

Adolf Behne, "German Expressionists, Lecture for the Opening of the New Sturm Exhibition," published in *Der Sturm* (1914)

Ladies and Gentlemen!

At the request of the organizer, I will guide you through this exhibition which is called "German Expressionists." There is no need to say much about the concept "German." Only this: with regard to the painters represented here, such as Campendonk, Franz Marc, and Kokoschka, it is best to think not so much of Ludwig Knaus and Paul Thumann who, of course, are also German-born; rather think of the painters of our Gothic, perhaps the creator of the Strasbourg glass windows, of the masters of Cologne or Westphalia or, to name a great spiritual relative of a later time, of Mathias Grunewald. German here it does not mean pseudo-Gothic style, sentimental poetry, and saccharine painting, but passion in presentation, urgency of imagination, the sovereignty of the spirit.

The artists of our time do not see their models for creative work in those early masters. Not a trace of archaism is to be found in their art. Nevertheless they recognize in the Gothics their rightful ancestors. What unites them is their love of expression. Nothing else is meant by "Expressionism." The builders, the sculptors, the painters, and the draftsmen of the Gothic were Expressionists, as were the Egyptians and the Greeks of preclassic times. Expressionist art, which some are fond of burdening with the stigma of seasonal faddishness, is in reality the reawakening of those inclinations that have always prevailed in art's happiest times. If the love for the Gothic professed in such suspicious haste by so many today were authentic, then Marc, Kokoschka, Heemskerck, and Mense would have reaped long ago the honors to which they are entitled.

But why are these pictures so strange? Because these painters treat art with gravity and precision. Because they have finally once again set priorities for their creative work according to artistic concerns, instead of scientific, literary, or commercial concerns. This has been faulted as pure formalism and bloodless estheticism. However, that is not the issue at all. Expressionism knows no form which is without spirit, without expression. Here, form is in the service of expression. But this expression should be a purely artistic one—the purer the better! Whoever is afraid that absolute purity of artistic expression will make a work sterile reveals that he had previously appreciated in art only what was non-art—obscurities and filler.

Expressionism has finally once again made artistic concerns the focus of creative production. What that means becomes clear when we compare an Impressionist work with a modern one in our minds, since Impressionism is the prototype of an art that has lost its focus. Every work of art worthy of the name is an organism. An inorganic work of art is a contradiction in terms. To produce a thing organically is the essence of artistic creation and the capacity for getting spiritual things to grow organically is what ultimately separates the artist from the nonartist. The true work of art is something that has grown and developed. The phrase of the biologist Uexküll: "Only machines are made but organisms evolve," also applies to art. Therefore it is the first responsibility of the artist to exclude from the creative process anything that could impede the growth of colors, forms, and lines.

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Two things are part of the organic principle: purposefulness in regard to a certain goal, lively activity of interrelated functions. We have recognized the goal of the Expressionist picture is the expression of an experience. The Impressionist was satisfied with the impression, with the surface, the appearance. The Expressionist wants the spiritual quintessence of an experience. For those artists represented here, Cubism is the means to achieve it.

Cubism, although it has the reputation of being a cold intellectual methodology, in reality emerges from feeling and aims exclusively at satisfying the demands of feeling. Not of course the sense as to whether a particular section of canvas represents satin or wool, but the feeling for the profound relationship of things, a cosmic world feeling. Cubism is not self-serving. The painter, the sculptor, the architect is not a Cubist for Cubism's sake, but only because certain things can be said only in that language.

What led to the formation of this language was the desire to give the picture the kind of functional life that necessarily belongs to the nature of a true organism. The Impressionist picture, torn out and isolated, was rigid. The Expressionist picture, a living cosmos, and therefore imbedded in everything cosmic, takes part in the universal flux of the world. Therefore its forms are not rigid but fluid. The form does not appear, complete, before me, but grows and evolves. Obviously, this art has no room for perfect objects. What a sign of poverty it would be for modern art if it remained bound to objects even after our thinkers have recognized that thinking in terms of objects is useless for any kind of deeper reflection.

The Cubist can only give his forms a sense of transformation, a functional life, by giving multiple meanings to separate elements of form. In the Impressionist picture every single item was something specific: tree trunk, foliage, walls, cloud, etc. Hence the rigidity. If the Cubist wants to let the form evolve, then he cannot close it off; he has to let it move out, flow out from the whole.... Wisely, the expression Cubism means only that for the modern painter certain elements present themselves for the construction of forms which, because of their remotely geometric character, permit the crystallization of expression. Therefore Cubism is no more a geometric science than Pythagorism was a method of calculation. Cubism, like Pythagorism has **mystical** underpinnings.

The presence of the Futurist picture gives us the opportunity to become acquainted with the origin of Cubism's language of form. It is obvious that the impetus to the creation of this language was a feeling. The Futurist wanted to transmit the strongest possible expression of life, its variety, its endlessness, its intensity, and the richness of its relationships. As a result out of inner necessity, he achieved an ambiguity of form in which for him only a small amount of materialism remained.

So let us summarize: Expressionism designates the goal. Modern art wants to be an art of expression. Cubism is the language used by many, not all, Expressionists. Futurism is a name for streams of feeling which have played the role of catalyst.

Now, however, I no longer want to stand in the way of your enjoyment of the individual pictures.