

‘A relentless march of energy: Expressionism’  
By Lloyd Gill

*“A canvas is no blank surface. It is already cluttered up with clichés, even if one can’t see them. The painter has to go through a time when he is no longer able to see anything, a collapse of his visual coordinates. That is why I say the painter has to integrate a catastrophe that becomes the very matrix of the picture.”*<sup>1</sup>

The roots

Expressionism was founded in Germany throughout WWII. While Hitler demanded that any type of express Art was to be band, he especially noticed expressionism. ‘Degenerate art’ as Hitler announced it, would be discarded and destroyed with everything else he hated.

In 1927, an organisation was formed to combat the 'corruption' of Art, called the National Socialist Society for German Culture. In 1937 thousands of artworks were banished from German Museums by Nazi officials, six hundred and fifty were chosen for an exhibition titled '*Entartete Kunst*'. The exhibition was intended to mock modern art, to allow the public to compare these works with that of more classical artworks. The exhibition opened in Munich and toured eleven further cities in Germany and Austria. The art was deliberately presented shoddily, surrounded by graffiti, hand-written labels and hung unevenly, some without frames. Some of the Artists included in the exhibition were Franz Marc, Max Beckman, Marc Chagall, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Emile Nolde, who had over 1000 of his works confiscated and Otto Dix who had two hundred and sixty paintings removed from German museums in 1937 and many of which were burnt on Joseph Goebbels's order.

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- 1 Observation by Gilles Deleuze, cited by Herve Guilbert, “La peinture enflame l’écriture,” Le Monde, December 3, 1981
  - 2 <http://wwar.com/masters/movements/expressionism.html>

It was not just the artists who were ridiculed at the 'Entarte Kunst' exhibition, whose works were dubbed 'degenerative'. Many Artists' works were banned when the Nazis came to power in 1933; including that of Julius Levin, who was also arrested and died in Auschwitz, Kathe Kollwitz and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Expressionism has its roots from Paris, through the movement of 'Fauvism', founded by Matisse.

*“Fauvism 1905-1908, originated from France and the artwork of this movement could be characterised by non-naturalistic, vivid colours. Rene Matisse was a dominant figure of Fauvism.”*<sup>2</sup>

Two groups are said to be at the root of German Expressionism, *Die Bruecke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*. Both groups sought to move away from representational imagery. Die Bruecke (The Bridge) was formed in 1905, by a group of architecture students from Dresden, Germany. They included Fritz Bleyl (1880-1966), Ernst Kirchner (1880-1938), Erick Heckel (1883-1970) and Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (1884-1976). The artworks of the movement often included distorted lines, enhanced forms, vivid colours and flattened perspectives; subject matter was often influenced by Freudian theory and 'Primitive' art from Africa, the South Pacific and Indonesia.

Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) existed between 1911-1913. This German Expressionist group from Munich, was established by Wassily Kandinsky (1886-1944) Franz Marc (1880-1916) and Gabriel Munter (1877-1962), promoting individual expression and freedom from artistic restraint. Although the impressionist influence is clear in early work, the artists that were part of 'Der Blaue Reiter' are considered to be the pioneers of Abstract art and Abstract expressionism.

The British painters Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff, Michael Andrews, and arguably David Hockney, were a generation of Artists that were particularly interested in the subject of the human figure.

### America

*“Compared to American art, the painting in Europe seemed less aggressive and more inwardly directed.”*<sup>3</sup>

After 1939, American painter’s congregated into a gestation period, where they studied Marxist theories and political action as well as the social and individual purposes of their work. Having rejected American scene painting, they also felt that social realism was not an adequate way to deal with the situation of human and societal crisis.

*“The socialist is to free the working class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed.”*<sup>4</sup>

Robert Motherwell felt that art was too important to be used as a tool to articulate socio-political references. Only revolutionary ideas and thoughts were accepted and anything else would be discarded in a similar manner as what the Nazi had done.

American expressionistic painters were an influence for Joan Mitchell. Pollock, Newman, Rothko and De Kooning were all colossal influences to her. Mitchell (1926 – 93) painted loose and with energetic flow. Her inspiration came from the landscape, water, trees, and rocks in her garden at Vetheuil, close to Monet’s water garden. Born and trained in

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3 Theories and documents of Contemporary Art, A source book of Artists’ writings, Stiles Kristine and Selz Peter, University of California Press, 1996, p230.

4 Robert Motherwell, excerpts from “Beyond the Aesthetics,” Design 47, no 8 (April 1946): 38-39. Reprinted by permission of the Dedalus Foundation, Inc

Chicago, Mitchell, like her friend and mentor Sam Francis, moved to Paris and was an important American presence in France.

Joan Mitchell Interview with Yves Michaud (1986)

Yves Michaud: What inspired you to paint?

Joan Mitchell: When I was sick, they moved me to a room with a window and suddenly through the window I saw two fir trees in a park, and the grey sky, and the beautiful grey rain, and I was so happy. It had something to do with being alive. I could see the pine trees, and I felt I could paint. If I could see them, I felt I would paint a painting. Last year, I could not paint. For a while I did not react to anything. All I saw was a white metallic colour.

YM: When you started again painting, you painted dying sunflowers. I remember that you said to me then: ‘At last, I can feel them.’.....

JM: Sunflowers are something I feel very intensely. They look so wonderful when young and they are so very moving when they are dying. I don’t like fields of sunflowers. I like them alone or, of course, painted by Van Gogh.<sup>5</sup>

### Abstract figuration

Alberto Giacometti What interests me about the head:

David Sylvester, Art critic and once a friend of Giacometti, once described his paintings in his book ‘looking at Giacometti’; *“In the paintings, space is like a cloudy heavy liquid*

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<sup>5</sup> Yves Michaud, excerpts from “Conversations with Joan Mitchell, January 12, 1986,” in Joan Mitchell: New paintings (New York: Xavier Fourcade, 1986), n.p

<sup>6</sup>Looking at Giacometti by David Sylvester, Chatto & Windus Ltd 1994, p. 35

*that is seen no less than the mass at the heart of it is seen, and is hardly less tangible. The mass has energy that is turned inward upon itself, violently compressed around a central core, so that it seems to have a highly concentrated density; the space has an energy that is turned outwards, sometimes as if exploding out of the picture, and at the same time often seems held back, drawn in, by the mass at its center, as if this were the center of a whirlwind”<sup>6</sup>*

When you are looking at someone directly, mostly you will be looking at their eyes. Even animals look you in the eyes, if you were to look at a blind man’s eyes you still would to gain the same connection you would with somebody who had full vision.

Giacometti understood that the beginning of creating a head, the eyes are a good place to start. Rather than focusing purely on the shape of the skull, the eyes will draw the viewer to the subject.

“When I get the curve of the eyeball right, then I’ve got the socket; when I get the socket, I’ve got the nostrils, the point of the nose, the mouth.....and all of this together might just produce the gaze, without one’s having to concentrate on the eye itself”<sup>7</sup>



Alberto Giacometti, Self-Portrait, 1962, Ballpoint pen on paper napkin

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<sup>7</sup> Alberto Giacometti, excerpts from an interview for the film *Alberto Giacometti* (Zurich, 1966) by Ernst Scheidegger, Peter Munger, and Jacques Dupin, cited in Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971), p. 324.

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Frank Auerbach A leader amongst men:

Auerbach born in Berlin, to Max Auerbach and Charlotte Nora Burchardt, both of whom had studied art. His parents sent him to England in 1939 to escape the Nazis as part of the Kindertransport programme. 'Kindertransport' or Refugee Children Movement or "RCM" is the name given to the rescue mission that took place nine months prior to the outbreak of World War II. The family was Jewish; his parents subsequently died in a concentration camp.

Auerbach studied art at St Martin's School of Art in London and later at the Royal College of Art, but was more strongly influenced by lessons with David Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic, and especially so by Bomberg's exploratory attitude. He also encouraged his St Martin's classmate Leon Kossoff to attend Bomberg's classes.

“Bomberg, Auerbach main influence was expelled from the Slade School of Art in 1913, with agreement between the senior teachers Tonks, Frederick Brown and Philip Wilson Steer, because of the audacity of his breach from the conventional approach of that time.”

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Auerbach's technique of plastering the paint, moving thickly applied paint in a flick like manner to create a textured plain began at St Martins under Bomberg's teachings. The Impasto technique, (thickly applied using a palette knife) which he still uses today, governed the entire work and subject matter.

“Auerbach does not prepare underpaintings, nor does he use outline sketches for portraits, and he relies on his sitters being able to reassume the same pose session after session. In

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<sup>8</sup> *David Bomberg 1890–1957: Paintings and Drawings*, Tate Gallery, London, Arts Council of Great Britain (organizer), 1967. (Exhibition catalogue.)

contrast, he sketches landscapes in the field and brings the sketches back to the studio, sometimes using as many as 200 sketches for a single painting”<sup>9</sup>  
His drawings as they still are today, full of vitality and human primordial essence.

Energetic and flow,  
Motion is rapid,  
Movement swift as a birds dive,  
Ripples in time marauder throughout,  
Time is forgotten,  
Time is lost,  
Time is caught in moment,  
Frozen and chilled,  
While Auerbach paints.

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<sup>9</sup> "[Francis Bacon](#)". *The New York Times*, April 1992. Retrieved on February 28, 2009