

# THE MAD SQUARE

## MODERNITY IN GERMAN ART 1910-37

ngv  
150  
YEARS

### THE MAD SQUARE

*The Mad Square* takes its name from Felix Nussbaum's 1931 painting which depicts Berlin's famous Pariser Platz as a mad and fantastic place. The 'mad square' is both a physical place – the city, represented in so many works in the exhibition, and a reference to the state of turbulence and tension that characterises the period.

The 'square' can also be a modernist construct that saw artists moving away from figurative representations towards increasingly abstract forms.



Felix Nussbaum *The mad square* 1931

The exhibition features works by Max Beckman, Otto Dix, George Grosz, Christian Schad, Kurt Schwitters and August Sander. This group represents Germany's leading generation of interwar artists. Major works by lesser known artists including Karl Hubbuch, Rudolf Schlichter and Hannah Höch are also presented in the exhibition in addition to works by international artists who contributed to German modernism.

*The Mad Square* brings together a diverse and extensive range of art, created during one of the most important and turbulent periods in European history, offering new insights into the understanding of key German avant-garde movements including – Expressionism, Dada, Bauhaus, Constructivism, and New Objectivity were linked by radical experimentation and innovation, made possible by an unprecedented freedom of expression.

## WORLD WAR 1 & THE REVOLUTION

The outbreak of war in 1914 was met with enthusiasm by many German artists and intellectuals who volunteered for service optimistically hoping that it would bring cultural renewal and rapid victory for Germany.

The works in this section are by the generation of artists who experienced war first hand. Depictions of fear, anxiety and violence show the devastating effects of war- the disturbing subjects provide insight into tough economic conditions and social dysfunction experienced by many during the tumultuous early years of the Weimar Republic following the abdication of the Kaiser.

## DADA

The philosophical and political despair experienced by poets and artists during World War 1 fuelled the Dada movement, a protest against the bourgeois conception of art. Violent, infantile and chaotic, Dada took its name from the French word for a child's hobbyhorse or possibly from the sound of a baby's babble. Its activities included poetry readings and avant-garde performances, as well as creating new forms of abstract art that subverted all existing conditions in western art.

Though short-lived, in Germany the Dada movement has profoundly influenced subsequent developments in avant-garde art and culture. The impact of the Dada movement was felt throughout Europe – and most powerfully in Germany from 1917–21.

## BAUHAUS

The Bauhaus (1919-33) is widely considered as the most important school of art and design of the 20th century, very quickly establishing a reputation as the leading and most progressive centre of the international avant-garde.

German architect Walter Gropius founded the school to do away with traditional distinctions between the fine arts and craft, and to forge an entirely new kind of creative designer skilled in both the conceptual aesthetics of art and the technical skills of handicrafts. The Bauhaus was considered to be both politically and artistically radical from its inception and was closed down by the National Socialists in 1933.



George Grosz *Suicide* 1916



Hannah Höch *Love* 1931



Karl Grill [*Spiral costume, from the 'Triadic ballet'*] c.1926–27

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Heinrich Hoerle *Three invalids* c.1930

### CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE MACHINE AESTHETIC

Having emerged in Russia after World War I, Constructivism developed in Germany as a set of ideas and practices that experimented with abstract or non-representational forms and in opposition to Expressionism and Dada.

Constructivists developed works and theories that fused art and with technology. They shared a utopian belief in social reform, and saw abstract art as playing a central role in this process.

### METROPOLIS

By the 1920s Berlin has become the cultural and entertainment capital of the world and mass culture played an important role in distracting a society traumatised by World War 1, the sophisticated metropolis provided a rich source of imagery for artists, it also came to represent unprecedented sexual and personal freedom.

In photography modernity was emphasised by unusual views of the metropolis or through the representation of city types. The diverse group of works in this section portray the uninhibited sense of freedom and innovation experienced by artists throughout Germany during the 1920s.

### NEW OBJECTIVITY

By the mid 1920s, a new style emerged that came to be known as Neue Sachlichkeit or New Objectivity.

After experiencing the atrocities of World War 1 and the harsh conditions of life in postwar Germany, many artists felt the need to return to the traditional modes of representation with portraiture becoming a major vehicle of this expression, with its emphasis on the realistic representation of the human figure.

### POWER AND DEGENERATE ART

After the seizure of power by the National Socialists in 1933 modern artists were forbidden from working and exhibiting in Germany, with their works confiscated from leading museums and then destroyed or sold on the international art market. Many avant-garde artists were either forced to leave Germany or retreat into a state of 'inner immigration'.

The Degenerate art exhibition, held in Munich in 1937, represented the culmination of the National Socialists' assault on modernism. Hundreds of works were selected for the show which aimed to illustrate the mental deficiency and moral decay that had supposedly infiltrated modern German art. The haphazard and derogatory design of the exhibition sought to ridicule and further discredit modern art.

Over two million people visited the exhibition while in contrast far fewer attended the Great German art exhibition which sought to promote what the Nazis considered as 'healthy' art.



Werner Graul *Metropolis* 1926

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### TIMELINE

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#### 1910

- Berlin's population doubles to two million people

#### 1911

- Expressionists move from Dresden to Berlin

#### 1912

- Social Democratic Party (SPD) the largest party in the Reichstag

#### 1913

- Expressionists attain great success with their city scenes

#### 1914

- World War I begins
- George Grosz, Oskar Schlemmer, Otto Dix, Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann and Franz Marc enlist in the army

#### 1915

- Grosz declared unfit for service, Beckmann suffers a breakdown and Schlemmer wounded

#### 1916

- Marc dies in combat
- Dada begins at Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich

#### 1917

- Lenin and Trotsky form the Soviet Republic after the Tzar is overthrown

#### 1918

- Richard Huelsenbeck writes a Dada manifesto in Berlin
- Kurt Schwitters creates Merz assemblages in Hanover
- Revolutionary uprisings in Berlin and Munich
- Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates and flees to Holland
- Social Democratic Party proclaims the Weimar Republic
- World War I ends

#### 1919

- Freikorps assassinates the Spartacist leaders, Karl Leibknecht and Rosa Luxemburg
- Bauhaus established in Weimer by Walter Gropius
- Cologne Dada group formed
- Treaty of Versailles signed

#### 1920

- Berlin is the world's third largest city after New York and London
- Inflation begins in Germany
- National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) founded
- Kapp Putsch fails after right-wing forces try to gain control over government
- First International Dada fair opens in Berlin

#### 1921

- Hitler made chairman of the NSDAP

#### 1922

- Schlemmer's *Triadic ballet* premieres in Stuttgart
- Hyperinflation continues

#### 1923

- Hitler sentenced to five years imprisonment for leading the Beer Hall Putsch
- Inflation decreases and a period of financial stability begins

#### 1924

- Hitler writes *Mein Kampf* while in prison
- Reduction of reparations under the Dawes Plan



Rudolf Schlichter *Tingle tangel* 1919–20

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1925

- *New Objectivity* exhibition opens at the Mannheim Kunsthalle
- The Bauhaus relocates to Dessau

1926

- Germany joins the League of Nations

1927

- Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* released
- Unemployment crisis worsens
- Nazis hold their first Nuremberg party rally



Christian Schad *Self-portrait* 1927

1928

- Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The threepenny opera* premieres in Berlin
- Hannes Meyer becomes the second director of the Bauhaus

1929

- Street confrontations between the Nazis and communists in Berlin
- Young Plan accepted, drastically reducing reparations
- Stock market crashes on Wall Street, New York
- Thomas Mann awarded the Nobel Prize for literature

1930

- Resignation of Chancellor Hermann Müller's cabinet ending parliamentary rule
- Minority government formed by Heinrich Brüning, leader of the Centre Party
- Nazis win 18% of the vote and gain 95 seats in the National elections
- Ludwig Mies van der Rohe becomes the third director of the Bauhaus
- John Heartfield creates photomontages for the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ)*

1931

- Unemployment reaches five million and a state of emergency is declared in Germany

1932

- Nazis increase their representation in the Reichstag to 230 seats but are unable to form a majority coalition
- Mies van der Rohe moves the Bauhaus to Berlin
- Grosz relocates to New York in as an exile

1933

- Hindenberg names Hitler as Chancellor
- Hitler creates a dictatorship under the Nazi regime
- The first *Degenerate art* exhibition denouncing modern art is held in Dresden
- Mies van der Rohe announces the closure of the Bauhaus
- Nazis organise book burnings in Berlin
- Many artists including Gropius, Kandinski and Klee flee Germany
- Beckmann, Dix and Schlemmer lose their teaching positions

1934

- Fifteen concentration camps exist in Germany

1935

- The swastika becomes the flag of the Reich

1936

- Spanish civil war begins
- Germany violates the Treaty of Versailles
- Olympic Games held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Berlin
- Thomas Mann deprived of his citizenship and emigrates to the United States

1937

- German bombing raids over Guernica in Spain in support of Franco
- The Nazi's Degenerate art exhibition opens in Munich and attracts two million visitors
- Beckmann, Kirchner and Schwitters leave Germany
- Purging of 'degenerate' art from German museums continues



John Heartfield *Adolf, the superman: swallows gold and spouts rubbish* 1932

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**Felix Nussbaum**, German 1904–1944, *The mad square* 1931

oil on canvas, 97.0 x 195.5 cm, Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur, © Felix Nussbaum/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

**George Grosz**, German 1893–1959, *Suicide* 1916

oil on canvas, 100.0 x 77.5 cm, Tate London, Purchased with assistance from The Art Fund, 1976, Photo: © Tate, London 2011, © George Grosz/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

**Hannah Höch**, German 1889–1978, *Love* 1931, from the series *Love*

photomontage, 21.8 x 21.0 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Purchased, 1983, © Hannah Höch/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

**Karl Grill**, German active at the Bauhaus 1920–29, [*Spiral costume, from the 'Triadic ballet'*] c.1926–27

gelatin silver photograph, 22.5 x 16.2 cm, J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Photo: The J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, © The artist's estate

**Heinrich Hoerle**, German 1895–1936, *Three invalids* c.1930

oil on plywood, 100.0 x 50.0 cm, Private collection

**Werner Graul**, German 1905–1984, *Metropolis* 1926

colour lithograph, poster, 210.0 x 95.0 cm, Austrian National Library, Pictures Archives and Graphics Department, Vienna, Photo: Courtesy Austrian National Library, Vienna

**Rudolf Schlichter**, German 1890–1955, *Tingel tangel* 1919–20

watercolour, 53.0 x 45.5 cm, Private collection, © Rudolf Schlichter Estate, courtesy Galerie Alvensleben, Munich

**Christian Schad**, German 1894–1982, *Self-portrait* 1927

oil on wood, 76.0 x 62.0 cm, Private collection, courtesy Tate London, © Christian Schad Stiftung Aschaffenburg/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

**John Heartfield**, German 1891–1968, *Adolf, the superman: swallows gold and spouts rubbish* from the *Workers Illustrated Paper*, vol 11, no 29, 17 July 1932, p 675

photolithograph, 38.0 x 27.0 cm, John Heartfield Archiv, Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, Photo: Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Kunstsammlung, Heartfield 2261/ Roman März © The Heartfield Community of Heirs /VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

### Timeline Credit:

Chronology compiled by Jacqueline Strecker and Victoria Tokarowski from the following sources:

Catherine Heroy 'Chronology' in Sabine Rewald, *Glitter and Doom: German portraits from the 1920s*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, exh cat, 2006, pp39-46

Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, eds, *Political chronology*, *The Weimar Republic sourcebook*, Berkely 1994, pp 765-71

Jonathan Petropoulos and Dagmar Lott-Reschke 'Chronology' in Stephanie Barron, *'Degenerate Art': the fate of the avant-garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, exh cat, 1991, pp 391-401