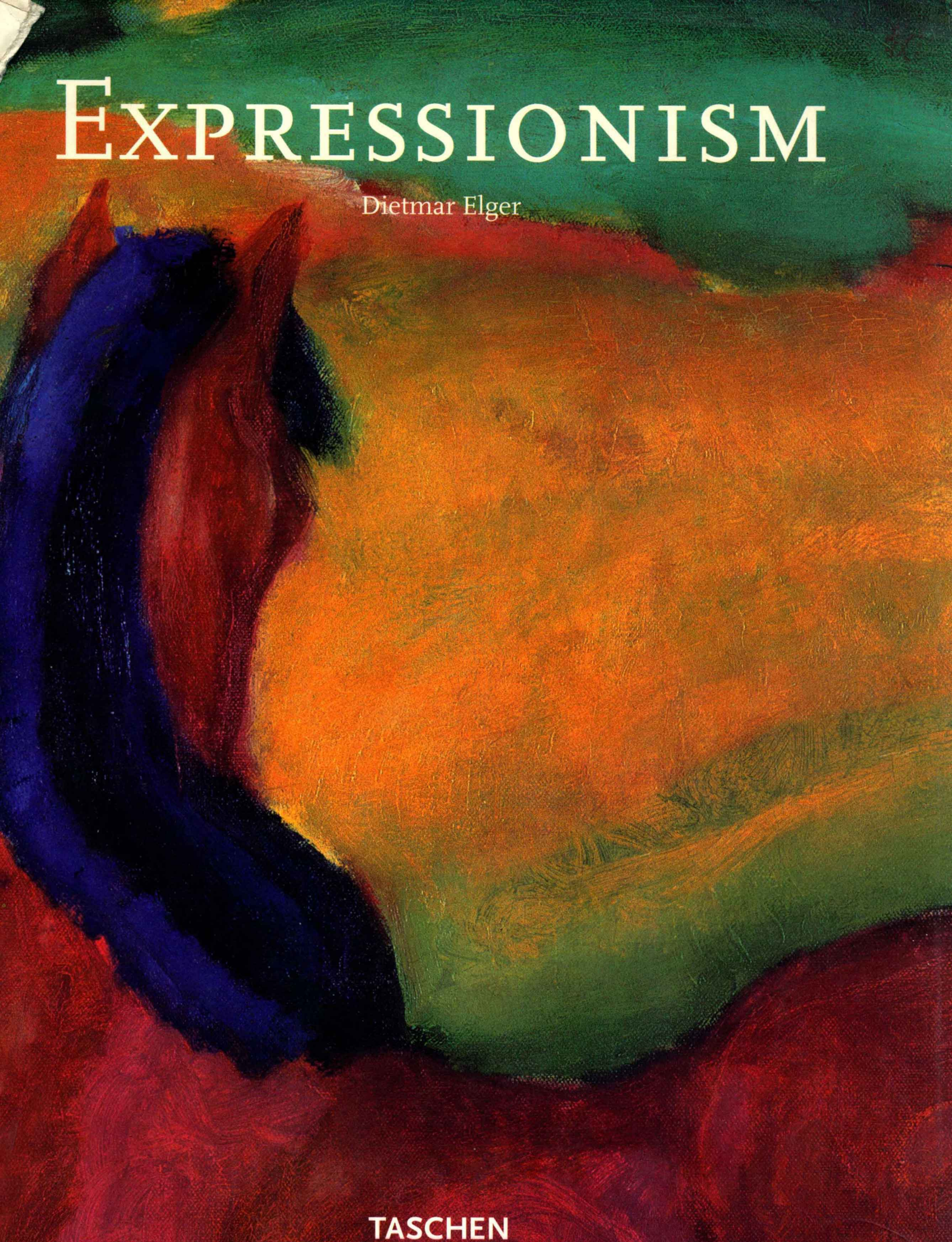
Expressionism

Dietmar Elger



TASCHEN

Dietmar Elger

EXPRESSIONISM

A Revolution in German Art

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KÖLN LISBOA LONDON NEW YORK PARIS TOKYO

Illustration Page 2:
Max Beckmann:
Synagogue, 1919
Oil an canvas, 90 x 140 cm
Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie,
Frankfurt am Main

Edited and produced by Ingo F. Walther, Alling
Appendix: Dietmar Elger and Ingo F. Walther
English translation: Hugh Beyer
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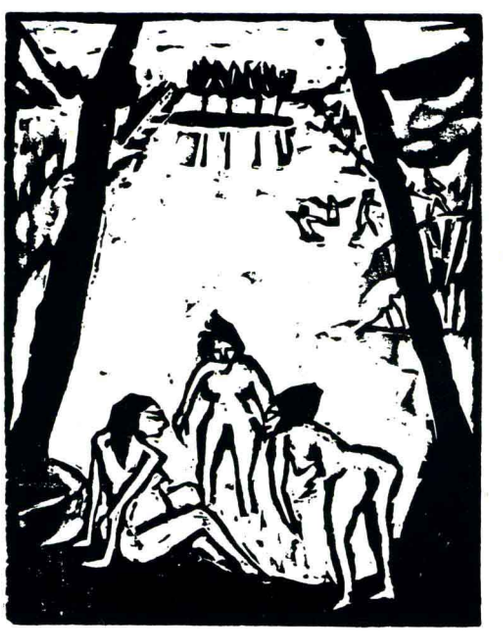
Expressionism – A Revolution in German Art

There is a certain vagueness and open-endedness about the term Expressionism. It can be understood on a variety of different levels and has eluded all attempts to give it a precise definition. What is more, coinage of the word itself has been ascribed to various people. Tradition has it that the Berlin art dealer Paul Cassirer explicitly characterized Edvard Munch's works as *Expressionist*, to emphasize their difference from *Impressionist* art. However, it is equally possible that Lovis Corinth's words were influential, commenting on the *22nd Secession Exhibition* of French Cubists and Fauvists in 1911: "Furthermore, we also exhibited a number of works by younger French painters – the Expressionists. We believed that we should not deny them to the public, because the Secession has always regarded it as its duty to show what interesting things are being created outside Germany." At least for Corinth's contemporaries, Expressionism continued to be a handy label and a synonym of modern art in general. Thus a book called *Expressionismus und Film*, published in 1926, also devoted a considerable amount of space to artists such as Piet Mondrian, Vladimir Tatlin, Kasimir Malevich, Man Ray and Kurt Schwitters.

Nowadays, of course, these artists have become history, and we no longer find it difficult to distinguish between their many different styles. Nevertheless, there continues to be a certain amount of confusion as to which artists can be regarded as typical representatives of Expressionism. In fact, a number of literary and art historians have become so suspicious of the term Expressionism that they have stopped using it altogether. Also, for many of the artists in this book, Expressionism was only a limited period – and often a very short one – within their overall artistic development. Wassily Kandinsky was probably the most radical example, because his Expressionism just before 1914 led to abstract art in a series of consistent steps. On the other hand, there was Walter Gropius's Bauhaus manifesto, which started off a school of art that was unparalleled in its demand for functionality and clarity of form, while at the same time still totally permeated by an Expressionist language.

Expressionism, however, was by no means limited to fine art, even though its significance and influence in other areas should not be over-

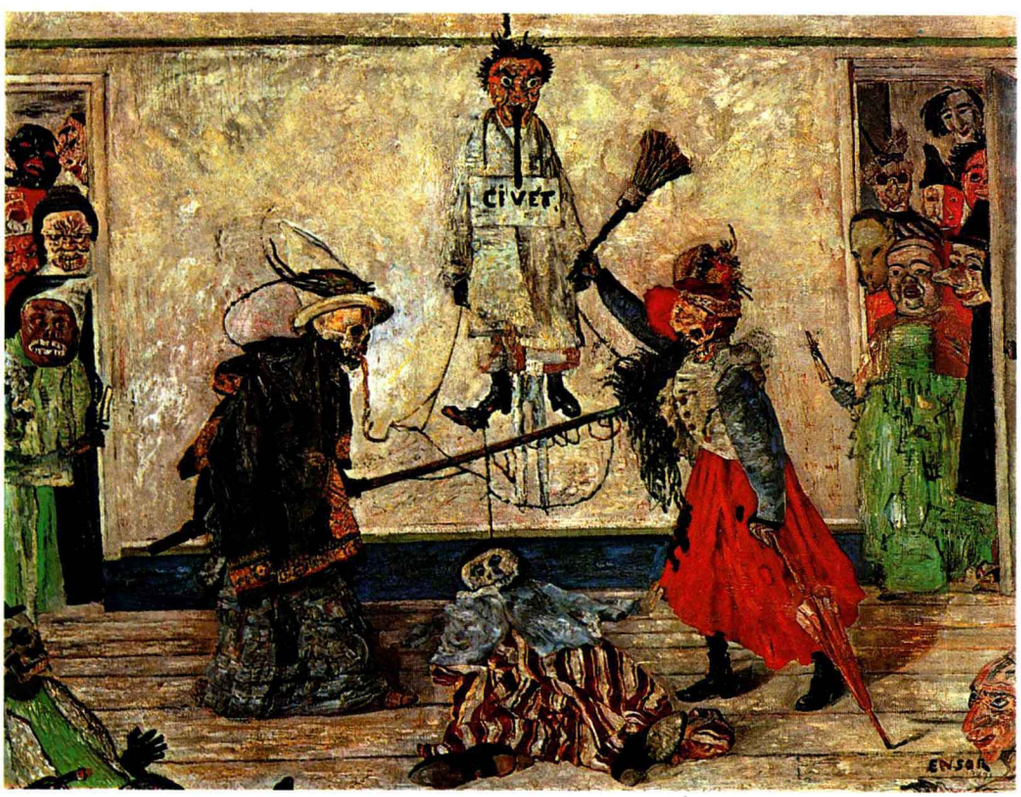


Erich Heckel:
Nudes by the Forest Pond, 1910
Akte am Waldteich
Woodcut, 19.4 × 15.1 cm

August Macke:
Russian Ballet, 1912
Russisches Ballett
Oil on hardboard, 103 × 81 cm
Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen

estimated. The desire to follow an Expressionist style was equally widespread in literature, drama, stage design, dance, film and architecture. If there is any consensus at all, then it can be found with regard to the temporal limits of the phenomenon. The foundation of the artists' group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) in Dresden in 1905 is generally regarded as the first cornerstone of Expressionism, and the revolutionary post-war unrest of 1920 is seen as the end of the movement in Germany, thus forming the second cornerstone. There are some who would prefer to pre- or post-date the period by up to five years. However, this certainly does not mean that after 1920 Expressionism ceased abruptly in art, literature and architecture. The period of 1905 – 1920 merely defines the years when political events and the social climate found their appropriate artistic expression in this particular style, a period – as we would put it nowadays – when Expressionism left its mark on the current mental climate, on the *zeitgeist*. Similarly, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings and lithographs, for instance, reflected the hedonistic society of the Belle Epoque in Paris, while at the same time influencing the spirit of the time.

Nevertheless, it is completely wrong to speak of a uniform Expressionist style, determined by a number of typical features. One only has to consider the formal differences between art, literature and cinema, but this lack of uniformity is also in evidence when we compare the various artists with each other. Take, for instance, Kirchner, Kandinsky, Kokoschka and Dix, and there are far more differences than signs of stylistic kinship. Apparently we seem to be dealing with an expression of



James Ensor:
Masks Arguing about a Hanged Man, 1891
Oil on canvas, 59 × 74 cm
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

Vincent van Gogh:
Starry Night (Cypresses and Village), 1889
Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

a certain awareness of life among the younger generation, whose common bond was no more than their rejection of dominant social and political structures.

What the Expressionists depicted was a simple, organic symbiosis, based on the rhythm of nature alone. They created a utopian counterworld that was the exact opposite of a society determined by the alienating processes of industry and governed by the political system of Kaiser Wilhelm II – the German equivalent of Victorianism. This process of coming to terms with the world was nearly always accompanied by the painter's personal emancipation. Most of the younger Expressionists came from respectable, upper middle class backgrounds, the kind of families in which the current political system had found its most faithful adherents.

The art scene towards the end of the Wilhelmine Empire was determined by the Impressionists of the *Berlin Secession*. Under the presidency of Max Liebermann, in particular, and as late as 1914, they claimed to be

Edvard Munch:
Evening on Karl Johan, 1892
Oil on canvas, 84.5 × 121 cm
Rasmus Meyer Collection, Bergen

the sole representatives of modern art in Germany. The young generation of Expressionists, however, felt rather more reluctant to emulate this German variant of French Impressionism. "On the whole," said August Macke contemptuously, "there are far too many 'nice paintings' in the Secessions." On the other hand, the Expressionists did allow themselves to be influenced quite considerably by the works of Vincent van Gogh (p.9), Paul Gauguin (p.11), Robert Delaunay (p.12), James Ensor (p.8) and Edvard Munch (above). Van Gogh's attempt to share his life and work with Gauguin – even though it failed – as well as Gauguin's later trips to Tahiti were seen by the Expressionists as ideal patterns for their own lives and communities. It was through van Gogh that they gained access to modern French art. In fact nearly all of them were so much under his influence at first that Emil Nolde advised his artist friends to call themselves *Van Goghiana*, rather than *Die Brücke*. However, while the *Blaue Reiter* and the Rhenish artists enthusiastically seized upon Delaunay's mystic colour theory, the *Brücke* painters also emulated Munch and Ensor, artists who endeavoured to go beyond a mere perception of reality and who aimed at a psychological rendering of the impressions they perceived. Seen within this context, it is probably understand-

Paul Gauguin:
What's New?, 1892
Oil on canvas, 67 × 91 cm
State Collection of Art
Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister,
Dresden

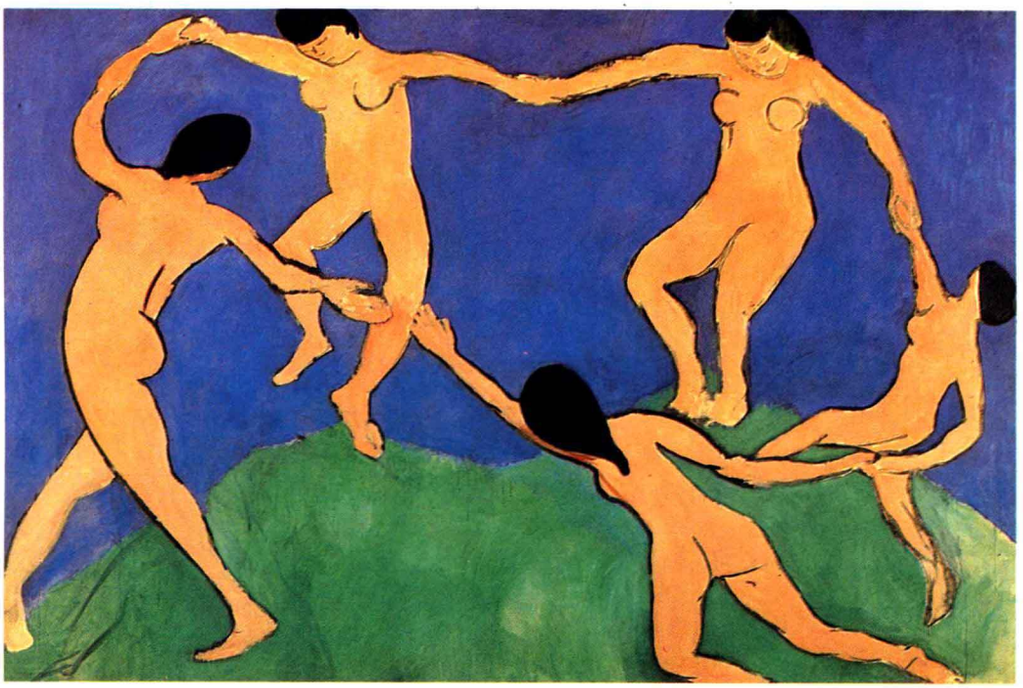
able that the *Brücke* painters denied having any links with the Fauve artists or Munch, because they were trying to define their own autonomous position in art. However, we can find similar evaluations in German art history as late as the sixties – a result of a false desire to assert themselves against French art.

In fact, this very enthusiasm for modern French art was one of the few features that united the various Expressionist artists' groupings and individual painters in Germany. On the other hand, a comparison between the *Brücke* circle in Dresden and the *Blaue Reiter* artists in Munich can also serve as an example of the vast varieties of style that Expressionism was able to cover. Only the *Brücke* artists can be regarded as a group of artists who actually worked together and even lived together for a while. The *Blaue Reiter*, on the other hand, was a name that had never been chosen as a group name by the artists themselves. Rather, it was the title – though a programmatic one – of the almanac edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc in 1912. Indeed, the very origin of the word is indicative of Southern German Expressionism, which was far more intellectual and determined by manifestos and written statements. The *Brücke* artists, on the other hand, spent considerably less time reflecting

upon their own activities and artistic aims, but tried to capture their sensory experiences and visual impressions as directly as possible in the form of paintings.

Although Erich Heckel and Franz Marc tried several times to establish a common ground between all the artists, there were too many differences to allow any closer links or even shared activities. Although *Die Brücke* was allowed to take part in the second *Blaue Reiter* exhibition, and works of Berlin artists were printed in the almanacs, Kandinsky did have his doubts about the *Brücke* people and only allowed small formats to be included. In a letter to Marc, he said, "Of course, one has to exhibit this sort of thing. However, I believe that it is wrong to immortalize them in a documentary of contemporary art (which is what our book is intended to be) and to regard them as a decisive force that gives direction. And so I, at any rate, would be against large-scale reproductions ... Small reproductions mean that this is one way of doing it. Large ones: this is how it is done."

Robert Delaunay:
Window into Town, 1912
Oil on canvas, painted pine frame,
46 × 40 cm
Kunsthalle, Hamburg



Henri Matisse:
The Dance, 1909
Oil on canvas, 259.7 × 390 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

The events of the First World War had a far-reaching effect on the Expressionist movement. The war, which was welcomed with nationalist enthusiasm in the whole of Germany, was regarded by the Expressionists as a powerful catharsis. They believed that it would destroy the ancient order, which they had felt to be so oppressive, and that a better society would arise from its ruins. As soldiers fighting in the trenches, they were looking for a great experience of community and youth that would transcend the traditional class barriers of bourgeois society. Beckmann, Kirchner, Heckel, Macke, Marc, Kokoschka, Dix and many others enlisted as volunteers, united by the common hope that they would gain fresh impressions for their art. "Outside there was that wonderful, magnificent noise of battle. I went outside, through large groups of injured and worn-out soldiers coming back from the battlefield, and I could hear this strange, weirdly magnificent music ... I wish I could paint this noise," Beckmann enthused in a letter to his wife in 1914. Only a few Expressionist artists, such as Max Pechstein, George Grosz, Ludwig Meidner and Conrad Felixmüller, did not share the prevailing euphoria. However, the longer the trench war dragged on, the more there was a change of attitude among the other artists, too: Dix's paintings changed into an accusation of militarism and the bourgeoisie. Kirchner, Beckmann and Kokoschka could not bear the horrors of trench warfare, but had physical and psychological breakdowns and were discharged. Many other Expressionists – Marc, Macke, Morgner – died in action at an early age.