

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

Barron, Stephanie and Sabine Eckmann. *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic 1919-1933*. New York: Prestel, 2015.

Rewald, Sabine and Ian Buruma. *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.

CREDITS

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CHILD PORTRAIT (PETER IN SICILY) (KNABENBILDNIS [PETER IN SIZILIEN]), 1925

Georg Schrimpf

Many of the era's artists favored portraiture. The genre has been popular for thousands of years, but for New Objectivity artists, portraiture was a means to keep art firmly in their own era rather than tied to the past. Subjects were depicted unflinchingly—as were urban landscapes, industrial facilities, and other subjects. These portraits tended to be unsentimental and unidealized—in fact, they often exaggerated what their subjects looked like in real life.

Children were no exception. In portraits such as *Child Portrait (Peter in Sicily)*, young children were accurately but impassively rendered, with the suggestion that beneath their placid expressions lurked something sinister or disturbed. Children were coming of age in a time characterized not by joy, play, and innocence but by alienation.

This child, the artist's son, stands at a balcony railing, with a pastoral landscape stretching behind him. Dressed in the proper fashion of the time, he looks at the viewer with a puzzling expression. No childlike wonder registers on his face; instead, we see wariness, or a reserve that would be more characteristic of a much older child, or an adult. The child's size in relation to the painting—he nearly fills the vertical dimensions of the canvas—imparts an almost surreal presence. As a German art historian pointed out, Georg Schrimpf's work is disconcerting because it includes both monumentality (in this case, the scale of the child's figure) and simplicity (an innocent child, with no narrative content). Yes, this is a child, but what lurks beneath the surface?



Child Portrait (Peter in Sicily) (Knabenbildnis [Peter in Sizilien]), 1925

Georg Schrimpf (German, 1889–1938)

Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 × 17 in. (62.2 × 43.2 cm);

framed: 30 3/4 × 23 1/8 × 2 in. (78.1 × 58.4 × 5.1 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the Robert Gore Rifkind Foundation, Beverly Hills, CA (M.2013.18)

Photo © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA

WAR VETERANS' ASSOCIATION (KRIEGERVEREIN), 1921

Georg Scholz

New Objectivity artists took as their subjects both the victims of the Weimar Republic and those in power who benefited from the era's deprivation and chaos. They often cast a critical eye on rampant profiteering and extremism on both ends of the political spectrum. Employing satire and exaggeration, these artists, through their creations, offered close observations that emphasized the ugly and the grotesque as an intentional affront to comfortable bourgeois society.

War Veterans' Association embodies Georg Scholz's distaste for the conservative members of German society who participated in the war and later prospered in its aftermath. Literally fat with their success, these rotund veterans are armed with symbols that identify them as conservative anti-republicans. The building behind them—a pub—is named "To the Iron Hindenburg," a reference to Paul von Hindenburg, a top German field

marshal during the war. (A few years after this painting was completed, Hindenburg served as the second president of Germany). Behind the three figures is a war memorial, not to the World War I war dead, but a monument to the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s, in which Germany was victorious over France. Thus, these men represent nostalgia for Germany's glorious pre-World War I past. The town depicted is quiet and undamaged by the war, but the three veterans and other figures (see the child in white holding flowers), all with cartoonish faces, suggest Scholz's criticism of social conservatism.

Scholz, himself a wounded war veteran, joined the Communist Party after the war and used his skills as an illustrator to contribute to satirical magazines. Once the Nazis came to power, his art was branded "degenerate" and removed from public museums.



War Veterans' Association (Kriegerverein), 1921

Georg Scholz (German, 1890–1945)

Oil on wood, 27 1/8 × 29 1/2 in. (68.9 × 74.9 cm); framed: 31 1/4 × 33 1/2 × 1 1/8 in. (79.4 × 85.1 × 3 cm)

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe

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Photo by A. Fischer/H. Kohler, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe Fotowerkstatt

ALLOTMENT GARDEN LANDSCAPE (SCHREBERGARTENLANDSCHAFT), 1929

Albert Renger-Patzsch

The Weimar Republic gave rise to the urban metropolis in Germany. For many, the city represented, ironically, both a space for new possibilities emerging from modernization as well as the driving force behind man's alienation from nature and from his fellow man. In both painting and photography, New Objectivity artists captured the frictions at play between the rural and urban—the former seen as connected to the past and, for some, the latter seemingly imbued with the future. Some embraced the changes; others sought to contrast the rapid encroachment of twentieth-century industrialization with nostalgia for the (supposedly) simpler, bucolic life of earlier times. Thus, a sense of displacement often characterized how they related to the landscape. How were the natural and the manmade environments to coexist?

Allotment Garden Landscape presents such a dilemma. A self-styled “photographer of things,” Albert Renger-Patzsch rejected the idea that photographs should mimic painting, employing heightened contrast or soft-focus romanticizing. Instead, he advocated a straightforward approach. He rooted his depictions in the idea that nature presented a sense of order, though not a

mechanistic order; he maintained that something sublime was contained within that order. Photographs such as this one clearly exhibit such orderliness: the repeated fence posts rise vertically, and the crop rows stretch neatly into the distance, shapes echoed by the distant vertical factory chimneys. It's difficult to discern if a point of view, positive or negative, is implied here. The photo captures an in-between world of ambiguity.

Some New Objectivity photographers (and painters) used extreme close-ups of factories and machines to transform them into geometric compositions of hard-edged beauty. Here, the focus is not on the surface but on contradiction. Are we to honor the past by maintaining it? For *Allotment Garden Landscape*, the photographer explores the relationship between urban modernity and organic nature, ultimately leaving it for the viewer to determine.



Allotment Garden Landscape (Schrebergartenlandschaft), 1929

Albert Renger-Patzsch (German, 1897–1966)

Gelatin silver print, Sheet: 6 1/2 × 8 7/8 in. (16.5 × 22.5 cm); framed: 20 3/8 × 16 3/8 × 1 1/2 in. (51.8 × 41.7 × 4 cm)

Galerie Berinson, Berlin

© 2015 Albert Renger-Patzsch Archiv/Ann u. Jürgen Wilde, Zülpich/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo courtesy Galerie Berinson, Berlin

***TO BEAUTY (AN DIE SCHÖNHEIT)*, 1922**

Otto Dix

One of the leading exponents of New Objectivity (along with George Grosz and Max Beckmann), Otto Dix was a war veteran who exposed the horrors of war in a searing group of works on paper entitled *War*. He also made paintings like this one, which, while seemingly cool and detached, actually presents a biting satire of postwar Germany.

To Beauty is a self-portrait, but it is anything but an accurate representation of the artist, who was staunchly anti-establishment rather than the dandified businessman he portrayed here (center). The figures and symbols of the painting combine to form a portrait of post-war Germany, particularly its urban centers. The jazz musician and dancers evoke the modern age (American jazz became popular in Germany, as elsewhere, in the 1920s, though it was not until years later that jazz bands actually visited the country). The artist holds a telephone, also symbolizing the modernity of the period.

The African-American drummer and the Native American painted on the drum both reference

Germany's interest in American culture, focused most acutely on Native Americans, who, to Germans, represented a romanticized view of Germanic tribes and tribalism.

Taken as a whole, the painting is unsettling, as some of the symbols have multiple meanings. Dix likely was familiar with the telephone, as field telephones were used during the war to pass commands to those stationed on the front lines, including Dix, who was a machine gunner. Thus, it is a symbol of communication but also a reminder of the war. A couple dances in contemporary dress in the background, but what of the figure to the right? She is a dressmaker's dummy, legless and lifeless, perhaps a stand-in for all the armless or legless battlefield survivors. The artist paints himself as older than his chronological age, with a receding hairline. The drummer is about to play, the telephone about to ring. Is this the present? It may be that the artist saw this moment as one of flux, suggesting an uncertain future.



To Beauty (An die Schönheit), 1922

Otto Dix (German, 1891–1969)

Oil and collage on canvas, 54 7/8 × 47 1/2 in. (139.5 × 120.5 cm);

framed: 60 1/4 × 52 7/8 × 2 3/4 in. (153 × 134.5 × 7 cm)

Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal, Germany

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Photo courtesy Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: EXPRESSING MOOD IN ART

ESSENTIAL QUESTION	How do artists create portraits that capture a mood?
GRADES	3–6
TIME	One class period
ART CONCEPTS	Mood, color, foreground, background, composition, portraiture, wax resist
MATERIALS	Pencils, oil pastel, watercolors, brushes, watercolor paper, cups, paper towels
TALKING ABOUT ART	<p>German artists of the Weimar Republic favored portraiture. Their portraits tend to be unsentimental and un-idealized, though their depictions frequently departed from what their subjects looked like in real life. Instead they used portraiture to say something about their subject and communicate a mood.</p> <p>Analyze Georg Schrimpf's <i>Child Portrait</i> as compared to Mary Cassatt's <i>Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child</i>. What do you see? What questions do you have about these paintings?</p> <p>Compare the overall feeling or mood of each artwork.</p> <p>Discuss differences in color, brush strokes (soft in the Cassatt vs. hard brushstrokes in the Schrimpf), expressions, setting, and composition. The two paintings have very similar arrangements, but each evokes a very different feeling. What do you see that might contribute to these feelings?</p> <p>Discuss different dark and light moods that can be expressed by a work of art. Ask students to demonstrate a sad face, a frustrated face, an anxious face.</p> <p>Make a list on the board. Describe how these moods can be communicated in art through colors, setting, style, and composition.</p>
MAKING ART	<p>Create a “moody” portrait using watercolor and wax resist.</p> <p>Write a dark or a light mood (for instance, sad, cold, lonely, or anxious, or happy, warm, or relaxed) on the back of your paper and then choose a partner. Ask your partner what mood they chose, and then, keeping that mood in mind, quickly draw him or her in light-colored oil pastel on his or her paper. Then have your partner do the same for you.</p> <p>Exaggerate the mood by exaggerating the drawing. Press hard with your oil pastel to make the face feel more stressed or anxious, or make soft, wispy lines for a more relaxed portrait.</p> <p>Remember, this is not a realistic drawing. Use simple lines and large shapes. No filling in details! Make sure the portrait fills the page from top to bottom.</p>

Decide what your background will be and how it will help create a mood in your drawing: bedroom, forest, city street? Outline the background in oil pastel.

When you're finished with your drawing, you can begin filling it in with watercolors. Start by painting the background and then fill in the face. Use darker colors for a dark mood, or brighter colors for a happier mood. Use less water for darker colors or more water for lighter colors.

REFLECTION

Share your art and have other students guess the mood depicted. What feeling do they get from your artwork?

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SPEAKING AND LISTENING

3–6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners.

6.4 Present claims and findings, using pertinent descriptions and details.

CCSS.READING STANDARDS FOR LITERATURE

6.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text (artwork) and how it is conveyed through particular details.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: CHANGING LANDSCAPES

ESSENTIAL CONCEPT	Our environment reveals the social forces that have shaped our progress. Photographs from the past and present can reveal much about our future.
GRADES	4–8
TIME	One to two class periods
ART CONCEPTS	Composition, design, shapes, geometry, line
MATERIALS	Landscape photographs
TALKING ABOUT ART	<p>Although the camera had recorded natural landscapes in the past, in the early 1900's, photographers now captured the transition from farmlands to urbanization. Renger-Patzsch's <i>Allotment Garden Landscape</i> can be seen as a survey of his country's land being encroached upon by modern industrialization.</p> <p>View and discuss Albert Renger-Patzsch's photograph, <i>Allotment Garden Landscape</i>, 1929. What words would you use to describe the landscape in this photograph?</p> <p>What shapes or lines can you point out in the photograph? Are they organic, man-made or both?</p> <p>Would you describe this landscape as residential, agrarian (farmland) or industrial? What visual clues tell you this? Why did the artist choose this vantage point for his photograph? Is he nostalgic or is he stepping forward into modernity by embracing urban development?</p>
MAKING ART	<p>We can link Patzsch's photograph of a German landscape to our society's urbanization from the 18th through 21st centuries. For example, in 1776, Mission San Juan Capistrano was a European settlement located 55 miles south of Los Angeles. Later, in an attempt to promote immigration and residential communities in the area, it was named Orange County—after the citrus fruit. Orange County was promoted as a semi-tropical paradise where various crops could grow. Then, in the mid-20th century, the railroad line and Interstate-5 Highway were developed, connecting Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego. Residential developments grew and attractions like Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm (previously renowned for its boysenberries) attracted tourists. Today, Orange County is the second most densely populated county in California, second to San Francisco County. Over the years, urban development has yielded high revenues, but Orange County is no longer the tropical paradise that initially drew people to the area.</p> <p>Examine your own surroundings. As you travel to and from school, observe the urban and/or natural landscape around you. With a camera or cell phone, take three to five photographs of what speaks to you—natural landscape, residential, commercial spaces, etc.</p>

Choose your favorite photograph, print it and reflect on it as it relates to the natural/urban environment. Write a title on your photograph and bring it to class to be displayed.

REFLECTION

Present your artwork, addressing the following:

Why did you feel it was important to document that particular site?

How does the site impact the community?

How did you frame the site in your photograph and why?

How do you think the site might change in the future?

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SPEAKING AND LISTENING.6–8

4–8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners.

6–8.2 Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

6–8.4 Present claims and findings, using pertinent descriptions and details.

CCSS.HISTORY SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS.4

4.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the physical and human geographic features that define places and regions in California.

6–8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary source; provide an accurate summary. 6.6 Identify aspects of a text (artwork) that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: HEROES, VILLAINS, AND YOU

ESSENTIAL QUESTION	Who deserves a look from our critical eye?
GRADES	9–12
TIME	One class period and a preview (to invite students to bring images of today’s famous leaders, politicians, and celebrities to the classroom for inspiration for the project)
CONCEPTS	Politics, identity, and criticism
MATERIALS	Pencils, colored pencils, and drawing paper; and print or digital photos provided by the students. Have the students bring to the classroom an image of a leader, politician or celebrity who they feel strongly about.
TALKING ABOUT ART	<p>View the painting by Georg Scholz, <i>War Veterans’ Association</i> (Kriegerverein), 1921. Make observations using the open-ended phrase, “I see...” Inventory the responses on the board, moving towards more and more detailed responses through close looking.</p> <p>Many of Scholz’s contemporaries favored portraiture. The three gentlemen pictured here are represented with symbols that identify them as individuals who supported the former government of the German emperor rather than the contemporary government of the president. During this interwar period, depictions of people frequently departed from what their subjects looked like in real life in order to convey information about their character and identity. Consider the men’s cartoonish expressions. Why do you think the artist chose to depict them with their eyes closed? How did the artist depict the individuals in a negative light? What symbols do you see that suggest their prosperity?</p> <p>Bars and restaurants are often popular meeting places where people can relax, refresh, and reflect on current events. The pub at the edge of the central square has a banner that reads “To the Iron Hindenburg.” Paul von Hindenburg, a top German field marshal during the World War I, was widely considered a hero; he was later elected as Germany’s second president. The term “Iron” refers to his strength. What other qualities are important for a hero? Do the men in the foreground appear to be “Iron Men?”</p> <p>Much of Germany was reeling from the war’s humiliating defeat, demilitarization, and economic hardships. How do you feel when looking at Scholz’s scene? The artist illustrates the ugly and even the grotesque aspects of life for many in contrast to the power and prosperity marking the lives of the few. How might the artist have chosen which details and features to include, or to not include? Scholz worked as an illustrator and used his imagination to emphasize and exaggerate details in his art. Later, the Nazis deemed his art—which criticized life in Germany—degenerate, even</p>

though he had fought for Germany in WWI and was a wounded war veteran.

MAKING ART

The New Objectivity artists were drawn to current events in post-war Germany, creating both heroic portraits and portraits that were more critical. Angelenos are inundated with images of our leaders, politicians, and celebrities, whether online, in print, or in media viewed throughout the city. Choose someone who you think is influential in Los Angeles.

List some of the defining features of the individual in the image that you have chosen. Include symbols or locations that are not featured in the image but that you think are relevant to this person. Make a quick sketch of the individual referring both to the image and your list of the individual's key attributes.

Now, take a stand and editorialize your thoughts about this individual. Suggest through positive or negative imagery how this individual is a hero or a villain. Use strong lines and bold colors to communicate important positive and negative aspects of the individual you are criticizing or praising. Exaggerate and emphasize important features that will make your depiction of the individual memorable and effective.

REFLECTION

Display the completed artworks in the classroom. Walk around and view each example. Share the story of your artwork or practice using a critical eye by analyzing your classmates' artworks. Are the depictions of the individuals positive or negative? Speak about who you depicted, why you chose that individual, and how that individual is affecting current events of Los Angeles.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SPEAKING AND LISTENING.9–12

9–12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own.

9–12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence.

UNFLINCHING REALISM: GERMAN ART BETWEEN THE WARS

ONLINE RESOURCES

"AMID SHADOWS OF WAR, A CULTURAL DECADENCE"

The New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/24/arts/design/24germ.html?_r=2&ref=arts&oref=slogin&

A review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2006 exhibit of German portraits of the 1920s.

BOOKS FOR TEACHERS

NEW OBJECTIVITY: MODERN GERMAN ART IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC 1919–1933

Barron, Stephanie and Sabine Eckmann.

Between the end of World War I and the Nazi rise to power, Germany's Weimar Republic (1919–1933) was a thriving laboratory of art and culture. This exhibition catalogue provides fresh insight into artistic expressions of life in the Weimar Republic, and its politics and legacy.

GLITTER AND DOOM: GERMAN PORTRAITS FROM THE 1920S (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART)

Rewald, Sabine and Ian Buruma.

This exhibition catalogue reveals how the portraits of the Weimar Republic reflect the glittering yet doomed society that was obliterated when Hitler took power.

OTTO DIX AND THE NEW OBJECTIVITY

Büttner, Nils and Daniel Spanke.

This book investigates what characterized New Objectivity, creating a new perspective on this crucial chapter in German art history.

BOOKS FOR STUDENTS

THE WAR TO END ALL WARS: WORLD WAR I

Freedman, Russell.

This book illuminates the complex and rarely discussed subject of World War I for young readers. Recommended for grades 7 and up.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Vander Hook, Sue.

Trace the development of photography from ancient China through the modern computer age. For grades 6–8.

ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Remarque, Erich Maria.

The story of a young man who enlists with his classmates in the German army of WWI, this novel illuminates the savagery of war. For grades 9–12.