

Im Farbenrausch
Munch, Matisse
und die Expressionisten
Museum Folkwang

Extract from the Catalogue

"The Ecstasy of Colour – Munch Matisse and the Expressionists"

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Notes on the exhibition by Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau and Sandra Gianfreda

The exhibition *The Ecstasy of Colour* explores the origin of Fauvism and the development of Expressionism in Germany between 1905 and 1911. The focus lies on Henri Matisse, André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck in France who, within the space of three years, finally liberated painting from merely being used to provide a realistic depiction of nature and, through their novel use of colour, created a revolutionary style of painting. *The Ecstasy of Colour* examines how this new way of painting was received by artists in Germany in the years leading up to 1911 – in particular by Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff in Dresden, by Alexej von Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter and Marianne von Werefkin in Munich and Murnau respectively, as well as by Franz Marc and August Macke.

The year 1905 is of particular importance for painting both in France and in Germany: This is the year in which Matisse and Derain spent the summer in the French fishing village of Collioure. In the southern light the two friends painted simplified views showing the harbour and the little village, seen from atop a hill, using broad, casually applied brush strokes and vibrant, unmixed colours. At the same time Derain's friend Vlaminck chose motifs featuring the suburbs of Paris: village scenes, hilly landscapes and steamships on the Seine. In parts still influenced by the paintings of van Gogh and Paul Signac, Matisse and his fellow artists freed themselves from Postimpressionism, still predominant in France at the time, and developed an innovative style of their own. The young generation of artists drew their inspiration from their artistic predecessors' novel use of colour resulting in a veritable "Orgy of Pure Tones" – at least this is how critic Louis Vauxcelles described their works exhibited in the 1905 Salon d'Automne and initially branded these young painters with the derisive label "Fauves" ("wild animals").

In the same year Heckel, Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff and Fritz Bleyl founded the artists' group "Die Brücke", aiming to find an alternative to the painterly tradition and to explore new possibilities of artistic creation. In 1906, they were joined by Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde. Based on the works of the "fathers of modernism" – Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin – the artists of "Die

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Brücke" also developed their own spontaneous, distinct style of painting which centres around subjective feelings rather than the motif itself. Another important influence on their development was their direct exploration of the art of the young Frenchmen whom they invited to Germany for exhibitions; Edvard Munch also played a central role from 1907/1908 onwards. The Norwegian repeatedly spent time in Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden and Chemnitz, where his paintings and graphic works were shown. In 1907 Heckel and Nolde got in direct contact with Munch via the collector Gustav Schiefler, who published the catalogue raisonné of Munch's graphic work. Despite the efforts of the "Brücke" to get him to take part in their exhibitions there never was a joint showcase of their work.

At the same time a meeting of like minds occurred when Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Münter and Werefkin met in Munich and then, following extended stays abroad in Italy and France, got together regularly from the autumn of 1908 onwards to paint in Murnau, Upper Bavaria. Encouraged by Jawlenski they moved towards the new French way of painting which soon resulted in fundamentally altering the way they saw nature. In addition Marianne von Werefkin explored Munch's world of images. Together they increasingly liberated colour from its ties with the object and turned it into a design element in its own right: With red trees, blue mountains and yellow meadows these artists transformed landscapes into breathtaking motifs, borne by a highly subjective perception.

The expressionists developed their new aesthetics by joining lines, colours and planes to create shapes which governed their pictures, by freeing the colours from the intrinsic colour, by ignoring proportions, treating all elements of a composition as equal and bringing an increasing degree of abstraction to bear on the depictions of what they saw. Not least owing to their inclination toward France and the work of Munch did these artists turn Expressionism into a distinct visual language of its own until 1911 – one of the most important achievements of Modernity in Germany. As such Expressionism celebrated its first public triumph on the occasion of the 1912 *Internationale Kunstausstellung des Sonderbundes westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler* in Cologne.

With the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue *The Ecstasy of Colour* we trace this change of style in painting in France and, slightly lagging behind, in Germany. We focus our attention on the novel treatment of colour and its consequences: how it increasingly breaks free from its function as a means of depicting nature, how it takes on a role as a design element superior to the line and is transformed into a primary means of expressing inner experiences. The direct juxtaposition of carefully chosen works shows clearly how close the artists' visual concepts were but also how greatly their approaches differed. The Fauves redefined the relationship between nature and art by allowing their paintings to arise from the powerful interplay of colours. They rejected the attempt to capture the fleeting appearance of a

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motif, as done by the Impressionists, and instead strove to show the lasting character of things. In their 1906 manifesto the artists of the "Brücke" allowed themselves further liberties – everybody was meant to reproduce, in an "immediate and unadulterated" fashion, "what made them create". Here spontaneity in the act of painting was the most important aspect for them. Kandinsky, on the other hand, in his 1906 founding manifesto of the "Neue Künstlervereinigung München", called for the search for new artistic forms which "above all have to be free of all matters incidental in order to only express that which is essential – in brief, the pursuit of artistic synthesis".

When it comes to the motifs they chose the artists might have remained committed to the traditional genres, they did, however, liberate them from their academic constraints. This is the reason why, in the works of Braque, Derain, Matisse, Manguin and Vlaminck, we predominantly encounter landscapes, views of Collioure, Chatou or L'Estaque, in those of van Dongen primarily portraits and nudes; Matisse and Vlaminck painted still lifes overflowing with colour; the classical subject of the nude in a landscape was radically reinvented by Matisse. Apart from landscapes Dresden painter friends mostly portrayed nude models in their living quarters, which they simultaneously used as studios (fitted out with items of furniture and objects they made themselves) or they captured their carefree, unrestrained lives in the lakelands surrounding Dresden in their paintings. While they paid no heed the still life, it played a vital role in the works of Jawlensky, Münter and Macke. The focus of the painters working in Upper Bavaria lay on the landscape whereas one looks in vain for bathers in their works. The motif of the lady with a hat, on the other hand, was something all artists were equally enthusiastic about ever since Matisse presented his famous painting *Woman with a Hat* – which, unfortunately cannot be loaned to exhibitions due to a stipulation laid down in his will – at the 1905 Salon d'Automne and caused a great scandal.

With regard to these times Berlin art historian and museum founder Eberhard Roters, in his 1988 essay *Ausstellungen, die Epoche machten* (Exhibitions which defined an Era), wrote rather aptly about "paintings exploding with colour" which had now entered "orderly spaces". What he had in mind were the at times highly dedicated gallery owners and directors of art societies, but also private collectors, whose houses presented the new paintings, hanging on wallpaper still reflecting the décor of the late 19th century, "in an atmosphere of bourgeois respectability". The museums, on the other hand, initially rarely paid any attention to the works of the Frenchmen and the German Expressionists – in fact, with the exception of the Museum Folkwang, not a single one really did.

In the first years following the foundation of the museum Osthaus' focus lay almost exclusively on contemporary artists from France and Belgium. Henry van de Velde, who not only designed the interior

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of the Hagen museum building but also the private residence of the collector, introduced Osthaus to the art dealers Ambroise Vollard in Paris and Paul Cassirer in Berlin. "In less than a year he had purchased works by Monet, Renoir, Seurat, Signac, Cross, van Gogh, Gauguin and sculptures by Minne, Rodin and Constantin Meunier," van de Velde noted in his memoirs. August Macke confirmed this account when, at the end of May 1908, he came to Hagen for the first time and from there reported to collector Bernhard Koehler in Berlin on June 1st: "It is an exceptionally beautiful collection as one is rarely like to see. Not only has he [Osthaus] got the best of the modern artists, also old things, many from Egypt, Greece, India, Gothic items and Italian ones. We went all jeck [crazy], as one calls it here."

What is remarkable is that Macke does not mention the "best of the modern artists" by name as, during his visit, he would have also found three paintings by Matisse like, for example, the *Still Life with Asphodels*, painted in Collioure, the first work by the Frenchman shown in a museum, which the collector had purchased in October 1907 from Bernheim-Jeune. In December 1907 the Folkwang Museum dedicated a solo exhibition to Matisse, displaying seven of his paintings. Osthaus purchased *La berge* (today at Kunstmuseum Basel) in February 1908 and in the spring of the same year *Bathers with a Turtle* (today at Saint Louis Museum of Art) already became part of the Hagen collection. Apart from works on paper and tiles, also created in 1908, which were embedded into a wall in the private Haus Hohnehof residence, Osthaus was also able to secure Matisse's unglazed terra-cotta *Reclining Nude* (today Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen) which, in 1907, formed the basis for the *Blue Nude*, one of the artist's most programmatic pictures. At the same time Osthaus also acquired *L'Estaque, The Harbour* (today Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle, Zurich) from Braques' Fauvist period and Kees van Dongens' portrait of the Japanese dancer *Sada Yacco* (destroyed in 1945).

Among the artists whose work was included in Osthaus' collection early on was Edvard Munch. His painting *Winter in Nordstrand* (today privately owned) is said to have become part of the Hagen museum as early as the summer of 1903. In 1906 the Museum Folkwang arranged an exhibition featuring works by Munch and in the inventory catalogue of 1912 as many as sixteen graphic works are listed already.

The "Brücke" artist turned out to be great admirers of the Hagen collection. The correspondence between Dresden and Hagen commenced as early as 1906 with regard to the "Brücke" getting the chance to show their works. Heckel considered the Folkwang Museum a "modern and, for us, exemplary institution" and he felt honoured "to be able to arrange an exhibition of our works in the wonderful rooms of the first and, for the time being, only modern museum", as he wrote in his letter to Osthaus dated December 3rd, 1906. In June 1907 the first group exhibition of the Dresden artists took place in

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Hagen; in June 1910 there was a further presentation. It must have been August Kuth, assistant at the Folkwang, who, leading up to this exhibition, published a press release in the *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung* on June 5th, 1910. In it he sang the praises of the "Brücke" artists and their goals: "Our June exhibition is all under the banner of the Sturm und Drang. Young artists, to whom the Berlin Secession no longer had anything to offer, came together to form the 'Brücke'. It might have been hurt artists' pride, it might have been a clear awareness of their own worth – in any case they wanted to be free of being mere epigons, wanted to stand on their own two feet (...). Even those who are well versed in the Impressionist way of seeing, who understand the vivacity of pointillistic depictions will have to be patient here if these paintings are meant to speak to them." Kluth further wrote about the "brilliance" of clear colours, of "the shadows of complementary colours", "grand fervour of colours" as well as developing a painting using few, but essential planes of colour: "And here it is colour which also reflects the inner experience of the artist's soul." Inner experience and external expression have, according to Osthaus, been reconciled in a "pleasant harmony of colour".

Reading these euphoric as well as authentic words it is surprising that Osthaus the collector did not immediately acquire works by all the "Brücke" artists for his collection but rather, initially, only cared about Nolde. Until 1912 Osthaus was to acknowledge the latter's vibrant worlds of colour through numerous purchases and – like the works of the other Brücke" artists – was to recommend them for exhibitions, for example those of the "Sonderbund westdeutscher Künstler", of which Osthaus was a dedicated supporter.

Kandinsky, Macke, Marc and Münter, the artists of the "Neue Künstlervereinigung München" and the "Blue Rider", which resulted from it, had also been in contact with the Hagen Folkwang Museum since 1909 and showed their works in different constellations in four exhibitions. In 1912 the "Blue Rider" stopped off in Hagen as part of its tour of Germany and there its programmatic variety of artistic means of expression competed with the Folkwang collection. At that time the industrial city of Hagen was a meeting place for avant-garde art and the Museum Folkwang was, already one hundred years ago, literally, experiencing "the ecstasy of colour"!

The legacy of Osthaus was handed over to Ernst Gosebruch, who, at the time was the director of the Kunstmuseum Essen, which purchased the Folkwang collection in 1922. With bringing the two collections together in Essen he not only fulfilled the legacy but also developed the collection in a highly museal fashion and in terms of world art. He further bought works by the "Brücke" artists as well as the French painters, in particular Derain.

When the National Socialists seized power the Museum – which American art historian Paul J. Sachs in 1932 had deemed "the most beautiful museum in the world" – lost its leading role as the house of

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modernity. The seizure of “degenerate art” in 1937 deprived the museum of its avant-garde works created after 1910. What remained of the Osthaus collection were the “fathers of modernism” and also the *Still Life with Asphodels* by Matisse. All other works, altogether around 1400 of them, above all those by Heckel, Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, Kandinsky, Nolde and Marc were irretrievably lost to the museum. After 1945 the directors of the museum managed to lessen the impact of these losses with important new acquisitions – among them repurchases of those paintings seized in 1937. Building on this, to this day, the museum has been fortunate to be able to acquire works by those artists who have a major importance for the museum and the history of its collection.

One hundred years after the museum’s tenth anniversary in Hagen in 1912 we are able to present an extraordinary exhibition on a subject which Osthaus once focused on with his innovative and creative collecting: a comparison of avant-garde art from France and Germany.