Aya Soika

**Max Pechstein (1881-1955)**

The Saxon painter Max Pechstein was hailed as one of the leading representatives of modern painting in Germany throughout the 1910s and 1920s, but played a comparatively minor role in the canonisation of German Expressionism after 1945.

Pechstein first gained notoriety through his affiliation with the artist’s group *Die Brücke* from 1906 until 1912. He only came to the attention of a wider art public by way of his involvement in the controversial exhibition society *Neue Secession* in Berlin in May 1910 for which he served as president, designing its legendary first poster and catalogue cover (see figure). Pechstein featured prominently in Paul Fechter’s 1914 book *Der Expressionismus* which presented him as the figurehead of *Die Brücke* in Dresden and Berlin (much to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s annoyance). Pechstein continued to paint and to exhibit throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Despite being included in the notorious 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition, and expelled from the Prussian Academy of Arts, he remained a member of the Reich Chamber of Arts throughout the Nazi dictatorship, and was the first of the so-called 'degenerate artists' to receive permission to exhibit again in private galleries in 1939. The first retrospective of his work after his death (in Berlin in 1959) signalled the art historical focus on the early period of his career during the *Brücke* years at the expense of his later oeuvre.

Pechstein, born into a workers’ family in Zwickau and trained as a decorative painter before moving on to the Royal Academy of Arts in Dresden in 1903, was the only *Brücke* member who had travelled to Paris and the first of the group to settle in Berlin in the summer of 1908. One of his three paintings on display at the *Berlin Secession* in April 1909 was sold to industrialist and art collector Walther Rathenau, a major success for the young painter. In 1913 Berlin art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt took him under contract, and managed the artist exclusively until their falling out in 1921. It was Gurlitt who sponsored Pechstein’s 1914 trip to the German colony of Palau in the South Seas which ended abruptly with the Japanese occupation of Palau following the outbreak of the First World War. In 1917 he produced a large series of nostalgic and romanticising depictions of his trip.

Pechstein’s works lack the roughness and sketchy appearance of paintings by his *Brücke* colleagues Kirchner, Erich Heckel or Karl Schmidt-Rottluff; instead they show the influence of Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse. But despite Kichner’s later accusations of him being a mere “imitator of Matisse”, Pechstein’s contribution to *Die Brücke* should not be underestimated. When he joined the group in Dresden in the summer of 1906 he impressed his colleagues by his versatility and technical skills as well as his professional success. After the end of the Second World War he was appointed professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in West Berlin.

References and further reading:

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Illustration: Poster for the Exhibition “Zurückgewiesener der Secession Berlin im Kunstsalon Maximilian Macht” (Rejected of the Berlin Secession…), 1910, colour lithograph, 74 x 100 cm, Private Collection