Die Brücke

Everyone who with directness and authenticity conveys that which drives him to creation, belongs to us.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER, 1906 MANIFESTO

On 7 June 1905 in Dresden, four German architecture students, Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966), Erich Heckel (1883–1970), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976) founded the ‘The Artists’ Group of the Bridge’, or Die Brücke (The Bridge). The group would become one of the main forces of German *Expressionism.

The artists were young, idealistic and imbued with the belief that through painting they could create a better world for all. Their first manifesto, Programm, published as a broadside in 1906, contained Kirchner’s call to arms:

‘We call all young people together, and as young people who carry the future in us, we want to wrest freedom for our actions and our lives from the older, comfortably established forces.’ Like others before them, such as those in the English *Arts and Crafts movement, the artists developed a broad-ranging social ideology, encompassing not just art but all of life. They saw their role to be revolutionaries, or prophets like the *Nabis, rather than keepers of tradition.

The name was chosen by Schmidt-Rottluff to symbolize the link, or bridge, they would form with art of the future.
In a letter inviting the older German Expressionist Emil Nolde (1867–1956) to join the group, Schmidt-Rottluff explained: "To attract all revolutionary and fermenting elements: that is the purpose implied in the name "Brücke"." Nolde, briefly persuaded, joined the group for a few months between 1906 and 1907. The philosophical underpinnings of the group, their name and their frequent use of the bridge motif have also been linked to Friedrich Nietzsche's book Also Sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 1883).

Despite their utopian aims, the group was united more by what they disliked in the art around them – anecdotal realism and "Impressionism" – than by any clear artistic program of their own. Guided by the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement and "Jugendstil (German Art Nouveau), they set up a workshop in Dresden in which to paint, carve and make woodcuts, often collaborating on projects. Part of their purpose was to advocate a greater connection between art and life, and Kirchner and Heckel made furniture and sculptures for their studios and painted wall decorations. Jugendstil graphics had an obvious influence on their work, as did Gothic German woodcuts and, later, African and Oceanic wood carvings, which were on show at the Dresden Ethnographic Museum. Vincent van Gogh (see "Post-Impressionism"), Paul Gauguin (see "Synthetism") and Edvard Munch (see "Symbolism") were also important precursors, admired by Die Brücke artists for their authenticity and expressiveness. Russian and Scandinavian literature also provided inspiration, Dostoyevsky in particular.

The Brücke artists were aware of contemporaneous developments in France, and in 1908 an exhibition of Henri Matisse's work in Berlin confirmed their enthusiasm for the "Fauves. Their work shares certain visual characteristics - simplified drawing, exaggerated forms and bold, contrasting colours - and both groups insisted on the freedom of the artist to interpret sources in nature in individual ways. However, in contrast to both Fauve paintings and Die Brücke's utopian ideals, most work by Die Brücke artists, particularly their woodcuts, presents an intense, often harrowing vision of the contemporary world.

The first major influence on the Die Brücke style – and on German Expressionism in general – was "Art Nouveau. In 1903 and 1904 Kirchner studied in Munich under one of the leading designers of the Jugendstil, Hermann Obrist, and an early street scene, Street, Dresden (1907–8), with its curvilinear figures in a dream-like space and bold colours, displays a debt to his Art Nouveau training. By 1913, when Kirchner completed Five Women in the Street, his painting displayed an awareness of the developments of "Cubism in its jagged, geometric forms, combining Fauve colour with the distortion of Gothic German art. The elongated figures with spiky feet and features are characteristic of Kirchner's mature style, as is the attempt to convey the harsh, psychologically intense atmosphere of urban life.
Schmidt-Rottluff was the boldest colourist of the group, producing images in a discordant, forceful style. His personal style is exemplified in his work *Midday on the Moor* (1908) in the simplification of the forms and in the balance of the work's composition. In works such as *Rising Moon* (1912) and *Summer* (1913), the two-dimensional quality and abrupt flat planes of colour reflect his style of woodcuts and exemplify many of the characteristics associated with Die Brücke artists.

From 1906 the founder members of Die Brücke were joined by other German and European artists, including Nolde and Max Pechstein (1881–1955) and the Swiss Cuno Amiet (1868–1961) in 1906, and in 1907 the Finnish artist Akseli Gallén-Kallela (1865–1931). In 1908, the Dutch Fauvist Kees van Dongen (1877–1968) joined, and in 1910 the Czech Bohumil Kubišta (1884–1918) and the German Otto Mueller (1874–1930) became members.

The group organized a series of exhibitions, the first two in 1906 and 1907, held in the showroom of a lampshade factory in suburban Dresden, which Heckel had designed. Soon their work was shown annually by prominent galleries in Dresden and in travelling exhibitions throughout Germany, Scandinavia and Switzerland. These activities were supported financially by 'passive members' of the group (friends and supporters), who received a portfolio of woodcuts or lithographs each year for their contributions.

By 1911 all of the members of the group had moved to Berlin, and had begun to go their separate ways. Differences between the artists were beginning to be reflected in their work, as each moved away from the principles of style which had originally united them. In 1913 Kirchner published *Chronik der Künstlergemeinschaft Brücke* (Chronicle of the artists' community of Die Brücke), a history of the group, and the prominence he gave to himself in it led to the formal dissolution of the group in the same year. Although short-lived, the movement's vision of life expressed through their style of hard, angular painting led to Expressionism being considered a primarily German art form. Their interest in woodcuts and the graphic arts led to a revival of printmaking as a major art form. Like the Fauve experiments in France, Die Brücke was indeed a bridge from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism to the art of the future which would assert its independence of means and expression through colour, line, form and two-dimensionality. As Kirchner wrote about Die Brücke:

Painting is the art which represents a phenomenon of feeling on a plane surface. The medium employed in painting, for both background and line, is colour.... Today photography reproduces an object exactly. Painting, liberated from the need to do so, regains freedom of action.... The work of art is born from the total translation of personal ideas in execution.

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**Key Collections**

- Brücke-Museum, Berlin, Germany
- Kunsthauz, Hamburg, Germany
- Leicester City Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, England
- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany

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Above: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Five Women in the Street*, 1913

The women in the picture appear as menacing creatures, like vultures ready to prey. The painting powerfully communicates the dual sense of attraction and repulsion that women, especially prostitutes, held for many artists associated with Expressionism, Symbolism and the Decadent Movement.

Opposite: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Poster: Die Brücke*, 1910

Simplified forms and bold contours characterize much of Kirchner's work; the poster shows the influence both of Gothic woodcuts and of African carvings.

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**Key Books**

- B. Herbert, *German Expressionism: Die Brücke and Der blaue Reiter* (1983)
- P. H. Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley, CA, 1983)