

Video Transcript

Title: but what is Expressionism?

Duration: 04:05

Summary:

The term Expressionism became commonly used in Germany around 1910. Developed from the work of Symbolist artists, expressionist art movements across Germany and Austria emerged; including Die Brücke in Dresden and Der Blaue Reiter in Munich. This short film tracks the story of Expressionism in art, from its beginnings in the early twentieth century and how it changed in the aftermath of the two World Wars, through to its influence on artists today.

Transcript

Narrator

The term Expressionism became commonly used in Germany around 1910 to describe Avant-Garde art of the time. Expressionist art grew out of the work of Symbolist artists such as Paul Gauguin, Edvard Munch and Vincent Van Gogh. Feelings were emphasised above all else: Expression over Impression, Expressionism over Impressionism.

Artists associated with Expressionism emerged in centres across Germany and Austria. In Dresden, a group of artists called themselves *Die Brücke* or The Bridge, seeing their art as the bridge into the future as they freed themselves of the constraints of tradition.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a key member of The Bridge. This early painting by him is highly decorative as well as expressive. The bold use of colour and exaggerated form express the exotic qualities of the subject - A Japanese theatre group performing in Dresden, something new and exotic, escaping from tradition.

Emil Nolde, a member of The Bridge for a short while was a frequent visitor to the ethnographic museum in Berlin. This painting looks forward to his trip in 1914 to the South Pacific. The heavy brush strokes, shadowy figure, and use of deep red gives the viewer a

sense of foreboding. Like Kirchner, Nolde was interested in trying to escape traditional artistic forms and in drawing inspiration from non-western culture.

Another Expressionist group developed in Munich at the same time as the Bridge. This group, called *Der Blaue Reiter*, or the Blue Rider, took its name from a painting by Wassily Kandinsky. The art of the group emphasized the spiritual over the earthbound.

After the First World War a new wave of artists came to prominence, rejecting the outpouring

of emotions of Expressionist art and turned to a matter of fact depiction of the world. The new movement was known as *New Objectivity*. George Grosz, who was associated with New Objectivity claimed it revealed to the oppressed the true faces of their oppressors: ugly, corrupt. In time though Expressionists and Realists who did confront the brutality of the modern industrialized world would find themselves victims of it.

Weimar Germany embraced avant-garde cinema, art, architecture, and theatre but this came to an abrupt end in 1933 when Hitler's Nazi party came to power. The Nazis labelled modern art *degenerate art*. Expressionists and other avant-garde art like New Objectivity was censored for not upholding what they saw as "German values"

Once classified as degenerate, many artists went into exile abroad. Kirchner killed himself. Expressionists continued though, in a fragmented way to create emotive work. Their influence survived in later art movements like *Abstract Expressionism* and *Neo Expressionism*.

After the Second World War, Expressionism was rediscovered and reclaimed in Germany as part of its true heritage. In the 1970's and 1980's in Germany several artists looked back at the expressionist forerunners and were themselves dubbed *Neo Expressionists*. Georg Baselitz was one such artist.

Censorship and persecution couldn't stop the influence of these avant-garde artists. But if art is born from the human spirit, should we really be surprised?