GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

from the Detroit Institute of Arts

Fig. 1

In 1905, four architecture students named Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff formed the artist group Die Brücke (The Bridge) in Dresden. One year later, they issued a woodcut with this rallying cry to fellow artists:

> With faith in development and in a new generation of creators and appreciators we call together all youth. As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against long-established older forces. Everyone who with directness and authenticity conveys that which drives him to creation, belongs to us.[1]

Die Brücke sought to overthrow the established order of art and society in turn-of-the-century Germany. Working together until 1913, its members developed a group painting style characterized by distorted forms, vigorous brushstrokes, and vivid colors (cover and fig. 2). Simultaneously, they experimented with the starkness of traditional German black-and-white printmaking (fig. 1). Following in the footsteps of the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863–1944), they focused on conveying psychological states and emotions rather than outward appearances. The young, self-trained artists of Die Brücke formulated the distinctive visual language and the fundamental premise of German Expressionism, one of the major movements in modern art.

This exhibition of German Expressionist painting, sculpture, and works on paper, which is drawn exclusively from the extraordinary collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), explores the entire breadth of this artistic movement from its beginnings around 1905 through 1950. The exhibition opens with the forerunners to Die Brücke who had freed themselves from the constraints and conservative tendencies of Germany's academic system and annual salons. Some of these

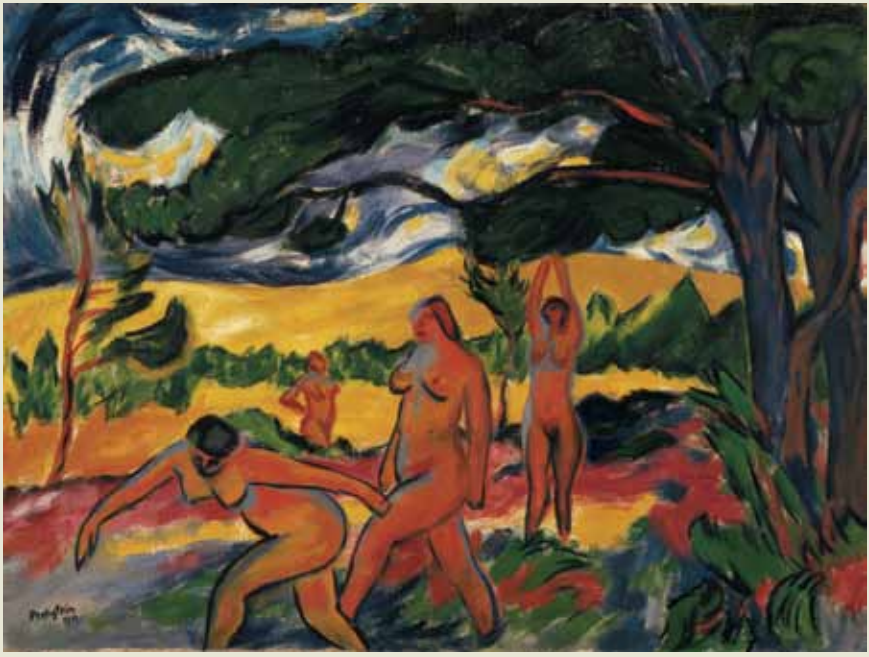

Fig. 2

pioneers, such as the sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck and the painter-printmaker George Grosz, were dedicated individualists. The majority of these artists, however, helped to change the course of German art history by taking part in a secession—an organization formed in protest of the selection process, hanging conditions, and exclusion of foreign artists from state exhibitions. The Berlin Secession stood out as the most avant-garde and cosmopolitan; it was additionally significant because it welcomed women, who had always been excluded from the state academies and salons. The secessions mounted exhibitions of their own and their members were able to survive outside the state system thanks to visionary private art dealers who marketed and sold their work. These developments paved the way for the more radical breakthroughs of Die Brücke.

This exhibition includes works by all the charter members of Die Brücke except Bleyl, who left the group shortly after it was founded. There are also works by three later members of Die Brücke: Otto Mueller, Emil Nolde, and Max Pechstein. Pechstein's *Under the Trees* (fig. 2), which shows four schematically rendered female nudes cavorting carelessly amid brightly colored sand dunes and trees, exemplifies the group style cultivated by Die Brücke during its prime. The subject matter, too, is typical. In search of utopia, the artists often decamped to the beach to paint and sketch and took their girlfriends with them to serve as models. The DIA collection is particularly rich in Die Brücke paintings made by the sea. It also includes urban scenes, which became more common in the art of Die Brücke after its members relocated from Dresden to the fast-moving metropolis of Berlin during the period 1908 to 1911.

The second major German Expressionist group, called Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), formed in 1911 in Munich and the Bavarian countryside around the village of Murnau. It was founded by two painters, the Russian émigré Wassily Kandinsky and the German Franz Marc, and differed in many significant ways from Die Brücke. Whereas Die Brücke was a tight-knit youth movement comprised of self-taught male artists who were mostly German, Der Blaue Reiter was a more loosely organized international association of older, academically trained artists and included women

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

as well as men as active members. What united this group was not a communal, bohemian lifestyle, but rather an interest in color theory, spiritual values, and the relationship between art and music and a tendency toward abstraction. The nude, which was central to Die Brücke, was insignificant to Der Blaue Reiter. Outstanding among Der Blaue Reiter paintings in the DIA collection are Kandinsky's *Study for Painting with White Form* (fig. 3), which dates to 1913, the year when the artist made his first forays into abstraction, and Marc's *Animals in a Landscape* (fig. 4), a kaleidoscopic explosion of primary colors.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 had major consequences for German Expressionism. Most Germans greeted the war with enthusiasm because they desired a new social order and thought war could achieve it. Ernst Barlach's *The Avenger*, a sculpture of a German soldier transformed into a human projectile (fig. 5), embodies that initial euphoria for battle. Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Grosz, Heckel, Marc, and Mueller were among the German Expressionists who volunteered for military service. Soon after the war began, however, frustration and outrage set in among artists. The ones not killed were left shattered and transformed mentally and often physically. Artists including Beckmann (fig. 6), Carl Hofer, and Max Kaus found outlets for their new cynicism in their art, while other artists, namely Lehmbruck

and Kirchner, succumbed to despair and later took their own lives.

Three years after the end of the First World War, the Detroit Institute of Arts hired the German art historian W. R. Valentiner (fig. 1) as a consultant and an art buyer. In 1924, Valentiner was named director of the museum and remained in the position until 1945. He specialized in Dutch and Flemish painting and Italian Renaissance sculpture, but developed an interest in German Expressionism after becoming friends with Marc in 1915 while they both served in the German Army. Thereafter, Valentiner became deeply engaged with the art of his own time and befriended many modern German artists. He published articles and books on the German Expressionists and organized group and solo exhibitions of their work in Detroit, New York, and other American cities. Almost all the works in this exhibition were acquired by the DIA either during Valentiner's tenure or were given as gifts to the museums by Detroit collectors where he advised. In a few instances, the works were gifts to the museum from Valentiner's own personal collection. Thanks to these efforts, the Detroit Institute of Arts has one of the largest and finest collections of German Expressionist art in the United States.[2]

The heyday of collecting German Expressionist art in Detroit coincides with a dark chapter in the history of German art. After the German economy collapsed in 1922, many artists struggled to make ends meet. Things went from bad to worse, however, once the National Socialists seized political power in 1933

Fig. 5

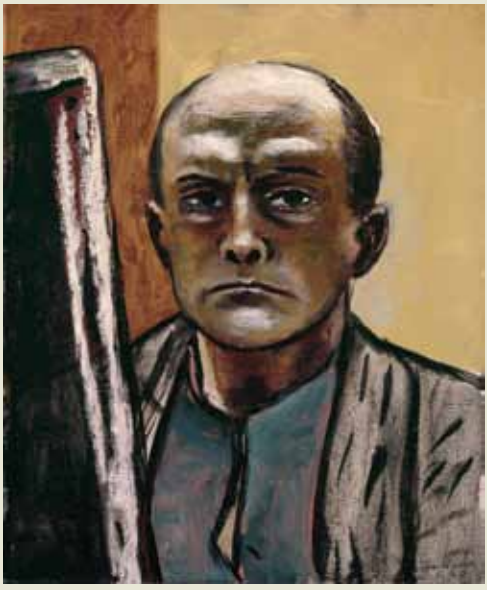

Fig. 6

and started a campaign of vilification against modern art for failing to conform to "healthy" Aryan values. Many German Expressionists lost their teaching positions at art schools and were prevented from exhibiting their work. The Bauhaus, Germany's innovative school of modern art and design, was shut. In 1937, the Nazis removed nearly 17,000 modern works of art from German museums and private collections. While many of those works were destroyed, more than 700 were put on display in the *Entartete Kunst—Degenerate Art*—exhibition at the Archeological Institute of Munich's Hofgarten in 1937.[3] Mueller's *Gypsy Encampment*—now in the DIA collection and on view in the present exhibition—can be seen hanging on the walls of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in a photograph taken on its opening day (fig. 7). Two years later, the Nazis were in need of hard currency and sold hundreds of the most valuable modern works of art they had confiscated at auction in Switzerland and to specially selected art dealers, who in turn sold them to collectors abroad. Through these avenues some of the paintings on view in this exhibition eventually made their way to the DIA, including Dix's *Self-Portrait*, Lyonel Feininger's *Sailboats*, Kirchner's *Winter Landscape in Moonlight* (cover), Paula Modersohn-Becker's *Old Peasant Woman* (fig. 8), Mueller's *Gypsy Encampment*, and Nolde's *Sunflowers*.

In his diary, Valentiner recounts witnessing firsthand the *Degenerate Art* exhibition while visiting Europe in the summer of 1937:

> [There were]…[d]ozens of paintings by Franz Marc, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner, Heckel, Hofer, Beckmann, and sculptures by Lehmbruck, Barlach, Gerhard Marcks, and others—all those artists whom I have passionately defended during the last two years. On a poster in the exhibition the friends of this art who have written about it are listed, my name among them.[4]

As the Nazis correctly noted, Valentiner was an avowed friend of modern German art. In the late 1930s, his advocacy took on greater urgency. The same year as the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, he organized Kirchner's first solo exhibition in the United States. Three years later, the German art dealer Curt Valentin gifted Kirchner's *Winter Landscape in Moonlight* (cover), one of the artist's masterpieces, to the DIA in honor of Valentiner's sixtieth birthday and in memory of Kirchner, who committed suicide in 1938. Equally touching, when Feininger fled

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Nazi Germany in 1937 and arrived in New York with just two dollars in his pocket, Valentiner helped him to secure commissions, including murals for the suburban Detroit home of Josephine Clay Kanzler, a major patron of the DIA. One year after Valentiner's death, the Detroit collector John S. Newberry gave Feininger's *Fisher off the Coast* (fig. 9) to the DIA in Valentiner's memory. In these ways, the DIA's German Expressionism collection is comprised as much of tokens of friendship and acts of kindness as it is extraordinary works of art.

Trinita Kennedy
Curator
Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Fig. 9

Notes:

1. Quoted and translated in Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 95.

2. See Horst Uhr, *Masterpieces of German Expressionism at the Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1982); Margaret Sterne, *The Passionate Eye: The Life of William R. Valentiner* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980); Virginia Chieffo Raguin, "Three German Saints and a Taste for German Expressionism: Valentiner at the Detroit Institute of Arts," *Gesta* 37, no. 2 (1998): pp. 244–50.

3. Stephanie Barron, ed. *"Degenerate Art": the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991).

4. Quoted in Sterne, p. 246.

Illustrations:

Cover: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Winter Landscape in Moonlight*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 47 1/2 in. Gift of Curt Valentin in memory of the artist on the occasion of Dr. William R. Valentiner's 60th birthday, Detroit Institute of Arts, 40.58

Fig. 1: Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. *Dr. Wilhelm R. Valentiner II*, 1923. Woodcut printed in black on Japan paper, sheet 26 1/4 x 21 1/2 in. Gift of Mrs. Ralph Harman Booth, Detroit Institute of Arts, 51.107. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Fig. 2: Max Pechstein. *Under the Trees*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 29 x 39 in. City of Detroit Purchase, Detroit Institute of Arts, 21.206. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Pechstein Hamburg / Toekendorf / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Fig. 3: Wassily Kandinsky. *Study for Painting with White Form*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 34 3/4 in. Gift of Mrs. Ferdinand Moeller, Detroit Institute of Arts, 57.234. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Fig. 4: Franz Marc. *Animals in a Landscape*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 43 3/8 x 39 1/4 in. Gift of Robert H. Tannahill, Detroit Institute of Arts, 56.144

Fig. 5: Ernst Barlach. *The Avenger*, 1914 (cast 1930). Bronze, 44 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 23 1/2 in. Gift of Mrs. George Kamperman in memory of her husband, Dr. George Kamperman, Detroit Institute of Arts, 64.260

Fig. 6: Max Beckmann. *Self-Portrait in Olive and Brown*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 19 5/8 in. Gift of Robert H. Tannahill, Detroit Institute of Arts, 55.410. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Fig. 7: The painter Adolf Ziegler addressing visitors at the exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' held in the Hofgarten Gallery in Munich, 19th July 1937 © SZ Photo / The Bridgeman Art Library

Fig. 8: Paula Modersohn Becker. *Old Peasant Woman*, ca. 1905–06. Oil on canvas, 29 3/4 x 22 3/4 in. Gift of Robert H. Tannahill, Detroit Institute of Arts, 58.385

Fig. 9: Lyonel Feininger. *Fisher off the Coast*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 36 in. Gift of John S. Newberry in memory of Dr. Wilhelm R. Valentiner, Detroit Institute of Arts, 59.11. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

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Frist Center for the Visual Arts

October 19, 2012–February 10, 2013

Upper-Level Galleries

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