
Introduction to German Expressionism

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Lisa Schulze (Erasmus student at the Faculty of Arts during the 2008/9 academic year, originally from Freie Universität Berlin) and Nina Müller (Erasmus student at the Faculty of Education during the summer semester 2011/12, from Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe) both joined the voluntary teaching programme "Europe Meets School" while they were studying at Charles University Prague. One being a History of Art student and the other studying Art Education, they both decided on an Art Education project and opted to introduce the bright, unmixed colours and simple shapes of German Expressionism, focusing on the Blue Rider (Der Blaue Reiter) group to the children. We have approached them to learn more about their experiences.

Lisa, Nina, ...

You have both decided to introduce German Expressionism to the children in your host classes during your Europe Meets School projects. Is it your own favourite period in (German) Art History or rather did you feel that it would be a suitable topic to work with the children on?

Nina: I chose the topic of German Expressionism because I had written an academic paper about Franz Marc and German Expressionism shortly before my Europe Meets School project took place. I really liked the topic and thought it to be well suited to children as well as teenagers.

I like German expressionism a lot, but I cannot say that it is my most favourite art movement. There are many interesting aspects about different art periods and I value and appreciate many different artistic movements.

Lisa: During my Art History studies, I grew fond of the majority of modernist art movements, especially because of their relationship with and position in regard to contemporary politics.

Expressionism seems to me particularly worthy and appropriate for working with children. The name of the movement already indicates its main idea. The innermost of a person could be expressed through the means of art: colour, form and lines as a direct expression and translation of moods and feelings. Therefore, the expressionists seem to have created artworks that can easily be understood by people from different age groups, as well as social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, also the communication between the Czech children and a German student was not impeded too much by a language barrier. Although we had a translator, words were not the only language used during this afternoon, but also fervent red, soothing blue and vibrant green.

The part of the German Expressionism you both concentrated on was the Bavarian group "Der Blaue Reiter" (The Blue Rider). Could you tell us a little bit about it?

Lisa: "Der Blaue Reiter" was a modernist art movement in which the artists were loosely connected and lived mostly in. It was founded in 1911 and existed until World War I. Some of its important members were Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke and Lyonel Feininger.

The name of the group probably derives from Kandinsky's and Marc's passion for horses and riders. Moreover, according to Kandinsky's theoretical artistic concepts the colour blue symbolizes spirituality. The expressionist movement in general attempted to explore the fantastic, the unconscious of the human mind. This is best described by Paul Klee's declaration "*Art does not represent the visible, but renders visible.*"

Expressionist artists shared a great interest in medieval art, primitivisms, folk art, art made by indigenous peoples, children and the mentally ill. They appreciated those art forms for the allegedly more spontaneous and therefore more authentic approach to expression through artistic gestures. The group "Der Blaue Reiter" was more metaphysical than for example "Die Brücke". Through the formal application of vibrant and intense colours, simplification of forms, abandonment of perspective leading toward totally neglecting the figurative and indulging in the abstract (especially Kandinsky) human instruments of expression actually expanded in and through art.

Nina: Franz Marc mainly painted animals. He was not just interested in their anatomy, but animals represented to him a spiritual attitude. He saw in animals "*purity and communion with nature that man had lost.*" Instead of using abstract forms to express his feelings, he "*identified feeling with animal existence in nature*" and he used colour to express conflict or harmony.

Franz Marc's animals was the topic that you both selected as the task for the younger children in your host classes. Lisa asked the children in her class to paint their own pet or favourite animal and depict their feelings while using colours in a way the Expressionist artists usually did; Nina suggested that the children should paint any animal they wanted and portray their significance to the outer world by applying the colours such as the

Expressionists did (e.g. a lion or a snake are dangerous animals; a cat was considered to be a cuddly, friendly pet by the children, etc.). Were you satisfied with the children's work?

Lisa: In Berlin I have been organizing birthday parties for children aged 3 to 7. I always enjoy how children of this age group tend to be very passionate about what they are doing – they are either burning for an activity and totally consumed by it or they do not like it at all – as a person taking care of them, one notices this immediately. Moreover, I like how younger children tend to open up quickly and allow one into their world.

I enjoyed working with the little ones quite a lot. I asked them to paint their favourite animal and express how those animals were feeling on this day and how they themselves felt towards them. I hoped for some exotic animals to enter our class as well – and I was not disappointed: some of the favourite animals included camels, elephants and lions. It was very interesting to observe how some children coloured the animals realistically. We had a yellow-brownish lion and a black cat. But those were joined by a green dog and a very colourful lizard. The children also put a lot of effort into decorating the backgrounds of their pictures: meadows full of flowers, but also more abstract emotional landscapes.

Nina: I think the children painted extraordinarily well and I liked their colour combinations.

To put the animal in a suitable context would have been the next step. I was happy to see some children already approaching this step.

In the second class attended by the older children, Lisa switched the topic to portrait in the Expressionist style, while Nina continued with the topic of animals. Was it very different to work with the older pupils for you, no matter what the topic of their work was?

Lisa: I appreciated working with both age groups. Therefore, I equally enjoyed the afternoon with the older children as one can be a bit more intellectual with them already. I was able to not only present Expressionism as a collection of colourful imaginative pictures, but to go more into detail about the theory behind it and the historic context of this movement.

I switched to portraits with the older children as I assumed that the genre of portrait could be more of an entertaining challenge for them. The task was to paint their neighbours, representing the mood the latter might be in by expressionist means. This required a high level of attention and the will to observe the other in detail in order to discover their special features and also how they felt at that moment. At first, some of the children were a little bit shy to look at somebody else so thoroughly. But they became more and more confident. As a result some of the pictures were stunningly realistic whereas some children dared to apply those exceptional colours and dominant lines.

Nina: I think that the topic of painting animals in an expressionistic way is suited for children and adults alike. In fact I think it is very interesting to see how the conception of animals changes depending on the age of a person.

I adjusted the way of presenting the topic of German Expressionism, however. The older students received a more detailed and theoretical input than the younger pupils. Having said that, most of the "older" students in my class were also still quite young.

For both of you, joining Europe Meets School was not the only extracurricular activity that you participated in while studying in Prague. Lisa was writing for the web magazine Tschechien Online; Nina joined the Charles University Choir. Could you tell us something about these activities?

Lisa: Besides my studies at Charles University I was an eager explorer of Prague's culture in terms of museums, exhibitions, cinemas and especially coffee house culture (one of my final projects for an alternative culture class consisted of a guide to my favourite coffee places). Therefore, I was very excited when I heard about the opportunity to be an intern for the web magazine "Tschechien Online". The platform is run by two very enthusiastic Germans who fell in love with Prague some years ago and moved here permanently. Now they are informing the German public about Prague and the Czech Republic in general. Their articles include analysis of the current political and economic situation in Czech Republic, as well as tips for trips to Czech cities and outings to the country side. I was mainly contributing to the cultural section of this website. This covered reviews of concerts and exhibitions as well as blog entries about my (not only) cultural experiences in Prague. One of the best things, besides the journalistic experience, was a free pass for the human rights film festival "Jeden Svět – One World".

Nina: In fact I joined quite a few extracurricular activities. One of them was singing in the Charles University Choir. Another activity offered by the Art Education Department in the Faculty of Education was a course in bookbinding. The third one was participating in Art History classes for American students. A friend of mine had told me about the possibility to join these Art History lectures.

I was happy to be given the opportunity to go and participate in all these activities. I don't mind learning new things and for some of those courses you would probably pay quite a bit, if it weren't for the possibility to take part in them as an Erasmus student.

And, of course, these activities were fun too!

You both lived in the Charles University Hall of Residence Hostivař during your study stay at Charles University (in the last 5 years, this has been the Hall of Residence where the majority of Erasmus students have been housed ; since winter semester 2012/13 a large number of Erasmus students are also housed in Hvězda and Větrník Halls of Residence) . What are the pros and cons of living with the other Erasmus students?

Lisa: The international experience which goes along with living in Hostivař was definitely very enriching. I very much enjoyed our spontaneous improvised dinners in the hallways attended by many people. One of the highlights was our classy Christmas dinner, where everybody provided a (Christmas) speciality from their country. Our parties with different themes in every floor were also a lot of fun. One could always start a more or less serious conversation about culture in general and learn a lot about different European countries.

Nevertheless, I am not a proponent of a hall of residence inhabited on the whole by Erasmus students. It was definitely interesting to broaden my knowledge about Spain, France or Poland, but I came to Prague to become acquainted with Czechs and Czech culture. This was to a certain extent impeded by the separation of Erasmus students and Czech students not only in my hall of residence, but also at university, where classes in English were mainly attended by Erasmus students. I think that Erasmus students applying for university accommodation should have the choice between an "Erasmus hall of residence" enabling them mainly to enjoy the social advantages of their Erasmus stay and a place in a hall of residence where one could also meet Czech students (*note of the redaction: Charles University is once more trying this model in the current academic year 2012/13; the previous experience was however mostly negative since Czech students take their hall of residence to be their home and place to study while many international students consider it primarily as a place to socialise*).

Nina: I met so many new people from all over the world in the Hostivař Hall of Residence and I really enjoyed living there. It is great when almost all your new friends live in the same Hall of Residence. The main reason for some Erasmus students to move out of Halls of Residence primarily is the long way to the university and the city centre. Nevertheless, the public transport connections to Hostivař are very good. (*Note of the redaction: Hostivař Hall of Residence is located just next to the train station Nádraží Hostivař providing a frequent 13-minute-connection to the city centre of Prague, but, despite being informed by the European Office, not many Erasmus students use this transportation option regularly*). Thank you for the interview.