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| Die Brücke [The Bridge] |
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| Convinced that art should be an expression of life representing the vitality of the times, four architecture students in Dresden joined together to found Die Brücke (The Bridge) in 1905. The name, suggested by one of their founding members, Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, reflected their intention to provide a bridge between the art of previous generations and that of the new era of the twentieth century.  As the initiator of Die Brücke and its chief spokesman, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner had the audacious idea of renewing German art. He was joined by Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, fellow students studying at Dresden’s Technische Hochschule (Dresden Technical Institute). In preceding years, both Kirchner, who had taken a leave to study art, and Bleyl had been working on woodcuts influenced heavily by the earlier Jugendstil. While Bleyl remained interested in the illusion of space, Kirchner had begun to simplify his style to include greater planarity, with jagged lines providing delineation and contour, creating a two-dimensional effect already indicative of his signature stylistic innovations of the future. |
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While Bleyl remained interested in the illusion of space, Kirchner had begun to simplify his style to include greater planarity, with jagged lines providing delineation and contour, creating a two-dimensional effect already indicative of his signature stylistic innovations of the future.  Bleyl’s involvement in the Brücke movement was primarily based on his friendship with Kirchner; his style remained more akin to Impressionism than Expressionism. Heckel, however, along with Schmidt-Rottluff, contributed significantly to the development of Expressionism. He admired many of the old masters and focused particularly on the planarity and use of colour evident in the work of Vermeer. Heckel rejected the bourgeois values inherent in both form and content of the art of the past, although his work continued to be somewhat tempered and harmonious in comparison to Kirchner’s.  Like Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff was a self-taught artist whose immediate appeal to the group was his flamboyant use of colour and his passionate self-expression. Also influenced by Jugendstil and Impressionism, he learned the art of the woodcut from Kirchner. Schmidt-Rottluff’s use of shape and line and the arrangement of space in his compositions were transformed by the practice of this technique.  The four friends set up a studio in an empty butcher shop in a workers’ quarter of Dresden. There they lived and worked together intuitively and intensely, pursuing goals that were essentially the same—to banish the bias and formalism, ornamentation and lack of emotion in the art then prevalent. In their view, art was to be at once inventive and illustrative and ardently expressive.  In addition to creating woodcuts in the manner of medieval German practitioners, an important medium for the group, the members of Die Brücke also practiced etching, lithography, wood carving, drawing, and painting. They were further influenced by the work of Japanese printmakers, African tribal art, and sculpture of the South Seas. A number of their contemporaries, including Vallotton, Gauguin, and especially Munch and van Gogh, played an important role as precursors of Expressionism and provided inspiration to the members. The Brücke group followed their example in devising personal imagery rendered in heavy line, strong colour, and thick brushstrokes.  Die Brücke expanded in 1906 by taking on Emil Nolde (who remained a member of the group for a relatively brief time) and Max Pechstein, an artist of singular skill and proficiency. Both Nolde and Pechstein participated in the first Brücke exhibition in 1906, staged in a light-fixture showroom in a factory among hanging lamps designed for the typical bourgeois consumer of the period. The exhibit did not draw a large audience and received little approbation from those that attended. The critic Paul Fechter was an important exception with his review in the *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, identifying the group as a rising new movement in art.    Kirchner wrote the manifesto of Die Brücke and cut it into wood, printing it by hand in 1906. Later that year, two foreign members were added to the group: the Finnish Axel Gallen-Kallela, who had moved from a naturalistic style to dramatic representations of Finnish myths and legends that evoked admiration from the Brücke members; and the Swiss Cuno Amiet, who had studied in Paris and Munich, and who joined the artistic community at Pont-Aven in Brittany in 1892. Influenced by Hodler upon his return to Switzerland, he nonetheless retained his individualistic, intensely brilliant colour palette which, along with his large planes of colour, commended him to the Dresden group.  Also in 1906, Die Brücke began publishing an annual portfolio of prints produced by the members for their supporters. From approximately 1907, the development of the group focused on an effort to unify figure and landscape, experiencing nature first-hand and studying the human body moving about freely in natural surroundings. Moritzburg in the lake district near Dresden and the moor country, as well as the nearby islands, became the settings for their studies and experimentation together and separately.  A second small exhibit of graphic works by the Brücke artists in winter of 1906/1907 also included woodcuts by Wassily Kandinsky, who was visiting Dresden at the time. The following fall, a larger exhibition at the Salon Richter in Dresden again met with disfavour. In 1908, at the instigation of Pechstein, the fauvist painter Kees van Dongen was invited to exhibit his work with the Brücke, which had its own gallery as part of the New Secession in Berlin from 1908 to 1911. The Silesian artist Otto Müller, the last member to join the Brücke, did so after its important exhibit at the Galerie Arnold in Dresden in 1910, which included their first published exhibition catalogue, a significant document of the Expressionist movement.  The Brücke artists finally achieved renown because of an exhibition held at the Galerie Fritz Gurlitt in Berlin in April 1912. Their individualistic styles had achieved fruition by 1911 and their work was no longer as consistent as it was earlier. But this, plus the dynamics of the Berlin art world, where almost all of the members had relocated, undermined the cohesion of the group. When Kirchner’s text for a jointly planned chronicle of the Brücke in 1913 did not meet the majority’s expectations, the group severed itsaffiliation and Die Brücke dissolved*.* |
| Further reading:  (Gordon)  (Selz) |