German Expressionism

The German Expressionist movement was not limited to an individual medium or style but encompassed breakthroughs in painting, sculpture, printmaking, film, theater, design, architecture, and literature. Reaching maturity by the years of World War I, German Expressionism reflected the great cultural, economic, social, and political changes occurring in the teens and during the Weimar Republic.

The movement began with two artists' groups: Die Brücke (the Bridge), founded in Dresden in 1905, and Der Blaue Reiter (the Blue Rider), founded in Munich in 1911. Die Brücke was established by four young architecture students: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Erich Heckel, and Fritz Bleyl. Influenced by the haunting subject matter and rich colors of Edvard Munch, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh and by African and Oceanic art, these artists passionately sought a new freedom of expression and a liberation from social convention. They exhibited and worked together first in Dresden and then in Berlin, where they remained united from 1911 to 1913.

Der Blaue Reiter was cofounded in Munich by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. During this period both were striving toward nonobjectivity in their paintings, whereby color itself became dominant and independent of any representational function. In Kandinsky's writings of the period, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912) and Reminiscences (1913), he explains his concept of color and form as the "content" or subject of his paintings.

German Expressionists are known not only for their paintings and wood sculptures but also for their prolific experiments with the graphic arts. Influenced by the northern Gothic tradition, they brought new meaning to the woodcut, which they reintroduced. Their prints appeared as individual images, in portfolios, and in various periodicals and books to which they contributed. Their works, bold psychological studies often rendered in vibrant colors, were imbued with haunting power.

For the German Expressionists, more than for any other group of artists in Europe, the anticipation, horror, and outcome of World War I were of critical importance. Many were eager to experience combat firsthand; they returned, if at all, despondent and anxious, changed by what they had witnessed. Expressionism continued after the war; the November Revolution of 1918 spurred many short-lived radical artists' groups throughout Germany. German art of the decade after World War I was, at its height, infused with the intense colors of Expressionism and influenced by the formal accomplishments of French Cubism and Italian Futurism. By the mid-1920s German Expressionism had ended.
Ernst Barlach (Germany, 1870–1938)

*The Beggar*, 1930, cast 1984

Bronze

85 ⅜ x 22 ⅞ x 17 ⅞ in.

(216.9 x 58.1 x 45.1 cm)

Gift of Anna Bing Arnold

M.84.97

Ernst Barlach is the best known Expressionist sculptor. An accomplished playwright as well, when he was faced with the Nazis, he went into hiding.

Text prepared by the Education Department and the Department of Twentieth-Century Art of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Design by Jeffrey Mueller
Ernst Barlach (Germany, 1870–1938)

*The Beggar*, 1930, cast 1984

Bronze
85 ¾ x 22 7/8 x 17 ⅜ in.
(216.9 x 58.1 x 45.1 cm)
Gift of Anna Bing Arnold
M.84.97

Ernst Barlach is the best known of the German Expressionist sculptors. An accomplished graphic artist, poet, and playwright as well, he worked from 1906 to 1938, when he was forced to stop work under the directive of the Nazis. Barlach was influenced in his sculptures by the Gothic wood carving of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He found in this Northern tradition a way to express many of his most passionate concerns, among which was man’s striving toward the spiritual. For Barlach the human figure was the only form by which to convey meaning.

*The Beggar* is one of a group of sixteen figures commissioned from Barlach for the niches of the brick façade of the Gothic Katharinenkirche in Lübeck, northern Germany. Between 1930 and 1932 he finished three figures; the project was assumed after World War II by fellow sculptor Gerhard Marcks, who completed the remaining thirteen figures following Barlach’s intentions. In *The Beggar*, as in most Barlach sculptures, no accidental gesture breaks the closed form; the heavy garments prevent any articulation of detail. While never abstract, the face avoids specifics, presenting instead a state of existence.
Hermann Scherer (Switzerland, 1893–1927)
Sleeping Woman with Boy, 1926

Painted wood
19 ½ x 53 ¾ x 21 ½ in.
(49.5 x 135.3 x 54.6 cm)
Gift of Anna Bing Arnold
M.84.30

Hermann Scherer was one of a group of Swiss artists active near Basel in the 1920s who formed a group known as Rot-Blau (Red-Blue) under the direct influence of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Kirchner, who had emigrated from Germany to the mountains near Davos in 1918, inspired these young artists in painting, printmaking, and carving of sculptures in wood.

Scherer is known to have created more than twenty wood figural compositions during his brief career. Sleeping Woman with Boy is a life-sized sculpture carved from a single massive piece of soft wood and painted with eerie, unnatural colors. The two figures are interwoven, the awkward position and perspectives conveying a sense of compressed space. Scherer’s primitive method of carving conveys his interest in simplified forms. The raw wood, which has literally been hacked away by the artist, confronts the viewer with the intense emotions it represents.
Alexei Jawlensky (Russia, active in Germany, 1864–1941)

The Young Christ, 1919–20

Alexei Jawlensky’s art was profoundly influenced by World War I. As a Russian artist in Munich prior to 1914, he had painted a group of portraits with increasing emphasis on heads and eyes. Under the influence of Emil Nolde, whom he met in 1911, Jawlensky began using more intense colors, and his works assumed a confrontational and audacious attitude.

The shock of war caused Jawlensky, a refugee in Switzerland, to turn inward for his subject matter. His portraits achieved a meditative quality, and he reduced the elements needed to define his subjects. The Young Christ is one of a series of paintings produced around 1919 which demonstrates the artist’s move away from realism as he became inspired by religious fervor. Ultimately his portraits were composed only of simple rectilinear gestures.

Jawlensky was a member with Kandinsky, Lyonel Feininger, and Paul Klee of the Blue Four, a group whose work was collected and promoted in America by German emigré Galkya Scheyer. This painting was purchased by Scheyer from the artist and then passed to the Freeman collection. The unusual black frame was designed by architect Rudolf Schindler, who also created the furniture for the Freemans’ Hollywood Hills home, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.
Otto Dix (Germany, 1891–1969)

Leda, 1919

Oil on canvas
40 3/4 x 31 3/4 in. (103.5 x 80.7 cm)
Purchased with funds provided by Charles K. Feldman, Mr. and Mrs. John C. Best, and B. Gerald Cantor
85.3

The Greek myth of the visitation of Leda by Zeus in the guise of a swan has appealed to artists since the Renaissance. Well-known paintings by Correggio, Michelangelo, and Veronese depict the image of this union, which produced Helen of Troy.

This myth continued to hold the interest of twentieth-century artists, including Otto Dix. Dix established himself with his paintings of 1919 as the leading German artist to come to maturity after World War I. He had been a keen observer of the Great War, having served at the front and documenting his responses in an ambitious graphic cycle entitled Der Krieg (the War). After the war Dix joined fellow artists Oscar Kokoschka, Ludwig Meidner, and Conrad Felixmüller in the radical, Dresden-based group Secession 1919 and exhibited with them for five years.

German Expressionist painting of the years after World War I demonstrates greater intensity of emotion in its vibrant colors and more narrative- or content-laden subject matter. In this densely conceived painting, Dix portrays Zeus as a swan with a long, curving white neck, swooping down upon Leda, who lies voluptuously at the lower left with a horrified expression on her face.
Wassily Kandinsky (Russia, active in Germany and France, 1866–1944)

Untitled Improvisation III, 1914

Oil on cardboard
25 ⅛ x 19 ½ in. (64.5 x 49.5 cm)
Museum acquisition by exchange from the bequest of David E. Bright M.85.151

Wassily Kandinsky is one of the key figures in the development of modern art, a reputation that derives from his innovative ideas and paintings created in Germany between 1910 and 1914. A Russian who played an active part in the Munich art world, Kandinsky formulated ideas that eventually led him to abstraction.

His most important works date from 1910 to 1914, the years in which he painted a series of highly abstracted Impressions, Improvisations, and Compositions based on direct observation of nature, yet retaining impressions of the exterior world. These early abstractions are imbued with an apocalyptic quality. In his book Concerning the Spiritual in Art Kandinsky defined the Improvisations as those paintings produced out of an inner impulse, sudden and unconscious. Compared with the more representational Impressions and more studied Compositions, the Improvisations are among the most lyrically abstract paintings. In Untitled Improvisation III, the quivering brush strokes, fluid line, and bold color combine to create a nonobjective painting in which pure form and color are the only subject.

This painting was formerly owned by the artist Gabriele Münter and then by Hans Hofmann, the Abstract Expressionist painter who brought the painting with him when he emigrated from Germany to America in 1931. The painting may be related to a series of four panels representing the seasons which Kandinsky executed in 1914 for Edwin Campbell (now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York).
Ludwig Meidner was not affiliated with either the Brücke or Blaue Reiter groups but worked independently in Berlin from 1907 creating energetic portraits and urban landscapes. He lived in abject poverty and was often forced to use the reverse of his paintings because he could not afford new canvas. In 1912 he formed a group called Die Pathetiker (the Passionate Ones) with Richard Janthur and Jacob Steinhardt; together they exhibited at Herwarth Walden’s famous Berlin gallery Der Sturm (the Storm).

Beginning in 1912 he painted a group of “apocalyptic landscapes,” predating by at least two years the devastation of World War I. This painting is characteristic of his frenetic landscapes, in which distorted streets and exploding earth and sky depict the horror of imminent destruction. On the verso of this canvas is a portrait of the poet Willi Zierath, painted with the same intense combination of blues and blacks punctuated with slashes of white.
Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, youngest of the founding members of Die Brücke, maintained an identity distinct from his colleagues Heckel and Kirchner. He preferred landscapes and nudes to their choice of scenes from modern urban life. Schmidt-Rottluff, like another member of Die Brücke, Max Pechstein, frequently visited the Baltic coast of northern Germany for inspiration.

In the summer of 1913, immediately following the formal dissolution of Die Brücke, Schmidt-Rottluff traveled to the north German town of Nidden. Its variety of scenery, especially its tall sand dunes and sparse vegetation, powerfully attracted him. While there, he painted a series of pictures of bathers, including this example, in which the dominant features of the landscape are reduced to two-dimensional symbols. These paintings share with French Fauvism a freedom in the use of color. In Bathers Schmidt-Rottluff reduces the number of tonalities to reds and oranges and intensifies their brightness. Figure and ground merge; objects are delineated only by the use of emphatic outlines.
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (Germany, 1880–1938)

Two Women, 1911/1922

Oil on canvas
59 x 47 in. (149.9 x 119.4 cm)
Gift of B. Gerald Cantor
60.33

The year 1911 was a milestone for the three key artists of Die Brücke: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. In the autumn they moved from Dresden, where they had worked since 1905, to Berlin. The pulsating urbanism of the city, its progressiveness and vitality were immediately recorded on canvas and in their prints.

Here Kirchner depicts two seamstresses on a Berlin street. The woman on the right resembles Kirchner’s friend Dodo, who frequently modeled for him. Characteristic of his work of this period, Two Women is a confrontational portrait executed in strong colors with jagged lines. In this aggressive depiction Kirchner does not attempt to beautify the subjects but rather to present them forcefully.

Kirchner emigrated to Switzerland in 1918 following a war-induced nervous breakdown. He worked on this painting again after his emigration and continued to produce paintings, prints, and wood carvings, inspiring a group of young Swiss artists to form the group Rot-Blau (Red-Blue).
Erich Heckel (Germany, 1883–1970)

Sand Diggers on the Tiber, 1909

Oil on canvas
38 x 32 1/2 in. (96.5 x 82.6 cm)
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Nathan Alpers 59.58

A founding member of Die Brücke, Erich Heckel shared with his fellow artists a predilection for Vincent van Gogh’s brushwork and color. In 1909 Heckel left his colleagues Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff for his first extensive trip outside Germany. He traveled to Italy, following the traditional artist’s itinerary: Venice, Padua, Verona, and Rome. He was greatly impressed by this pilgrimage, and his paintings reflect the intense light and colors inspired by his Mediterranean surroundings. He was drawn more to everyday scenes than to examples of classical art and painted several compositions of Italian workers, including Sand Diggers on the Tiber. In this painting he captures with quickly applied brush strokes and intense color the blistering heat of a scene set in the midday sun. Like other Brücke paintings of this period, this canvas is characterized by vibrant contrasts of complementary colors.