, suggests something of the essence of the art and the era, as well as their correlation. The term Expressionism was coined to distinguish a new tendency in painting from other contemporary movements, such as the late form of Impressionism then being practised by many German painters. Expressionism became synonymous with the avant-garde and a concomitant rejection of traditional Western naturalistic conventions. Gradually the term was also applied to sculpture, literature, music and film. A number of the artists who are included under the label of German Expressionism were not in fact German born. Kandinsky, for example, was Russian and his friend Paul Klee was born in Switzerland. Both, however, trained in Munich and reached artistic maturity in Germany. Kokoschka and Schiele were Austrian and Feininger was born in New York of German-American parents. Their work, however, forms an essential part of the diverse movement known as German Expressionism. The two great forebears of the movement, Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch, were also not German but both played formative roles in the development of Expressionism in Germany. The art of Matisse and the *Fauves* in Paris and above all their liberation of colour from its traditional descriptive role was also very influential. But if Expressionism was not exclusively German, the movement in Germany is the key to the whole phenomenon and where it reached its most full and characteristic form.

Because the chronological limits of German Expressionism are difficult to establish and are a matter of debate among scholars, this essay is confined to the period between 1905 and 1914, as this was the time when the concepts of the artists were being formulated. Expressionism appeared in various forms, in a number of different locations and involved many artists who produced an extremely large and heterogeneous body of work. To address all these manifestations would require a much larger study and so only a few of the most distinctive and influential artists will given extended examination. The scope of this study is also limited to the two central movements of German Expressionism. Because of the importance of Kandinsky as a pioneer of a new art form, his insistence on the primacy of the expressive and the on-going influence of his writings, he is here given a major role. Rather than seeking to be definitive, the essay offers a brief exploration of the distinguishing features of the culture of the period and the conditions in which its art was produced.

In the visual arts, the Expressionist movement began in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century and reached its high point of development in the years immediately preceding the First World War. It was never a unified movement and its most famous manifestations were the two avant-garde artists groups in Dresden (*Die Brücke* or the Bridge) and in Munich (*Der Blaue Reiter* or the Blue Rider). The dispersed nature of German art was largely a result of the historical

lack of political centralisation in Germany and consequently cultural centres had emerged in the various principalities and small states. This is in contrast to France, where the development of the arts had for centuries been dominated by Paris as the great artistic nucleus of the whole country. Expressionism in Germany therefore lacked the coherence of a common style and can be regarded more as a state of mind or a clustering of attitudes shared by artists who were related to the emerging canon of modernism.

The character of German Expressionism was to a large degree an embodiment of German social and cultural history. The artists involved in the movement were inextricably bound to the general questioning of the established order which arose in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and which had its own particular inflection in Germany. Many were in agreement with Nietzsche when he said: "What is needed above all is an absolute scepticism toward all inherited concepts". Large-scale shifts in attitudes to such institutions and processes as industrialisation, capitalism, established religion, science and philosophy, which were to affect the European intellectual and artistic outlook, were underway. The work of Darwin, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche had all, in their various fields, contributed to an undermining of traditional beliefs and to a consequent pervasive sense of doubt in a world no longer being sustained by the old moral and spiritual imperatives.

In Germany the general ferment that was being experienced elsewhere was accentuated by a set of particular historical circumstances. Germany had only been unified as the German Empire in 1871 and under Kaiser Wilhelm II it still remained a country of distinct regions and numerous centres. Industrialisation had come later to Germany than to other parts of Europe and the period between 1871 and 1914 was one of accelerated industrial growth. From 1895 Germany was experiencing an economic expansion which was known as 'the great leap forward'. In other countries where industrialisation was more gradual, its effects could be more readily assimilated into the social structure. The impact of the rapid rate of industrialisation in Germany was more dramatic and the social and cultural ruptures more acute. Many of the traditional rhythms of life were disrupted with the growth of industry and mechanisation, as populations shifted from rural areas to the expanding urban centres where, as Georg Simmel wrote in 1903, the individual became

> a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality and value ... the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact.

The accumulated effects of rapid social and economic change and the erosion of previous physical, psychological and spiritual certainties gave rise to the perception that life had lost much of the meaning it once held.

Out of this context developed reactions against materialism and rationalism along with a new subjectivism which was fostered by trends in modern psychology, philosophy and science. This reactive process resulted in two apparently antithetical responses, which can be loosely classified as cultural pessimism and optimism. The former presented itself as loss of identity, alienation and despair, while the latter found expression in utopian idealism and a search for spiritual renewal. The duality or tension between the optimistic and the pessimistic present in contemporary German culture was transmitted through Expressionist art and is one of its most prominent constituents. The visual expression of the inner experience was a central concern for the Expressionist artist, who characteristically

resorted to distorted form and a radically anti-naturalistic use of colour as the carrier of meaning. In contrast to French Impressionism, which was an art of objectively recorded visible reality, German Expressionism rejected naturalism as being merely the superficial appearance of things. As Paul Klee put it: "The world was my subject, even though it was not the visible world."

Die Brücke

The emergence of Expressionism in Germany is marked by the formation in Dresden of the artists group, the Brücke in 1905. The core members of the group were young architecture students, Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff. Although none of them had any official training in painting they turned to this medium for its potential to express personal and social messages. But since their aim was the essence and experience of life, painting was not necessarily the most important means to this end and most of them also worked in many other media and materials, such as sculpture, etching, wood carving and especially the woodcut. Detaching themselves from their own middle-class backgrounds, they were resolutely anti-bourgeois, seeing themselves as revolutionaries and believing that creative expression was a path to a fundamental revitalisation of all facets of life. Ardent admirers of the work of the German philosopher, Nietzsche, they took their name, the Brücke - the Bridge, from a passage in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Nietzsche, the bridge is used as a metaphor for the predicament of humanity, strung between the contradictory alternatives of body and spirit, past and future. Written by Kirchner, the manifesto of the group echoed Nietzschean ideas in its emphasis on their 'faith in a new generation of creators', who 'embody the future' and want to free their lives 'from the long-established older powers.

The principal themes of the Brücke artists were landscape, portraits, street-views, the nude and, most importantly, the human figure in relationship to either nature or to urban life. The nature themes of the Brücke included their particular adaptation of the traditional subject of the bather, which had been used as a subject by artists since antiquity. The nude in the landscape, alone or more often in groups, appears over and over again in the art of Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff as well as in the work of Pechstein, who joined the group in 1906. Kirchner's *Bathers Throwing Reeds*, 1909 (Berlin, Brücke-Museum), *Bathers at Moritzburg*, 1909 (London, Tate Gallery) or *Bathers Striding into the Sea,* 1912 (Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie) are characteristic examples. Traditionally, the theme of bathers had offered an opportunity to display the beauties of the nude, idealised female form. In the Brücke interpretations of the early twentieth century both men and women appear together, at one and in harmony with the natural world. Instead of the smoothly modelled forms and natural colour traditionally used to create an illusion of reality, Kirchner's bathers are often stylised and rendered in strident unnatural hues. Rather than the landscape merely providing a background setting for their bathers, as was customary, the Expressionist conception of the theme integrates the figures into their environment so that they become images of liberated humanity in communion with nature.

The notion of an existential unity in nature implicit in this theme of the nude in the landscape was, on one level, a reflection of anti-bourgeois, anti-materialist feeling. But the reasons behind this thematic pre-occupation were more complex.

One of these was the pervasive influence of the ideas of Nietzsche and the solutions to the European cultural, spiritual and moral crisis he seemed to offer. Highly critical of contemporary civilization, especially that of Germany, Nietzsche advocated a revaluation of inherited values and the parallel necessity for regeneration and renewal. Although it may seem contradictory, he equated the future and progress with a return to nature, with the natural being associated with expressive freedom. The landscape motifs of the Brücke artists, where figures are bound into the natural world through linear rhythms and related colour, are Nietzschean in spirit, suggesting both liberation from the restraints of the civilised world and the revitalising forces of nature.

The idea of an escape into nature reflected in the subjects of Kirchner and his colleagues was part of a widespread European phenomenon. This was partly fuelled by a resistance to industrialisation and the associated belief that the remaining rural communities had somehow retained the moral and spiritual values which modern life had lost. The best known (then and now) exemplar of this idealisation of supposedly uncivilised cultures is Gauguin, who first went to live and work in the remote French province of Brittany in the 1880s. "I love Brittany", he wrote, "here I find a savage, primitive quality". Later he went to the South Seas, extending beyond Europe the search for what he called the 'primitive'. In Germany artists were also seeking out the perceived purity and integrity of peasant life in nature and by the turn of the twentieth century there were more than 20 groups of artists working in rural areas. Members of the Brücke group made journeys to remote coastal villages or to the more easily accessible areas near Dresden, such as the Moritzburg lakes, which inspired a number of their bathing images.

Like other avant-garde European artists in this period, the Brücke group also looked to other sources of the 'primitive', ranging from the art of children and folk art to that of non-European cultures. Ancient Egyptian, Medieval and Gothic art also fulfilled the same need. These previously undervalued art forms were now seen as more authentic forms of expression, produced by peoples and cultures which were uncorrupted by the materialist bias of the modern world. Primitivism, as this set of ideas is called, was encouraged by the proliferation in Germany of ethnographical collections. The Dresden Ethnographical Museum held collections of African and Oceanic art and artefacts which were intensely studied by the Brücke artists and translated, directly and indirectly into their work. Of particular interest were the carved and painted house beams from the Palau Islands, then a German colony. Motifs and figures from these house beams appear in many Brücke works, such as Kirchner's painting *Girl with a Japanese Umbrella* of 1909 (Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung) or Schmidt-Rottluff's painted wood relief *Two Female Nudes* of 1911 (Berlin, Brücke Museum). The simplified and schematised bodies in many of the bathing images were also derived from various primitivist sources. The attractions of the primitive were therefore not only the meanings that were read into art and artefacts from geographically and historically remote cultures but also the visual style of these objects and the expressive possibilities they offered.

While the nude in the landscape was a thematic focus in the early years of the Brücke, its mirror image was the equally significant theme of modern urban life. Scenes of café and street life, the music hall, the cabaret and the circus are found throughout the work of Kirchner, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff and Pechstein, as well as that of Emile Nolde, who was part of the Brücke group for a short time. Urban

entertainment had been a staple subject source for many French painters in the second half of the nineteenth century, from Manet onward and was sometimes used to symbolise the artificial nature of modern Parisian life. With the expansion of urban centres in Germany, cabaret and variety acts were developing as popular entertainment from the 1890s. In the first decade of the twentieth century acrobats, trapeze artists and dancers of all kinds became increasingly favoured subjects for artists, in images which were both products and expressions of a new urban culture. On one level it was the exoticism of the cabaret and the circus which attracted the artists of the Brücke. The tightrope walkers, belly dancers, snake charmers, Chinese jugglers, Japanese acrobats and Russian dancers which appear in the art of Kirchner, Heckel and the others all had a richness of associations which corresponded to their primitivist inclinations. The same subjects, particularly the cabaret, appeared in contemporary literature as metaphors for artistic renewal. Nietzsche's influence can also be felt here as in his writings he used similar imagery. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, Nietzsche used the tightrope walker and the dance as metaphors for the regenerative spirit which could liberate humanity from straight-laced, obsolete bourgeois values. In works such as Kirchner's *Tightrope Walker* of 1909 (Private Collection) or *Negro Dance* of 1911 (Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen) the exaggerated gestures, strident colours and wilful distortions of both anatomy and space create a sense of vitality and abandonment which by comparison make many of their French predecessors appear quite sedate. Perhaps the best known images of this kind are the dancers of Nolde. *His Wildly Dancing Children* of 1909 (Kiel, Kunsthalle), and the *Dance around the Golden Calf* of 1910 (Munich, Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst) are rightly seen as archetypal embodiments of primordial hedonism and instinctual release.

The Brücke artists continued with their urban entertainment subjects when they moved from Dresden to Berlin in 1911. Because of the late political unification of the country, Germany had previously had a number of small centres of culture, such as Dresden and Munich. After unification in 1871, the Imperial court and the Prussian army were based in Berlin, which became the centre of German commerce and business. Writers and painters from all over Germany went to settle in Berlin, which grew into a significant cultural centre for the entire country. After taking up residence in Berlin, a city whose population had more than doubled in forty years, Kirchner began an extensive series on the city, again using both paintings and prints. He had used the subject in the Dresden years, but the experience of Berlin infused his images of the city's streets with a darker mood. His *Street Scene in Berlin*, 1913 (Berlin, Brücke Museum), *Belle-Alliance Platz*, 1913 (Berlin, Nationalgalerie) or *Two Women on the Street*, 1914 (Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen) are characteristic examples of Kirchner's vision of the city. The bodies are angular and attenuated, the space illogical, unnaturally tilted and congested which, aligned with the harsh contrasts of colour, suggest a world out of joint. Lacking any signs of individual identity, these denizens of the modern city are crowded together physically but psychologically they are isolated from each other. The concept of alienated life in the streets of the modern city expressed here is in marked contrast to the harmonious co-existence which prevails in the bather images of the Brücke. Such symbolic oppositions or antitheses, such as those of nature and culture, primitivism and modernity, the spiritual and the material, form a prominent pattern in German Expressionist art and ideas.

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Die Blaue Reiter

Symbolic oppositions were also inherent in the aesthetic of the other major Expressionist group in Germany, the Blue Rider, which formed in Munich in 1911. The major figures associated with the Blue Rider were Kandinsky and Franz Marc and included Gabriel Munter, Auguste Macke and Paul Klee. According to Kandinsky, the name of the group came about because both he and Marc liked blue, Marc was fond of horses and Kandinsky had an affinity with riders. When Kandinsky left Russia in 1896 he was thirty years old and left behind a career in the law. Having decided to become an artist, he chose Munich for his studies for very good reasons. Munich had long been a focus of cultural activity and from the middle of the nineteenth century it had become a major centre for art training, second only to Paris. Art students came to Munich from many countries, extending from the United States to Russia; even Picasso considered settling in Munich in preference to Paris. By the time he left Munich in 1914 at the beginning of World War I, Kandinsky had become an international celebrity as a painter of pictures without objects and as the author of one of the seminal statements on art to appear in Germany which he called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. By then he had been publicly described as the leader of German Expressionism. But it was the experience of Munich which had fostered the central tenets of Kandinsky's art: the expressive autonomy of colour and line and idea of abstraction as a spiritual transcendence of reality.

Although there were many differences between the two main Expressionist groups, the artists of the Blue Rider shared with the Brücke certain fundamental beliefs about the purpose and function of art. Foremost among these was the concern with the issue of art as a vehicle for ideology and as a means of addressing the complexities of the modern world. Both artists' groups saw art as a means of healing the moral and spiritual ills of contemporary civilization brought about by the unprecedented social, technological, political and cultural changes of their era. The image of the Blue Rider, a constant presence in Kandinsky's art from the early years, is a symbol of the artist as a modernday St. George, who rides out to battle the dragon of materialism. Even more so than the Brücke, the Blue Rider relied on the idea that creativity should be expressive of the subjective and the intuitive. As Kandinsky wrote in *Concerning the spiritual in art* :

> When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself.

In general, although both groups had their roots in German Romanticism, the work of the artists of the Blue Rider was more mystical in its orientation and in a sense more intellectually based. Like the Brücke, the Blue Rider was a relatively short-lived alliance which was effectively dispersed by 1914, with its members following more or less divergent paths. But despite its brief life and the differing national origins of its members, the Munich group was, like the Brücke, essentially German and Expressionist in character.

Kandinsky's interpretation of his age as being dominated by a struggle between the opposing forces of the spiritual and the material, shared by many of his generation, was a position which informed the development of his art. His era, he wrote in 1911, was "a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit" and for many it was "a time of terrible, inescapable vacuum." Kandinsky saw his art as

anticipating a new realm of the spirit and his search was for a means of suggesting the spiritual, cosmic orders of existence, rather than describing the visible, physical world. Because he believed that abstraction had the least relationship to materialism, he hoped that an abstract mode of painting could be instrumental in bringing about a general awakening to immaterial, spiritual values. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky put forward the conviction that a renewal of these values was what was needed to bring about a new utopian epoch. The paintings of Kandinsky, especially in the years immediately preceding World War I, often present themes of struggle and redemption. Storms, battles, tumbling towers and other apocalyptic motifs of turmoil appear in veiled form in paintings which are sometimes referred to as his cosmic landscapes. These are often given biblical titles such as the *Last Judgement*, *Deluge* or *Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The antithesis to this theme of destruction is the utopian vision of the spiritual paradise, variously designated by titles such as *Paradise or Garden of Love*, representing a state of being which will emerge after the "collision of matter and spirit". In a painting which is arguably his most important work from the Munich period, *Composition VII*, 1913 (Moscow, Tret'yakov Gallery), Kandinsky's iconographic programme combines both the struggle and redemption themes. The catastrophic imagery (*Last Judgement, Deluge*) is balanced by the *Garden of Love* motif, symbolising Kandinsky's view of the condition of the world in the present and its future in spiritual renewal.

One of the keys to an art of suggestion rather than description found by Kandinsky was the language of colour. From his childhood, Kandinsky was unusually sensitive to the emotional associations of colour and he had highly developed powers of synaesthesia. Early in his artistic career his work was much influenced by Matisse's use of pure colour, divorced from its previous obligations to reality. Of all the means at the artists disposal, colour was perhaps for Kandinsky the most significant as it had the power, he said, as music did, to influence the soul directly. His ideas on the effects of colour were guided by contemporary experimental colour-psychology and colour played a strategic role in his visionary system of pictorial symbolism. Kandinsky believed that both colour and form had intrinsic spiritual and expressive attributes, independent of appearance. Blue, for example, was for both Kandinsky and Marc the most spiritual of colours, the significance of which is underlined by its inclusion in the name of the group, the Blue Rider.

Throughout his writings, Kandinsky forges the links between colour and music, assigning particular colours to different sounds and musical instruments. He divided his paintings into three major categories, Impressions, Improvisations and Compositions, terms which point to the intended analogy of art and music. One of the most striking examples of the interwoven experience of colour and music is *Impression III - Concert* of 1911 (Munich, Lenbachhaus), where acoustic experience is translated into a complex pictorial equivalent. Painted by Kandinsky shortly after attending a concert of Schoenberg's music with Marc, the image is predominantly yellow and black. The black form in the centre is a schematised representation of a grand piano, attended by the black edged shapes of the audience. The colour of yellow is the sound, which floods the image and threatens to engulf the forms. For Kandinsky, yellow had specifically musical connotations and it supposedly gave out an expanding spiritual warmth. Two years before painting this picture, Kandinsky had also written a stage composition titled Yellow Sound, which was published in the *Blue Rider Almanac.*

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From 1909 Kandinsky had been painting pictures in which objects were simplified to the point of becoming signs and colour was employed for purely expressive purposes, detached from naturalistic associations. In works such as *Mountain*, 1909, *Murnau with church*, 1910, and *Improvisation No. 19*, 1911 (all in the Lenbachhaus, Munich) there are progressively less recognisable pictorial signals to distinguish the objects in the flow of colour. During this period Kandinsky, who had already absorbed Symbolist literary and aesthetic theory, was also appropriating Theosophical concepts of the interrelatedness of matter and spirit. By the time of the founding of the Blue Rider group in 1911, the central features of Kandinsky's art had been established.

In 1912 the group set out the theoretical principles on which their new art was based in published form as the *Blue Rider Almanac*. The cover illustration, executed by Kandinsky, features the horse and rider motif, a woodcut variation on the theme of St. George and the dragon. Kandinsky and Marc were the major contributors to the book which contains articles on contemporary developments in the visual arts, music and the theatre. The nature of art is a central question; the authors insist on its value as spiritual communication and its detachment from the material world. Equal in importance to the written texts were the *Almanac* illustrations which included all the major modern artists (from Van Gogh, Picasso and Matisse to Kirchner, Klee, Marc and Kandinsky) as well as representatives of the primitive, such as African, Oriental, Medieval, folk and children's art. Also included were musical scores by Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. Through the juxtaposition of all these different art forms, from different cultures and from different periods of time, the Blue Rider were demonstrating that what they called the 'inner spirit' was present in all true art. Revolutionary in its own time, the *Blue Rider Almanac* has since influenced successive generations of artists and, alongside Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, it is regarded as the most important theoretical document of twentieth-century German art.

Conclusions

By the time World War I began, the Blue Rider movement had more or less dissolved and Kandinsky returned to Russia. Both Marc and Macke died in the trenches. By 1913, the Brücke group had also disbanded. When war broke out, Kirchner enlisted but suffered a physical and psychological breakdown and was discharged from the army. After the war Kandinsky returned to Germany, where with Klee, he taught at the Bauhaus in Weimar and then in Dessau, where they disseminated the ideas of the Blue Rider. Then in 1933 the school was closed by the National Socialist regime. In 1937, in one of the most infamous episodes in the history of cultural politics, the work of the artists of the Brücke and the Blue Rider was branded as 'degenerate art' by the Nazis. Around 16,000 works of art were rounded up from German museums, confiscated and either sold off or publicly destroyed. Among the main casualties were Kirchner (639 works), Nolde (1052 works) and Schmidt-Rottluff (688 works). Large numbers of paintings by Kandinsky and Marc were also removed. Artists still in Germany, such as Nolde and Schmidt-Rottluff, were prohibited from painting and many others were forced into exile. An exhibition of this *Degenerate Art*, as it was titled, was opened by Hitler in Munich so that the public could see the products of the 'disturbed minds'

of the German Expressionists for themselves. The exhibition catalogue included the Führer's call for an end to 'artistic Bolshevism'. *The Degenerate Art* exhibition was the culmination of a campaign against existing cultural activities in order to establish a new 'healthy' German art, more suited to accompany the ascendant phase of Nazism. German Expressionism was condemned as a symptom of the cultural decay which National Socialism aimed to cure. The great irony of these events was that Expressionism itself had begun with the hope of renewing the culture of modern Germany and instead it ended as a witness to its dissolution. After the end of the Second World War, however, the spirit of German Expressionism revived and it continues to inform aspects of the postmodern ethos.

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