

German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse” at the Museum of Modern Art

Jonathan Goodman

Art movements of the twentieth century are notoriously short: Cubism lasted about five years, from 1908 through 1913; and Abstract Expressionism, about ten, from the early 1940s through the early 1950s. By comparison, the period covered in the Museum of Modern Art’s fine show “German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse,” examines a longer time—from 1905, when Die Bruecke movement came into being, into the 1920s, after the devastations of the First World War. The Germans’ extended trajectory enabled them to develop a style that followed the tragic times they were living in. Unlike the French painters working roughly the same time, the German expressionists were more or less a figurative bunch, pouring their hopes, their beliefs, and also their anger and frustration into art that remains memorable for its unflinching intensity and its consideration of such basic themes as Nature, War, and Death. The longer time span assigned to their art remind us that even after the Great War, the artists were determined to expose such things as the unattractiveness of the bourgeoisie or the persistence of prostitution, which were much more evident because of the problems resulting from military defeat.

Perhaps for historical reasons—in particular because of the Holocaust and memories of the American generation that fought to end the Second World War—the Germans have not received so much attention in the United States for their important Expressionist studies of the human condition. “German Expressionism” corrects the deficit with a big show: 250 works, including many prints and some paintings and sculptures, done by thirty artists. Many of the objects, the prints especially, come from the Museum of Modern Art’s own collection and point out the considerable depth of the institution’s holdings. The exhibition may not be seminal, but it sets right a historical blind spot that has existed in the New York City art world for some time now. As such it is a very impressive show.

That the Germans were outstanding graphic artists is well known; their paintings and three-dimensional works also evoke deep emotion—we only need to witness the melancholy of Wilhelm Lehmbruck’s angular bodies created in cast stone, motionless in sad reverie. During the short but riveting times of the Weimar Republic, from 1919 to 1933, economic times were tough and included sharp increases in inflation and high unemployment; the Expressionists, who also included the great Austrian artists Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, strove to meet the spirit of the times after the war and through the Weimar period. Hitler’s party surged to power in 1933, but the artists clairvoyantly outlined a vision of aggression and borderline despair before the takeover of the Nazis. In their own way, they were prophets depicting the demise of decency in human relations.

At the same time, they celebrated, with bohemian glee, the rebellious life of the artist in work concerning the body, sex, and city life (along with nature, portraiture, war, and religion, each of these themes is treated separately in the exhibition’s excellent

catalogue). The nude figures in the works of the early movement Die Bruecke, founded in Dresden in 1905 and continuing into 1913, underscored innocence and recognized desire in ways that undermined conservative society. Still, the Nazi period overwhelmed these Expressionist efforts, which came more or less to a close with the exhibition “Degenerate Art” in 1937; many of the artists now seen in “German Expressionism” were accused of making such art and were sent into exile, wanted or not. The point is not that these artists were without any sense of exaltation; indeed, the works that treat religion show that the Expressionists were concerned with spiritual matters. But in the intensity of their vision, they went from idiosyncrasy to iconoclasm, breaking boundaries even at the beginning of the movement.

Three years after the organization of Die Bruecke, in 1908, the Austrian artists Schiele and Kokoschka embarked on their own vision of Expressionism aligned with the Germans. Other early members of Die Bruecke—Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Fritz Bleyl—were architecture students who threw off the seriousness of their training and celebrated the pleasures of bohemianism: making love, camping out, generally disregarding the rules of their upbringing and education. Quickly after the movement was formed, masters such as Emil Nolde joined in 1906; as did Max Pechstein, also in 1906; and Otto Mueller, who took part starting in late 1910 and who stayed with the group until it stopped in 1913. Not surprisingly, the early works of Die Bruecke easily accommodated (mostly female) nudity, as well as pastiches of nature that romantically commented on mountains and seas. In the show, the nudes appeared in woodcuts and gouaches by Heckel, a watercolor by Pechstein, and a lithograph by Kirchner. These efforts tended to be openly erotic in their sketchlike Intimacies. Kirchner’s work, *Hannah Dancing* (1910) offers us an attractive woman posing nude; her frank smile shows a disdain for convention and a belief in bodily pleasure.

A 1913 lithograph, *Dancer*, by Emil Nolde, presents a half-naked woman wearing a skirt that reveals her pubic hair. With her mouth open and her body in a near contortion of forms, her artful primacy conquers the two men sitting and watching on the left of the painting. Around the same time, the sculptor Lehmbruck made drypoint prints of nude women: *Seated Girl with Bent Head* (1912) and *Cowering Woman III* (c. 1914). Smallish in size, they convey a self-involved yearning; their melancholy, along with Lehmbruck’s brilliant statue *Seated Girl* (1913), whose extended and narrow limbs intimate a deep loneliness, belong most to the artist but also to the spirit of his world at the time. Schiele’s erotic understanding of the body is seen in his drawings and brilliant drypoints; witness *Squatting Woman* and *Sorrow* (both 1914), whose forms make the women eminently erotic even as they look inward at themselves. The female dancer was observed and even honored for the freedom she communicated in performance; Christian Rohlf’s *Two Dancers* (c. 1913) show a man and a woman with bent legs and outstretched arms, a pose taken to its logical extreme in Schmidt-Rottloff’s *Dancer III* (1922), one of the later works in the show. While the time for Die Bruecke may have passed before the publication of *Dancer III*, the date shows that, as a movement, German expressionism died hard.

Lovemaking received scandalous treatment in Kirchner's 1914 lithograph *The Murderer*, a powerful, grisly vision of the ultimate crime. In the scene, set by a maroon foreground and background, a man dressed in black, standing with a desk and lamp behind him, looks over his victim, a nude woman lying on the floor. Her throat has been cut, and a thin ribbon of blood streams down her chest, pooling at her lower belly and over her sex. Her mouth is open, as if she were still able to communicate her death agony. Although the individual elements of the print are relatively disheveled, nothing I have seen communicates murder with this kind of transparent intensity. In the exhibition, George Grosz and Beckmann each display a work involving group sex: Grosz's *Den of Iniquity* (1914) presents an amorous couple surrounded by resting figures; in Grosz's drypoint, a nervous, often wiry line shows the pair starting to perform sex in public. And Beckmann's *Night* (1914) depicts a woman, likely a prostitute, watching with two men a dead client, lying partially on the bed and partially on the floor. Sex in these works is grim, but it must be remembered that it was 1914, when the outbreak of the First World War began. The salacious images, of deliberately dubious morality, demonstrate the grim reality the Expressionists often experienced.

The Blaue Reiter, a movement led by Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky and the German artist Franz Marc, took place at roughly the same time as Die Brücke was active—from 1911 to 1914. But as the catalogue points out, the movement was not so rigidly controlled; artists such as August Macke, Heinrich Campendonk, and Paul Klee were members, “most of whom shared an interest in color theory, a tendency toward abstraction, and an interest in spiritual values” (1). Kandinsky was active making woodcuts that showed his development from realism into pure abstraction; generally, though, the prints don't have the compelling power of Kandinsky's painting efforts. Works done in 1911, part of Kandinsky's *Sounds* (1913), an illustrated book composed of fifty-six woodcuts, seem caught between figuration and abstraction in ways that the watercolors of the same period do not. Marc's fine sensibility, devoted to the gentle portrayal of animals, is evident in the 1911 woodcut *Horses Resting*, which consists of blue-and-white horses reposing on the ground. Generally speaking, the German Expressionist movement is figurative, outside of Kandinsky's participation; even Paul Klee maintains a sense of architectural structure in the slightly curving bars of color seen in the watercolor-and-pastel-on-paper entitled *Laughing Gothic* (1915).

The Austrian Kokoschka, who moved to Germany in 1910 and who took part in the ongoing Expressionist movement, illustrated a poster with his own picture: *Self-Portrait, Hand on Chest* (1911-12) shows a ghastly image of himself placing an index finger in a chest wound, testifies to his essentially morbid genius. That description might well fit Schiele, too, whose contributions to the show also include drawings that both cleave to and transcend the body in ways that are entirely original for the time. Schiele remained in Austria but died young, of influenza at the age of 28, in 1918. His genius was to see eroticism frankly, although not necessarily free of guilt or shame; his images of in this show demonstrate an exorbitant sexuality, a lust that transcended moral judgment by welcoming it.

The artists of German Expressionism were drawn both to nature and to the city, evoking a vigorous, slightly romantic treatment for the former and a hard-headed, hard-hitting cynicism for the latter. Kirchner's *Winter Moonlit Night* (1919) is a majestic woodcut that belies its smallish size (32.2 x 31.3 cm). The image consists of gray-white snow, with blue mountains and reddish-brown trees, whose color echoes the sky at the top of the composition. A moon watches over a vista that belongs to nature alone—no person is present. Schmidt-Rottluff made woodcuts that encompass the sea and man's effort to navigate it with boats; these schematic works, including *Two Fischer mit Netz* (1923), advance a certain gravity in their treatment of the fishing industry. One oil by Otto Mueller, *Landscape with Yellow Nudes* (c. 1919) stands out; three slender nudes, painted a bright yellow-green, maintain a presence at the edge of or just in the water. They are framed by green foliage at the top and green grass and bushes on the ground.

The First World War made the troubled, troubling imagery of German expressionists prophetic beyond the wildest imagination. Otto Dix's suite of fifty graphic works, named *The War* (1924), grimly treats rotting bodies and deformed faces as the order of the day. Corpses and skulls receive vivid and particular treatment, offering the viewer no way out of the disastrous events that accompany combat (we remember that Dix served as a machine gunner for three years during the conflict). There doesn't even seem time for burial: *Dead Sentry in a Trench* and *Corpse in Barbed Wire (Flanders)* testify to the disintegration of the flesh, revealing bony features and limbs made even more horrible by the men remaining in uniform. The grim severity of what we see is so extreme as to seem funny: a skull is rendered with maggots filling the eyes and mouth to the point of horrific absurdity. These works support our intuition that Dix unflinchingly found material for art in numerous deaths of soldiers; as a group of images, its only rival is Goya's great set of prints, *Disasters of War*. Käthe Kollwitz's seven woodcuts entitled *War* were published in 1923; the individual images were done in 1921-22. Her high anguish is seen in *The Parents*, in which a faceless couple embrace on their knees in unremitting sorrow; in *The Widow II* a woman in rigor mortis, head resting on the ground, sightlessly looks back at the viewer. Kollwitz's emotion is historically grounded, as well as metaphysically charged: she lost her own son in the hostilities.

City life, as opposed to nature, offered artists the chance to become social commentators. Beckmann's eleven lithographs, entitled *Trip to Berlin* (1922) offers us the pleasure of urban entertainment—one image is of common people dancing in a tavern; another is of naked women dancing on a stage for an audience mostly made up of men. After a while, one comes to the conclusion that the desperation of people never ends because their depravity never ends. Most of the imagery caters to a jaded or cynical viewpoint; idealism follows far behind. But the style of art matches the dissipation exactly; grief about the human condition is almost always due to the desperation of the times. Grosz's acid wit relentlessly reveals depravity; *Metropolis* (1917) shows well-dressed men and naked women along the avenue of a city street; despite their seeming proximity to each other, each is following his or her own path, oblivious to the rest of the figures. In a drawing of two angry, well-dressed men, entitled *Dispute by Moon Light* (c. 1920), Grosz again shows us overweight physiques and unshaved features, which emphasize the

brutality of the ruling class at this point in time. The work's brutality is of course prophetic of the future Nazi Reich.

Just as the German expressionists exhausted history, so did history exhaust them. Their art, inherently spiritual, finds forms of traditional solace but subjects them to their own methodology, in which vision competes with orthodoxy. There is the beautiful woodcut by Schmidt-Rottluff of Saint Francis (1919), whose Cubist features are sharply outlined in black and white. Surrounded by an aura of spiky white forms, the saint's eyes are narrowed to thin slits, perhaps a sign of spiritual transformation. A 1912 Nolde woodcut of a prophet emphasizes the downcast look and thick eyebrows of a troubled visionary, whose integrity itself may be the cause of his suffering. In 1917 Beckmann produced a moving interpretation of Adam and Eve covering themselves after having eaten the apple; the serpent just behind them coils itself around the tree of knowledge. His painting *Descent from the Cross* (1917) shows a green, ghostly Christ wearing the wounds of his hands and feet; his listless face and unseeing gaze compel us to consider him dead, beyond the hope of resurrection. Words are hard put to do justice to the pathos of the figure, preeminently the man of sorrows. Ernst Barlach's great bronze sculpture, *Singing Man* (1928), resolutely offers something else, the image of a man in joyous song; its achievement is found in the genuine spirituality of the figure.

In the years after the war, politics became important—it was another way for the German Expressionists to register their indignation—in fact, their wrath—with the poverty and pain that followed their defeat in the war's aftermath. Beckmann made a series called *Hell* (1919) that consisted of a portfolio of eleven lithographs. *The Way Home* shows an elegantly dressed man receiving directions from a former soldier, half of whose face has been shot away. The deformed soldier points with his one good hand; his other arm ends in a stump. *Hunger* shows a family of four saying grace before very little food; their resignation is a comment on the times. In 1924, Kollwitz portrays a suicide in the woodcut titled *The Last Thing*. A grimacing person, standing on a chair, holds a noose in front of him. Kollwitz has been accused at times of emotionalism, but her stark truths remain so at least in part because she refuses to diminish the intensity of human suffering—this means that, like the other Expressionists, she stands for emotional impact above the consideration of any social nicety. Severity of affect is sought after and achieved.

“German Expressionism” shows that the artists felt compelled to continue their barbed descriptions of urban depravity in their postwar portraits. *Café Couple* (1921), a watercolor-and-pencil drawing by Otto Dix, shows an unattractive wife wearing a lime-colored, wide-brimmed hat and a fox stole; her husband, impeccable in suit and tie, wears the war's scars on the right side of his face. His physical deformity matches her small-mouthed, small-spirited features. In another work by Dix, a lithograph entitled *Procuress* (1923), an overweight, squinty-eyed, faintly bearded, and red-headed matron of the night smokes a cigarette; her red hair and red lips and hint of breasts combine to make an image of ferocity and corruption. Beckmann's self-portraits, in drypoint, woodcut, and oil, show us a formally dressed, brooding artist; he is grim to the point of morbidity. In the drypoint *The Barker* (1921), he portrays himself as a barker in Circus Beckman; it is a witty image, but also suggests that life during this time is itself an unwholesome fair. Dix,

in many ways the star of the show, offers a 1922 *Self-Portrait*, a drawing done in watercolor and pencil. Like Beckmann, he is impeccably clothed; however, his thin lips, narrow eyes, and receding hairline, coupled with a background of vague, cloudlike masses, argues for grief and uncertainty, perhaps looking ahead to the Nazi period.

Indeed, the Nazis hang like a cloud over the period following the First World War. But we know so only in hindsight, and so it is striking to see the German Expressionists offer so hopeless a present, one occurring before the invasion of Poland. One can argue for or against the prophetic nature of their art, yet it seems clear that their view of the human predicament is unflinchingly realist, without much solace. The artists recorded suffering without romance or fantasy; the sad part is just how true their imagining was during the time of their esthetic activities. The stark pain of poverty, warfare, and ruling-class indifference led some of them toward socialism, but their vision was larger than being political alone. For this writer, they captured human relations, often at their worst, but also with an energy and intensity that possessed positive traits. “German Expressionism” shows us that it is in fact possible to portray the imagery of both depravity and sorrow in ways that do not condescend; this is clear in the self-portraits of Beckmann and Dix, who stand out in the exhibition as exemplars of a painful integrity. That integrity is key to the artists’ achievement, which the exhibition so clearly demonstrates. It is not too much to imagine our own times as mirroring that of the artists whose work is in the show; but they have rendered it in a fashion whose brutal truthfulness outshines our own.

Footnotes

- (1) Starr Figura, “German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse,” p. 16, in Figura, Starr, ed. *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2011).

Jonathan Goodman