

Modern art in Germany and the Nazis Part 2: The Die Brücke painters

Sybille Fuchs
26 July 2019

Two art exhibitions currently on display in Berlin raise important questions about the relationship of certain modern German artists to the Nazi regime (1933-1945).

In Part 1, we discussed the Hamburger Bahnhof contemporary art museum's exhibition of paintings by Emil Nolde (1876-1956), which treats the artist's relationship to the Nazis and their ideology.

The Brücke Museum in Berlin has taken up the same theme in *Escape into Art? Die Brücke Painters in the Nazi Period*, concentrating on the artists Erich Heckel (1883-1970), Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884-1976), Max Pechstein (1881-1950) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938). In 1905, this group founded the artistic collective known as Die Brücke (The Bridge).

Were "escape" and "internal migration" the artists' reactions to Nazism? After World War II, this was the broad interpretation of the behaviour of the group of painters associated with Die Brücke. It is time to take a closer look at this question, which is the theme of *Escape into Art?* Its curators are Aya Soika (Bard College Berlin), Meike Hoffmann (Free University Berlin's Degenerate Art Research Centre) and Lisa Marei Schmidt (Brücke Museum).

The adjacent Kunsthaus Dahlem museum in Berlin complements the latter exhibition by examining the *post war* history of these Brücke artists. Like Nolde, these representatives of Expressionism were associated in the minds of the broad public with what the Nazis termed "degenerate" art. The artists were invariably judged to be victims of the Hitler regime.

The various ways in which former Brücke members reacted to Nazism emerge in the current exhibition. All of them were able to continue working as artists until shortly before the end of the Second World War.

For the first time, the exhibition provides a comprehensive historical view of the activities of these artists under the Hitler regime, their artistic work and the extent to which they could effectively pursue their efforts. They wavered between hope, adaptation and resignation. In some cases, they sought to bring their art to the attention of the Nazi elite and when this failed they often simply withdrew into their private lives.

Like the Nolde exhibition, the Brücke exhibition provides visitors with a nuanced historical viewpoint, adopting neither a one-sided "victim" perspective nor a glorification of the role of the avant-garde during this period. Both exhibitions represent a welcome change in the current perception of art, eschewing a primarily sensualist, playful or quasi-religious approach in favour of art appreciation based on a critical examination of contemporary history.

The exhibition explains that many German artists did not survive the Nazi era. One such was Charlotte Salomon, whose impressive work was featured in the Kassel documenta 13 exhibition in 2018. The artists Otto Freundlich, Moissy Kogan and Felix Nussbaum were also murdered in concentration camps. Others, as well as many collectors and gallery owners, had to flee Germany and go into exile because as Jews they were deprived of their livelihoods and, for the most part, their property by the Nazis' notorious Nuremberg Race Laws.

The paintings of Brücke artists are shown along with detailed explanatory texts and numerous documents. The first part of the exhibition is devoted to the period 1933 to 1937. During this time, museums and gallery owners sought to present Expressionist artists as genuinely "German Modernists," producing artwork that corresponded to the nationalist outlook of the Nazis.

During the Weimar Republic period in Germany (1919-1933) advocates of a backward-looking, pseudo-realistic art had already denounced avant-garde art and especially the Brücke artists as the abortive product of morbid brains. As noted in the first part of this series, it was only after the "Expressionism dispute" within the Nazi party that the matter was settled in favour of the reactionary artistic nostrums of Adolf Hitler and his leading ideologue Alfred Rosenberg.

Die Brücke

The group of artists known as Die Brücke was founded by the Dresden architecture students Fritz Bleyl, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff and Kirchner in 1905. Bleyl decided to pursue architecture while the others resolutely turned to painting. Some time later, the group was joined by Pechstein, the only member with academic training in art. After the group moved to Berlin in 1908, Otto Mueller (1874-1930) became a member and, for a short time, the older Nolde. The young artists also attempted, in vain, to win the venerated Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944) to their ranks.

Following a major exhibition in Cologne in 1912, the Brücke painters were displayed together with Fauvists, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, August Macke, Nolde, Munch, Ferdinand Hodler, Egon Schiele and others. The exhibition was conceived as a provocative answer to the widely publicized protest in 1911 by German artists, i.e., conservative artistic circles, against "infiltration" from foreign, predominantly French art.

In 1907, the Hamburg art historian Dr. Rosa Schapire (1874-1954) was accepted as a supporter. She went on to devote much of her work to the Brücke artists. She gave lectures, created catalogues of work and was in constant correspondence via letters and postcards with the painters who did her portrait on several occasions. She held Schmidt-Rottluff in particular high regard and he responded by painting her several times. One 1911 portrait of Schapire is included in the current Berlin exhibition.

Schapire was close to the Social Democrats and regarded herself as a champion of women's rights. In an essay in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte* (*Socialist Monthly Bulletins*), she attacked the bourgeois women's movement in 1897 and declared that genuine emancipation for women was only possible in a socialist society.

The Brücke group had already gone out in the area surrounding Dresden

to paint from nature, although without any intent of reproducing it. The group's motto was: "Painting in nature, but not naturally." Rather than depict nature directly, they sought to use it as inspiration for their spontaneous perceptions. They were especially influenced by the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Heckel particularly admired Matthias Grünewald, the German Renaissance painter.

In their manifesto, the Brücke artists distanced themselves from the prevailing school of Impressionism. "Everyone belongs with us who reflects what compels him to create in a direct and unadulterated manner." They were not interested in influencing social reality through their art, as Käthe Kollwitz was, but sought instead to capture their subjective view of the world using artistic means.

The painters and their models often spent time at the Moritzburg Castle ponds near Dresden. They were drawn by the light, life in the open and the movement of people, especially artists and dancers. They were entranced by casual nudity, which in turn aroused the hostility of conservative circles. Later, they primarily visited places on the North Sea and Baltic Sea coasts.

Like other Expressionist painters and writers and many other artists of the time, the Brücke painters were strongly influenced by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. They understood their art to be a form of "spiritual self-liberation." Heckel produced a woodcut featuring a portrait of Nietzsche. The name of the group stems from a quote from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885): "What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is lovable in man is that he is an OVER-GOING and a DOWN-GOING."

In 1913, Kirchner wrote a chronicle about Die Brücke, in which he overstated his own role and history in the group. A bitter dispute then erupted with the other members, and Kirchner resigned. This led to the final dissolution of the group. The outbreak of war in 1914 led to the further dispersion of the various artists.

Weimar

The Brücke Museum exhibition refers only briefly to a fact of some political and historical significance. The November Revolution of 1918 and the uprising of the German working class evoked a response from the Expressionists.

In December 1918, Pechstein was the initiator of the 122-member November Group, which included George Grosz, Wassily Kandinsky, John Heartfield, Otto Dix, Hannah Höch, Lyonel Feininger, El Lissitzky and Rudolf Schlichter, as well as a number of musicians (George Antheil, Hanns Eisler, Kurt Weill) and architects (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe). The artists from very varied artistic backgrounds, including a number of leading Expressionists, regarded themselves as ready to support social revolution in Germany. Their joint activities were limited after 1921, although members of the November Group continued to regard themselves as progressive, committed artists.

The Nazis in turn used that commitment to demonise these artists as the "Red November Group." The latter's embrace of abstraction and full artistic freedom was denounced as "Bolshevik" and in 1933, the group could no longer continue their work. In 1935, its fate was sealed when it was deleted from the register of associations in Berlin.

In 1918 as well, a number of artists and architects formed the related Art Soviet, or Workers Council for Art (Arbeitsrat für Kunst), in solidarity with the workers 'and soldiers' councils, which had been formed across Germany. Its members included the former Brücke artists Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff, Heckel, Mueller and also Nolde. A leaflet by the group dated March 1, 1919, stated: "At the top is the motto: Art and the people

must form a unity. Art should no longer be mere enjoyment, but rather the fortune and life of the masses. The aim is to combine the various arts under the wings of a large-scale body of arts." The activities of the Workers Council for Art provided important impulses for painting, modern architecture, "new forms of building" and also the Bauhaus.

The suppression of the 1918 revolution enabled reactionary tendencies, anchored in the state apparatus and judiciary, to influence cultural policy and prevail in many areas. This development in turn led many artists to withdraw into the private sphere.

Although Pechstein, Kirchner and Nolde were among the most popular modern artists in the Weimar Republic and were highly acclaimed in artistic circles, they came under fierce attacks from national-conservative circles.

One of their most virulent opponents was the architect and art critic Paul Schultze-Naumburg, whom the Brücke exhibition quotes in detail. He propagated "Nordic aesthetics" and a form of culturally based racism. His closest friends from the early 1920s included leading Nazis. In his book, *Art and Race* (1928), he denounced all modern art as "cretinism" and "degenerate" and juxtaposed works of art, especially those of the Expressionists, with photographs of the physically and mentally handicapped.

Schultze-Naumburg was an important pioneer of the Militant League for German Culture founded and headed by Nazi zealot Alfred Rosenberg. Founding members also included Gregor Strasser and Heinrich Himmler. Schultze-Naumburg joined in 1929 and gave a number of lectures on behalf of the organisation. He was one of the first to demand the purging of modern art from "shameful exhibitions." Ferocious ideological struggles over art were fought inside and outside the NSDAP throughout the Weimar period.

Under the National Socialist regime

The Brücke artists responded to the takeover of power by Hitler in 1933 and the hostility of the Nazis with a variety of strategies. All of them—with the exception of Kirchner who had been living in Switzerland since 1917—remained in Germany and continued to paint more or less undisturbed until the mid-1930s. They hoped their artwork would ultimately be recognised by the regime.

The paintings on display in Berlin, together with various letters and documents, suggest that defining the artists' stance as one of "internal emigration" is too one-sided. At the same time, there is barely any evidence of resistance to the Nazis. What prevailed among all former Brücke artists was a vacillation between resignation and adaptation. Unlike Nolde, none of them was either a member of the party or a convinced National Socialist. Their style of painting during this period became somewhat more conventional. Their shock was all the greater when in 1937 thousands of their works were removed from public collections.

On June 30, 1937, Goebbels commissioned the president of the Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts, Adolf Ziegler, to scour every museum for "decadent German art," draw up an inventory of works and prepare an exhibition. Almost half of the more than 600 works shown at the subsequent Degenerate Art exhibition consisted of paintings by Brücke painters.

Given that the group's paintings were in demand, many were sold abroad for foreign exchange. In 1938, Hermann Göring asserted: "We want to try to make some money out of the crap." On this basis, Hitler's art dealers (Bernhard A. Böhmer, Karl Buchholz, Hildebrand Gurlitt and Ferdinand Möller) were also able to divert quite a few into their own

collections.

The Brücke Museum also includes a film excerpt of the Degenerate Art exhibition shot by the US documentary filmmaker Julien Bryan—the only film record of the Munich show.

The Brücke Museum exhibition deals with the biographies of Kirchner, Pechstein, Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel, their respective reactions to Nazism and the individual stages of their proscription. Otto Mueller died of tuberculosis in 1930, but his work was also censored and denounced by the Nazis posthumously.

Erich Heckel

Heckel, who in 1933 had been praised by advocates of his work as a contemporary alternative to traditional academic art, signed the “Call of Cultural Artists” of August 19, 1934. The document was a pledge of allegiance to the *Führer*, drafted by Josef Goebbels. The 37 signatories included Wilhelm Furtwängler, Werner Krauss, Agnes Miegel, Hans Pfitzner, Richard Strauss, Mies van der Rohe, Barlach and Schultze-Naumburg.

The pledge, however, did little to improve Heckel’s fortunes. Although he was able to exhibit from 1933 to 1935, his art was denied recognition by the Nazis and, in 1937, was placed on the list of “degenerate art.” After the seizure and removal of his work from museums in 1937, Heckel retired from public life. Until the end of World War II, he preferred to paint in his summer retreat in the tiny village of Osterholz on the Flensburg Fjord. When his Berlin apartment was bombed in January 1944, he found a new refuge in Hemmenhofen on Lake Constance, where he remained after the war.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Following a nervous breakdown during World War I, Kirchner became heavily dependent on drugs. His self-portraits of these years—*The Drinker* and *Self-portrait as Soldier* (both 1915)—reflect his state of despair. He moved to Davos in Switzerland in 1917 and managed to wean himself there from morphine, staying until 1925. That year he returned to Germany for three months. He tried, in vain, to obtain a professorship and then went back to Switzerland. Although he enjoyed quite a high degree of recognition, he believed his art was inadequately appreciated. His painting style changed, becoming more abstract and with more emphasis on broad surfaces instead of lines.

He stayed in Switzerland and never returned to Germany. In a letter he describes a visit of his wife in Germany in 1935, which listed a number of positive aspects of life, although most of their acquaintances had left Germany. He expressed the hope that the new regime would ultimately triumph. He wrote that his ill health prevented him from returning.

Kirchner remained a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts until his expulsion in 1937. On June 15, 1938, he committed suicide in Davos, shooting himself in the heart. The motive for his suicide was probably not just a relapse into morphine addiction, but also, as his wife wrote after his death, the fact that 639 of his pictures had been removed from German museums and confiscated by the Nazis. Thirty-two of his paintings were displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition, including his self-portrait as a soldier from 1915.

Max Pechstein

Max Pechstein came from a Social Democratic milieu and in 1933 was sacked from his teaching post. He protested fiercely when the Prussian Academy of Arts expelled left-wing artists such as Kollwitz and Heinrich Mann. Nevertheless, he remained a member of the Academy, which testifies to his wait-and-see attitude toward the regime. The Nazi sympathiser Nolde denounced him as a Jew, as mentioned in Part I, only due to his name, but he must surely have been aware of Pechstein’s political views under the Weimar republic.

The Brücke Museum exhibits a number of letters that testify to Pechstein’s principled opposition to the Nazis. From the start of its reign of terror, Pechstein expressed his regrets at the departure of Jewish acquaintances and collectors. He clearly sided with Jewish friends and gallery owners, whom he appreciated, in contrast to the “purely Aryan art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt,” who had cheated him “from the proceeds of his work.” (1)

Some of Pechstein’s relations and acquaintances, however, were fervent Nazi supporters. He maintained these relationships and tried to adapt to their taste both in his painting style and content. Thus, the Berlin exhibition features a rather naturalistic portrait of his son (*Boy with Snowballs and Three Carnations*, 1937) with a short haircut and short pants, painted in the style of New Objectivity. Pechstein took part in a competition for the National Socialist organization *Kraft durch Freude* [Strength Through Joy] with a mural adorned by a swastika and was disappointed when it was rejected.

Prior to and during the 1930s, he spent months near the Baltic, at Lebasee (?ebsko Lake, now Poland) and went repeatedly to the Curonian Spit. There he founded the artists’ colony in Nidden (Nida). He painted landscapes, sunsets or fishing boats. When his economic situation became increasingly precarious, he decided to join the National Socialist People’s Welfare association and the National Socialist Air Corps. (2)

In 1937, Pechstein was expelled from the Academy, but could still occasionally exhibit up until 1939. The Degenerate Art exhibition featured 16 of his pictures while more than 326 were confiscated from the collections in German museums. In the same year, he wrote a letter to his sister Gertrud expressing his unfounded hope: “Fortunately, the military does not want a war.”

During the Second World War, Pechstein stayed mostly on the Baltic Sea in Pomerania. In 1943, his Berlin studio was destroyed, along with a large part of his work, in a bombing raid. Two years later he painted the ruins of a devastated Berlin.

Karl Schmidt-Rottluff

Even during the period of the Weimar Republic, Schmidt-Rottluff’s portraits were vilified by folkish-nationalist circles, while others saw him as a welcome representative of Nazi cultural ideology because of his depictions of peasant life. As a result, he initially held out certain hopes for the new regime—hopes that were quickly dashed. He withdrew to Pomerania and kept out of politics. Schmidt-Rottluff, however, continued to correspond with the critic Rosa Schapire, who had emigrated to London.

In 1933, he was expelled from the Academy, having joined two years earlier. In 1936, two of his landscape paintings were exhibited in Hamburg. However, more than 600 of his works were confiscated from museums with many on show at the Degenerate Art exhibition the following year. In 1939, several of his artworks were burned in the

courtyard of Berlin's main fire station.

Like many other artists, Schmidt-Rottluff received a "professional ban" in 1941 and could not sell his work. He had no access to art supplies and only survived with the help of friends. To keep working somehow he used chalk and pastels to sketch simple motifs like vegetables or feathers. He also painted some watercolours.

In September 1942, he was given the opportunity to stay and paint with Helmut James Graf von Moltke and his wife Freya at Schloss Kreisau in Lower Silesia. He shared his hosts' rejection of the Nazis, but was unaware of the Christian-oriented resistance circle led by Moltke and his friends. (3) In 1943, Schmidt-Rottluff's apartment in Berlin was destroyed by a bombing raid and he fled to the countryside.

In 1934, he painted the image *Uprooted Trees*, which was interpreted by art historians as a metaphor for his own "uprooting." Other landscape paintings, such as *Bridge with Icebreakers* (1934), were interpreted as symbols of his subliminal resistance.

Conclusion

The principal merit of the Brücke Museum exhibition lies in the fact that it refrains from categorical judgements and instead objectively charts the behaviour and role played by the individual artists. The art of the Brücke painters and their attitude adopted in the Nazi period should neither be glorified nor simply condemned.

The surviving Brücke artists were appointed to academic posts after 1945 and their postwar paintings could and were used to rehabilitate German culture because they represented a significant modern art movement. Following the downfall of Nazis, broad layers of the population who had been culturally starved embraced modern art and were open to rediscovering its merits.

This occurred despite the fact that these painters and their art failed to express any sort of political resistance to the Nazis. What Leon Trotsky wrote in 1938 is particularly true of the Expressionists and their dilemma during Nazi rule:

"The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch. It fears superstitiously every new word, for it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death. ... Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society."(4)

Notes

Catalog: *Escape into Art? Die Brücke Painters in the Nazi Period*, Brücke Museum, Berlin, edited by Aya Soika, Meike Hoffmann and Lisa Marei Schmidt

(1) Pechstein filed a lawsuit against Wolfgang Gurlitt, a cousin of Hitler's later art dealer Hildebrand Gurlitt, when in 1922 he refused to release work stored by the artist. Although Pechstein received most of his paintings under a court agreement, Gurlitt was allowed to keep eleven. For the ten paintings Pechstein sold that year, he received 180,000 Reichsmark from Gurlitt—a virtually worthless sum in Germany's year of mass inflation.

(2) Bernhard Fulda, Aya Soika: *Max Pechstein: The Rise and Fall of Expressionism*, De Gruyter, Berlin / Boston 2012, p. 313.

(3) Kreisau Circle: a resistance group that rejected assassinations and

designed plans for a society after the collapse of the Third Reich. Moltke was sentenced to death by the People's Court in 1945 and executed.

(4) Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch" (June 1938), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)