

Expressionism in Germany and France: From Van Gogh to Kandinsky

Private Collectors

French avant-garde art was being avidly collected and exhibited in Germany, especially by private collectors, who did not have the same constraints that museum directors and curators faced. Karl Ernst Osthaus was one of the most passionate and important collectors and a fervent supporter of the German Expressionists. In 1902 Osthaus opened the Museum Folkwang in Hagen (today the museum is in Essen). There he exhibited his own collection, including the works of Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Paul Signac. His museum was frequented by admirers of avant-garde art, including many of the new generation of Expressionists, among them August Macke, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein, and Christian Rohlfs (who later moved to Hagen and had a studio at the museum).

The cosmopolitan Count Harry Kessler, who grew up partly in Paris and later divided his time between France and Germany, discovered Neo-Impressionism early through the works of Signac and Théo van Rysselberghe, which he saw in Paris. He was also interested in the French artists group known as the Nabis, and acquired *The Mirror in the Green Room* (on view in this exhibition) by Pierre Bonnard, one of its members. Kessler also commissioned works from French painters, including Henri-Edmond Cross's *Bather*, also on view in this exhibition.

In 1905, when he was the director of the Grand Ducal Museum in Weimar, Kessler organized the first major Gauguin exhibition in Germany. Although it provoked a scandal—Gauguin was criticized for being too “exotic”—the exhibition presented the artist's colorful Symbolist paintings of Brittany and Tahiti to the German art world.

Berlin

Around 1900 the German capital was the center of the country's commerce, finance, and industry—both a metropolis and a meeting point for different cultures between East and West. Beginning in the late 19th century, exhibitions in Berlin presented in-depth surveys of Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism. The Berlin Secession exhibition, which first opened in 1899, quickly became a platform for established German and Swiss painters but championed Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism through works by Maximilien Luce and Paul Signac as well. Periodicals such as *Pan* also showcased Neo-Impressionism and Art Nouveau.

Forward-looking museum directors, including Hugo von Tschudi at the National Gallery in Berlin, began to acquire works by Paul Cézanne and other modern French artists even before French museums did. In 1898 cousins Bruno and Paul Cassirer opened the Kunstsalon Cassirer in Berlin, a commercial gallery where they showed French artists, notably Cézanne. In December 1901 Paul Cassirer, at his newly renamed Galerie Cassirer in Berlin, was among the first to exhibit Vincent van Gogh's works, including *The Poplars at Saint-Rémy* and *Wheatfield with Reaper*, both on view in this exhibition. Cassirer's numerous exhibitions, which often traveled to other cities, introduced Van Gogh's art to Germany.

The frenetic cultural life and cosmopolitan art scene in Berlin attracted young German artists to visit or settle there, among them Brücke members Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. However, the standards of taste as set by the Berlin Secession turned against works by artists such as Henri Matisse and Pechstein, and the rejection of the Brücke's works led to the founding of the Neue Secession in 1910 with the objective of showing a broader spectrum of the German and international avant-garde.

Paris

The City of Light had a dynamic art scene and was home to an international avant-garde, which attracted numerous German artists and amateurs to Paris. Collectors and museum directors frequently came to the French capital, visiting galleries and artists' studios. Their contacts with French collectors—especially Gustave Fayet, who owned several paintings by Gauguin, or the gallerist Ambroise Vollard, an early supporter of the French avant-garde—allowed them to show Post-Impressionist works in Germany. The Galerie Bernheim-Jeune presented the first major Van Gogh retrospective in the spring of 1901, a show seen by the German gallery owner Paul Cassirer as well as André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Maurice de Vlaminck.

Regular exhibitions such as the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Indépendants also allowed German artists to become acquainted with the work of modern artists; for instance, Gauguin's *Swineherd* (on view in this exhibition) was presented at the 1906 Salon d'Automne, which also included works by Alexei Jawlensky and Wassily Kandinsky. Moreover, these exhibitions gave rise to new artistic movements such as Fauvism.

Many German artists whose works are shown in this exhibition also frequented Paris. They gathered at the Café du Dôme with other German and French artists; visited the studios of Robert Delaunay, Henri Matisse, Henri Rousseau, and others; and looked at art in galleries, museums, and private collections such as that of Sarah and Michael Stein. A number of them also studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and private art schools. German art dealers such as

Wilhelm Uhde and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler settled in Paris, where they opened galleries and, most notably, helped introduce Picasso and Rousseau to a larger public in France as well as in Germany. The blue in the central spine and on the walls in the adjacent galleries emphasizes works that were shown in Paris.

Brücke

“A new generation of creators as well as appreciators, we call together all youth. Whoever renders directly and authentically that which impels him to create is one of us.” —Program of the Brücke (1906)

The Brücke (Bridge) was an artists group formed in Dresden in 1905; its name reflected its intention of linking past, present, and future. Founding members Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff were familiar with Neo-Impressionism, a French art movement of the 1880s that was based on color theory.

Dresden’s Galerie Arnold showed Neo-Impressionist works in 1904, a year before the founding of the Brücke. Cuno Amiet, Emil Nolde, and Max Pechstein, who soon joined the Brücke were familiar with the movement as well. The graphic works of the Brücke artists also reflected an awareness of Jugendstil, the international variant of French Art Nouveau, a style based on sinuous line, flat patterns, and the black-and-white contrasts characteristic of woodcuts. Many were exposed to this style through the work of Félix Vallotton, a Swiss artist associated with the Nabis, a French group also represented in this gallery by Edouard Vuillard.

Yet the Brücke artists were seeking to go beyond well-established styles, particularly Impressionism, which they felt relied too much on “the accidental, merely frugally natural impression.” They hoped instead to convey a deeply felt “inner” experience and were inspired by a Van Gogh exhibition at Galerie Arnold in 1905. The Dutch artist’s spontaneous and vivacious brushwork and deep emotional engagement expressed through color offered an entirely new avenue, and the Brücke artists’ work soon exploded into bright colors rendered in expressive brushstrokes.

Brücke and Fauves

During the summer of 1905, Henri Matisse and André Derain worked together in the small Mediterranean fishing port of Collioure and began using bright, unnaturalistic colors and vivid brushstrokes in their paintings, as seen in Matisse’s *Open Window, Collioure* in this gallery. Like the Brücke artists, who were coming together in Dresden at the same time, they sought alternatives to Impressionism through the Post-Impressionism of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh and the Neo-Impressionism of Henri-Edmond Cross and Paul Signac.

Departing from traditional three-dimensional space, Matisse and Derain created paintings composed of color planes. Along with Georges Braque, Raoul Dufy, and Maurice de Vlaminck, they exhibited their vibrant canvases at the 1905 Salon d'Automne in Paris. In a review of the exhibition, critic Louis Vauxcelles referred to the artists as fauves (or "wild beasts"), a name that thereafter was applied to them.

Soon the Fauves were being shown in Germany, including in an exhibition with the Brücke artists at Galerie Richter in Dresden in 1908. When Kirchner and Pechstein saw a major exhibition of Matisse's work in 1909 at Paul Cassirer's Berlin gallery, they wrote in a postcard to Heckel that it was "wild." Indeed, Kirchner must have been impressed by Matisse's experimentation with composition and space, as may be seen in works such as Kirchner's *Reclining Nude in Front of Mirror*, on view in this gallery. Also in 1909 the prominent Berlin periodical *Kunst und Künstler* published the German translation of Matisse's essay "Notes of a Painter," in which he stated famously, "What I am after, above all, is expression."

Neue Künstlervereinigung München

The Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists Association of Munich, or NKVM), founded in 1909, was a loosely associated group of artists, including Adolf Erbslöh, Alexei Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, and Marianne Werefkin. They regarded the Munich Secession and the city's art scene in general as conservative and sought an alternative platform for their work.

The group organized annual exhibitions to present its members' work but also included the international avant-garde. In 1910, at its second exhibition, the NKVM showed Fauvist works, including woodcuts, and early Cubist works, notably by Picasso; among the other artists represented were Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Münter, and Erbslöh, whose *The Red Skirt* was exhibited. The exhibition was generally not well received by critics, but Franz Marc wrote a supportive review and subsequently met with Jawlensky, Werefkin, and Kandinsky, which initiated a close artistic relationship and laid the foundation for the Blaue Reiter.

Blaue Reiter

Apart from the Brücke, the other prominent Expressionist group in Germany was the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider), formed in Munich in 1911 as a loose association of painters. After the jury of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists Association of Munich) exhibition rejected one of Wassily Kandinsky's abstract paintings, he quit the group, followed by Franz Marc and Gabriele Münter, and together they founded the Blaue Reiter. The group's name refers to the recurring motif of a horse and rider in Kandinsky's work; horses were also an important theme for Marc. A striking aspect of the Blaue Reiter was its cosmopolitan

character; not only were several of its members from other countries, including Russia, Switzerland, and the United States, but the artists also traveled extensively through Europe and were well aware of the latest artistic trends in France. Sharing a belief in art's spiritual dimension, they transcribed their subjective observations in an expressive and colorful style.

In Paris, Marc and August Macke came into contact with the chromatic abstraction of Robert Delaunay's colorful "simultaneous" paintings, which led them to develop a new visual language based on patterns of geometric and crystalline forms. At the same time, Kandinsky evolved toward abstraction in his painting. He and Marc also explored folk art, inspired by traditional German crafts and by the paintings of Henri Rousseau, which they reproduced in the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, published in 1912. The first Blaue Reiter exhibition, held in Munich in late 1911, presented works by Delaunay and Rousseau (including the latter's *Malakoff*, the *Telegraph Poles*, on view in this exhibition), alongside works of other Blaue Reiter artists, thus providing an overview of the international avant-garde.

Cubism

By 1912, the work of Paul Cézanne, one of the essential inspirations for Cubism, was widely available in Germany. After viewing Cézanne's work in Berlin that year, Max Pechstein experimented with still life to enhance the spatial effects of his paintings, as exemplified by *Still Life with Nude, Tile, and Fruit*, on view in this exhibition. Pablo Picasso's Cubist works were also being rapidly absorbed by German artists, who used them as a point of departure as they pursued entirely new directions, just as critic Curt Glaser in his review of the 1912 Berlin Secession considered this influence to be "a byway for sure" toward new discoveries.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner first experienced Cubism in 1911 during a visit to Prague, where the French movement was also being avidly absorbed. The multinational Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne in 1912 gave the Brücke artists, who also exhibited there, a more comprehensive experience of Picasso's Cubism. This is likely responsible for Kirchner's transition from forms based on African sculpture (as in *Seated Woman with Wood Sculpture*, from 1912, on view in this exhibition) to the use of spatial distortion and diagonal, faceted planes to capture fleeting motion (as in *Street Scene*, from 1913, on view in this exhibition). Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel became acquainted with Cubism over the course of 1911 and 1912 as the Brücke members gradually moved to Berlin, where they could see works by Picasso in the annual Secession exhibitions.

Blaue Reiter artists August Macke and Franz Marc interpreted Cubism through the revival of an interest in crystalline forms in nature. Similarly Lyonel Feininger responded with "visionary" imagery based on prismatic forms, as seen in *Sleeping Woman—Julia and Bridge I*, on view in this exhibition.

World War I

With the outbreak of war in August 1914, the cosmopolitan milieu in which Expressionism had flourished was brought to an abrupt halt. Many artists and writers were initially swept up in a euphoria that viewed the war as signaling a cultural transformation away from the rigid hierarchies of the past for the good of humanity. However, foreigners such as Kandinsky, Jawlensky, and Werefkin were compelled to return to their native countries or to seek refuge in neutral countries. Many, including Marc and Macke, would perish in the war, while others, such as Kirchner, were traumatized by their wartime experiences.

In this nationalist atmosphere, Paul Fechter published the first monograph on the movement in 1914, defining Expressionism in terms of German metaphysical and national traditions. Subsequent events of the 20th century, including Nazi persecution of Expressionist artists starting in the 1930s and the rehabilitation of Expressionism as essentially German in the 1950s, served to further obscure the movement's international nature.