Expressionism

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)
'Davos under Snow', 1923 (oil on canvas)

Expressionism is a term that embraces an early 20th century style of art, music and literature that is charged with an emotional and spiritual vision of the world.

The Roots of Expressionism
Expressionism is associated with Northern Europe in general and Germany in particular. The Expressionist spirit has always existed in the German psyche. Its embryonic forms can be recognized in the physical and spiritual suffering depicted in Grünewald's 'Crucifixion' above, in the tortured vision of Martin Schongauer's engraving of the 'Temptation of Saint Anthony' below.
MARTIN SHONGAUER (1448–1491)
'The Temptation of Saint Anthony'
circa.1480 (engraving on copper)

At the end of the 19th century, this Expressionist spirit resurfaced in the paintings of two awkward and isolated personalities – one was the Dutchman, Vincent Van Gogh and the other a Norwegian, Edvard Munch. While the Impressionists were admiring the colour and beauty of the natural landscape, Van Gogh and Munch took a radically different perspective. They chose to look inwards to discover a form of ‘self-expression’ that offered them an individual voice in a world that they perceived as both insecure and hostile. It was this more subjective search for a personal emotional truth that drove them on and ultimately paved the way for the Expressionist art forms of the 20th century that explored the inner landscape of the soul.
Paintings like Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' (1888) opened our eyes to the intensity of expressive color. He used color to express his feelings about a subject, rather than to simply describe it. In a letter to his brother Theo he explained, 'Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I see before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily to express myself forcibly.' His heightened vision helped to liberated color as an emotional instrument in the repertoire of 20th century art and the vitality of his brushwork became a key influence in the development of both the Fauves' and the Expressionists' painting technique.
EDVARD MUNCH (1863–1944)

'The Scream', 1893 (oil, tempera and pastel on board)

Munch’s painting of ‘The Scream’ (1893) was equally influential. It provides us with a psychological blueprint for Expressionist art: distorted shapes and exaggerated colors that amplify a sense of anxiety and alienation. ‘The Scream’ is Munch’s own voice crying in the wilderness, a prophetic voice that declares the Expressionist message, fifteen years before the term was invented. "I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly the sky became a bloody red. I stopped, leaned against the railing, dead tired. And I looked at the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword over the blue-black fjord and city. My friends walked on. I stood there, trembling with fright. And I felt a loud, unending scream piercing nature."

Die Brücke (The Bridge)
Die Brücke was founded in Dresden in 1905 by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Karl Schmidt–Rottluff (1884–1976), Erich Heckel (1883–1970) and Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966). The meaning of the name suggested they would build Die Brücke (the bridge) from the great German artistic past of Dürer and Grunewald over the contemporary artistic bourgeoisie to a new and better future. They even wrote a manifesto which Kirchner carved in wood proclaiming, ‘Putting our faith in a new generation of creators and art lovers, we call upon all youth to unite. And being youth, the bearers of the future, we want to wrest from the comfortably established older generation freedom to live and move. Anyone who directly and honestly reproduces that force which impels him to create belongs to us.’

The members of Die Brücke adopted a bohemian lifestyle and lived as an artistic community in a working class district of Dresden, deliberately isolating themselves from the ‘comfortably established’. They believed that artists should have total freedom of expression, unrestricted by social or artistic conventions.

Like many artistic movements they looked back to move forward. Gothic art, which had both a German lineage and an appropriately dark temperament, became Die Brücke 's natural inspiration. Its jagged forms were easily fused with the primal visual vocabulary of
the African and Oceanic art that they had discovered in the Ethnographic Museum in Dresden.

The main artistic form that emerged from this fusion of styles was the woodcut. The woodcut had been a traditional German print medium for narrative illustration. When fused with the vocabulary of 'primitive' art, the medium became a powerful tool for personal expression. A modern alternative to this traditional technique was the linocut, a medium invented by Die Brücke.

![Image](image.jpg)

**EMILE NOLDE (1867–1956)**

'Crucifixion', 1912 (oil on canvas)

The Die Brücke manifesto was an open invitation to other artists with similar values to join the group. Emil Nolde, whose painting was following a similar path to Die Brücke, joined in 1906. However, Nolde only remained a member for a few months as the community lifestyle did not live up to his expectations. He was older and had a more conservative nature than the young Die Brücke activists.

Nolde's favourite subjects were dark brooding seascapes that recalled the landscape of his youth and biblical themes that reflected his strict religious upbringing. He was fascinated by the expressive intensity of the Isenheim Altarpiece and created his own version: a nine section polyptych of the life of Christ. The central Crucifixion panel above, obviously based on Grünewald's masterpiece, is a classic piece Expressionist painting – a stylistic fusion of
primitive drawing with the exaggerated color of the Fauves, held together by a German Gothic composition.

Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider)

AUGUSTE MACKE (1887–1914)

‘Girls Under Trees’, 1914 (oil on canvas)

Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) was not exactly an Expressionist group, more a meeting of diverse talents who contributed to the publication of an almanac 'Der Blaue Reiter' and two exhibitions of the same name.

Der Blaue Reiter (the almanac) was published in May 1912 by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. The title was taken from a drawing of a blue horseman that was used for the cover of the almanac. Kandinsky stated, 'We both loved blue: Marc – horses, myself – riders. So the name invented itself.'

While Die Brücke artists adopted 'primitive' art as a raw style that would subvert the traditions of the establishment, Der Blaue Reiter artists were attracted by the more mystical aspects of the style, particularly its relationship with the spiritual and supernatural. Primitive art had a certain purity that set it apart from the materialism and corruption of the time – 'a bridge into the world of the spirit' as Marc put it.

Der Blaue Reiter exhibitions took place in Munich and preceded the publication of the almanac. The first, an exhibition of paintings by Kandinsky, Marc, Auguste Macke and
some others, took place in December 1911, and the second, a graphics exhibition which included a wider range of artists from further afield, opened in the spring of 1912.

The aim of Der Blaue Reiter exhibitions was to highlight the similarities in different approaches to creating art, for example, finding common ground between the primitive and the contemporary. They outlined this objective in the catalogue for the first exhibition, 'We do not seek to propagate any precise or particular form; our object is to show, in the variety of the forms represented, how the inner desire of artists realises itself in multiple fashion.'

Der Blaue Reiter came to an end after the deaths of Franz Marc and Auguste Macke during World War 1.

Expressive Abstraction

WASSILY KANDINSKY (1866–1944)

'Composition IV', 1911 (oil on canvas)

Kandinsky's painting was moving away from the depiction of realistic forms into the more spiritual realms of abstraction. Since childhood he had studied music, playing both the piano and cello. He also had a highly developed sense of synaesthetic response (experiencing colors in response to hearing sounds) and he recognized that color could trigger our emotions much in the same way as music touches our soul. This link between the visual and the aural inspired his experiments with color as an abstract element for the subject of a painting. The idea was reinforced by a chance experience in 1908, 'I was returning, immersed in thought from my sketching, when on opening the studio door I was suddenly confronted by a picture of incandescent beauty. Bewildered, I stopped and stared at it. The painting lacked all subject, depicted no identifiable object and was entirely
composed of bright color patches. Finally, I approached closer and saw it for what it really was – my own painting, standing on its side on the easel.....One thing became clear to me: that objectiveness, the depiction of objects, needed no place in my paintings, and was indeed harmful to them.'

In his publication, of 1911, 'CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART' he states that 'Color cannot stand alone; it cannot dispense with boundaries of some kind .........A never-ending extent of red can only be seen in the mind; when the word red is heard, the color is evoked without definite boundaries.'

His paintings of this period are attempts to release this psychic quality of color by freeing it from the task of describing physical objects. In moving towards abstraction by breaking down the boundaries of realistic forms, Kandinsky tries to tap into the more expressive power of color as it exists in the mind. Although, as in the musically and abstractly titled 'Composition IV' above, there are still vague references to figures and objects in the landscape, color emerges as an ephemeral force that energizes the entire canvas.

Kandinsky was the first artist to push painting towards total abstraction. He is quoted as saying, "Of all the arts, abstract painting is the most difficult. It demands that you know how to draw well, that you have a heightened sensitivity for composition and for colors, and that you be a true poet. This last is essential."

PAUL KLEE (1879–1940)

'Ad Parnassum', 1932 (oil on board)
The Swiss artist Paul Klee took part in the second Der Blaue Reiter exhibition. Through the influence of Kandinsky, Marc and Macke, Klee became interested in the abstract use of color. Klee, like Kandinsky was a talented musician and the relationship between art and music was a driving force in his art. The painting above illustrates this link between the arts.

The title ‘Ad Parnassum’ (towards Parnassus) refers to both Mount Parnassus (the home of the Muses – the nine goddesses of the arts in Greek mythology) and 'Gradus Ad Parnassum' (the Path to Parnassus – the name of a classic 18th century textbook on musical counterpoint). The bold triangle at the top of the picture represents Mount Parnassus, the orange circle symbolizes the sun and the arch at the bottom indicates the door to the temple. The most important element of this painting is the way that Klee uses color to express a musical idea. The underpainted patches of background colors are like the deep base chords of a musical composition while the brighter mosaic-like surface of dots act like a counterpoint to complete the harmony.

Beyond Expressionism

MAX BECKMANN (1884–1950)

'The Departure', 1932–33 (triptych – oil on canvas)

After the disintegration of the more formal Expressionist groups in Germany, Expressionism continued to evolve in a variety of ways through the work of individual artists like Paul Klee and Max Beckmann. The Expressionist spirit resurfaced in art across the world throughout the 20th century: Francis Bacon in Britain, the Abstract Expressionists in the USA and eventually returning to Germany in the form of Anselm Kiefer in the last quarter of the century.
Max Beckman continued Die Brücke's spirit of protest and relationship with the art of the past in his disturbing allegories of victimization and alienation. These powerful images, triggered by his traumatic experiences of the trenches in the medical corps during WW1, often used the religious format of a triptych for their composition, recalling Renaissance art like the Isenheim Altarpiece.

FRANCIS BACON (1909–1992)

'Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X', 1953 (oil on canvas)

Francis Bacon, the British painter, also used the triptych format in his convulsive images of post-war angst and abandonment. While personally denying any Expressionist influence in his art, his electrifying version of 'Pope Innocent X', (again recalling the art of the past as it was based on the Velázquez painting of 1650), reinvents the original Expressionist prototype: 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch.

Expressionism Notes
ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER (1880–1938)

‘Nollendorfplatz’, 1912(oil on canvas)

- The 'self expression' in the art of Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch inspired Expressionist artists in the 20th century.

- German Expressionism also drew inspiration from Fauvism, German Gothic and 'primitive art'.

- German Expressionism was divided into two factions: Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter.

- Die Brücke (The Bridge) was an artistic community of young Expressionist artists in Dresden. Their aim was to overthrow the conservative traditions of German art. Their 'bridge' was the path to a new and better future for German art.

- Der Blaue Reiter was a publication of essays on the Expressionist art forms. The aim of Der Blaue Reiter exhibitions was to find the common creative ground between these diverse art forms.

- After the various Expressionist groups disbanded, Expressionism spread and evolved in the work of many individual artists across the world.