

**Gill Perry, From “Primitivism and the ‘Modern’”
in Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry,
Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century
(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993): 62-81.**

The expressive and the Expressionist

In [an] earlier section “Primitivism and Kulturkritik” I suggested that the conventional nature/culture opposition which underpinned contemporary European notions of the “primitive” is both sustained and confused in some of the theory and practices of modern German art at the time. In the following section I want to consider this issue in relation to the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the Brücke group, and the emergent ideology of “Expressionism” with which the group is associated. In the preceding section I suggested that the idea of the “decorative” was central to the contemporary French understanding of a “primitive” (i.e. modern) art. Recent research has shown that the Brücke group were also interested in concepts of decoration, and both Erich Heckel and Kirchner worked on decorative schemes for their studios which were influenced by “primitive” motifs. But I also want to suggest that in pre-war German avant-garde art the “primitive” was more often predicated on the related idea of the art (and by implication the artist) as “expressive,” as directly conveying some “authentic” or unmediated expression.

The belief that the artist could directly convey some kind of inner feeling—emotional or spiritual—through art was a fashionable idea in German artistic and intellectual circles at the beginning of the twentieth century. We have seen how a revival of nineteenth century Romantic philosophy, the legacy of Kulturkritik and the writings of Nietzsche had already encouraged artists to seek “new freedoms,” to break free from civilized constraints and Academic conventions and somehow express themselves more freely; these ideas are fundamental to what we call German “Expressionist” art.

The term “Expressionism” has been used with different emphases in modern art history. As a stylistic label it has often been used retrospectively to denote, and implicitly to account for, a quality of distortion and exaggeration of forms found in the work of any artist or period. However, when used to describe German Expressionism it also takes on specific historical and cultural meanings, some of which I will be considering in this section.

There is a sense in which all artists are “expressing” themselves, in that their own perceptions, personalities and interests are involved in the process of painting or the production of an artwork. But how do we distinguish between this general notion of expression and an “Expressionist” art? On what grounds do we decide that a painting is directly expressive of some inner feeling, that it is “Expressionist” in the sense described above? In the case of the Brücke artists, their works have been described as “Expressionist” for several reasons. Firstly, because the artists claimed at the time of producing their pictures that they, were communicating more direct emotion or feelings (although many of them subsequently resisted the label Expressionist). Secondly, critics and art historians have consistently described Brücke works as “Expressionist” because of the way they look.

Let’s consider these two points in relation to two early Brücke works, Erich Heckel’s *Seated Child* and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s *Clay Pit*, both of which have been seen as examples of early Expressionist painting. The first point raises the problem of artistic intention. But

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because the artist claims that he is directly expressing some kind of emotion in paintings like these it does not automatically follow that the painting then contains some kind of fixed meaning (which is the emotion in question). On the second point (that is the issue of labeling the work according to what it looks like), we can suggest reasons why these two paintings have been labeled Expressionist. In both works the brushwork appears crude and unfinished; individual brushstrokes are visible and seem to have been loosely applied. In addition, non-natural colours are often employed, as in the face of Heckel's child or in Kirchner's landscape. As a result, the subject-matter appears distorted; there is an uncomfortable tension between the images depicted and the visible brushwork on the canvas surface. In contemporary Academic terms this mode of painting revealed a lack of competence, a crude unfinished technique. But for those who subsequently used the label "Expressionist," it was valued according to a different criteria. It was seen to be expressive of much more than the subject-matter depicted; it was seen as clear evidence of the artist's physical and emotional involvement with the medium, of a rejection of sophisticated forms of artistic competence in pursuit of the direct expression of the artist's feelings or emotions onto the canvas.

Clearly these implications of the label raise some problems. Many of the technical aspects of these works can be attributed as much to the influence of French Neo-Impressionist and Impressionist techniques (such as the individual brushstrokes of bright colour) as to the artist's "expressive urges." And how do we distinguish between supposedly "authentic" expression and technical incompetence? One of the problems is that many of the popular meanings of the label Expressionist which I have discussed above are untestable. They are largely based on subjective claims for what a work expresses, or on a personal response to what a work looks like. What we can do is assess the artistic and cultural context in which such art emerged, and then try to sort out some of the more difficult or complex meanings that these Brücke works held both for their contemporaries and hold for us today.

In 1906 the Brücke painters, who then included Kirchner, Heckel, Fritz Bleyl and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, produced their group manifesto. It was printed in the opening pages to the (incomplete) catalogue of their first group exhibition held in the Löbtau district of Dresden in 1906:

With faith in progress and in a new generation of creators and spectators we call together all youth. As youth, we carry the future in us and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against the long-established older forces. We claim as our own everyone who reproduces that which drives him to creation with directness and authenticity.

There's a sense in which this short manifesto, printed in pseudo-primitive lettering, helped to set the agenda for what is now loosely labeled an Expressionist ideology. It echoes the concerns of many contemporary artists, writers and intellectuals who, during the pre-war period saw their work as a radical alternative to bourgeois culture and its values. According to the few surviving letters and documents the Brücke notion of progress was inseparable from a muddled sense of rebellion against industrialized bourgeois society. It was steeped in Nietzschean ideas of the need to destroy sterile middle-class values in order to facilitate an artistic renewal, to enable new forms of creative expression.

For many artists and writers Nietzsche's writings offered quasi-philosophical solutions and alternatives to contemporary currents of anti-materialism and religious skepticism, solutions

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which placed special emphasis on the role of the “individual” and the artist in seeking out creative freedoms. Despite some of the contradictions in his writings (produced during the years 1872-88) “modernity” is consistently associated with cultural decadence, which is to be overcome by a dialectical process of “re-valuation” and “selfovercoming” (see, for example *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Case of Wagner*). What is involved in these processes is explored in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (published in parts in the 1890s), a book regularly cited by members of the early Brücke group to justify their declared attitudes to art. In it Nietzsche uses the figure of Zarathustra to explore and counter modern cultural conditioning. He declares the death of religion and the loss of conventional “meaning” of life (in the sense of supernatural purpose), advocating an attempt to “overcome” this conditioning, to seek out other forms of expression and meaning. Zarathustra calls the man who has overcome these forces of decadence the *Obermensch* (overperson or overman), an idea subsequently popularized by Bernard Shaw’s somewhat ironic translation of “superman” (Nietzsche’s texts are exclusively addressed to men, who are seen by him as the agents of cultural change). The idea that the individual could overcome the constrictions of a culture was irresistible to the early Brücke artists, who probably took their group name from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. The metaphor of the bridge (*die Brücke*) is used by Zarathustra in the book to represent man’s journey from absorption in a decadent culture to a state of freedom and “overcoming.” In the prologue Nietzsche writes in his characteristically epigrammatic style:

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under* ...
I love him who does not hold back one drop of spirit for himself, but wants to be entirely the spirit of his virtue: thus he strides over the bridge as spirit

The bridge then could symbolize the group’s journey towards, and pursuit of, “new freedoms.” For the Brücke group this idea of rebellion is inextricably tied up with an understanding of the value of “primitive” sources. The group’s interest in these sources, many of which came from the Dresden Ethnographical Collections, was predicated on the belief that these were “truthful” unsophisticated forms of art, uncorrupted by modern bourgeois culture. And the evidence for this lay partly in the (seemingly unsophisticated) distortions and simplifications which they observed in “primitive” artifacts. They could thus be identified with what the manifesto calls “authenticity” (*Unverfälscht*). Similarly, this “new generation of creators” is laying claim to a new more direct mode of creation, a form of expression which can somehow deny its conditioning in the way that Nietzsche’s *Obermensch* overcame his decadent culture.

The manifesto tells us that this more “authentic” mode of expression was also seen as the prerogative of youth. The founder members of the Brücke were architectural students studying at the Sächsische Technische Hochschule. As students, all in their early twenties, they shared a sense of youthful rebellion. For the Brücke, as for many other Germans at the time, youth was seen as the vehicle of less corrupt modes of expression, and as standing in the front line of attack against prevailing bourgeois values.

It is important to qualify this notion of rebellion and its implications for a supposedly radical or “modern” art. In turn-of-the-century Germany, to be against modern bourgeois culture often meant little more than to be against modern industrial society and aspects of urban life, especially petty bourgeois commercialism and its associated values. Thus in 1934 the Hungarian writer Georg Lukács described “the complete emptying of the concept of ‘revolution’ among

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Expressionists." The early Brücke group were idealistic young students with controversial and anti-establishment views, but there is no evidence that they adopted coherent political positions or belonged to any left-wing political movements. But as we have seen, their ideas were not exclusively tied to theories of artistic expression. For the Brücke artists they were expressed and developed in an attempted fusion of art and life. In both their social activities and in their painted and graphic work the group set about undermining contemporary bourgeois sexual mores, and a reevaluation of "primitive" sources and lifestyles (largely African, Oceanic and Medieval). Contemporary discourses on sexuality, like those on the meaning and value of the "primitive", were the focus of much cultural and political debate in Germany at the time. How far these interests were, or could be embodied in Brücke art will form one of the themes of the following section.

Expression and the body

One of the subjects which predominates in Brücke painted and graphic work was the female and, on occasion, the male nude. This preoccupation owed much to Jugendstil art interests, in which the theme of the nude came to represent a wide range of decorative, symbolic and cultural interests. For the Brücke artists, the nude female body in particular became a central motif, laden with various literal and symbolic meanings. In singling out the repetition of this subject-matter I am, of course, developing a theme explored earlier in this essay, the implicit and explicit association often made in Western art and culture between the female nude and the "primitive," between woman and nature, by contrast with a more masculine "culture" or, in this context, *Zivilisation*. But I want to argue that in Brücke work the nude also becomes the symbolic focus of a wider range of interests and debates, both cultural and aesthetic. These include the groups' claims for technical radicalism, for sexual liberation and antibourgeois activities, and for more "authentic" modes of social and artistic expression. I want to look at some of the slippages and displacements of those symbolic meanings which I believe are suggested in several Brücke paintings of the nude theme from the period c.1909-1916.

Around 1910 Kirchner produced several nudes in interiors which seem to raise questions about meaning and symbolic function. *Reclining Nude in Front of a Mirror*, *Bathers in a Room*, and *Standing Nude with a Hat* were all painted during the period 1909-10, although the *Bathers in a Room* was reworked in 1920 (in the 1920s Kirchner reworked many paintings from this pre-war period). Each of these works is painted in a style rather different from the freely applied brushwork and vibrating surface effects of the earliest Brücke paintings. Although there are areas of loose brushwork, the paint seems to have been applied in flatter areas with forms reduced to more angular, almost spiky shapes, a style influenced by the techniques of the woodcut medium which the Brücke artists were using extensively at the time. The use of vibrant, often non-natural color, as in the lurid green body of the *Reclining Nude*, contributes to the sense of distortion and awkwardness conveyed by most of these nudes. Technically at least, these works could be read as a rejection of the conventions and competences associated with two strands of contemporary German painting: the Courbet-influenced school of naturalist painters (which included many of the Worpswede painters) and the so-called German Impressionists (notably Liebermann, Corinth and Slevogt). Around the turn of the century both broad groups had laid claim to radical objectives and a shared opposition to Wilhelmine Academicism.

The relative technical radicalism of these Brücke works draws on another source: "primitive" and exotic artifacts and designs. The decorative motifs in the drapes and background of the *Bathers in a Room* and the *Standing Nude* are influenced by African and Oceanic objects

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available in the Dresden Ethnographical Museum, including carved and painted house beams from the Palau Islands, a German colony in the South Seas. Such references, however vague and unspecific, would have been recognized by contemporary viewers as an indication of the paintings’ “modern” qualities, of the explicit association of Kirchner’s work with artifacts deemed to be the product of “uncivilized” and therefore more “authentic” expression.

As in France, the growth of artistic interest in “primitive” or tribal objects coincided with the founding and expansion of German ethnographical collections around the end of the nineteenth century. During this period German colonial acquisitions in Africa and more importantly Oceania, and the political and economic competition for world markets which accompanied it, were represented by the founding of ethnographical collections in Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig and Dresden. Public exhibitions of colonial art became increasingly popular and Dresden hosted a series of shows of “primitive” and “exotic” cultures which began in 1909. These included an African village and dancers, shown in the Dresden zoological gardens in 1910, on which Heckel and Kirchner reported with enthusiasm.

As with contemporary French readings of African and non-European works, the idea that objects in museum collections and contemporary exhibitions were somehow more “authentic” forms of expression was, of course, part of a Western fantasy of “primitive” culture, which gave meaning to - or could be identified with - its own “modern” modes of artistic expression. But at the same time this alien culture was also represented as the “other” of civilized Western culture. In the German context, the Nietzschean notion that “genius resides in instinct” (*Will to Power*), in unfettered personal expression, was easily projected onto works which were thought to be the products of a less civilized and therefore more instinctive culture.

However, references to supposedly “primitive” techniques and sources contribute only a part of the possible meanings of these paintings. The *Bathers in a Room* is a large canvas (151 x 198 cm) which reworks an established art-historical theme. Kirchner’s nude women assume graceful poses reminiscent of many Symbolist bathers, and of Matisse’s pastoral compositions. Yet there are several aspects which confuse the art-historical precedents. The bathers theme is conventionally associated with an outdoor setting—the nude in nature—but these women are contained within an artificial interior space, albeit one decorated with pseudo-primitive designs and carvings. In spite of the indolent pastoral poses, other aspects—the use of greenish tones, the distortions and angularities in some of the bodies and their positions in relation to the decorative surround—draw the viewer’s attention to the artifice of painting, to the complex processes of representation, rather than to its potential as instinctive expression. This emphasis is reinforced by the inclusion both of a painting within a painting at the back of the bedroom annex in the centre, and by what seems to be a deliberate ambiguity in the painting of the annex. The scale of the reclining woman on the bed does not quite seem to fit her position at the back of the scene. And the opening with its carved door jambs also serves as a frame for this nude, in her reclining odalisque pose. Thus this figure can also be read as a fictional painting within a painting, an ambivalence which is reinforced by the inclusion of a fictional painting on the wall behind her. While it’s impossible to prove that this pictorial ambivalence was intended by the artist, the likelihood that Kirchner was concerned with the nude both as a symbol of “primitive” associations and as a problematic image in the history of representation, is also suggested by other works from this period. The *Reclining Nude in front of a Mirror* reworks the art-historical theme made famous by Velasquez’s *Rokeby Venus* (late 1640s) in which the female nude reclines holding a mirror to her face. We are invited to gaze both at the body and its mirror image. Yet in Kirchner’s work there is once again a seemingly deliberate pictorial ambivalence:

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the mirror image does not quite match the pose or the distortions of the body which it supposedly reflects. It seems to function both as a mirror image and as another painting of a nude within a painting of a nude.

Kirchner's *Standing Nude with Hat* also plays on art-historical precedents. The pose, necklace and shape of the body are influenced by Cranach's *Venus* of 1532. However, Kirchner's reworking of this theme helped to produce an image which contemporary German viewers would have found hard to read. The "primitive" references in the background seem to jar with the sophisticated, urban nature of the nude. She is naked yet heavily made up, wears jewelry, a fashionable hat and shoes. Much like Manet's *Olympia* of fifty years earlier, her nudity is not of the conventional odalisque kind; she carries evidence of her sophisticated, possibly morally corrupt life. Prostitution, dancing and modeling were the "careers" implicated by her fashionable state of undress. This implied public invasion of feminine privacy is further suggested by the starkly painted pubic hair which has been shaved into a triangle shape, a fashion at the time among dancers. Moreover she is shown standing and engages the viewer with her eyes, rather than passively reclining as the object of his gaze. For the contemporary German audience for whom the nudes of Impressionist painters such as Corinth still held some progressive or "modern" status, Kirchner's *Standing Nude* posed some problems of interpretation and meaning.

The sexual connotations of Kirchner's work also contributed to its controversial "modern" status. The model was the artist's girlfriend, the dancer Doris Grohse, and the Brücke group's overt association with the world of dancers, prostitutes and performers, who were often the subjects of their works, was a part of their sexual revolution. Sexuality, and its representation in both female and male subjects, was central to their notion of free self-expression, as was their association with various forms of modern dance. From the bourgeois point of view such open sexuality, associated with social groups such as prostitutes, bohemians and dancers, was condemned as decadent or deviant. In his works Kirchner often combined overt references to this "decadent" sexuality, with references to a more "primitive" sexuality. In the *Bathers* for example, the drapes which protect the room to the left contain figure groups in the roundels, including couples making love. Similar drapes decorated with scenes of copulating couples appear in the background of other works from this period, including *Girl under Japanese Umbrella*, and were probably based on painted drapes in Kirchner's own studio. They were influenced by erotic scenes on carved and painted house beams from the Palau Islands which Kirchner saw in the Dresden Museum.

The overtly sexual imagery on these beams and other African and Oceanic sources also encouraged prevalent Western myths about black sexuality, "natural rhythms," and instinctive expression. Such myths are evoked, or at least suggested, in Kirchner's use of male and female negro dancers and models in his works from around 1909-11. And in a now famous studio photograph he combined the "primitive" with its painted representation when he posed his black models Sam and Milli in the nude amidst the same decorative drapes as those depicted in the background of the *Bathers*.

For Kirchner in particular, the representation of the nude was a potential weapon in the refutation of contemporary bourgeois sexual mores. I am not arguing, however, that through his work Kirchner was somehow able to escape a prevalent system of Eurocentric values through which both black people and nude women came to symbolize some fantasy of free "primitive" expression. His liberal sexuality also reinforced Western myths. I am suggesting rather that when this primitivism was combined with a visible concern with the technical and art-historical problems of representation, he could on occasion produce works which upset contemporary

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artistic expectations, and which cannot be read easily in terms of a crude nature/ culture opposition.

In some ways this opposition is more easily read into the many nudes in nature and bather subjects produced by members of the Brücke group between c.1909 and 1914. For example, the association between nude woman, the "primitive" and nature is made explicitly and (I would argue) somewhat crudely, in Heckel's famous *Day of Glass*. In this work, woman is shown naked against an awesome nature of snowy mountain peaks, reflected in a lake. Her arms are raised to display a body painted to resemble an African sculpture. She has a pot belly, pendulous breasts and partly visible face. Denied recognizable features, she functions as both a literal and symbolic representation of the "primitive," of "woman as nature."

Yet there are several bathers subjects from around the same period in which the symbolic meanings are less clear cut. During the summers of 1909, 1910 and 1911 members of the group, accompanied by girlfriends and models (often including Sam and Milli) made regular expeditions to the Moritzburg lakes, in the countryside north of Dresden, and within easy reach of the town by train. On these expeditions, they would often bathe, sunbathe and sketch in the nude. Thus the Moritzburg paintings represent both a record of those summer activities and a critical engagement with a long-established art-historical theme.

Paintings such as Kirchner's *Bathers at Moritzburg* or Heckel's *Bathers* (Plates 61, 75) show both men and women bathing naked and participating in nudist cults (Nackkultur or Freikörperkultur) which were especially popular among the younger generation in Germany at the time. Such cults were often associated with vegetarianism, dress reform and nature cures, and fed into early Expressionist ideas of direct and unsophisticated expression. Although Naturism and nudist cults tended to be represented as "alternative" movements their political associations were often contradictory, for they attracted both progressive and conservative supporters, reinforcing once again the confusing political sources of Expressionist ideology.

It is no coincidence that the Brücke group emerged in Dresden, a town then famous for its provision of sanatoria and health resorts, promoting a culture of natural medicine and bodily revitalization through nudity. Sexual freedom was more often than not a part of this culture of the body. Like the experience of nudity within nature, open expressions of sexuality and eroticism were seen to be tapping the more instinctive needs of the individual. Thus many of the Moritzburg sketches and paintings show naked couples, often in erotic poses. The theme of the naked couple and the frequent inclusion of male nudes, often with their sexual organs clearly displayed, did not conform to some of the historical conventions for the bathers theme. Moreover the sexual implications would have been read by some as a defiant refusal of contemporary bourgeois sexual mores.

The *Bathers at Moritzburg* was probably intended as a companion piece to the *Bathers in a Room*. It is identical in size (151 x 199cm), and was repainted around the same time. Given these dimensions, it is reasonable to presume that both works were intended as "modern" statements on a grand scale. The tension between the epic pretensions of such large scale canvases, and the unconventional reworkings of the bathers theme evident in each canvas, is still accessible to a modern audience. Although the Moritzburg work is out of doors, the crude distortions, the use of greenish skin color (perhaps intended as a literal association with the green of nature?) and the combination of full frontal male and female nudity do not fit even with Cezannesque conventions for the bathers theme, which were then regarded in France and Germany as progressive interpretations of the subject. The technical distortions and angularities,

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the crowding of figures to the left of the canvas, seem, moreover, to undermine the pastoral associations which are sustained in, for example, many of Matisse's reworkings of the theme.

Brücke primitivism, then, could be double edged. The interpretations of the imagery of bathers which recur in pre-war painted and graphic work by the group, seem to reinforce the nature-culture opposition central to contemporary Expressionist theory. On the other hand, I have suggested that, in Kirchner's work in particular, some of the pictorial conventions associated with the representation of woman in nature are critically analyzed - or at least reworked - and take on different meanings. Kirchner's deliberate combination of the sophisticated and urban with "primitive" and tribal imagery, of female and male nudity, contribute to this reworking of conventions. In some of the paintings discussed I suggested that the use of technical distortions, spatial confusion, and the play on conventions for the representation of the nude, contribute to a pictorial ambivalence, focusing our attention both on issues of pictorial representation, and on the modern associations of a supposedly "primitive" subject-matter.