

ON THE DEFINITION OF GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

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EXPRESSIONISM has become an apparently self-evident, generally accepted designation. Like all terms which refer to artistic styles and trends, the word "Expressionism" proves to be ambiguous and complex when examined more closely.

French writings on art brought the word "expression" into circulation around 1900. Even here, there are different nuances of meaning.¹

"Expression" can mean "expression of self". This was postulated by the Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, and by Paul Fietz in 1899, one year after Moreau's death, as the true task of the artist.

But the word can also mean "expression of an object". It was used in this sense when the young painter André Derain wrote to his friend Maurice de Vlaminck in 1901, that a telegraph wire ought to be depicted in gigantic proportions "because it transmitted so much information".

Finally, "expression" can also mean the "expression of the picture itself". That is the sense given it by Henri Matisse in his *Notes d'un peintre* in 1908 referring to the formal structure of the painting as a whole. This kind of "expression" is "décoration" at the same time.

The word "expression" requires further definition: "expression of what?" - expression of the artist, of the object represented, or of the painting?

This need for differentiation also applies to earlier uses of the term "expression" - for the word is of course not an invention of the period around 1900. To quote but two examples from older theories of art:

In 1715, the French painter Charles le Brun published a *Conférence sur l'expression générale et*

particulier des passions (Lecture on the general and particular expression of the passions), in which he uses "expression" to mean mainly the "caractère de chaque chose" (the nature of each thing), that is, the expression of the object.

The French theoretician and critic Roger de Piles, in his *Cours de Peinture* (Course on painting) of 1708, was already using "expression" in its subjective meaning; he meant "la pensée du cœur humain" (the thought of the human heart).²

The person regarded as the greatest exemplar of artistic self-expression was Michelangelo. As late as 1855, Jacob Burckhardt wrote about Michelangelo in his *Cicerone*: "The signature of the last three centuries, subjectivity, appears here in the form of an absolutely unrestricted creativity. But it does not do this unintentionally and unconsciously as is the case in so many of the great spiritual movements of the sixteenth century, but with a powerful intention..."³

"Self-expression", the term with which we began and ended our brief survey, thus appears to be at the centre of meaning of the word "expression". At the same time, we saw that different values were attached to it.

In what sense was this term understood in relation to German Expressionist painting?

The earliest "Expressionist" artistic statement, the programme of the "Brücke" cut in wood by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in 1906, concludes with the sentence: "That artist is one of us who reproduces immediately and unadulterated what it is that drives him to create." "Immediacy", "unadulterated" are thus characteristics of a specifically "Expressionist" art, but also an indication that it arises from a "drive to create".⁴

These are also the criteria Kirchner stressed in his

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reviews when, under the pseudonym "Louis de Marsalle", he wrote reviews of his own works.⁵ Thus, for instance he writes in a review published in 1921 entitled *On the Swiss Works of E.L. Kirchner*: "Since these paintings have been created with blood and nerves and not with coldly calculating reason, they speak to us directly and emotively. They create the impression that the painter had layered many versions of an experience one on top of the other. Despite all the calm, a fiery, passionate struggle for the objects can be felt...⁶ "Experience" and "directness" are the crucial words here too, but they have been reduced to their physiological bases, to "blood and nerves" ".This kind of reduction does not occur in the writings of the Dresden art-critic Paul Fechter, later to be Max Pechstein's biographer. In his book, *Expressionism*, which appeared in Munich in 1914, he declared that

the task of the observer of Expressionist works was not "to read in them what the painting 'represents', to reconstruct in the mind's eye the original picture of reality from the colour analysis of that reality; rather, it is to gain access to the feeling out of which the painting grew for the artist by the detour of what the picture provides". The aim, according to Fechter, "is no longer to gain knowledge but to feel, to ascend to those regions of the soul where slumbers the force that corresponds to the productive power which gave rise to the work..."⁷

"Feeling" is to be the bridge between the observer and the painter; the work itself is merely the medium of transmission. In this type of theoretical approach, there is no reflection on the problem of artistic structuring itself, the special nature of the "pictorial expression" as such, the experience of

concrete expressive values in colours and shapes.

"Direct self-expression" and "feeling", however, do not suffice to characterise the new "Expressionist art" within a more comprehensive intellectual horizon. An attempt to establish the position of art as the expression of a basic attitude to the world was undertaken by Wilhelm Worringer in his thesis *Abstraction and Empathy. A contribution to the psychology of style*, which appeared in book form in 1908. It became the basic text of Expressionist art theory.⁸ Worringer⁹ distinguished two basic possibilities of the human "attitude to the world", the "drive to empathy" and the "drive to abstraction". The former finds its satisfaction in the "beauty of the organic"; one of its conditions is a "happy pantheistic intimacy between man and the phenomena of the external world". The "drive to abstraction", on the other hand, is "the



ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER
Schlemihl's encounter with the shadow
 Colour woodcut Cat. 73
 Museum Folkwang, Essen

result of a great inner disturbance of man by the phenomena of the external world and on the religious level corresponds to a strongly transcendental colouring of all ideas". This state Worringer called "a huge spiritual view of space" and added: "When Tibullus says: *primum in mundo fecit deus timor* (the first thing God made in the world was fear) this same feeling of fear can also refer to the roots of artistic creation."

Thus the "drive to abstraction" attains its satisfaction in the "life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline, or generally, in all abstract regularity and necessity". "In the drive to abstraction, the intensity of the urge to lose oneself is incomparably greater and more consistent. Unlike the drive to empathy, which is not characterised by an urge to lose one's individual being, but as an urge to be released, by the contemplation of something

necessary and immutable, from the accidental nature of human existence; from the apparent arbitrariness of organic existence in general." Worringer regarded Greek art and all so-called naturalistic art as the principal examples of empathic art, and "primitive" art, that of the Egyptians and of the early twentieth century, as the principal examples of abstract art.

In this conception, nothing remains of art as "self-expression"; on the contrary, the new art emerges from the urge "to be released, by the contemplation of something necessary and immutable, from the accidental nature of human existence altogether". This introduces a new element into the theory of Expressionist art.

In this changed form it affected the theoretical artistic reflections unifying the *Blue Rider Almanac*. This book, which appeared in 1912, was the first comprehensive explanation of modern art against the background of world art written by artists.¹⁰ Contributions by Franz Marc, August Macke, Wassily Kandinsky, David Burljuk, Arnold Schönberg and others were accompanied by illustrations of selected works by the "Brücke"-artists, and those of the "Blue Rider" group, but also of Picasso, Robert Delaunay, El Greco, Paul Cézanne, Henri Rousseau, 15th and 16th century German woodcuts, Bavarian painted glass pictures, Japanese drawings, Russian folk-prints, carved statues from Southern Borneo, the Easter Islands, Cameroon, Mexico, New Caledonia etc.

This means that the horizon goes well beyond Worringer's theoretical-historical attempt. In a crucial contrast to Worringer's basing abstraction on fear of the world, the expositions of the artists (as already in the "Brücke"-programme) are full of the awareness of a new beginning, of the longing to set off into a new realm of liberty and of the spirit.

In Franz Marc's contribution, *The 'Fauves' of Germany* (by which he understood especially the artists of the Dresden "Brücke", the Berlin "New Secession" and the "New Artists' Association of Munich"), he turned against a purely formal interpretation of the new aspects of their art: "It is impossible to try to explain the latest works of these 'Fauves' by a formal development and re-interpretation of Impressionism ... The most beautiful prismatic colours and the famous Cubism have lost their meaning as goals for these 'Fauves'.

"Their thinking has another goal: by their work to create symbols for their time, symbols which belong on the altars of the future spiritual religions and behind which their technical procreator disappears."

"Mysticism awoke in their souls and with it, age-old elements of art."

Cézanne and El Greco are much-admired models for Marc. "The works of both stand at the entrance of a new era of painting. Both felt in their world view the mystical inner construction which is the great problem of today's generation". Marc also pointed this out in another contribution, called *Spiritual Treasures*, and his third essay, *Two Paintings*, which contains the prophetic words: "There are unconventional, fiery signs of the time increasing in all places to-day. This book is intended to be their focus until the new age dawns and, with its natural light, takes away from these works the ghostly appearance in which they are still manifest in to-day's world..."¹¹

August Macke also expressed himself in a similar way. His article *Masks* centres around a new definition of form: "Form is a secret for us, because it is an expression of mysterious forces. It is only through it that we can sense the mysterious forces, the 'invisible God'. For us, the senses are the bridge from the incomprehensible to the comprehensible. Looking at plants and animals is: feeling their mystery. Hearing the thunder is: feeling its mystery. Understanding the language of forms means: being closer to the mystery, living.

"Creating forms means: life. Are not children creators who create directly out of the mystery of their feelings, more than the imitators of Greek forms? Are not the savages artists who have their own form, strong as the form of thunder?"

"Mankind gives expression to its life in forms. Every art form is an expression of inner life. The exterior of the art form is its interior."¹²

Not only "feeling" becomes visible in the work of art, but the whole "inner life" of mankind, not only the "self-expression" of the artist is precipitated in the work, but at the same time life, the forces of whatever comes together in nature, creating in this way a new relationship between man and nature.

In the centre of the *Blue Rider Almanac* stands Wassily Kandinsky's great treatise "On the Ques-

tion of Form". It too is borne by the belief in the arrival of a "great spiritual epoch". As its characteristics "in present-day art" Kandinsky lists "1. a great liberty, which seems boundless to some, and which 2. makes the spirit audible, which 3. we can see reveal itself in an especially powerful force in things, which 4. will gradually take as its tool all spiritual areas and already does so, from which 5. it will create in every spiritual area, including the visual arts (especially in painting), many autonomous means of expression (forms) encompassing both individuals and groups 6. which has available to it the entire ladder, i.e., every material, from the most 'solid' to that living only two-dimensionally (abstract) will be used as an element of form."

Point 6 was expounded by Kandinsky with the observation that "the forms in which it is manifest, torn from the store cupboard of matter by the spirit ... can easily be arranged between two poles". "These two poles are 1. the great abstraction, 2. the great realism. These two poles open up two paths which ultimately lead to a single goal".

With this, Kandinsky was aiming from the start for a great synthesis, for an equality of the two paths of "abstract" and "representational" art, which have unfortunately been set against each other often enough in our century.

Kandinsky proposed that what "great realism" and "great abstraction" had in common was what he called the "inner harmony". "Great realism is a striving to drive the external artistic aspects from the painting and to embody the content of the work in the simple ('non-artistic') representation of the simple hard object. The outer husk of the object conceived and fixed in the painting in this way and the simultaneous removal of its customary obtrusive beauty are the surest ways of revealing the inner harmony of the object."

"The great antithesis to this realism is the great abstraction, which consists of the endeavour, apparently to remove the concrete (real) entirely, and tries to embody the content of the work in 'non-material' forms. Abstract life, conceived and fixed in the painting in this way, reduced to a minimum of concrete forms and thus to the conspicuous predominance of abstract units, is the surest way of revealing the inner harmony of the painting."¹³

Thus Kandinsky described the "expression of the object" and the "expression of the painting" and the combination of the two methods of expression.

Kandinsky does not mention "self-expression" anywhere, but talks about the "expression of the world": "The world resounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually acting beings. It is the living spirit in dead matter."¹⁴

With this kind of pushing back of "self-expression" in favour of supra-personal expression, Kandinsky is thinking along the same lines as the philosopher and theoretician of art, Ludwig Coellen in his book *New Painting*. This appeared in 1912, the same year as the *Blue Rider Almanac*. Coellen distinguished Expressionism from Impressionism in the following terms: "The essential difference between the objectivism of Impressionist painting, which is also based on the concrete, and Expressionism is the dominance of the spiritual: the concrete increases its validity in the sphere of the spiritual". This "spiritual", however, is not carried by the "self", by the individuality of the artist, i.e. it is not "self-expression". On the contrary, this "spiritual" actually demands the dissolution of the individual: "The law of the dissolution of individual value in favour of the spiritual energy of the totality, which is the secret and mysterious root of all individual concreteness, has suddenly become the sure dominant motif in the visualising of the most recent painters" (i.e. the Expressionists).¹⁵

The "spiritual energy of the totality" of Coellen is comparable to the "resounding world" of Kandinsky. Both authors pointed to the fact that the artists became aware of a spiritual world encompassing them, that the works of the new Expressionist art exhaust themselves neither in self-expression nor in the expression of individual concrete objects, but are, above and beyond this, the expression of a spiritual world.

Despite this, later commentators reduced the characterisation of Expressionism to the expression of subjectivity. Thus Hans Hildebrandt declared in his lecture of 1919, *Expressionism in Painting*, that this had "re-erected the primacy of the inner world. Giving sensuous expression to what is alive in the creating artist" was everything for Expressionist painting.¹⁶

George Marzynski, in his 1920 article, *The Method of Expressionism*, stressed the subjective sphere: "Expressionist art no longer aims to sublimate the objective side of total reality but to sublimate the subject ... Expressionism remains enclosed within the realm of the subject, its objectifications are nothing more than means for extending the subject..." In addition, Marzynski tried to concretise this subjective dimension as a sphere of "imagination". Expressionist artists, he said, painted "imagination pictures". "Imagination of things" was the true basis of their paintings.¹⁷

However this leaves Expressionist art inadequately defined. Such is the case if it is seen only as a vehicle for the "self-expression" of artists.

Let us conclude this overview of the definitions of the term "Expressionism" in German-language art criticism between 1900 and 1920, by summaris-

ing its wealth of meanings. Its specification as the "self-expression" of the artist, as obvious as it may seem and frequently used though it was, does not suffice. It must also account for "expression of the object", "expression of the painting itself" and finally "expression of a world in total", whether this is characterised by anxiety and threat or by a new spirituality and freedom.

But a semantic analysis such as this makes only the most general scheme available for interpretation. It is only by looking at and analysing the works themselves that their special nature and inner fullness, the expressive power of the shapes and colours, their strength, spontaneity and simplicity are revealed. These are not accessible to general concepts, they can be reached only by seeing them, and the word, the concepts have to serve this seeing as well.

NOTES

- 1 C.f. Donald E Gordon, "On the Origin of the Word 'Expressionism'". In: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29, 1966, 368-385.
- 2 C.f. Wladislaw Tartarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, Vol III: Modern Aesthetics. The Hague, Paris, Warsaw, 1974, pp.402,404, 412, 413.
- 3 Jacob Burckhardt, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. X (Der Cicerone, II), Darmstadt, 1959, p. 78.
- 4 Cf. Georg W. Koltzsch, "Begriff und Programm der "Brücke". In: *Künstler der Brücke. Heckel, Kirchner, Mueller, Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Druckgraphik 1909 - 1930*. Moderne Galerie des Saarland-Museums, (Concept and Programme of the "Brücke". In Artists of the "Brücke". Heckel, Kirchner, Mueller, Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff. Paintings, Water-colours, Drawings, Prints, 1909 - 1930. Modern Gallery of the Museum of the Saar, Saarbrücken, 1980, 205-236.)
- 5 C.f. Frank Whitford, "Kirchner und das Kunsturteil." In: *Katalog Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ("Kirchner and art criticism") Berlin - Munich, Cologne - Zurich, 1979/80, pp. 38-45.
- 6 Quote from Lothar Grisebach, *E.L.Kirchners Davoser Tagebuch* (E.L. Kirchner's Davos Diary) Cologne, 1968, p. 196.
- 7 Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, Munich, 1914, p. 3.
- 8 Thus Peter Selz noted: "This book soon became almost the official guide to expressionist aesthetics ... Worringer's first essay, *Abstraction and Empathy*, was so important for the development of the movement itself, that Hans Tietze (in: *Lebendige Kunstwissenschaft*, Vienna, 1925, p. 25) referred to expressionism as "having characteristics which became familiar to us through Worringer's book". (Peter Selz: *German Expressionist Painting*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957, pp. 8, 9).
- 9 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*. (Abstraction and Empathy) Quoted from the reprint, Munich, 1948, pp.16, 27, 36.
- 10 Dokumentarische Neuauflage von Klaus Lankheit (New documentary edition by Klaus Lankheit). Munich, Zurich, 6th ed. 1987. This edition is used for quotations.
- 11 "Der Blaue Reiter" as Note 10, pp. 23, 30, 31, 35/36.
- 12 "Der Blaue Reiter" as Note 10, pp. 54, 55, 56.
- 13 "Der Blaue Reiter" as Note 10, pp. 143, 147, 154, 155.
- 14 "Der Blaue Reiter" as Note 10, p. 168.
- 15 Ludwig Coellen: *Die neue Malerei. - Der Impressionismus. Van Gogh und Cézanne. Die Romantik der neuen Malerei. Hodler. Gauguin und Matisse, Picasso und der Kubismus. Die Expressionisten* (New Painting - Impressionism. Van Gogh and Matisse, The Romanticism of new painting. Hodler. Gauguin and Matisse, Picasso and Cubism. The Expressionists), 2nd ed., Munich 1912, pp.69, 72.
- 16 Hans Hildebrandt, *Der Expressionismus in der Malerei. Ein Vortrag zur Einführung in das Schaffen der Gegenwart* (Expressionism in Painting. An introductory lecture on the creation of the present day). Stuttgart and Berlin, 1919, p.19.
Hildebrandt wanted to restrict the name Expressionism in the "narrower sense" to those painters who "tend towards a purely emotional, one might almost say explosive manner of creation" (id.)
- 17 Georg Marzynski, *Die Methode des Expressionismus. Studien zu seiner Psychologie* (The Method of Expressionism. Studies on its Psychology). Leipzig, 1920, pp.30, 51, 52.