



LYONEL FEININGER *The Ship* woodcut 1920

GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST PRINTS

AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY

1972

Expressionism, as an art movement, belongs to the Post-Impressionist era. Reaction at the beginning of this century against the Impressionists' exclusive attention to materialism and, more particularly, to the effects of light upon form, led to the establishment of new artistic programmes.

In Paris, the movements of Fauvism and Cubism were formed. In Germany, a subjective rather than objective response arose. Here the artists stressed the emotional experience in its most intense form and Nature was used not merely to explain the appearance of things, but to act instead as a vehicle, conveying an inner conception. German Expressionism encouraged the assertion of individualism and freedom of style, and it critically examined existing conventions with the intention of establishing a more desirable social order. The artists collectively known as The Bridge (Die Brücke) made up the movement's earliest organisation. Initially consisting, in 1905, of four young architectural students from Dresden, the group soon expanded. It included among others, the artists Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Ernst Kirchner, the latter being undoubtedly the foremost member. Although the group ended in 1913, the individual artists continued to work in the manner of Die Brücke until about 1920.

Shortly before World War I, the second group of Expressionist artists formed, this time in Munich. The Blue Rider (Blaue Reiter), as they became known, demonstrated greater international spirit and were more analytical and philosophical in their outlook than Die Brücke. Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky were considered the chief exponents.

The War and its aftermath brought German Expressionism to full fruition and its manifestations became more complex and diverse as the century progressed. Reaction against the more extreme forms occurred during the mid-twenties by the followers of 'New Objectivity' who, as with the work of George Grosz and Max Beckmann, were more concerned with making a factual statement of the miserable social conditions in Germany than in showing introspective states of an artist's soul.

New facets of Expressionism continued to evolve through the graphic works of Käthe Kollwitz, Christian Rohlf, Oskar Kokoschka, and Lyonel Feininger. The movement as a whole may have started as a German phenomenon, but the idea in its broader sense reached out from its country of origin, to encompass other regions as well.

From the beginning, printmaking was a medium particularly suited to the Expressionists. Although several of the artists employed the techniques of etching, introduced to the movement by Nolde, and lithography, introduced by Otto Mueller, it was the woodcut which became the most widely used graphic medium. Its properties encouraged clarification of form and with the emphasis on contrasts of predominantly black and white, and strong overall planar effects, images of great monumentality were often produced.

Origins, technically speaking, for the Expressionist woodcuts stemmed from the 15th century German illustrators and the work of the African carvers. In more general terms, the precursors of the movement include the early European artists, Lucas Cranach and Hercules Seghers, who were noted for their agitated and contorted treatment of landscape. For some artists, the mystical attitudes of William Blake and Odilon Redon, were a source of inspiration, as was the imagery and method of Paul Gauguin's and Edvard Munch's woodcuts.

The artists represented in this exhibition present divergent attitudes towards graphic art. Some had wanted to be painters but had found work with the wooden block, the copperplate and the stone, more satisfying in fulfilling their aims. This applies especially to the painters of Die Brücke. There are the artists whose importance is defined solely by their printmaking: Kollwitz, Grosz and Alfred Kubin. For others the medium stood equal in importance with painting and sculpture. Beckmann and Wilhelm Lehmbruck, respectively, are examples of this.

The German Expressionists were individualists, but collectively they had a far-reaching effect. Their achievements were distinguished and their aspirations were boundless.

