

KUMU



THE SAVAGES OF GERMANY

DIE BRÜCKE DER BLAUE REITER EXPRESSIONISTS

**22.09.2017–
14.01.2018**

The exhibition *The Savages of Germany. Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter Expressionists* offers a unique chance to view the most outstanding works of art of two pivotal art groups of the early 20th century. Through the oeuvre of **Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke, Franz Marc, Alexej von Jawlensky** and others, the exhibition focuses on the innovations introduced to the art scene by expressionists. Expressionists dedicated themselves to the study of major universal themes, such as the relationship between man and the universe, via various deeply personal artistic means.

In addition to showing the works of the main authors of German expressionism, the exhibition attempts to shed light on expressionism as an influential artistic movement of the early 20th century which left its imprint on the Estonian art of the post-World War I era. **Ado Vabbe, Peet Aren, Nikolai Triik, Konrad Mägi** and others experienced the German art scene directly during their studies and travels, but also via expressionist influences in modern literature, drama and elsewhere. The context of the exhibition allows the viewer to experience multi-layered developments in expressionism via original works of art by Estonian artists, enriching their understanding of expressionism as a dynamic, versatile and vital phenomenon covering a large geographical area.

The exhibition has been made possible thanks to collaboration with a number of German art museums and galleries. The expressionist works of art by Estonian authors come from the collections of the Art Museum of Estonia, Tartu Art Museum and a private collection.

DIE BRÜCKE (“The Bridge” in English) was a German artistic group founded in 1905 in Dresden. The artists of Die Brücke abandoned visual impressions and idyllic subject matter (typical of impressionism), wishing to describe the human inner world, full of controversies, fears and hopes. Colours in their paintings tend to be contrastive and intense, the shapes deformed, and the details enlarged. Besides the various scenes of city life, another common theme in Die Brücke’s oeuvre was scenery: when travelling through the countryside, the artists saw an opportunity to depict man’s emotional states through nature. The group disbanded in 1913.

DER BLAUE REITER (“The Blue Rider” in English) was another expressionist group and was active in the years 1911–1914. It centred around Russian emigrants (Wassily Kandinsky, Alexej von Jawlensky and others) and local German artists (Franz Marc, August Macke and others). The members were united in their desire to express topics related to the universe, the soul and the world of spirits. Strong colours were important in their work, and each colour was assigned a certain spiritual or symbolist association. The works of both of the groups earned acclaim in Europe and their members are considered the most outstanding representatives of expressionism, one of the most significant artistic movements ever.

Introduction. Expressionism – the quest of the modern man for closeness to nature and the meaning of life

Cora Faßbender

Expressionism is an umbrella term spanning a number of viewpoints of differing form and content of various artistic groups. The best-known representatives of the style are the artists of Die Brücke (The Bridge) and Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), whose works are predominant at this exhibition. The art of the expressionists shocked Europe's art circles as the expressive paintings highlighted emotions and spirituality, abandoning the imitation of reality characteristic of naturalism. The exhibition *The Savages of Germany. Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter Expressionists* is dedicated to the expressionists' view of life and nature and to the historical events and innovations that determined this view.

In 1917, Hugo Ball gave a presentation on the artist Wassily Kandinsky and mentioned historical conditions that had influenced expressionist art, thus putting into words a part of the expressionists' vision of the world. Ball listed the following significant factors: the de-deification of the world in critical philosophy, the splitting of the atom in science, and the large-scale stratification of the peoples of modern Europe. He was referring to the Nietzschean philosophy and the death of God, declaring the nihilist doctrine, and he also had in mind developments in quantum physics and the theory of relativity, which shook the foundations of mankind's general understanding of the world. An added factor was the rapid modernisation and technologisation of cities, which had begun in the mid-19th century as a result of industrialisation. The spreading urbanisation and quick-paced industrial development destroyed the unity of man and nature, which was a central theme in the oeuvre of expressionists. As an example, we could take the urban scenes of the Die Brücke group, established in 1905 in Dresden and relocated to Berlin in 1908–1911. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's images of prostitutes, for instance *Women on the Street* (1914), stand out for the lack of connection between the figures, and for the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion.

Some expressionists of Der Blaue Reiter, however, showed city life in a positive light (the exhibition theme "People on City Streets"). August Macke, who joined Der Blaue Reiter in 1911, for instance, had an undoubtedly positive outlook. Among his motifs, he favoured leisure activities mostly related to nature, such as walking or going to a café. These peaceful scenes offered safe havens in restless times and reflected the author's optimistic view of life.

As a result of the estrangement from the original, the opposite of urban life – simple country living – became a common theme. Both Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter artists preferred landscape scenes that recalled ancient times and closeness to nature (e.g. *Simple Country Life* and *Beauty of Nature*). The artists' interpretations of the sea express their yearning for the contemplative peace in nature (e.g. *Journeys and Good-Byes. Rhythms of the Sea*). The openness of the sea, the captivating spell of the untouched, the unpredictable force of nature, and the enticing call of new shores and freedom enchanted expressionists and touched their souls deeply. Propelled by the yearning for freedom, artists were constantly looking for new sources of inspiration and forms of expression. A few of them even sought to escape the bonds of civilisation. One way to do this was expressed in reforms promoting naturalness in people's lifestyles, e.g. the right to be naked in nature.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938). *Women on the Street*. 1914. Pastel. Leopold-Hoesch-Museum & Papiermuseum Düren



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938). *Young Girls from Fehmarn Island*. Detail 1913–1920. Oil. Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg. Photo: Bernd Kirtz

Unconstrained nudity in the open air, free from social restrictions, was practised near the Moritzburg lakes near Berlin (e.g. *Naked in the World*).

Another way to search for freedom for expressionists was to travel to inaccessible areas of the planet in order to find the ancient simple way of life there. Members of Die Brücke sought inspiration from the works of Vincent van Gogh of the Netherlands and Edvard Munch of Norway, but also from the woodwork of the southern seas and African cultures. Expressionists' oeuvre contains various cultural influences, bearing witness to the desire for the simple, natural life (e.g. *Enchantment of the Unknown*).

Mountain scenery (e.g. *Soul Landscapes*) is another wonderful example of the principles guiding the expressionists. One reason for the emergence of expressionism was the reaction to impressionism, which was criticised due to its focus on outer appearances, and which was disdainfully deemed superficial. Instead of the outside, the proponents of the new style wished to express the internal life, subjective spiritual sensibilities and personal psyche: the inner world reacting to the outside world. To do this, the artists manipulated shapes and proportions to create a stronger expressive force, separated colour from object and assigned it a meaning, divided planes with strong outlines and used high-level abstraction, although the depicted object remained mostly recognisable (especially in the case of Die Brücke).

With the publication of the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* in 1912, the new art concept was given a voice of its own. The objective was to expand the borders of artistic expression. The experiment reached its climax with abstractionism. Franz Marc considered it particularly important to depict the inner, spiritual side of nature and to "show the influential laws at work behind the beautiful facade". Marc was mostly engaged in the study of the internal characteristics and regularities of nature.

The mimicry of nature was gradually replaced by abstracted symbols and elements, which were meant to show the reality behind visible objects (e.g. *Animals and Cosmic Unity*). The trend reached its climax with Kandinsky's abstract painting *White Dot* (1925).

The expressionist portraits on display are multi-layered (e.g. *The Face as the Mirror of the Soul*). These allude to the misery of war (e.g. Heckel), were made on commission (e.g. Münter) or exemplify the abstraction of depiction (e.g. Alexej von Jawlensky). Alexej von Jawlensky's late abstract human heads are based on "ancient forms", transindividual stylised images, which consist merely of lines, planes and colours.

Although expressionists represented different points of view in terms of form and content, the central themes in these revolutionary times were mankind's need for closeness to nature and the question of the origin of human existence and its meaning in the world.

Why do Germans love expressionism

Detmar Westhoff

From the German perspective, it would seem that there is no need for another exhibition on German expressionists. Expressionism has been thoroughly handled in the past couple of decades, both in extensive monograph-like overviews and in treatises on a single subject. So why are the Germans so fond of expressionism that the number of visitors at all of the exhibitions about this movement keeps growing?

The rich flaming colours and untamed brush strokes release explosions of emotions in visitors. The paintings are a festival for the senses. The paintings of the expressionists contain feelings that no one can escape, even Germans, who are not considered a sensitive nation. Perhaps it is this emotional contrast to their usual nature that makes the Germans love expressionism so much. Then again, the museum-goers of other nationalities also experience a similar wild burst of emotions while standing in front of the works of the expressionists.

Return of the expressionists

In the case of the German audience, we need to consider another aspect. When looking at works by Kirchner, Heckel, Pechstein, Kandinsky, Marc, Macke, Münter and others, the Germans come face to face with their history. These were the artists scorned and branded as "degenerate" by the national socialist regime. Just as Jackson Pollock's works used to serve as the manifestation of the national idea of unlimited freedom in the United States, the works by Kirchner, Heckel, Marc and others stand for the democratic self-awareness of Germany. This is what German children learn at school.

There is a reason why Kirchner's famous painting *Mountain Farmers on Sunday* hangs on a wall in the German Chancellery.

In addition, several important museum collections in Germany have come into existence due to the rehabilitation of the artists who were in disfavour during the Nazi times. Expressionist works that were either destroyed by the Nazis or sold to buyers in the States from German museums during economic boom years had to be replaced. Some museums, such as the Chemnitz City collection, the Die Städtischen Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, were able to do that with the help of generous donations only after Germany had been reunified. Other museums, for instance in Duisburg, Düren and Wiesbaden, took advantage of the economic growth of the young Federal Republic of Germany to buy back lost works of art soon after the end of World War II. Leonie Reygers, the first director of the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund, was tasked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as early as 1955 with organising exhibitions of expressionists' works in American museums, in order to send a clear signal abroad of Germany having cut ties with its "brown" past. The aim of the German policy-makers was to make amends for the injustice suffered by the artists disparaged by the Nazis.

Expressionists and neo-expressionists are held in great esteem in the German art market

Expressionism is not only popular in Germany due to its political connotations, it is also highly valued by art collectors. The German art market greatly benefited from the economic boom of the post-war era. The art pages of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Handelsblatt* were filled with notices of sensational prices paid for Kirchner's and Heckel's works at auctions and fairs. High prices positively affected the number of visitors, as everyone considered something so expensive worth seeing. Success in the art market in the 1980s was shared between the expressionists, the "Savages" (*Wilde* in German), and the neo-expressionists, also known as the "New Savages" or *Neue Wilde*. This is especially true for Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, who still have large exhibitions dedicated to their work in Germany and elsewhere. It did not matter whether the expressive style was savage or newly savage; both enjoyed extreme popularity in Germany in the 1980s. The success of neo-expressionists only reinforced the significance of their predecessors.

German expressionism has always been an international phenomenon

It seems that in the past few years, with the increased interest in the international links of expressionism, European exhibition organisers have begun to rediscover German expressionism.

Major exhibitions on the ties between the German expressionists and the French *les Fauves* at the Kunsthau Zürich, and on expressionism as a reaction to the French impressionism at the Old National Gallery in Berlin are recent examples of this new point of view. As art historians are now more willing to look at German expressionism not as a strictly German phenomenon, interest in this style has grown all over Europe. To name just a few examples: Emil Nolde's exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris (2008), a display of the works by Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter at the Pinacothèque, Paris (2012) and the Palazzo Ducale, Genova (2015), and major overview exhibitions on expressionism in museums in Zwolle and Groningen in the Netherlands (2016), which were also the starting point for the current Estonian exhibition.

Expressionism brings freedom

Liis Pählapuu

The “how to do” and the “what to do” are not important; the important thing is the “to do” /.../ From this standpoint, the value of art is evident in the expression, the energy of manifestation

Johannes Semper, 1919

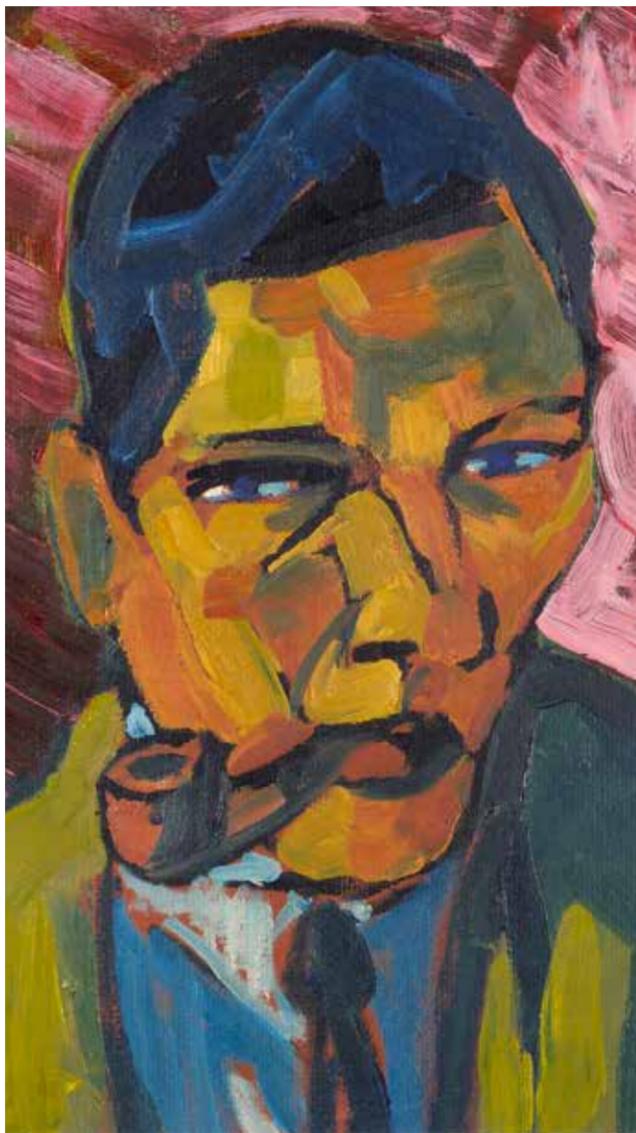
First contacts with the avant-garde. New colours and forms

The young Estonian artists travelling to Europe in the early 20th century were captivated by the freedom of modern art, the richness of ideas and forms, and the individualism of artists. Expressionists had a vision which did not require the skill of accurate depiction of the traditional realistic world, but involved a search for primitive authenticity and valued internal aspects of the intuitive creator; this showed the new generation of Estonian artists a beguiling path to develop their own unique styles. Expressionism valued a multitude of expressive means, and did not strive for a fixed style, thus becoming a phenomenon that brought together a number of techniques, as can be witnessed in the most experimental era of Estonian art, the first decades of the 20th century, a relatively short period that saw a mixture of all kinds of modernist movements, from expressionism to constructivism and cubo-futurism. Patchy or a complete lack of classical art education may have been a positive precondition for young artists to enter modernist movements, such as expressionism. Many of them shared the leftist world-view and socio-critical attitude characteristic of the European avant-garde scene, which helped the young Estonians position themselves in the field of new, modernist cultural phenomena. As students of the Stieglitz school, they dutifully participated in revolutionary events and mental rebellion against old-schoolers. Konrad Mägi, for instance, distributed leaflets and acquired weapons for revolutionary gangs; his leftist ideals remained steadfast throughout his life.

Although the whole era was filled with revolutionary newspapers and magazines, as well as political cartoons, also produced in Estonia during the revolution of 1905, politics and social criticism were exceptional topics in the oeuvre of Estonian artists. The more poignant branch of the European expressionism of the post-World War I era truly suited only Eduard Wiiralt, and even then not right after his graduation from the Pallas Art School in Tartu, but later, in Germany, on the streets of Dresden, full of post-war controversies. The environment that gave birth to Estonian artists was not yet charged with the tensions of the modernising and industrialising European society, a society which the German expressionists sought to escape by striving for freedom, closeness to nature and unlimited individuality. Young Estonian artists mostly came from simple farm families, straight from nature. This closeness to nature, the landscapes remembered from the days of youth, as so expressively described by Jaan Vahtra in his memoirs, may explain why the European expressive artists, from such individual geniuses as van Gogh and Munch, to *les Fauves* and the members of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter, were appealing to Estonian artists at the beginning of their careers. Jaan Vahtra wrote the following during his studies in Saint Petersburg:

I used to be a supporter of the new Western European art trends, I was familiar with the debates of the theoreticians of the new art, and I was enthralled with van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, and even more so with Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall, because they spoke of the new, which was supposed to be in opposition to the old world, the new, which promised to bring a revolution in art /.../ Being interested in everything new and modern by nature, I soon discovered myself to be a dedicated admirer of expressionism and cubism.

Jaan Vahtra



Märt Laarman (1896–1979). Self-Portrait. 1922. Oil. Art Museum of Estonia

Estonian artists were primarily attracted to the expressionists' freedom in the use of colour, their spontaneous play with form, their spirituality and their sense of spiritual depth, which are especially evident in the work of Ado Vabbe, Nikolai Triik and Konrad Mägi.

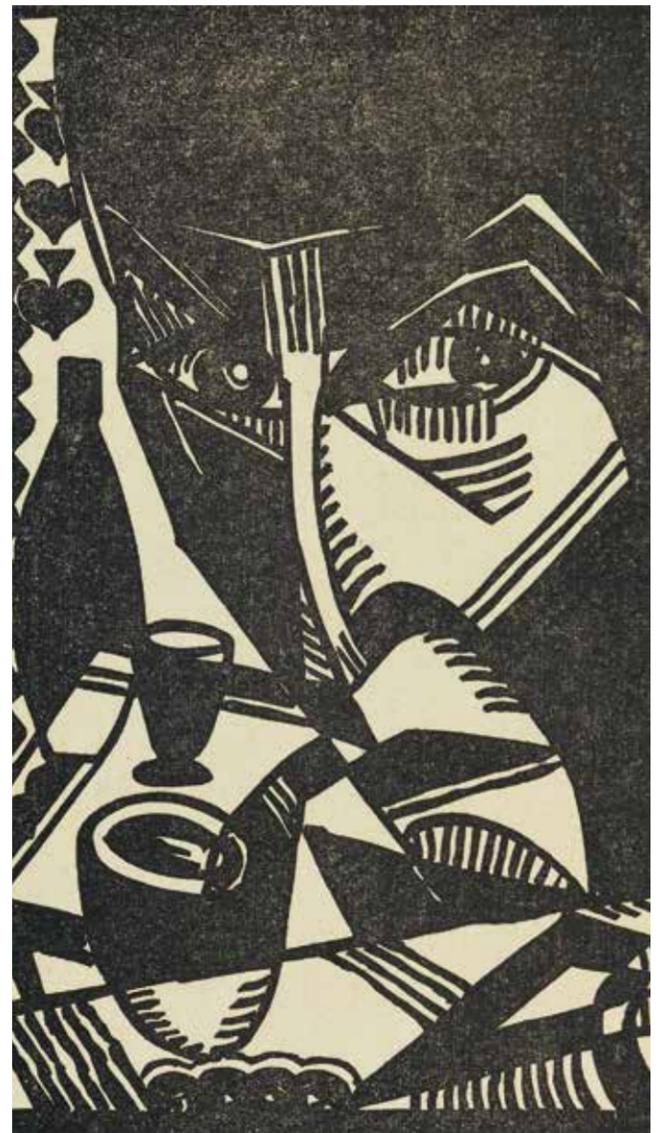
Internal landscapes

Before the outbreak of the First World War, European metropolises served as environments where Estonian artists could have modern experiences, adopt the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the modern artist, constantly search for new stimuli, and learn to become individual creators. The oeuvre of Estonian artists from that era contains the Nietzschean pathos of the New Man, the cult of the genius, observations of the cultural elite and their depiction in portraits. With the help of drawings filled with tension and colours that emphasise psychological intensity, artists looked at themselves in expressively restless self-portraits (Vahtra, Laarman and Wiiralt), and depicted their artist friends and key figures in cultural breakthroughs (e.g. Triik's portraits of Konrad Mägi, Ants Laikmaa, Juhan Liiv, Bernhard Linde and others).

The big cities themselves were not present in the Estonians' oeuvre. Despite Mägi's cosmopolitan attitude to life, his work showed almost no ties to the contemporary world. Jaan Koort's Paris consisted only of the slums, and Tassa focused on the green “wilderness” of parks. Peet Aren's later views of Tallinn employed the narrow streets and houses only as a means to achieve a skewed observation of the environment, to provide emotional rhythm for the (city) scenes. In line with Die Brücke's ideals, the artists distanced themselves from the cities and focused on creative time in nature. Triik left Paris in the summers of 1907 and 1908 to travel in Norway. This landscape had a profound effect on Triik, as well as on Konrad Mägi, who also spent two years in Norway. As a result of his experiences in Norway, Triik's landscapes acquired a mystical, anxious, unsettled mood, which can still be sensed in his later work, for instance in *Finnish Landscape* (1914), also painted in the fresh air of the North. Similarly to Franz Marc, Mägi fell in love with the colour blue, which represented the deepest spirituality for expressionists and awakened the human desire for eternity.

Expressionists tried to release colour and form from the bonds of reality. The most radical Estonian representative of such spontaneous expressionism was Ado Vabbe, who had his closest contacts with the avant-garde while living in Munich, Italy and Moscow, and whose artistic mind was the most receptive to its ideas. In 1914, Vabbe displayed his abstract *Paraphrases* for the first time in Estonia. His small-format works on paper stood out for their inner dynamics, playfulness and fantasy. Vabbe's woodcut series of 1920 was closely linked to Die Brücke's robust graphic art, which is also true of the graphic works of other artists, such as Wiiralt and Mülber, issued as portfolios in the same year.

The tensions of the modernising society and the atmosphere of impending doom entered Mägi's and Triik's works a few years before the outbreak of the great war. Triik's suffering in Berlin due to terrible living conditions



Jaan Vahtra (1882–1947). Self-Portrait. Sheet from the portfolio Blanc et noir 1919–1921. Woodcut. Art Museum of Estonia

sharpened his outlook and sowed the seeds of future major images associated with his oeuvre. Tense figures in Triik's works affect us like the wails of the human soul within the metropolitan rootlessness and seemingly endless night of controversies. In the 1917 Kasaritsa landscapes, we see a darkness stemming from Mägi's reaction to his lethal illness; the constant changes in his mental state and ecstatic existential anxiety are apparent in the following visionary and apocalyptic Pühajärve landscapes from the politically tumultuous summer of 1918. A similar expression of a sense of danger, tension and depression is apparent in the restless, threatening spikes of the Obersdorf mountains, drawn on the road home from the artist's last trip to Europe.

Sharp fluctuations from Germany

World War I and the years immediately after it saw the formation of close ties with Germany. Most of the artists travelled to Germany, particularly Berlin. Anton Starkopf's contacts brought new teachers to the Pallas School from Germany, namely Georg Kind, a master of the grotesque, and the venomous Magnus Zeller, who became the main mediators of post-war expressionism. Wiiralt, who had become interested in Die Brücke's prints during his studies in Tartu, was introduced to the oeuvre of Otto Dix by Kind, who suggested that Wiiralt continue his studies in Dresden. The city's controversial environment, shaped by hyper-inflation and social chaos, led Wiiralt to balance between criticism and enjoyment of vices, expressed in his works through voracious eroticism and the image of the prostitute. At art exhibitions in the early 1920s, expressionism and its offshoots of social criticism were powerfully visible. Another popular trend, religious expressionism, appealed to Peet Aren, who was affected by the numerous *pietàs* he saw during his studies in Munich.

Ene Lamp has called expressionism the phenomenon that touched the art of the most talented Estonians of the period. For the artists, it was the first experience with modernism, which opposed everything that preceded it. In the works of Estonian artists, expressionism is mixed with many other phenomena, revealing the artists' links and movements in Europe. For such artists as Märt Laarman, who promptly moved on to constructivist, sober and emotionless geometric art of architectural imagery, expressionism served as the first step on the path to avant-garde art. In its time, expressionist art was not understood or positively welcomed by the Estonian public. The term “expressionism” was often used to refer to all of the confusing phenomena in modern art: its savagery, dark morbidity and provocativeness. At a time of nation building and longing for stability, expressionism stood out as the art of radical people, and its unlimited creativity and uncompromising nature was feared rather than admired. Despite its brief time in the spotlight, expressionism influenced the oeuvre of succeeding generations. Expressionism provided an opportunity for individual self-assertion for introverted artists, whose creative stimuli were personal emotions and quests for the meaningfulness of the invisible world.

EXPRESS & DRAW. NUDE DRAWING SESSIONS

Drink & Draw organises drawing sessions in theatres, malls, gyms and schools, but mostly in bars. Hence the name. D&D was initiated by illustrator and graphic artist **Toon Vugts** (www.betoon.be), who has lived and drawn in Estonia for quite some time now. D&D is all about the beauty of people, the ecstasy of drawing and the love of paper.

For the special occasion of the exhibition *The Savages of Germany*, D&D is collaborating with the Kumu Art Museum to create the serial event **Express & Draw**. During the exhibition, four drawing sessions of two hours with live models will be organised in the Kumu exhibition halls among paintings by renowned German expressionists. In each nude drawing session, we will take a closer look at a few select works from the display and get to know the exhibition and displayed works of art a bit better before starting to draw.



Otto Dix (1891–1969). Reclining Nude. Ca 1920. Graphite
Art Museum of Estonia

ART WALKS

Drop-in guided tours in English

On the last Sunday of every month (NB! check the exact schedule <http://kumu.ekm.ee/en/art-walk/>, because national holidays might affect this!) at 3 pm, we offer a special drop-in guided tour that will introduce one of our latest exhibitions. Through our museum mediators, you can gain deeper insight into art and history.

Art walk: *The Savages of Germany*

Sun 29.10.2017 3 pm
Sun 17.12.2017 3 pm

SESSIONS WILL TAKE PLACE ON

Sat 14.10.2017 4–6 pm
Sat 11.11.2017 4–6 pm
Sat 16.12.2017 4–6 pm
Sat 13.01.2018 4–6 pm

Admission with a museum ticket

Drawing supplies available
for 3 €



Eduard Wiiralt (1898–1954). Dice Players. 1923. Pressed chalk, charcoal and Indian ink. Art Museum of Estonia

BOOKING IN ADVANCE

GUIDED TOURS

We offer the opportunity to order guided tours in different languages to visit the exhibition.

ENTERTAINMENT TOUR

The entertainment tour at the exhibitions *The Savages of Germany* and *Children of the Flowers of Evil* focuses on the persona and oeuvre of Eduard Wiiralt, the most famous Estonian printmaker. In the second half of the programme, the participants can try out printmaking themselves. It is a fun experience for groups of colleagues, friends or birthday guests!

Duration: 1,5 h

Price: less than 10 participants 150 €/group, up to 15 participants, 15 €/person, and starting with the 15th participant, 13 €/person

Can be ordered in Estonian, Russian and English

Information and booking

Mon–Fri 9 am to 5 pm

Tel. +372 5343 9230

kumu@ekm.ee, kumu.ekm.ee

KUMU ART MUSEUM
Weizenbergi 34 / Valge 1, Tallinn, Estonia
kumu.ekm.ee

Open: Oct.–March Wed, Fri–Sun 10 am – 6 pm;
Thu 10 am – 8 pm
April–Sept. Tue–Wed, Fri–Sun 10 am – 6 pm;
Thu 10 am – 8 pm

An exhibition in collaboration with:
Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle; Westhoff Fine Arts

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Curators: Detmar Westhoff, Liis Pählapuu
Assistants: Eva Knels (Westhoff Fine Arts), Helen Volber (Art Museum of Estonia)
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On the cover: Franz Marc. The Creation of Horses. Detail. 1913
Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle

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