German Expressionist Painting

*Die Malerei stellt auf, was der Mensch sehen möchte und sollte, nicht, was er gewöhnlich sieht.*

Goethe
To My Wife

THALIA

and to the Memory of My Grandfather

JULIUS DREY
Published in 1957, German Expressionist Painting was the first comprehensive study of one of the most pivotal movements in the art of this century. When it was written, however, German Expressionism seemed like an eccentric manifestation far removed from what was then considered the mainstream of modern art. But as historians well know, each generation alters the concept of mainstream to encompass those aspects of the past which seem most relevant to the present. The impact of German Expressionism on the art and thought of later generations could never have been anticipated at the time of the original writing of this book.

During the subsequent years an enormous body of scholarly research and an even larger number of popular books on German expressionist art has been printed. Numerous monographs and detailed studies on most of the artists exist now and countless exhibitions with accompanying catalogues have taken place. Much of this new research could have been incorporated in a revised edition and the bibliography certainly could have been greatly expanded to include the important writings which have been published in Germany, the United States and elsewhere since this book was originally issued. The author, however, was faced with the choice of reprinting the original text with only the most necessary alterations—such as updating the captions to indicate present locations of the paintings—or the preparation of a revised text and bibliography. Desirable as a revision appeared, present printing costs would have priced the paperback out of reach for students. It is for this reason that I decided to reissue the original text which stands on its own as a primary investigation of German Expressionist Painting.

Peter Selz

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Introduction

In a recent eulogy of Edvard Munch, Kokoschka described expressionism as "form-giving to the experience, thus mediator and message from self to fellow human. As in love, two individuals are necessary. Expressionism does not live in an ivory tower, it calls upon a fellow being whom it awakens." (Oskar Kokoschka, "Edvard Munch’s Expressionism," College Art Journal, xii [1953], 320.)

This statement might, in the loosest terms, justly describe most movements in the history of art, but Kokoschka seems to have meant it to differentiate expressionism from all other directions. The expressionist artist is not satisfied with formal construction or belle peinture. He seeks rather the I-Thou relationship of a Martin Buber, and hopes to establish a similar dialogue between himself and the observer.

The deep personal involvement on the part of both artist and viewer led naturally to a fervent conviction that expressionism was the ultimate fulfillment of art. Artists and critics believed that they were on the threshold of a creation vastly superior to previous endeavor. The term “expressionism,” did not originally have this significance, although recently it has again been used with such extravagant claims.

The term is of recent origin. Although it may date back to the beginning of the century, it seems to have occurred in critical discussion for the first time in Berlin reviews of 1911 referring to former Fauves exhibiting in the Secession of that year. "Expressionism" was coined to distinguish strikingly between the new tendencies and impressionism. Critics quickly seized upon it to describe the modern movement in general, including cubism and futurism. During the second decade of the century, however, "expressionism" slowly came to mean a specifically German manifestation in painting and sculpture, and shortly in literature and the film.

The expressionist artist—in this more specific meaning of the term as it will be used in this book—rejects tradition, especially that of the most immediate past. He turns away from both conventionally realistic representa-
tions of nature and accepted concepts of beauty. When he finds an affinity with the art of the past—whether in the painting of Grünewald, El Greco, van Gogh, the late medieval woodcut, or South Sea sculpture—he is likely to consider it as a prototype of his own endeavors and to let it shine in his reflected glory.

The expressionist artist is concerned with the visual projection of his emotional experience. Generally he is driven by "inner necessity" to express his unresolved conflicts with society and his own personal anxieties. This often results in feverish accusations of society and urgent affirmation of self, expressed by the use of agitated form. The dramatic quality of urgency is rarely absent in expressionist painting, and the artist is more likely to attack the canvas than to caress it.

The expressionist movement may be seen in part as a reaction against the prevailing values of the deceptively stable society in which the artists grew up. In their reaction against materialism and rationalism they were attempting to affirm the values of the spiritual. Frequently they turned to religious subjects, or used art as a spiritual substitute for religion. Some expressionists dreamed of a new brotherhood of man or, beyond that, of a fusion of man and animal in cosmic universalism. Expressionism can be more fully understood if it is seen in relation to the relativistic and subjective trends in modern psychology, the sciences, and philosophy—trends of which many of the expressionist painters were acutely aware. The strong desire of the expressionist artist for self-knowledge and for comprehension of the meaning of human existence in its loneliness and threat of death can be compared with parallel trends in existentialism.

Ten years ago, when I began this study, the work of the German expressionists was little known inside or outside Germany. In Germany it had long been banned by the Nazi government. Here in the United States even artists and critics were relatively unfamiliar with the work of most of the expressionists. Because Paris had supplied the standards of modern art for several generations, creative emphasis was likely to fall on the constructive elements of harmonious relationships.

In the postwar years, however, a rapid change has taken place. The creative process itself has assumed chief importance, and the younger artists here and abroad often ask questions and seek solutions similar to those of the German expressionists of an earlier generation. At a time when a large body of painting is carried out in the abstract and expressionist vein, a reappraisal of the work of the expressionists, who felt the need to distort or to abandon the objective world, seems relevant and necessary.

Perhaps we now have sufficient historical perspective to make a first attempt at a comprehensive history of German expressionist painting. Until now there has been little definitive material available. Except for the oeuvre catalogs of Kokoschka by Edith Hoffmann and Hans Maria Wingler, Will Grohmann's catalogs of paintings by Paul Klee and Schmidt-
Rottluff, and for Gustav Vriesen's book on August Macke, there are only incomplete listings of the works—particularly graphics—of the other artists.

Although there is a dearth of scholarly publications, there is an abundance of general descriptive and critical material. I found it necessary to sift through multitudes of documents such as reviews which were either too enthusiastic or too antagonistic to be of much critical or scholarly value. Further, a great deal of expressionist criticism is written so effusively as to be almost incomprehensible and certainly useless from the scholarly point of view. Not much scientific precision can be expected in essays heralding the arrival of an art that will improve the lot of mankind.

On the other hand, I have been fortunate in being able to discuss the movement with many of the artists themselves, as well as with the critics and historians who were intimately involved with the origins of the movement. It is questionable, of course, whether statements made by individuals about their activities forty years earlier can be considered as fully reliable or as primary source materials. Here I had to weigh carefully conflicting statements and contradictory evidence against genuine primary sources whenever extant. Exhibition catalogs and brief factual reviews in periodicals proved to be of particular help when questions arose as to validity or to the dating of the usually undated paintings. When no reliable confirmation of dates could be found, an analysis of the internal stylistic evidence sometimes furnished the key. This proved particularly feasible with the work of Kandinsky, Kirchner, Kokoschka, and Marc, whose styles underwent fairly perceptible changes in the period under examination. It proved more difficult with painters such as Otto Mueller, whose form experienced very little change. At times only approximate datings could be deduced.

The expressionist painters were generally eager to write about themselves and their ideas, and their writings have furnished this book with much source material. Their statements are also discussed from the point of view of esthetic thought. Unless these were previously published in translation, I have translated them (as well as the rest of the documentation) as literally as possible to permit the reader the most authentic insight into the period.

The writing of the history of a movement presents insurmountable problems, especially as to structure. Originally I had hoped to discuss each group of painters by itself and to analyze the development of each artist separately. This procedure, however, although doing justice to the individual artist, was not conducive to the principal aim of this book—the fullest possible understanding of the movement and its crosscurrents. After discarding an early draft along the lines of this "vertical" method, I attempted to proceed strictly chronologically, analyzing works by various artists executed simultaneously. This second method, highly useful for the later period, seemed artificial for the early years, when little or no contact existed among the painters in Dresden, Vienna, and Munich.

The present structure is admittedly a compromise between the "vertical" and "horizontal" methods. This compromise, in spite of some unavoidable
repetitions, seemed most successful for the stated purpose of this book. It was not premeditated, but dictated by the nature of the material—the movement and the particular turns of its development in the period under investigation. This method, I hope, will establish for the reader the relationship between the creative personalities and the resultant style.

The scope of the discussion includes a good many painters—Kandinsky and Jawlensky, Schiele and Kokoschka, Klee and Feininger—who may not properly be called German painters but whose work forms an essential part of the total web. The book, however, limits itself to the early period of German expressionism, when the greatest vitality of statement occurred. After the First World War expressionism became an accepted manner in Germany, and the early dramatic quality too often lapsed into a theatrical gesture. By then the leading creative talents were already engaged in new and different discoveries.

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