

German Expressionism and Printmaking

A response to the tumultuous beginnings of the 20th century, German Expressionism was most certainly a movement as opposed to a style. It affected literature, music, philosophy, and the visual arts and was by far one of the more influential art movements in history, addressing both the philosophical and political queries of the age while offering a new look at aesthetics in art. (Sabarsky, 4) It stood as a powerful and influential statement against the values of the fragile society in which the artists spent their childhood. Not exclusively print-based, this movement was supported by writers, philosophers, poets, composers and sculptors alike who shared the need to break the barriers and lend a refreshed perspective on cultural authenticity. At points, German Expressionism became a means of religious expression while the artists considered themselves spiritual custodians. (Heller, IX) The artists of the German Expressionist movement were dissatisfied with the lack of representation of their new sense of life in the art available in the early 20th century, and in rebelling against Jugendstil (the popular art form of the time focusing more on prettiness of line, form and subject) they truly did something to meet not only their own needs, but the needs they could perceive in the communities around them.

To truly appreciate the German Expressionist movement, it's very important to know what was going on politically and socially in the nation during the two decades before World War I. The Napoleonic wars, (the series of wars fought during Napoleon Bonaparte's rule over France which led to the fast rise and fall of French power over Europe) the failed Democratic revolutions of 1848 (a series of essentially spontaneous popular disturbances that brought down Governments through shifts in political focus) and the wars fostered by Bismarck during the 1860's and 1870's (the Prime

Ministers disagreements with an increasingly liberal French society) created a Prussia-dominated German Empire centered in the nations capitol which altered the number of states in Central Europe dramatically. The years following these-among other-events spurred economic and technological transformations of an unprecedented degree including an economic revolution that replaced agrarian dominance with capitalist industrial power, uncontrolled urbanization, new forms of communication and transportation, shifting class and population concentrations, altering educational needs and differing moral convictions, conflicting ideologies and world oriented political as well as economic ambitions. It was an upheaval of the greatest degree, and this tumultuous environment became the basis of uncertainty that characterized the social and cultural atmosphere of Germany at the turn of the century. (Sabarsky, 8)

Though the supposed dates of German Expressionism are usually set somewhere between 1903 and 1930, already in the 1890's significant members of the German art community became aligned with non-academic stylistic tendencies whether under the influence of French or English ideals. They organized independent art groups involving other artists of the same sensibilities and used their groups as means to present their work consistently and regularly to the German public while private galleries (much like society at the time) either proved insufficient or inappropriate. (Heller, 4) Artists sought to voice their own standards and needs, free from the constraints of a rigid and increasingly less relevant past. Die Brucke is the most noteworthy of these independent artists communities whose influence on the German Expressionist movement is immeasurable.

In Weimar, December 1903, the fermenting tide of dissatisfaction and reformatory artists groups bore four students of architecture in Dresden. They called themselves Kunstlergruppe Brucke: the Artists' Group Bridge (later shortened to simply Die Brucke meaning "The Bridge") and became official on June 7th 1905 when the original four artists –Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff- formally pledged themselves to the creation of new art-forms that

resisted formal teachings and instead favored the violent, intense and emotional markings of a new era. (Heller, 4) These artists focused on using bold and graphic shapes in an almost chaotic arrangement to reflect the increasing chaos around them. Their work focused on darker subjects than German art had experienced before: instead of the simple woman knitting in her breakfast nook they showed prostitutes working the streets to keep their children fed, and instead of showing gentlemen reading in their studies they showed soldiers rotting on the battlefield. These artists impacted the German Expressionist movement significantly and were key in the spreading of printmaking as a whole through a combination of their talent and their ability to organize and fund exhibits. Though they organized at the beginning of the German Expressionist movement the artists of Die Brücke were not its creators, rather highly talented individuals who saw a niche for themselves in a rapidly evolving artistic movement.

Before anyone had ever heard of Expressionism, German artists were already perfecting the techniques Expressionists would make famous. Woodcut, lithography and etching methods were popularized in Germany thanks to artists like Albrecht Durer, Johann Chadow and Adolf von Menzel (to name a few), so it was natural that the German Expressionist movement focus so intensely on the print process that their nation spawned. German artists were able to draw upon the recent innovations in woodcut techniques by Vallotton, Gauguin and Munch and the use of lithography with its simplistic lines, popularized in the Art Nouveau poster movement of the 1890s. (Sabarsky, 13) The method of printmaking came to these artists by way of culture however the mediums used in printmaking provided the artists with a style unto itself.

Because printing does have its limitations due to the availability of materials, known techniques, and tools, German Expressionist printmakers focused on the intensity of powerful positive and negative space balanced with the subtlety of line that lithography provided. “Less is more” became their mantra as they focused on the shocking, occasionally savage shapes and lines of the

increasingly chaotic world around them. (Carey, Griffiths, 18) The combination of simplicity of technique and accessibility of medium made the print a means of mass reproduction that was also an independent visual art form, worth more in the meaning than in the materials. Mass-production had two great affects on the German community: it made the spreading of political messages easier than it had ever been previously while simultaneously making art accessible to the public which inevitably led to the popularization and democratization of art. (Carey, Griffiths, 19)

So, in a nutshell: The confusion and disorientation of the German people at the turn of the century created a need for immediate and tangible meanings. Instead of representing a particular style, technique or expression that was visually similar to the techniques or expressions used by other artists at the turn of the century, the German Expressionist movement, the development of aesthetics, subject matter, and meaning in art, represented a shared sentiment that allowed the artists within it to express their opinions and emotions, and to project meaningful declarations about society rather than create a pleasing or formal picture. The German Expressionist was about the self and the whole. They were veritable prophets of a new order, representing a balance between man and the universe while defining flaws in a decrepit society. The arts moved in the direction of a new primitivism. This opened the way to the rediscovery of graphic techniques. In the ecstatic and sometimes almost barbaric forms of their woodcuts, the German artists, especially the members of Die Brucke developed a style that used crudely simplified and powerfully sensual forms to greatly intensify the testimony of their art.