

Contrasting Realities: Unveiling Emotions in German Expressionism

Faith Bennett

Filled with countless intense, dark lines creating bold images of German Expressionist art, the pieces within *The Anxious Eye* exhibition at the National Gallery of Art reveal the dramatic changes in the surrounding world during the tumultuous period of the early 20th century, marked by war and revolution (Washington, D.C.). Curated by Shelley Langdale and on display from February 11 to May 27, 2024, this exhibition is arranged throughout three main rooms of German expressionist art, followed by a fourth room containing more contemporary art by artists who drew upon the strategies of German expressionists, these pieces come together to tell a compelling story of the human psyche (National Gallery of Art). By drawing upon several pressing human emotions and body language, such as anxiety, despair, spirituality, and relationships, the German expressionists in this exhibition explore society's physical and psychological archetypes (Washington, D.C.).

[caption id="attachment_1971" align="aligncenter" width="237"]



"The Great Anxiety," Walter Gramatté 1918[/caption]

Throughout this exhibition, there are over 100 drawings, illustrated books, portfolios, and sculptures by various German artists, such as Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Walter Gramatté, Kathe Kollwitz, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. For example, one of these pieces titled "The Great Anxiety" by Walter Gramatté encapsulates these ideas of human emotions through various strokes of ink that create an abstract image of a bodyless man reaching out to the viewer with a blue withered hand, seemingly surrounded by a whirlwind of thoughts emerging from the top of his head. In addition to this piece, all the works within the exhibit reveal the complex cultural

movement in Germany during this period that aimed to rebel against the traditional confines of societal expectations of that time (National Gallery of Art).

Upon entering this exhibition, viewers are met with bright, yellow walls holding several black and gray works that contrast this intensity. Yet, as one travels further into the depths of this exhibition, they are met with brighter and more colorful pieces against a dull blue and gray wall. Therefore, as viewers walk through this maze of bold, captivating works, they can feel the gut-wrenching, earnest emotions captured by the expressionists. Do these emotions elicited by this exhibition generate strong emotions within the eye of the viewer? Or does this imagery demonstrate the artist's anxious eye when creating these intense pieces? In my view, the curator's choice of displaying the pieces in a manner that contrasts the background on which they are displayed highlights the emotions of the artists during their portrayal of human behavior and the subconscious while allowing the viewer to fully understand the reality of individual's attitudes and spiritual aspirations during the early 20th century.

German Expressionism has been one of the most significant art movements in history and, according to linguist and psychologist Isabella Meyer, has played a vital role in revealing German rebellion and independence and demonstrating the desire for social change and activism in economics, politics, music, architecture, sculpture, literature, cinema, and painting (Meyer). Additionally, Meyer's commentary about German Expressionism art describes how this art depicts "the subjective feelings of the artists about the disillusion they saw in society as the promise of war loomed" (Meyer). In my understanding of post-WWI Germany and artists' growing desire to create these pieces, the most significant reason for their reasoning to speak out was the betrayal and disillusionment they felt against the German government, primarily due to economic instability and political upheaval. Meyer's reflection on the significance of the artist's intent behind creating these pieces reveals the true nature of the intensity of their emotions and their ability to convey those emotions into their art to show the true reality of their experiences.

[caption id="attachment_1972" align="aligncenter" width="300"]



"Untitled Anxious Red," Rashid Johnson, 2021[/caption]

However, as German Expressionism became more widespread and known in Germany, this led to a broader range of works that were created, not only signifying rebellion but shifting to a more nuanced perspective of the human psyche and body, focusing on portraits, nature and

spirituality, relationships, and body language, all of which are represented throughout *The Anxious Eye* exhibition. Nevertheless, breaking these conventional artistic norms led to a more dynamic and evocative approach to artists' and viewers' expressions. Therefore, as this art style grew in popularity, simplified shapes with bold, sharp contours, bright colors, and geometrical images became some of the critical characteristics of German Expressionism (Hummel). However, as I viewed the exhibit and observed the various mediums present throughout, not only was I surprised by the lack of color in the works, but I was also intrigued to see that the majority of the pieces in the exhibition were prints and woodcuts rather than traditional paintings.

Artist and art blogger Anita Louise Hummel describes how the “reduction of forms allowed for heightened expression and a departure from the constraints of physical reality” for the few mediums that were used in this collection (Hummel). This allowed expressionist artists to utilize these mediums as a way to capture the intensity of human emotions and evoke strong waves of passion, anxiety, and accountability in the eyes of the viewers. According to this exhibition's curator Shelley Langdale, the medium of printmaking also “offered artists access to a wide range of textures and tonalities: crisply cut or roughly gouged marks of woodcut; fine, velvety lines of drypoint; granular crayon and washlike drawing effects of lithography; and subtle tonal shifts of aquatint” (Langdale). Langdale's inclusion of these works, therefore, demonstrates how, despite the artists using similar mediums, this allowed them to express a collective form of depth and nuance in their works. Each piece represents the artist's own emotions in different ways while still representing a central image of anxiety and rebellion.

However, some of the brighter and non-natural colors in some works help create a clear distinction between the artwork, artist, and objective reality (Hummel). That said, the gestural markings that make up the pieces within this exhibition still serve as a powerful vehicle for emotional expression, as the bold, exaggerated, and vibrant style implies a sense of urgency and intensity. At the same time, the art still maintains a dynamic visual rhythm that reveals the turmoil and unrest of this period. One piece that demonstrates this expressionist style more abstractly is the piece “Anxious Red” by Rashid Johnson. This piece, as it is very different from the other pieces within this exhibition, demonstrates a more aggressive form of anxiety. As I analyzed this piece, which immediately caught my attention when viewing the exhibition, its vibrancy and abstract images arranged in various overlapping ovals, straight and curved lines, and blots of the same bold red color made me reflect on the emotions it was eliciting from me. As I stared at the screenprint, I began questioning whether it was anger or distress I was feeling, ultimately allowing me to realize this was an important piece to symbolize the different ways a person may capture their own feelings of anxiety.

With this knowledge and context of German Expressionism art throughout history and the role it has played in revealing the emotions of artists and the viewers who perceive this work, I found that *The Anxious Eye* exhibition does a complete job at eliciting the emotions of anxiety, despair, spirituality, and relationships; however, the exhibition does leave out two very significant parts of German Expressionism that are crucial to understanding its importance and impact on society today. The two prominent artistic groups that emerged during this period that are crucial in understanding the artist's motivations behind creating the works featured within this exhibition are Die Brücke, which was founded by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Der Blaue Reiter, founded by Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Paul Klee,

and August Macke, most of whom are featured within this exhibition (Plasse). While Die Brücke aimed to bridge the gap between traditional academic art and the more advanced works, and Der Blaue Reiter was known for its spiritual and abstract approach to art, both played a significant role in shaping both Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter played substantial roles in shaping German Expressionism and paving the way for new forms of artistic expression through their innovative approach.

Moreover, when looking at the majority of the mediums that compose this exhibition, such as screenprints rather than paintings, it is important to consider that despite paintings being seen as the primary form of Expressionist artists, especially in Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, printmaking was also a crucial medium, as it was more accessible, easier to produce, and allowed a greater potential for experimentation. Regardless, the lack of representation of these two groups in the exhibition leaves a major gap in the clarity of the crucial historical context of German Expressionism's origins, which I believe should have been incorporated or mentioned somewhere within the exhibition. However, publisher Mark Jenkins, in his review of *The Anxious Eye* in *The Washington Post*, may disagree with my opinion on the lack of representation of these movements throughout the exhibit, as he explains that the inclusions of artists who were active in Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter provide sufficient context of the period (Jenkins). Nevertheless, Jenkin's presentation of this idea still does not give enough foundation for the viewer to grasp the influence of these movements during the German Expressionist period.

Nonetheless, *The Anxious Eye* and its curation allow the viewers to fully transcend into the age of German Expressionism and understand the emotions and perspectives of the artists who created the works within the exhibition. Furthermore, as Shelley Langdale states when explaining the importance of curating this exhibition, "The devastation of war, social unrest, political clashes, economic instability, and pandemic: the world events of today parallel those experienced in Europe during the early 1900s" (Langdale). This explanation of the exhibition's relevance on society today reveals the world's uncertainties through the lens of not only the artist but also the eyes of the viewer. Additionally, looking back not only on the pandemic that had created more turmoil, anxiety, depression, and isolation than what had been observed in several decades but also on the political and global conflicts that society faces today is critical to understanding why this exhibition is more relevant than ever before. Anxiety and societal discourse through these present-day conflicts establish a vital reason for creating an exhibition that parallels these emotions and allows viewers to relate to those faces in the early 20th century.

Therefore, as one walks through this exhibition, they are first met by several portraits which show the emotions and internal states of mind fascinated by German expressionists. After this, viewers will experience a fascinating interaction between humans and nature in the next room of the exhibition as part of German expressionists' cultural heritage and a tradition across art forms, which reveal an exemplified portrayal of life in spiritual harmony and nature. Moving on, viewers will see a variety of human figures in the eyes of German expressionists, many of whom are naked. This expression of the human body allows the viewers to understand a raw, freeing image of society, which aligns with the exhibition's overall rhythms, movements, and emotions. Finally, upon entering the exhibition's final room, viewers will see a reimagined depiction of the challenges German expressionists endured through contemporary artists, who still have similar intense

emotions. As such, not only is the viewer delving into the minds of artists during the era of German Expressionism, but they open the “anxious eye” of the viewer.

Works Cited

“The Anxious Eye: German Expressionism and Its Legacy.” *National Gallery of Art*, www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2024/the-anxious-eye-german-expressionism-and-its-legacy.html. Accessed 21 Feb. 2024.

“The Anxious Eye: German Expressionism and Its Legacy.” *Washington DC*, washington.org/event/anxious-eye-german-expressionism-and-its-legacy. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

Hummel, Anita Louise. “German Expressionism: Exploring the Inner World of Art.” *Anita Louise Art*, 27 Oct. 2023, anitalouiseart.com/german-expressionism-exploring-the-inner-world-of-art/.

Jenkins, Mark. “German Expressionists Mined the Anxiety of War — and the Vibrancy of Life.” *The Washington Post*, 6 Mar. 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2024/03/06/anxious-eye-german-expressionism-national-gallery.

Meyer, Isabella. “German Expressionism - One of the Greatest German Art Movements.” *Art in Context*, 10 Feb. 2024, artincontext.org/german-expressionism/.

Peterdi, Gabor F. “Germany.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/art/printmaking/Germany. Accessed 29 Feb. 2024.

Plasse, Marianne. “The Powerful Legacy of German Expressionism.” *TheCollector*, 22 Nov. 2023, www.thecollector.com/german-expressionism-legacy/.

Villarreal, Jose. “German Expressionism’s Response to Changing World Explored in National Gallery of Art Exhibition.” *ArtDaily*, 12 Feb. 2024, www.artdaily.com/news/166630/German-Expressionism-s-response-to-changing-world-explored-in-National-Gallery-of-Art-exhibition.