

## What is German Expressionism?

German Expressionism can basically be defined by its use of bright colors, bold strokes of paint, dark lines, high contrast imagery which strove to display the inner nature of the person or object, as opposed to the replication of the image as in Renaissance art, or the depiction of the light from the image as in Impressionist art. "Expressionist artists built on the discoveries of the Post-Impressionists, who rejected Impressionist devotion to optical veracity and turned inward to the world of the spirit. "They employed many languages to give visible form to their feelings, but generally they relied on simple, powerful forms that were realized in a manner of direct, sometimes crude expression, designed to heighten the emotional response of the viewer. The essence of their art was the expression of inner meaning through outer form." 2

Art historian Norbert Lynton helped define German Expressionism with this description, "All human action is expressive; a gesture is an intentionally expressive action. All art is expressive - of its author and of the situation in which he works - but some art is intended to move us through visual gestures that transmit, and perhaps give release to, emotions and emotionally charged messages. Such art is expressionist." 3

There were two main groups of German Expressionist artists that rose to prominence. One was Die Brücke ("the bridge"), led by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. The other was called Der Blaue Reiter ("the Blue Rider"), led by Vassily Kandinsky. Although both movements did express differing visions, they both displayed the many characteristics of German Expressionism. 2

German expressionism was also about a certain time, the early part of the 20th century. As pointed out by art historian Victor Miesel, "All Europe was in a state of ever-increasing discontent. Rapid industrialization and urbanization, such revolutionary discoveries as Freud's theory of dreams (1900) and Einstein's theory of relativity (1905), a succession of political crises; these were events which filled Europeans everywhere with apprehension." 4

It was during this time that "painters abandoned realism and countryside landscapes for nightmare depictions of impoverished lives in ravaged cities, their bold strokes of dark lines bending and creaking under the strain. Writers clipped their sentences to the barest essence, their voices almost always pounding away full blast, and in all the arts, there was a near-obsession with death and decay and an apocalyptic sense that civilization had come to the end of its rope." 3

German Expressionism not only developed in the world of painting, but also in sculpture, literature, drama, and cinema. "In German cinema, in the years immediately following WWI, expressionism was characterized by extreme stylization of sets and decor as well as in the acting, lighting, and camera angles. The grossly distorted, largely abstract sets were as expressive as the actors, if not more. To assure complete control and free manipulation of the decor, lighting, and camera work, expressionist films were always shot in the studio, never outdoors, even when scenes called for exterior shooting. Lighting was deliberately artificial, emphasizing deep shadows and sharp contrasts; camera angles were chosen to emphasize the fantastic and the grotesque; and the actors externalized their emotions to the extreme." 3