

**THE PERSONAL APOCALYPSE:**  
German Prints from the Syracuse University Art Collection

Syracuse University



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**Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery**  
School of Art,  
College of Visual and Performing Arts,  
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## THE PERSONAL APOCALYPSE

*Today art is moving in a direction of which our fathers would never even have dreamed. We stand before the new pictures as in a dream and we hear the apocalyptic horseman in the air. -Franz Marc, 1912*

The struggle between the desire for immediate form and the desire for confrontation with reality, between an intensity of personal vision and a reevaluation of social history, led many German artists in the early decades of the 20th century to create a body of work that remains one of the most powerfully expressive dialectics in modern art. Since scholars to this day cannot agree on whether this work constitutes a formal style or a pluralistic vision generated from individual experience, it is our aim in this exhibition to focus attention on the most dominant aspect of this highly complex movement-- the "personal apocalypse". This was a moment in history when the need to destroy past values in social attitudes and art dominated. Yet these artists continued to retain the persistent German need-- the urge to communicate the dynamics of objective intellectual concerns through the symbolic forms from their private world of emotional experience.

Using printmaking, primarily woodcuts, as a means for distributing art to the public, the artists strove for an unsophisticated directness inspired by Edvard Munch, Vincent van Gogh, James Ensor, and the Symbolists whose paintings were concerned with humanity's alienation from the world. In addition, the power of pure form, derived from the linearism of *Jugendstil* design, stimulated a more direct, simplified concept of reality.

Reacting against society, these artists considered themselves prophets of the future, of both doom and ultimate salvation. Social, psychological, and religious issues were primary to their aesthetics. In this exhibition one can observe a record of the spiritual crisis that Germany suffered from the first decade of the 20th century through the rise of Hitler, foreshadowing the impending holocaust which was to follow. Vasily Kandinsky, historically viewed as the first abstract painter; George Grosz and Otto Dix, well known for their bitter satirical portrayals of social custom; and Käthe Kollwitz, who powerfully depicted the sufferings of the poor and underprivileged all directed their subject matter toward a vision of a new world. Herman Pechstein's *The Lord's Prayer* portfolio illustrates the prayer through dramatic woodcuts, thus introducing the religious vision.

Other subject matter is more social or political in nature. The disintegration of Germany manifested itself in various social ways. The combined forces of economic ruin and World War I caused great physical and mental suffering across all strata of society. Many of the prints, such as those of Max Beckmann, depict the seamy aspects of German life; cabaret singers, prostitutes, and circus characters demonstrate the perceived erosion of morals and values. Yet some artists chose to satirize the bourgeoisie, seeing the downfall of human freedom in their intellectual ignorance. Among the *Brücke* artists who organized in Dresden in 1905, (which included Eric Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff), Ernest Ludwig Kirchner was the leading force. The eldest and most gifted of the group, his interest in primitive art and French Cubism allowed an expressiveness in his work that was both immediate and devastating.

The most inclusive of the three themes, common to all the prints, is each artist's personal vision. Portraits of people absorbed by despair and chaos emphasize the validity of the artist's intention: to express his or her own psychological perception. All of the artists represented in this exhibition experienced humiliation under Hitler. It was only after 1937, following the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich, that they began to receive gradual recognition in Europe and America.

Through the example of these German prints, one is compelled to confront the inequities of our own contemporary society. The knowledge of a time when artists strove to incite revolution in order to redirect the flow of humanity, once more forces one to be aware of the commitment needed to understand the present and to affect the future.

R.A.

## ARTISTS IN EXHIBITION

### Ernst Barlach 1870-1938

Barlach was an artist who, while grouped stylistically with the German Expressionists, philosophically remained quite separate. Rather than concentrating on socio-political issues, Barlach dealt with broader, timeless themes. His vision was rooted in the religious traditions of Protestant, northern Germany. His works, which encompass drawings, prints, sculpture, poetry and plays, are products of his concern with human suffering and Man's desire for salvation.

Barlach spent his life as a recluse living in German villages where he could draw on the peasant population for his characters. His people are massive and crude, untouched by the pretensions of civilization. Such a figure is shown in *The Staggering Woman* (1911-12), one of a series of lithographs interpreting Barlach's play *The Dead Day*. One of Barlach's few close friends, Käthe Kollwitz helped to develop his interest in woodcuts. His woodcut series *The Creations of God* (1920-21) represents the seven days of creation, although each work is often more descriptive of the ominous and complex relationship between God and humanity than the literal creation of the world. In *The Divine Beggar*, a print from this series, a suffering but patient Christ-figure stands against a background of tortured and tragic figures.

Although recognizing the baseness of human nature, Barlach was not a defeatist. His hope for mankind lay in human rejection of the material world. To Barlach, the apocalypse would be a joyous moment for those who worshipped the spiritual.

B.A.S.

### Max Beckmann 1884-1950

Beckmann first utilized the graphic medium while at the Weimar Academy and continued to explore its stylistic and expressionistic qualities throughout his career. Because of its dynamic and violent qualities, drypoint became his favorite graphic technique. In 1905, after being exposed to the art of the Post-Impressionists and the French Primitives, Beckmann became a member of the Berlin Secessionists, a group of independent artists who were in revolt against the staid traditions of the academy. *Bordello* (c. 1912) exhibits the agitated line and startling light effects which resemble the graphic work of Corinth and Liebermann, two older members of the Secessionist group. Even in this early period Beckmann's subject matter often was concerned with the tragic and the darker side of human emotions.

Beckmann's experiences as a medical corpsman during World War I had a profound effect on his view of life and led to the development of a new pictorial style with which to express his vision of the human condition. Drawing on sources of late German Gothic art, Beckmann developed a style which combined exaggeration and distortion with a multiple-point perspective and a constricted spatial arrangement. His subjects comment not only on the confusion of post-war Germany and the brutality of the Hitler era, but offer a universal statement about the experiences of modern man and woman. *Siesta* (1918) is indicative of Beckmann's post-war style. The subject of the print most likely is symbolic of the notion, popular in literature and film of the era, that Germany was entering into a state of apathy and somnambulism from which it would not be able to control its own destiny. The enlarged heads and mask-like features of the figures add a menacing quality to the expression. The simplified forms and exaggerated features of the two figures in *The Dressing Room*, (1921) are again typical of Beckmann's mature style.

J.Y.

## Otto Dix 1891-1969

After World War I, Otto Dix classified himself as a painter of city life, social injustices and bigotry who vehemently protested the contemporary social conditions around him. Using his ability to define and classify humans and their weaknesses, Dix expressed the irony and satirical side of human existence in images that border on cartoon or caricature. Many of Dix's prints are concerned with intrinsic human weakness and the corrupt nature of men and women which is independent of society and social oppression.

Dix fought during the war in the trenches along the front line. Often his art describes this terror by using a half-masochist and half-moralist attitude. This attitude is clearly expressed in the print, *The Lion Tamer* (1922). Although he strove for and often accomplished expressionist goals, his art was given a new name, "Neue Sachlichkeit" which translates to mean, "New Objectivity."

Much of his anger was pictorialized using images of pain and cruelty inflicted upon the living. In his portraits, he is mainly concerned with the individuality of the sitter as expressive of the social and spiritual values of the times. "He condemned the values of an era, as well as a way of life, by a merciless analysis of a particular person."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George Heard Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880-1940* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1975), p. 478.

M.T.

## George Grosz 1893-1959

George Grosz studied at the academies of Dresden and Berlin. He was a prominent member of the Dada group in Berlin (1917-20) and, by 1923, he and Otto Dix and their followers were working in a style termed "New Objectivity." During this time, Germany was undergoing political, economic, and social upheaval. Grosz, excelling in a series of graphics, concentrated on social and political criticism, much of it in the satirical or caricature form typical of the expressionist style. Militarism and religious hypocrisy were often subjects of his graphic attacks. Many of his works were prophetic, foreshadowing the catastrophic events which were to come during the Third Reich.

In 1932, before the Nazis could detain him, Grosz had taken a position at the Art Students League in New York. There, he eventually established a private school. His later works reflect a gruesome romanticism. His autobiography, *Ein Kleines Ja, Ein Grosses Nein* (*A Little Yes, and a Big No*) was published in the United States in 1946. The lithographs entitled *The Bomb* (1916), *Upheaval* (n.d.) and *After the War* (n.d.) all encompass the uncertainty of humanity's existence and the evils of war with frightening fidelity.

A.M.



Erich Heckel  
*Man on the Plain*, 1919  
Woodcut

## Erich Heckel 1883-1954

Heckel had no formal fine art training, although he did study architecture at the Technische Hochschule in Dresden. As members of the *Brücke*, Heckel, Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff wrote to other sympathetic artists to encourage a new generation of creators and art lovers. In addition, the renewed possibilities of the woodcut intrigued and stimulated the *Brücke* artists to create new works.

Heckel's graphics were shown in the first *Brücke* exhibition of 1906<sup>1</sup>; and by 1914, he had developed into a fine printmaker. He served with the medical corps during World War I, where he met Beckmann and Ensor. Greatly disturbed by the war, Heckel chose to depict universal suffering rather than specific social evil. *Figure Kneeling on a Rock* (1913) demonstrates Heckel's virtuosity in using angular lines to integrate the figure with the landscape. *Man on the Plain* (1917) is probably a self-portrait. Behind the deep black of the figure three distinct areas of marks describe a landscape. Around the forehead irregular slashes suggest a mind in turmoil. *Head* (1917) is also a self-portrait. The scar on the cheek implies serious psychological damage; while in the background, a lyrical landscape echoes the mask-like face which appears to be made of glass.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, *Brücke*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 19.

G.M.

## Vasily Kandinsky 1866-1944

*If destiny will grant me enough time, I will create a new language.*

More than any other printmaker in this exhibition, Kandinsky sought to perfect the language of form and color, pure and unrestricted by realistic representation. His works symbolize a religious apocalypse-- an artistic vision which is amplified in his writings. "Heaven has become uninhabited, God is dead... all the artificially contrived suns have exploded into so many specks of dust."<sup>1</sup>

Historically, Kandinsky is considered to be the first truly abstract painter. He was still experimenting with this revolutionary concept when he created *The Archer* in 1908, which retains the representational forms of an equestrian archer and castle.

Shortly after this print was executed, he became a member of a group of artists who called themselves the Blue Rider. Unlike many of the other artists in this circle, Kandinsky never aligned himself with the German Expressionists nor was he ever associated with the *Brücke*. After leaving the Blue Rider, he printed a sequence of twelve prints entitled *Small World* (1922), and it was by this time that his powers as an abstract artist were greatly appreciated. For Kandinsky, every color had a specific meaning. The overpowering black color was meant to symbolize a silent, hopeless terror. Yellow denotes passionate aggression "and suggests the sound of a trumpet." Blue is a celestial color calling to mind "the sound of a flute..." White is the color of rebirth and of silent "possibilities."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Will Grohmann, *Vasily Kandinsky Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1958), p. 87, (quote taken from *On The Spiritual In Art* by Kandinsky).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89 (Quote taken from *Point and Line To Plane* by Kandinsky).

R.M.



Ernest L. Kirchner  
*Girl Buttoning her Shoe*, 1912  
Woodcut

## Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1880-1938

Kirchner, the leader of the *Brücke* group, believed that art itself must be an expression of the time in which it was created. He sought truth, emotion, intensity of feeling, and youthfulness. Bold and intense, his greatest designs translate everyday occurrences into a stylized format. This is readily apparent in his print, *Girl Buttoning Her Shoe* (1912). In his Manifesto of 1913, Kirchner wrote:

*With a belief in the development of a new generation of creators and appreciators, we summon all youth. As those who will bear the burden of the future, we are determined to create for ourselves a physical and spiritual freedom opposed to established and traditional forces. He who portrays directly, without qualification, the creative impulse, is one of us.*<sup>1</sup>

During 1904-1905, Kirchner studied painting in Munich. He was greatly influenced by Greek vase painting, Roman murals, primitive art of the South Seas, Byzantine, and Medieval Art. In his prints, he tried to recognize joy and sorrow as well as the deep psychological meaning contained in the subject matter. This inner content and purpose became the essence of expressionism. In 1907, he wrote of his prints:

*Perhaps the urge which drives the artist to print-making is partly due to the effort to fix in final form what in drawing remains loose and unpredictable. The actual technical manipulations release in the artist powers which do not come into play in the much easier handling of drawing and painting. The process of printing welds the previous and separate steps into reality.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*. (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), Appendix A, pp. 320-321.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

M.T.

## Paul Kleinschmidt 1883-1949

A contemporary of Nolde, Kirchner, and Beckmann, Kleinschmidt is largely ignored because he remained, by expressionist standards, a cool, almost formal artist. Kleinschmidt's link with his contemporaries is through his choice of subjects. Influenced by Kokoschka and Beckmann, he chose to depict, through a calculated vulgarity of figure and form, the contemptible aspects of post-World-War-I Germany.

The two sinister hyena-like animals in Kleinschmidt's *Two Dogs* (1922) are symbols indicative of the horrors of the post-war period.

J.Y.

### Käthe Kollwitz 1867-1945

Käthe Kollwitz was a prolific 20th-century artist and writer. German history shaped her interests into a form of social protest as seen in her prints and sculpture which show a tremendous concern for the poor and underprivileged. Her work is related to such German Social Realists as Otto Dix, George Gross and Max Beckmann. *Despair* (1897), a lithograph from Kollwitz's *A Weaver's Revolt* cycle (1893-1898), clearly illustrates the concern of a parent for a dying child. This tragic scene symbolizes both her own grief and that felt by German society for the Silesian weavers in their 1844 struggle against degradation and human misery.<sup>1</sup> In 1914, the artist's younger son Peter was killed in World War I, and as a result of this, the work that followed was deeply affected by her despair showing an increasingly anti-war stand. *Mothers* (1922-23) is a woodcut vividly expressing the deep emotional fear of a group of women defensively protecting their young. The stark contrast of black and white lends a monumental effect. Kollwitz also produced a sculpture of this theme in the spring of 1922. The lithograph entitled *The Call of Death* (1897) illustrates the artist's struggle to accept death. Death is not revealed by a skeleton, but by a simple touch on the shoulder.

<sup>1</sup> University of California, Riverside, *Käthe Kollwitz 1867-1945*, exhibition catalog, 1978, p. 12.

R.C.

### Otto Mueller 1874-1930

Otto Mueller was the last member to join the *Brücke* in 1910. He was apprenticed as a lithographer in Górlitz, east Germany when his artistic career began in the early 1890s. He subsequently attended the Dresden Art Academy. Associating with the Revolutionary Writers' circle, Mueller soon became frustrated with the dogmatic curriculum offered at Dresden and left in 1898. He spent the following ten years as a recluse in the Silesian mountains developing his particular form of expression.

*Girl on the Sofa* (1922) is stylistically typical of Mueller's work. The sharp, angular qualities characteristic of his style are present here. The image resembles a gypsy and possibly draws from the gypsy heritage from which Mueller is believed to have come. Although many of his nudes possess qualities that seduce the viewer with their abrupt sensuality, *Girl on the Sofa* intrigues because of its dark, foreboding background and the girl's provocative dress. The image retains qualities of the "femme fatale" whose deceptive seduction leads one to inevitable death.

Although Mueller was a more accomplished painter than printmaker, his gypsy themes of 1927 represent some of his best lithographic achievements. *Girl on the Sofa* may be seen as a preface to these powerful works.

P.T.

### (Herman) Max Pechstein 1881-1955

In 1906, upon graduation from the Dresden Academy, Pechstein became a member of the *Brücke*. Pechstein seems to have been the first member of the *Brücke* accepted by the German public, possibly because of his studies in Italy and Paris (1907-08) his work was less strident and avant garde than his contemporaries. Pechstein worked in Berlin until 1913 when he left for the South Seas where he spent a year searching for the primitive origins of man, life, and art. In 1918, back in Berlin, Pechstein became a founding member of the *Novembergruppe* (November Group). The group issued several manifestos supporting socialism. Pechstein designed the cover for the pamphlet *An alle Künstler* (To All Artists) and wrote the major article, "Was Wir Wollen" (What We Want). This article exhorts the artist to discard old symbols and earlier styles to make art relevant to society and therefore a vehicle of social change.

In 1921, Pechstein issued his portfolio of woodblock prints illustrating *The Lord's Prayer*. The iconography of these prints does not allude to distant historical figures, but is based on contemporary life and its daily concerns and needs. Executed in a characteristically expressionist manner, these prints confront the viewer with a disturbing testimony of the present-day German society and the necessity of working toward future salvation.

M.W.

### Karl Schmidt-Rottluff 1884-1976

While Schmidt-Rottluff was studying architecture in Dresden, Germany, an artists association was formed; Schmidt-Rottluff, the youngest member of the group, suggested its name: the *Brücke*.

Schmidt-Rottluff's works are known for their bold format and simplified forms. In 1906, he produced his first lithographs. Between 1907-1912, he painted with Eric Heckel and developed an interest in the block-like forms of African Art. After leaving the army, he began carving in wood and creating wood-block prints pertaining to religious themes until 1918. *Woman's Head* and *Head of a Man* were created during this period. Until 1922 he remained loyal to expressionism based on block-like forms. One can see a great resemblance between both Heckel's and Schmidt-Rottluff's works primarily in their angular, linear structure derived from the woodcut technique.

Many of Schmidt-Rottluff's works were confiscated from public museums in 1937 when the National Socialists outlawed expressionist painting and drove many artists into starvation or exile.<sup>1</sup> After World War II, his style gave way to impressive studies of nature, and his colors became more subdued.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p. 319.

P.T.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### Ernst Barlach

DESTITUTE, n.d.

Lithograph  
19 1/8 x 16 1/2 inches

RAGING MAN, n.d.

Lithograph  
20 1/2 x 16 5/8 inches

STAGGERING WOMAN, 1911-12

Lithograph  
10 5/8 x 13 inches

THE STONING OF SAINT STEPHEN, 1919

Handcolored lithograph  
10 3/4 x 13 1/2 inches

THE WOUND, n.d.

Lithograph  
9 5/8 x 12 1/4 inches

*The Creations of God, 1920-21*

THE DIVINE BEGGAR, 1920-21

Woodcut  
10 1/8 x 14 1/8 inches

GOD BELLY, 1920-21

Woodcut  
10 1/8 x 14 1/8 inches

### Max Beckmann

BORDELLO, c. 1912

Drypoint etching  
4 3/4 x 6 7/8 inches

THE DRESSING ROOM, 1921

From the *Jahrmart Series*, a series of  
10 drypoint etchings, 1921

Drypoint etching  
8 1/8 x 5 5/8 inches

SIESTA, 1918

Drypoint etching  
12 x 10 1/8 inches

### Otto Dix

LION TAMER, 1922

Drypoint  
8 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches

PORTRAIT OF A FRIEND, 1923

Lithograph  
15 1/4 x 10 inches

SELF PORTRAIT, 1922

Lithograph  
8 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches

### George Grosz

AFTER THE WAR, n.d.

Lithograph  
19 3/4 x 14 5/8 inches

THE BOMB, 1916

Lithograph  
7 3/8 x 9 1/2 inches

MOON NIGHT, n.d.

Lithograph  
14 1/2 x 11 1/4 inches

THE ROBBERS, n.d.

Lithograph  
17 1/4 x 15 inches

UPHEAVAL, n.d.

Lithograph  
8 x 7 5/8 inches

STREET IN BERLIN, 1919

Lithograph  
18 1/4 x 12 3/8 inches

### Erich Heckel

HEAD, 1917

Woodcut  
14 1/8 x 11 3/4 inches

KNEELING ON A ROCK, 1913

Woodcut  
19 3/4 x 12 1/2 inches

MAN ON THE PLAIN, 1917

Woodcut  
14 7/8 x 10 5/8 inches

### Vasily Kandinsky

ARCHER, 1908-09

Color woodcut  
6 1/2 x 6 inches

SMALL WORLD VII, 1922

Color lithograph  
10 11/16 x 9 1/8 inches

SMALL WORLD VIII, 1922

Woodcut  
10 3/4 x 9 1/8 inches

### Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

GIRL BUTTONING HER SHOE, 1912

Woodcut  
12 1/8 x 10 inches

### Paul Kleinschmidt

TWO DOGS, 1922

Drypoint  
8 5/8 x 10 1/4 inches

### Käthe Kollwitz

THE CALL OF DEATH, 1934-35

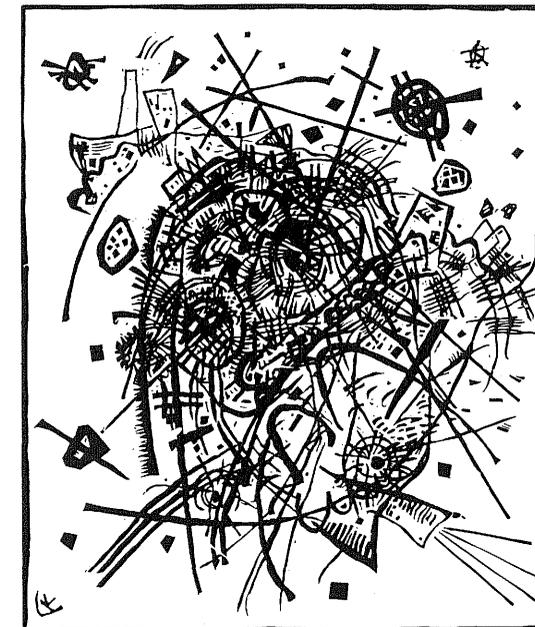
Lithograph  
14 x 14 1/2 inches

DESPAIR, 1897

Lithograph  
6 x 5 7/8 inches

MOTHERS, 1922-23

Woodcut  
13 1/2 x 15 3/4 inches



Vasily Kandinsky  
*Small World VIII*, 1922  
Woodcut

### **Otto Mueller**

GIRL ON THE SOFA, 1022

Lithograph

11 1/2 x 15 5/8 inches

### **Herman Max Pechstein**

*The Lord's Prayer*, 1921

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, 1921

Woodcut

15 5/8 x 11 11/16 inches

OUR DAILY BREAD, 1921

Woodcut

15 5/8 x 11 11/16 inches

THE POWER AND THE GLORY, 1921

Woodcut

15 5/8 x 11 11/16 inches

### **Karl Schmidt-Rottluff**

HEAD OF A MAN, c. 1922

Woodcut

11 x 7 7/8 inches

WOMAN'S HEAD, 1916

Woodcut

10 1/8 x 7 1/8 inches

Cover:

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff

*Woman's Head*, 1916

Woodcut

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Syracuse University Art Galleries

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