

**WALL TEXTS**

# **“GREAT REALISM & GREAT ABSTRACTION”**

**DRAWINGS FROM MAX BECKMANN TO GERHARD RICHTER****13 November 2019 to 16 February 2020, Städel Museum****Introduction**

Distinguished by the fast pace of scientific discoveries and technical developments, radical breaks in society and politics and the convulsions of two world wars, and seemingly reconciled by the reunification of the divided country, the twentieth century in Germany was contradictory, polyphonic and extreme. Those adjectives also characterize its art: it was a century of avant-gardes, artists' associations and unyielding individuality.

This broad artistic spectrum can be described by the two “poles” Wassily Kandinsky referred to in 1911 as fundamental for modernism: “great realism” and “great abstraction”, the representational and the non-representational. Sometimes a pair of opposites, sometimes a synthesis, these two complements together form a leitmotif that unites the nearly 1,800 works of German twentieth-century draughtsmanship in the collection of the Städel Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings, even across generations.

The exhibition “Great Realism & Great Abstraction” features some 100 major works from these extensive and superb holdings, from simple pencil sketches to vivid pastels and watercolours and even monumental collages, ranging in date from 1910 to 1989/90. Drawing has always been the medium of searching, invention and experimentation and – especially in times of surveillance and oppression by the state – of free thought. In modernism, it gained increasing autonomy. The works on display moreover show how the Department of Prints and Drawings continually shifted its focus over the decades, mirroring the strong ties between the artists and their patrons on the one hand and the Städel Museum on the other.

The exhibition presents works from the holdings of the Städel Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings and Modern Department and permanent loans from the Deutsche Bank.

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**Max Beckmann's “Transcendental Objectivity”**

Max Beckmann (1884–1950) was one of the many artists who were deeply affected by the cruelties of World War I. In 1915, certified unfit for military service owing to a physical and mental breakdown, he did not return to his family in Berlin but settled in

Frankfurt. In an abrupt departure from his previous artistic work, he developed a new style that is first evident in his drawings. He now sought to capture his motifs directly, without regard for spatial or anatomical correctness. Even the types of lines he drew changed, becoming harder and more prominent. He wanted to reproduce not only what was outwardly visible, but also tensions and forces lying concealed beneath the surface. In his attempt to verbalize his new pictorial language he arrived at the term “transcendental objectivity”.

### **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**

#### **From Nature Impression to “Hieroglyph”**

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) engaged in drawing on a daily basis. Whether he was on the street, in the cinema, at a concert or variety show, studying nudes in the studio or the outdoors, he always had his drawing utensils with him so as to capture what he experienced directly. As he worked in this medium, he reduced natural forms to simple signs conveying their essence – so-called “hieroglyphs”. Yet even if these abstract forms consist of just a few distinct lines, they always retain a certain closeness to reality. To quote the artist himself, his pictures were “not illustrations of certain things or beings, but independent organisms of line, surface and colour that contain the natural forms only to the extent necessary to serve as a key to comprehension”.

#### **German Expressionism – Colour-Form Events**

In the years around 1900, a spirit of optimism and new departure prevailed – also in art. In the search for artistic renewal, a great number of often very different avant-gardist currents emerged simultaneously. Young artists joined in associations such as the Brücke or Blauer Reiter and sought adequate means of expressing what August Macke called the “stupendous life” rushing in on them. They turned away from the traditional conceptions of art taught at the academies and, initially on paper, experimented with new modes of depiction. Rejecting naturalistic representation, they translated what they saw and experienced into basic visual elements such as line, surface, colour and form. They no longer modelled bodies to look three-dimensional but worked instead with bold contours and two-dimensional, monochrome zones of colour from palettes that departed from the natural appearance of things. What is more, the artists emphasized the material qualities of their crayons, charcoals, opaque body colours and delicate watercolours and integrated chance into their compositions and application of the paint. In their watercolours, for example, they allowed the paints to spread across the paper uncontrolled, bringing about lively interplays between colour and form: colour-form events.

### **Probing Form**

#### **Abstract & Real – The Primal Forces of Nature**

In the 1920s and '30s, a number of artists developed abstract formal languages, taking Expressionism and its revaluation of line, surface and colour as their starting point. At the same time, they gradually departed from those older examples, each

finding his way to his own individual style. Refraining from the illusionistic representation of depth, Rolf Nesch (1893–1975), Werner Gilles (1894–1961) and Ernst Wilhelm Nay (1902–1968) worked with surface-spanning colour forms, geometric figural depiction and emphatic lines. These formal tendencies are also evident in the work of Willi Baumeister (1889–1955), who clearly distanced himself, however, from Expressionism. He initially cultivated a more prosaic mode of expression, later devoting himself to archaic pictorial forms. Lines incised in the paper, but also chiaroscuro contrasts, served Baumeister as means of activating the picture surface. Yet however greatly their styles differed, these artists all based their works on the immediate visual impressions they captured in their drawings. Their artistic aim was to represent the primal forces of nature, which they perceived as expressions of life and translated into their pictorial compositions – for example in surging progressions of colour, clear colours of a virtually sunlight-flooded quality or relief-like effects reminiscent of rock formations.

## **Probing Form**

### **Eyes & Arabesques, Foldings & Codes**

The late works by Paul Klee (1879–1940) and Ernst Wilhelm Nay (1902–1968) and the “foldings” Hermann Glöckner (1889–1987) produced from the 1930s onward all exhibit a completely abstract formal language. Nay had initially cultivated a figurative style influenced by Expressionism, which he then gradually supplemented with geometric colour forms. Towards the end of his career, he thus found his way to pure abstraction that nevertheless retains subtle traces of nature in the form of eyes or rank arabesques. Glöckner’s “foldings” – reminiscent of constructivist compositions of the pre-war era – are surprising by virtue of their ever-new geometric constellations. Klee experimented with a non-representational sign language, unconventional materials and an energetic brushstroke that seems to anticipate the gestural dynamic of the 1950s “Informel”.

## **The German Informel**

### **From Expressionism to the Expression of Line**

Against the background of World War II and National Socialism’s crimes against humanity, it seemed impossible – especially for the young generation of artists – simply to pick up where the art of the 1920s and ’30s had left off. As their predecessors had done before and after World War I, emerging artists sought new means of expression, now also beyond the limits of German Expressionism. They developed a new, abstract pictorial language consisting exclusively of colour and form. In the process, they received pathbreaking impulses above all from their travels to Paris. In the early 1950s, Karl Otto Götz (1914–2017) and Bernard Schultze (1915–2005) and others discovered works of early Tachism in the French capital. This was an artistic current distinguished by an impulsive and generously pastose application of the paint. Inspired by Surrealism, Tachist artists allowed the unconscious and chance to intervene in the working process. Particularly the small-scale watercolours by Wols (1913–2005), with their fine linear webs that gave rise to

surreal-looking fantasy figures, served the young artists as a liberating and pioneering force. Wols's drawings thus became the point of departure for a new current known as 'Art Informel'. In 1953, its most important exponents in Germany – Otto Greis (1913–2001), Karl Otto Götz, Bernard Schultze and Heinz Kreutz (1923–2016) – founded the "Quadriga" artists' group in Frankfurt am Main.

### **Variants of Informel – Gesture, Space & Figuration**

After the exhibition of the Quadriga artists' collective at the Zimmergalerie Franck in Frankfurt in December 1952, the city on the Main developed into a centre of German Informel. From here the current spread throughout the Federal Republic and became one of the predominant artist movements of the 1950s. In the process, Informel developed such manifold variants as delicate bundles of graphite lines and vivid splatters of pastose paint, fine linear webs and compact whirls of colour spreading out to form two-dimensional colour zones. Its exponents drew, painted, scratched, dripped, poured, decaled and layered, destroyed and created anew. A drawing came about now in quiet concentration, now in loud, expressive gesture. Some artists merely adopted certain elements of Informel in their art. Carl Buchheister (1890–1964), for example, consolidated line clusters of the finest conceivable kind with dynamic sweeps in striking configurations in which his earlier geometric formal language makes its reappearance. Gotthard Graubner (1930–2013) translated gestural forms into the third dimension, and in the early '60s Karl Bohrmann (1928–1998) began combining free, expressive gesture with depictions of nudes. Around 1980, Arnulf Rainer (b. 1929) united non-representational expression with figural motifs in his "overdrawings" of Christ, thus transporting the "seed of the Informel" (Rainer) buried deep within him to the art of the late twentieth century.

### **"Creative Alliance"**

#### **'Realism' in the Divided Germany**

The artists of the post-war generation clearly dissociated themselves from the exponents of Informel. They had experienced the horrors and consequences of World War II as children, and now they addressed themselves to that chapter in German history. To do so, they deliberately reverted to a representational pictorial language. Eugen Schönebeck (b. 1936) and Georg Baselitz (b. 1938) depicted bodies covered with scars, wounds and ulcers in coloured pencil and ink drawings, Markus Lüpertz (b. 1941) drew "German motifs", Jörg Immendorff (1945–2007) prepared a stage for "Café Deutschland" in vividly colourful gouaches, and Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) produced monumental works reflecting on an aesthetic perceived as "German". In contrast to these expressions of resistance, with their explicit rejection of artistic "beauty", the East German artist Werner Tübke (1929–2004) of Leipzig trained himself on the Old Masters to develop a technically brilliant style. Around 1989/90, the reunification of East and West Germany brought forth an entirely new atmosphere, which Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) captured in sensitive, delicate graphite drawings. Even today, their dynamic language still conveys the mood of collapse and

new departure that A. R. Penck (1939–2017) described as: “EVERYTHING IS OPEN AGAIN. [...] FUSION – CONFUSION.”

### **New Drawing Mediums and Formats**

#### **Reflections on Art, Consumption and the Media**

In the 1960s, German artists not only began to address themselves increasingly to the country’s recent past, but also turned their attention to the affluent, consumption-oriented civil society. Thomas Bayrle (b. 1937), for instance, made drawings in which he dressed a female nude in a coat with a pattern consisting of coffee cups. Newly developed drawing mediums as well as commonplace ones previously considered unworthy of art – for example ballpoint pens, neon markers, fine liners and spray paint – now came into use. Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) employed them for simple drawings as well as complex, multi-layered collages. Many artists exceeded the dimensions previously common for draughtsmanship and produced monumental works: Antonius Höckelmann (1937–2000) spun a dense web of squirming loops across wide lengths of paper and Johannes Grützke (1937–2017) staged himself in large-scale self-portraits. Peter Sorge (1937–2000) created coloured pencil drawings assembled from various pictorial quotations to reflect on the changing media landscape and the increasing omnipresence of images, a phenomenon that is today more relevant than ever.