

UNFLINCHING REALISM: GERMAN ART BETWEEN THE WARS

New Objectivity: Modern Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919–1933 offers an opportunity to examine an often overlooked chapter in art, history, literature, and social change. During the years between 1918 (end of World War I) and 1933 (when the Nazis came to power), Germany faced enormous challenges. This period, known as the Weimar Republic, was the nation's first democracy. Reeling from war's humiliating defeat, demilitarization, economic dislocation, and cultural disillusionment, the once-powerful nation moved forward into an era of increased industrialization and urbanization.

Artists responded by leaving behind pre-war approaches, such as the focus on exoticism and Expressionism's emphasis on personal feelings, and moving into a new era characterized by somber, unflinching Realism. Photographers documented widespread changes, while writers described the cultural flowering of Berlin and other urban areas.

These curriculum materials are designed to help teachers discuss the artworks created during this important era in German history, and the objects explored here can be used as primary source materials for lessons in history, social science, language arts, and visual arts, among other subjects.

Writers, critics, and historians have described the cultural production of the years between the two World Wars in various ways. "New Objectivity" is the term that has been used most consistently. Less a style or a cohesive movement than a shared attitude, New Objectivity was characterized by stark, unsentimental artistic styles centered on themes such as cynicism regarding the trajectory of German society following the war, human isolation, contemporary urban life, modernization, as well as the consequences and aftermath of the nation's disastrous defeat in World War I.

Despite this label, many artists were far from objective in their depictions. While some approached their subject matter with Realism and precision, others distorted their subjects to emphasize the bleaker aspects of contemporary life. Others, while rejecting the label "Expressionism," nevertheless used their art to express deep personal feelings. What links the diverse and often opposing outputs from these artists is that they were surveying their world through the lens of a harsh reality.

An overview of this time span, and a closer examination of the art in the exhibition, provides inspiration for a wide range of engaging classroom activities. For students of all ages, the era's Realism and its sometimes nostalgic return to portraiture or still life, for example, affords the chance to examine and then create art in a traditional genre or with a technique made new by social forces. Documentary photography, satire, caricature, and still-life paintings were all utilized towards a new purpose. For older students, discussing German artists' skepticism regarding their nation's direction—and how that influenced their art—offers a rich opportunity to delve more deeply into this era's history and to draw parallels to present day.

When examining the development of artistic styles throughout history, often it is what is later perceived as positive change that has been a primary influence—the reawakening of Humanism during the Italian Renaissance, for example, or the invention of technology that enabled artists to make art in a new way. By contrast, in the case of the Weimar Republic era, it was often the negative consequences of war that supplied great impetus and inspiration. Some of the key concepts that infuse the artworks in the exhibition include:

- The visual manifestation of how society treated its war casualties and the plight of military veterans. Were they honored? Or neglected?

- The choices made by photographers and painters in their depictions of the shift from agrarian landscape to industrial urbanism. Was this change something to criticize? Were the artists nostalgic, looking back, or embracing change?
- Attitudes toward those who led the country into war. How did artists portray these political and business leaders after the war?
- The formulation of a new national identity. How did Germany see itself after the war, with all the changes that ensued? How does any community view itself as it grows and shifts with the times?

All of these issues and questions are pertinent today. As the exhibition's curator, Stephanie Barron, stated about the artists whose work is included: "Together, they created a collective portrait of a society in uneasy transition, in images that are as striking today as they were in their own time."

WORKS CITED

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CREDITS

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