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How the Museum of Modern Art in New York canonised German Expressionism

Gregor Langfeld

This paper will consider why and how the negative attitude towards German Expressionism in the USA changed abruptly in the second half of the 1930s.¹ Alfred H. Barr Jr., the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) at that time, played a crucial role in canonising this form of art. In order to gain an insight into this volte-face, it will be necessary to consider the reception of German Expressionism that preceded it. Although the movement was present in the USA from the beginning of the 1920s, for a long time German Expressionism had only very few supporters and collectors and it was generally met with disapproval.

Obviously, various groups and institutions play a role in the art canonisation process: artists, gallery owners, private art collectors, patrons and art dealers all responded to modern art earlier than the museums. However, it was the museums in the first half of the twentieth century that eventually gave a real boost to the art forms that they patronised and their vision of them. MoMA, founded in 1929, marked an increasing institutionalisation and professionalisation of the modern art scene. The New York museum quickly became a role model, recognised as the most important museum of modern art in the USA. Crucially, it contributed to the establishment of the reputation of modern German art outside of Germany.

Other groups on the American art scene, and the artists themselves, had supported this art even earlier and maintained close contacts with German artists, but they were unable to gain acceptance for their view. Katherine Dreier and the Société Anonyme that she cofounded with Marcel Duchamp in 1920 can be regarded as an example of this. Their goal had been to foster understanding of modern art in the USA. Very soon, however, it was primarily Dreier who organised the society's ongoing activities, since Duchamp returned to France in early 1923. Over the next two decades she organised around ninety exhibitions, gave numerous lectures and organised discussions and symposia.²

¹ The present text was published in German under the title 'Bedeutungsveränderung und Kanonisierung des deutschen Expressionismus in den USA' in *The Aesthetics of Matter: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange*, volume 3 of the series *European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies*, 2013. The present English translation by Steven Lindberg has been minimally revised.

² Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter and Elise K. Kenney, eds, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 772–779.

When Dreier was studying in Munich in the winter of 1911–12, she heard about Wassily Kandinsky for the first time.³ His influential book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912)⁴ helped her clarify her vague ideas of art. She agreed with Kandinsky's analogy of painting and music. In late 1922, after meeting him at the Bauhaus in October, she appointed him the 'first honorary vice-president' of the Société Anonyme.⁵

Dreier's idea of modern art was tied to theosophy. Avant-garde artists in particular felt a tie to this religious doctrine because it attributed particular importance to abstract art. They were convinced that they were living at the beginning of a great new era, whose effects would be revealed internationally in all intellectual fields. Ultimately, Katherine Dreier felt artistically closer to Kandinsky's intuitive approach and his idea of the spiritual significance of abstract art, than to Duchamp's more intellectual position. Although she advocated the broad spectrum of the avant-garde that was inclined to abstraction, she distanced herself from naturalism and figurative Expressionism. To Dreier, the realism of the Brücke (Bridge) artists, who directly depicted their sensory experiences, did not seem spiritual enough.

In essence, she subordinated everything to her ideas of universal, 'cosmic forces'.⁶ Her irrational, extra-aesthetic view of art must have seemed suspect to the experts and to sober observers. The critics had no sympathy for Dreier's metaphysical views, her assumption of a cosmic force as the driving force of artistic activity. Several critics responded cynically and rejected her views as mere rhetoric used to legitimise weak art. In connection with Dreier's most important exhibition, *International Exhibition of Modern Art* (1926–27),⁷ most reviewers found that abstract art was purely decorative, lacking sensitivity and intellectual depth.⁸ Only a very small number of critics saw a lasting value in the exhibits, even as applied art outside the museum. In essence, they denied it any aesthetic value, which justified excluding it from the realm of art to be taken seriously.

The view that the exhibits could not really be art at all and consequently did not belong in a museum at all is understandable insofar as until that time American museums had not seriously exhibited or collected international modern art. The Brooklyn Museum was the first to make its spaces available for such a large show,

³ Katherine S. Dreier, *Kandinsky*, New York: Société Anonyme, 1923, 3.

⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Bern: Benteli Verlag, (1912), 1952.

⁵ Herbert, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest*, 753.

⁶ Katherine S. Dreier, *Modern Art. Text by Katherine S. Dreier. Composed by Katherine S. Dreier & Constantin Aladjalov*, New York: Brooklyn Museum, exhibition catalogue, 1926.

⁷ This show was seen first at the Brooklyn Museum and then at the Anderson Galleries in New York, the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo and the Art Gallery of Toronto.

⁸ Ruth L. Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America*, PhD diss. Saint Louis, Missouri 1980. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980/1982, 98–101.

which in itself was a bold act. But the museum's director, William Henry Fox, did not act as a supporter of this art. In his foreword he distanced himself from the exhibition; he did not take sides regarding this form of art, he was neither for or against it.⁹ Fox said that he wanted to give the audience the opportunity to see this art, and he wanted to create a forum for artistic debates, because that was indispensable for artistic evolution. But he explicitly left it to the public to judge for itself.

Through its founding of MoMA, a social elite in the USA was crucially involved in modern German art gaining acceptance. A small group of like-minded people, including Abby Rockefeller, influenced the museum's strategies for exhibiting and collecting. The founders of the museum appointed the art historian and expert on modern art Alfred H. Barr Jr. as the director of MoMA. Barr made a name for himself with his knowledge, which he disseminated in catalogues and exhibitions. Moreover, in his function as museum director and later as head of collections, he possessed the capital of institutional authority. His authority and competence, emanating in part from that of the museum, was recognised in the artistic field of the United States.

Both Rockefeller and Barr wished to foster more appreciation for German art. Two German immigrants supported their interest in this art in a personal way: the art historian William R. Valentiner who organised the exhibition *Modern German Art* for the Anderson Galleries in New York in 1923 and the New York art dealer Jsrael Ber Neumann.¹⁰ In the period between the wars, these four personalities made essential contributions to the dissemination of German art in the United States. They formed an effective network in which different areas of the artistic field came together: the museum, art trade, private art collectors, and patrons of the arts.

The large exhibition *German Painting and Sculpture* (1931) took place barely a year and a half after MoMA opened. This is evidence that German art was an essential concern of the museum's directors. Barr's seemingly objective text in the catalogue for the German art exhibition in 1931 can therefore easily obscure how subjective and one-sided his presentation of German art actually was. With his exhibition, Barr reinforced a one-sided, stereotypical image of German art that marginalised international artistic connections. MoMA's use of a dichotomy of

⁹ Katherine S. Dreier, *Modern Art and Catalogue of an International Exhibition of Modern Art Assembled by the Société Anonyme*, New York: Brooklyn Museum, exhibition catalogue, 1926.

¹⁰ In 1924, Valentiner travelled to Germany with Abby Rockefeller, and he encouraged her to purchase works by Erich Heckel and Georg Kolbe. These were her first acquisitions of modern German art. Valentiner became a mentor and adviser to Rockefeller. In 1926, Barr met Neumann, who spent a great deal of time with the young art historian and taught him about the German and Russian avant-gardes. Neumann's contacts and counsel were also important during Barr's formative trip through Europe in the years 1927-1928. Wendy Jeffers, 'Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: Patron of the Modern', *The Magazine Antiques* 166 (November 2004): 121; Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2002, 150-151.

German and French or Northern and Latin art in this exhibition was not just an exception. It had done so previously, as is evident from its opening exhibition on Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Vincent van Gogh (1929)¹¹ and its first sculpture exhibition on Wilhelm Lehmbruck and Aristide Maillol (1930).¹²

This perspective was antithetical to Dreier's, who, though she promoted German art, never organised any national exhibitions in the strict sense. She was convinced that the modern movement was not restricted by national borders. Since German art was merely part of that movement, she did not perceive it primarily as German. Nationality did not play an essential role in her assessment of art.¹³

By contrast, Barr excluded artists who were not, in his view, 'typically German' but were instead international or 'French' in orientation. He explicitly underscored an alleged distinction between 'French form' and 'German content', which was based at least in part on irrational, clichéd ideas with a long, sometimes centuries-old tradition that had rarely been questioned critically.¹⁴ This memorable

¹¹ Barr characterised Van Gogh's work as trenchant, disproportionate, 'tasteless', and absolutely un-French in its burning, spiritual fervor. If any race could lay claim to Van Gogh, it was the Northern race. This artist was the archetype of Expressionism, of the cult of pure, uncensored spontaneity. Museum of Modern Art, *First Loan Exhibition, New York, November 1929: Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, 1929, 18; Alfred H. Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, 1931, 9.

¹² The vice director of the museum, Jere Abbott, emphasised in the catalogue on Lehmbruck and Maillol the polarity between these two sculptors rather than their parallels, which were certainly evident in the works exhibited. Most of the sculptures by both artists were close to the classical ideal. The focus of the exhibition was not late, highly deformed sculptures of the German sculptor. Nevertheless, Abbott claimed that there were only a few works of twentieth-century sculpture that were more different than those of Lehmbruck and Maillol, a difference that was founded in part on race. Abbott was convinced that the dichotomy of these two artists should be sought even more fundamentally in the traditional relationship of North to South, of the Gothic to the Classical/Greek. Maillol expressed physical movement and controlled, organised realism; Lehmbruck, by contrast, a spiritual mood, a state more mental than physical. Museum of Modern Art, *Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Aristide Maillol: Exhibition of Sculpture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, 1930, 5.

¹³ *Catalog of an International Exhibition Illustrating the Most Recent Development in Abstract Art*, Presented by the Société Anonyme, Buffalo: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy/Albright Art Gallery, exhibition catalogue, 1931, 7.

¹⁴ Barr was taking up an old idea, originating with Giorgio Vasari, that the unclassical Gothic can be traced back to the Germans and not the French. In his *Lives of the Artists* of 1550, Vasari wrongly attributed unclassical Gothic (and earlier) architecture to the Germans, rather than the French, whereas the Gothic had in fact emerged in the mid-twelfth century. By doing so he contributed to a consequential development that would prevail into the twentieth century. He described German architecture as vast, barbarous, and rude. He used the word 'degenerated' in the sense of deviating from one's own national, classical ideal,

identity for German art and its equation with Expressionism, which supposedly conformed to a timeless German character, were of great significance to the canonisation process. Barr thus contributed to a mystification of this art. His nationalist perspective persuaded art critics, which should not be regarded as inevitable for its reception outside of Germany.

Although he mentioned, alongside the Brücke artists, the Blauer Reiter (Blue Rider) artists, who tended more to abstraction, as a second important group of Expressionists, they were less well represented in the show.¹⁵ Kandinsky, their central figure, was lacking entirely, since according to Barr the abstract artists were too international in their orientation to be included in the exhibition.¹⁶ Barr regarded both Marc's work, which he characterised as decorative, and that of Kandinsky, in formal and aesthetic terms.¹⁷ By contrast, Katherine Dreier emphasised Marc's approach to colour in his animal paintings, and she considered Kandinsky's spiritual and transcendental views to be essential.¹⁸

Alongside various forms of Expressionism, the painters of Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) formed their own group in Barr's exhibition: Otto Dix, George Grosz and Georg Schrimpf. Relatively few painters of Neue Sachlichkeit were represented, even though the movement was more contemporaneous than Expressionism. Schrimpf's paintings radiated timelessness and harmony. Nevertheless, Dix and Grosz in particular, the best known proponents of Neue Sachlichkeit, had points of contact with Expressionism. The sculptors Ernst Barlach,

referring also to the moral level. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster, vol. 1, London: H. Bohn, (1550) 1850, 21, 24–25.

¹⁵ Alfred H. Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, 1931, 10.

¹⁶ Quantitatively, abstract art was a peripheral phenomenon in Barr's exhibition; even if one includes the group of artists who were working with the human figure in a way that was partially constructivist and geometric (Baumeister, Schlemmer, and Molzahn), they were only represented by a total of five works. Franz Marc, however, was represented by six paintings. Corrected copy of the catalogue, MoMA Archives, New York, REG 11.

¹⁷ In 1923–24 Barr saw four oil paintings and nine watercolours by Kandinsky in an exhibition at Vassar College organized by the Société Anonyme. In terms of colour, Barr found his work decorative, but at the same time he believed it lacked rhythm, so that the decorative qualities were diminished. He felt that Kandinsky's art conveyed no emotion. MoMA thus began to collect his work actively only after the Second World War, although in 1935 Abby Rockefeller had donated a watercolour from 1915 and in 1941 purchased a drawing from 1915 for the museum. In 1934 Barr remarked that decorative Expressionism, with its spontaneous freedom and pure aesthetic experience, had found its most extreme expression in Kandinsky's work. See Kantor 2002, 31–32; *Modern Works of Art: Fifth Anniversary Exhibition*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, exhibition catalogue, 1934, 14.

¹⁸ Dreier wrote: 'The danger of the ornament which Americans find especially hard to avoid – Kandinsky has mastered and controlled. He saw the danger from the beginning. He speaks of his love of "the hidden", the mysterious, the quality of time'. Dreier, *Kandinsky*, 12; Dreier, *Modern Art*, 30–31.

Ernesto de Fiori, Georg Kolbe, Gerhard Marcks and Renée Sintenis were also well represented. They tended towards neoclassical and realistic form that could be sure of a good reception. Only Rudolf Belling and Oskar Schlemmer were represented by abstract sculptures.

In his exhibition catalogue, Barr explained that internationally oriented art could not be called 'German.' Pure abstraction, Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism were barely represented at all. This was not because he did not admire the movements and artists not represented here. Barr showed great admiration for the work of Hans Arp, Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters, collecting and exhibiting it from as early as 1935 or 1936.¹⁹ With his presentation, he created a concentrated idea of German art. This highly one-sided view of German art would prove to be key to its canonisation.

Thanks to the identification of a few, clear features, German art obtained its own status. The term 'Expressionism' functioned as an identifying mark for German art, which thereby distinguished itself from French art and obtained a noticeable place on the art scene. Barr declared a non-formalist perspective on this art to be essential to understanding it. He subordinated the formal and aesthetic qualities of this art to psychological, social, political, philosophical and religious ones.²⁰ He claimed that form and style were not as much ends in themselves as they were in French and American art. He even asserted that German art was not, as a rule, pure art and that artists often confused art and life with each other. He believed contemporary artists were walking in the footprints of their forebears: for example, Albrecht Dürer was interested in science and metaphysics; Hans Holbein, in exploring human character; and Matthias Grünewald, in violent expressions of emotion.²¹ With his linear view of history he shaped the image of an immutable German character that was expressed in art. Barr also suggested that the idealistic program of the Brücke had been inspired by a romantic interpretation of medieval guilds.²²

His perspective derived from the German discourse on art since the First World War and presumed a timeless Germanic artistry opposed to the Mediterranean cultural sphere.²³ After Expressionism had been understood within an international context prior to the First World War and had been rejected as a

¹⁹ These artists were represented in the important MoMA exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (both 1936).

²⁰ Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture*, 7.

²¹ Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture*, 7.

²² Barr, *German Painting and Sculpture*, 10, 13, 22 etc.

²³ For the discussions in Germany, see: Magdalena Bushart, *Der Geist der Gotik und die expressionistische Kunst. Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie. 1911–1925*. Munich: Silke Schreiber, 1990; Christian Saehrendt, *'Die Brücke' zwischen Staatskunst und Verfemung: Expressionistische Kunst als Politikum in der Weimarer Republik, im 'Dritten Reich' und im Kalten Krieg*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005.

particularly absurd variation on modernism, it became established in the Weimar Republic as a manifestation of national self-representation. As early as 1923, William R. Valentiner was advocating a *völkisch* conception of German art in the United States when he organised the exhibition of German art for the Anderson Galleries in New York.²⁴

Although Barr's exhibition triggered a broad spectrum of reviews, ranging from the dismissive to the enthusiastic, in general, critics responded more positively to Barr's German show than they had to Dreier's international exhibition in Brooklyn, which primarily featured abstract art. Barr's own assessment of the quality of Expressionism was subject to fluctuations and was sometimes almost divided. This is in part due to the fact that, in his view, German artists referred to content, and not to form like French artists. Expressionism had not yet been canonised at the time, and it would be a while before Barr acquired his first paintings by a Brücke artist and by a representative of the Blauer Reiter (apart from isolated works on paper). Barr's ambivalent attitude towards these artists is evidence that they had not yet been canonised. The objective distance this demonstrated increased his credibility. His texts were free of the fanatic intolerance that could certainly be found in the writings of other defenders of the avant-garde, such as Katherine Dreier. His analyses, by contrast, gave the impression of being solid and unprejudiced, which is why art critics were happy to adopt his views and disseminate them. The only important painting by a German artist to enter MoMA's collection around the time of the German exhibition (1932) was Otto Dix's *Portrait of Dr. Mayer-Hermann* (1926). If an artist's acceptance into a museum collection is an indicator of canonisation, then the decisive criterion for modern German art at the time was less its expressive content and more the realism of its depictions.

Modern German art did not by any means get universal recognition in the USA only after 1933. It had not been fundamentally rejected with the rise of National Socialism. This is often overlooked by scholars who use today's canon as their point of departure. At the time, however, other art forms that today play only a marginal role were much more highly regarded. Reviewers appreciated neoclassical and figurative trends like those expressed in German sculpture and in *Neue Sachlichkeit*. The art scene was dominated by a rivalry between the defenders of traditional norms and those who sought to transform them. To an extent, the avant-garde movements became established and traditional artists lost their previous position in the artistic hierarchy. Conservative art critics savaged for aesthetic reasons not only modern German but also modern French art, neither of which corresponded to the taste of the time.

During the National Socialist period, a significant turn in the assessment of the German avant-garde began. In the first half of the 1930s, American interest in National Socialist cultural policy was still limited. This attitude changed only after

²⁴ W. R. Valentiner, *A Collection of Modern German Art. Introduced by W.R. Valentiner*, New York: Anderson Galleries, Exhibition catalogue, 1923.

Germany undertook crucial measures against modern art in 1937. Increasingly, influential players on the American art scene took up the issue, which was an essential precondition for the sweeping acceptance of art that had only begun to receive recognition. Barr was once again in the front ranks when it came to legitimising modern art ideologically. This is all the more astonishing given that he is generally considered to be the epitome of a formalist.

One example of this is a MoMA press release from August 1939 titled 'Exiled Art Purchased by Museum of Modern Art' that announced new acquisitions of works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee and Wilhelm Lehmbruck and by French painters. The paintings and Lehmbruck's sculpture came from the collections of important German museums, from which they had been confiscated by the National Socialists as 'degenerate' art and then sold.²⁵ MoMA acquired them via Curt Valentin, a former employee of the Berlin book dealer and gallery owner Karl Buchholz. Valentin had been forced to immigrate to New York in 1937 by the racial laws of the 'Third Reich' and opened the Buchholz Gallery/Curt Valentin that same year. Buchholz was able to remain in Germany and continued to operate his businesses in Germany and abroad. He brought art and funds to the New York gallery, at which Valentin made use of his good contacts; the profits were to be shared.²⁶ It was extremely significant that Buchholz was one of the art dealers who received permission from the National Socialists to sell confiscated 'degenerate' art.²⁷ Over the years MoMA acquired more works through Valentin, who was the only American art dealer with access to such works; in the process many first-class, museum-quality works moved from Germany to the United States.

In a press release, Barr called Lehmbruck's *Kneeling Woman* (1911) one of the greatest masterpieces of modern sculpture and said that the painters of the works

²⁵ Gregor Langfeld, *Deutsche Kunst in New York: Vermittler, Kunstsammler, Ausstellungsmacher, 1904–1957*, Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2011, 127. One of the most recent publications on 'degenerate' art is: Olaf Peters, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Attack of Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*, New York: Neue Galerie, Exhibition catalogue, 2014.

²⁶ Because the Second World War had begun, on September 2 1939, Buchholz decided to transfer part of his business to Valentin. Anja Tiedemann, *Die 'entartete' Moderne und ihr amerikanischer Markt: Karl Buchholz und Curt Valentin als Händler verfemter Kunst*. Schriften der Forschungsstelle 'Entartete Kunst' 8. Berlin: Akademie, 2013, 16.

²⁷ The most important art dealers 'disposing of' (that is, selling or exchanging) 'degenerate' art for the National Socialists, in addition to Buchholz, were Hildebrandt Gurlitt in Hamburg, Bernhard A. Böhmer in Güstrow, and Ferdinand Möller in Berlin. They 'disposed of' around 8,700 works for the Ministry of Propaganda, including 730 paintings, 90 sculptures, 950 watercolors, and 650 drawings. Andreas Hüneke, 'Bilanzen der 'Verwertung' der 'Entarteten Kunst'', in: Eugen Blume and Dieter Scholz, eds., *Überbrückt: Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus; Kunsthistoriker und Künstler, 1925–1937*, Cologne: Walther König, 1999, 265 and 267.

acquired were among the best living artists, even outside of Germany.²⁸ The ambivalence about the assessment of these artists that he had expressed in 1931 had vanished. Now he described them as being of great importance internationally, whereas previously he felt that Kirchner's influence was only national. This was the first time an oil painting by a Brücke artist entered the collection: one of Kirchner's Berlin street scenes (1913–14). The museum acquired Klee's first oil painting, *Around the Fish* (1926). The same year, 1939, his watercolour *The Twittering Machine* (1922) would follow from the collection of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin.

To make his acquisitions seem more valuable, Barr argued more politically than he had previously. He quoted Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech earlier that year for the opening of the new museum building on the claim to artistic freedom under democracy, thereby establishing the ideological position of the USA on 'degenerate' art.²⁹ The international political situation and the resulting positioning of American authorities relative to modern art led many to revise their attitude towards this art. In 1939, the journal *American Art News* described *Kneeling Woman* as the most important modern sculpture any museum had acquired that year.³⁰ From that point, Lehmbruck's late work belonged to the canon of modern art.³¹ The context of the National Socialist condemnation of modern art played a crucial role, with Lehmbruck's late work becoming almost symbolic of this art. The second half of the 1930s brought a drastic change in the assessment of Lehmbruck's oeuvre, which must be described more as a rift than a continuous development. Until that time the artist's classical sculptures had been clearly favoured.³²

In his press release Barr discussed National Socialist art policy. He argued that resistance to modern art was closely linked to Nazi ideology. The repression of modern art and artists had begun, he wrote, immediately after the Nazis took power. He reported on 'insulting remarks' made about 'masterpieces of modern art'; on the firing of museum directors, curators, and leading artists; on the removal

²⁸ 'Exiled Art Purchased by Museum of Modern Art'. Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, exh. no. 186. The museum presented the newly acquired works of art in the exhibition for its tenth anniversary, *Art in Our Time*.

²⁹ The speech was quoted at length, among other places, on the front page of the *Herald Tribune* and in the *New York Times* (11 May 1939). For other reactions in the press, see the Archives of American Art (MoMA Archives, Public Information Scrapbooks), reel 5062.

³⁰ 'The Year in Art: A Review of 1939', *American Art News*, 30 December 1939.

³¹ Olaf Peters comes to a similar conclusion in his article on the American reception of Lehmbruck. Olaf Peters, 'Wilhelm Lehmbruck', in: Renée Price, ed., *New Worlds: German and Austrian Art, 1890-1940*, New York: Neue Galerie, Exhibition catalogue, 2001, 146-51.

³² Although Lehmbruck sold his neoclassical *Large Standing Woman* (1910) at the Armory Show in 1913, his *Kneeling Woman* went unsold, and the reaction to the work was malicious. This expressionist, elongated and deformed sculpture was ridiculed, above all by former president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. He cynically compared the sculpture, which he felt was 'pathological', to a praying mantis. See Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, New York: Abbeville; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1988, 146.

of works of art from museums; and on the two large art exhibitions in Munich in 1937.³³ Barr believed that the only good thing about the exile of these outstanding works was that they would enrich the countries where artistic freedom still existed. Barr welcomed these important exiled works which represented such an extraordinary addition to MoMA's European collection.

In general, art critics concurred completely with Barr's view. For example, the *American Magazine of Art* also judged *Kneeling Woman* to be one of the great masterpieces of modern sculpture.³⁴ The critic called Kirchner's painting from the Nationalgalerie in Berlin the most interesting acquisition, since it was the least well known of the works. But Barr had already shown the painting in his German exhibition of 1931. When considering this positive reaction to Kirchner's painting, one should recall that the artist's first solo exhibition in America, which had been held just two years earlier, received no attention whatever.³⁵ Only now did both MoMA and museums outside of New York begin to collect Expressionist art.

Promoters of art made the artists who had been condemned out to be the polar opposite of fascism. The myth of the antifascist artist was born, though it overlooked all the political contradictions. The political views of Expressionist artists close to National Socialism were systematically overlooked, trivialised or reinterpreted in order to justify their art. Over the course of this change, viewers became open to an aesthetic that did not really conform to their ideas of beauty. Conversely, the promoters of such art made art that could be connected to National Socialism taboo and thus 'unworthy of the canon'. Only after the USA entered the Second World War did the ideological perspective on modern art truly prevail. With the victory of the Allied forces over Germany, this perspective solidified under a polarised international situation that had changed yet again. The canonisation of Expressionism that had begun in the 1930s could now be implemented completely.

In Barr's presentation, works of art took on symbolic character: they stood for the Germany of the Weimar Republic, before the 'Third Reich'. This art symbolised the repression of artists who countered tyranny and who themselves

³³ Library of the Museum of Modern Art (Releases 1939).

³⁴ 'News and Comment', *American Magazine of Art*, 32, 1939, no. 9, 534, 534–540.

³⁵ In early 1937 Valentiner organised Kirchner's first, small solo exhibition in the USA. Valentiner was aware that there was little interest in this 'unknown name'. He sold only a few watercolours; Valentiner himself purchased an oil painting so the artist would not be disappointed. In September and October 1937 Curt Valentin showed Kirchner's more recent work. Because the exhibition was once again unsuccessful, Valentiner acquired another painting. Reinhold Heller, 'Ernst Ludwig Kirchner', in: Renée Price, ed., *New Worlds: German and Austrian Art, 1890–1940*, New York: Neue Galerie, Exhibition catalogue, 2001, 166 and 167. Valentin wrote to Kirchner: 'When you read the enclosed reviews, don't be too shocked. Please do not blame me; I did my best [...]. So I have nothing to report yet in terms of 'practical' success. But here one must have patience and prepare the ground slowly – working not for today but for the longer view.' Curt Valentin to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 5 October 1937, Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

represented a better, intellectual Germany. Honouring works of art was a way of honouring those who created them while living under adverse circumstances. Americans with a democratic feeling of obligation and sympathy for the persecuted felt a connection to their art, which initiated a process of identification.

The art that was, on the one hand, recognised within Germany by the National Socialist regime and the art that was, on the other hand, condemned by it was a good indication of what would be tabooed and canonised after National Socialism was defeated. Art that could be stylistically associated with the official art of the 'Third Reich' – namely, naturalist trends – was devalued. This diminished the reputations of many artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement and of the sculpture that had been greatly admired between the wars.

This political argument over modern German art continued to be asserted even after 1945, but was adapted to the circumstances of the Cold War. The recognition of such art continued in connection with this. The exhibition *German Art of the Twentieth Century* at MoMA in 1957 is a good example.³⁶ Most of the approximately 180 exhibits tended towards Expressionism, from which one is forced to conclude that the organisers still equated modern German art with this movement. Other currents, such as Neue Sachlichkeit and Constructivist trends were only sporadically represented, but the press release nevertheless praised the show as the 'most comprehensive survey' ever shown in the United States.³⁷

Werner Haftmann, who was one of the most influential art historians in West Germany at the time, contributed the longest essay in the catalogue. The concept of 'northeastern Expressionism' characterised Haftmann's essay in *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, even though he simultaneously pointed to the international character of modern art.³⁸ Much like Barr and Valentiner roughly three decades earlier, he was convinced that the formal and aesthetic qualities of German art were not so much ends in themselves as metaphors for spiritual experiences and for the 'position of mankind in the universe'.³⁹ He emphatically underscored the differences between French and German art and reduced them to the simple formula 'décor' versus 'illustration'.

As we have seen, the reference to the condemnation of modern art by the Nazi regime was, even before the Second World War, a tried-and-tested technique to increase regard for this art. Haftmann drew parallels between National Socialism and the communism-oriented systems before and after 1945 (German Democratic Republic, Soviet Union and China), which amounted to updating the political re-

³⁶ MoMA showed this exhibition from 1 October to 8 December 1957 before it travelled to Saint Louis.

³⁷ Library of the Museum of Modern Art (Releases 1957).

³⁸ Werner Haftmann, Alfred Hentzen and William S. Lieberman, *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, New York: Museum of Modern Art (in collaboration with the City Art Museum of Saint Louis, Missouri), Exhibition catalogue, 1957, 14.

³⁹ Haftmann, *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, 19–20 and 125.

evaluation of the art condemned in these countries and lent it additional weight. In his view, all the totalitarian regimes led to inauthentic, prettified photographic realism that depicted the subject matter prescribed by authorities. He claimed that there was a plan to destroy free, independent thoughts and individual personalities. After the Second World War it was Barr who identified modern art with Western democracies and depicted it as irreconcilable with fascism and communism, by doing so he encouraged tolerance towards such art.⁴⁰ The totalitarian systems were diametrically opposed to the self-image of the West during the Cold War. It was a time in which people identified with the values of freedom and individualism more than ever before. This is illustrated by the foreword to the MoMA bulletin published on the occasion of the museum's twenty-fifth anniversary and written by the president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Its principal idea is that artistic freedom, as an expression of the American stance, is fundamentally opposed to tyranny.⁴¹ Much as Franklin D. Roosevelt had done in his speech for the museum's tenth anniversary in 1939, he offered modern art a political justification of existence that is solidly anchored in American society.

In that spirit, Haftmann contrasted realism with abstraction and Expressionism, which, in his view, were characterised by individualism. He flatly declared the whole modern art movement to be anti-naturalistic, though for him that did not so much mean the complete negation of the object as a personal way of observing and experiencing the world of objects. This is why Expressionism played such an important role. Haftmann's rigorous separation of modern art and totalitarian systems reflects the impotence of the 1950s vis-à-vis the National Socialist past, because continuities and entanglements were overlooked, resulting in a falsified picture of history that helped to establish modern art. The supporters of modern art practiced this structurally, consciously or unconsciously, which made it inevitable that this art would be valued more highly and ensured its canonisation.

Whereas after the Second World War art that had been explicitly aimed at National Socialism was hardly shown at all, influential exhibition organisers and art historians such as Werner Haftmann appealed to the idea of the artist who withdraws from the world, into his or her private sphere and personal relationship with the world. They transported modern art to a state of supposed innocence and

⁴⁰ That was expressed in a declaration of principles for American museums published in 1950, in whose conception Barr played a central role. In this declaration, the museums clarified their position on modern art. In addition, in the 1950s, Barr repeatedly opposed the conservative congressmen George A. Dondero and Fred Ernest Busbey and Senator Joseph McCarthy, all of whom associated modern art with communism and characterised it as subversive and anti-American. Irving Sandler and Amy Newman, eds, *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986, 35–36, 214ff, 220ff.

⁴¹ '[...] freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty in our land. [...] Likewise, our people must have unimpaired opportunity to see, to understand, to profit from our artists' work. [...] But, my friends, how different it is in tyranny [...].' Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Freedom of the Arts', *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 22, 1954, no. 1–2, 3.

projected features such as individuality, strength of emotions, non-conformism, and rebellious attitudes onto this art and its artists, who were thus considered as representatives of the other, better Germany. Expressionism, in particular, symbolised values such as freedom and individualism, so that this art movement helped shape identity in democratic countries. Contemporary developments in post-war art further improved the valuation of Expressionism.

Canonisations are social processes that establish identity. Viewers recognise themselves in the work of art and find their convictions affirmed. Identification with the ideology associated with the work of art in question creates the precondition for the work being considered worthy of the aesthetic gaze.

The nationalist perspective on German art proved to be so successful that it has lasted into the present. In that sense, the nationalist nineteenth century lives on in art history. Expressionism is still considered to be the epitome of German art, even though this view can be disproved. Over the course of time, people have projected onto the art movement of that name often irrational meanings (expression of the character of the German people, democratic, anti-totalitarian etc.) that were essential to its establishment. The supposed aesthetic autonomy of art in the museum space is, on closer inspection, only tenable to a very limited degree. Aesthetic experiences are the product of social and historical conditions. The recipient experiences the work of art at a specific point in historical time and tied to a specific social place, under conditions through which he or she brings its artistic significance up to date.

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