Coloring German Expressionism

A coloring book for adults (and kids, too!)

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German Expressionism

In the first decades of the 20th century, artists in Germany known as expressionists rebelled against official, academic traditions and the societal conventions of the German Empire (1871–1918). They believed that by doing so, they could achieve a kind of spiritual awakening. Two major groups are typically associated with the movement: Brücke (The Bridge), active in Dresden and Berlin from 1905 to 1913, and the Munich-based Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider), which was founded in 1911 and likewise disbanded in 1913. Though both dissolved prior to World War I, major representatives of these groups, including Gabriele Münter, Emil Nolde, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, continued to work well into the mid-20th century, alongside emerging artists.

Expressionist painting is synonymous with thick brushstrokes, bold, distorted forms, and especially with vibrant, non-naturalistic color, derived in some cases from artists’ exploration of complex color theory. In addition to absorbing the ideas of cubism and futurism, expressionists adapted earlier traditions in a range of media, such as Bavarian glass painting and woodcuts from medieval Europe. They gave equal weight to the fine and decorative arts, where the former was once privileged, and their homes and studio spaces were often the very subjects of their work.

Beyond drawing from folk and medieval Christian models, expressionists—active during the period of German colonialism—were also interested in African and Oceanic material culture, which they came to know through publications, commercial galleries, and ethnographic museums. They also collected works from these regions. African and Oceanic material culture directly influenced the expressionist style, but it was not just the formal qualities of such objects that appealed to European artists working in this mode. Hoping to free themselves from society’s restrictive codes of behavior, expressionists identified with what they considered to be the “authentic” qualities of “primitive” cultures. In doing so, they, like many modernists, subscribed to longstanding stereotypes about people outside Europe that had been used to justify colonial violence. The expressionists’ engagement with a wide range of creative traditions galvanized new ways of art making in the 20th century; today, there is also increasing acknowledgment of the movement’s cultural appropriation.
The Busch-Reisinger Museum

The Busch-Reisinger Museum was founded at Harvard University in 1903 as the Germanic Museum. Unique among North American institutions, the museum is dedicated to the study of all modes and periods of art from central and northern Europe, with an emphasis on German-speaking countries. It is the only such museum situated within a university. Its holdings span the 14th century to the present day and include a remarkable collection of German expressionist paintings, sculpture, and works on paper.

The Busch-Reisinger greatly shaped the appreciation and understanding of German expressionism in the United States. Beginning in the 1930s, the museum exhibited works by artists such as Max Pechstein, Alexei von Jawlensky, and Emil Nolde, still little known in the United States. Their reputation grew as a direct result of the defamatory Nazi “degenerate art” campaign in Germany at that time. Many artworks by expressionists were removed from German museums and offered for sale abroad. The status of these works as the “art that Hitler hated” bolstered myths about German modernism and fed its popularity. In 1941, for example—the same year the United States entered World War II—the Busch-Reisinger exhibited Franz Marc’s *Grazing Horses IV* (pp. 15–16) as part of the artist’s first solo exhibition in the country, elevating the painting to the status of expressionist icon. After the war’s end, additional works by expressionist artists, such as Erich Heckel’s *To the Convalescent Woman (Triptych)* (pp. 21–24), entered the museum’s collection. The Busch-Reisinger’s holdings have been continually strengthened ever since, including through the acquisition of works by important women artists, among them Gabriele Münter and Paula Modersohn-Becker.

The works featured in this coloring book represent a small selection of the Harvard Art Museums’ German expressionist holdings. For paintings, sculpture, and works on paper by a broader group of artists, including Walter Gramatté, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Käthe Kollwitz, visit the digital collection on the museums’ website. As you explore German expressionism in its incredible variety, don’t forget to express yourself on the pages that follow!
Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Birch Tree in a Landscape*, 1899

The flat terrain, birch tree, and open sky in this work by Paula Modersohn-Becker are characteristic of Worpswede, a small village in northern Germany. The region’s rural inhabitants, the simplicity of its landscape, and the teachings at the local artists’ colony inspired Modersohn-Becker’s signature “naive” style. Her thickly painted brushstrokes, like those of post-impressionist painters such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh, combine to create textured layers. Already in this early work, Modersohn-Becker’s swift application of paint directly onto the flat surface of the board testifies to her role as a major expressionist figure, despite her brief career. As you color, imagine the look and feel of a birch tree’s bark, built up from whites, blacks, browns, and grays.
Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Birch Tree in a Landscape*, 1899
Gabriele Münter, *Pink Still Life*, 1908–9

A founding member of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (New Artists’ Association Munich) and later Der Blaue Reiter, Gabriele Münter painted this still life early in the first mature phase of her career. It depicts a table and an array of small objects in the apartment she shared with companion and fellow artist Wassily Kandinsky in Munich. The black outlines around key objects are a new tactic likely adopted from her close engagement with Bavarian folk art and traditions of painting on glass. They also recall the outlines of stained glass windows, such as Max Pechstein’s *Woman with Animals* (pp. 19–20). Whereas the objects in *Pink Still Life* are often densely painted, in the background Münter employs loose, impressionist dabs of color, often barely covering the surface of the board. You might also like to try varying the density of the marks you make with your crayon, pencil, or paintbrush.
Gabriele Münter, *Pink Still Life*, 1908–9
Expressionists revived the woodcut, a relief-printing technique popular in Renaissance Europe, and made the medium their own. They laid bare its material qualities and exploited its capacity to convey strong emotional content through sharp angular lines. Here, Brücke artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner purposefully gouged the surface of the woodblock to emphasize its rough-hewn texture. *Bathers Tossing Reeds* reduces the human body and the landscape to spiky forms of vibrant, contrasting color. Each application of ink—black, green, and orange—was printed individually by hand. This manual process is evident in the upper right corner, where the inked block made only fleeting contact with the paper. The way the colors interact, overlapping and sometimes leaving blank spaces on the paper, heightens the sense of movement in the scene. Kirchner embraced imperfection. As you add life to the figures in this print, don’t be afraid to color outside the lines.

Paper conservator Christina Taylor demonstrates how this woodcut was made in a video on the museums’ Vimeo channel.
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers Tossing Reeds*, 1909
Franz Marc, *Grazing Horses IV, 1911*

In 1911, Franz Marc was deep in discussions about issues of color with other members of Der Blaue Reiter, including Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky. *Grazing Horses IV*—the fourth in a series of works, as its title suggests—is the culmination of Marc’s definitive move away from the naturalistic use of color. He assigned each primary color a symbolic value as a way to give form to various sensations. For Marc, red was matter (“brutal and heavy”), blue was masculine (“austere and spiritual”), and yellow was feminine (“soft, jovial, and sensuous”). Believing that “incredibly strong forms” were required to hold these colors together, he arranged the horses in a strict triangular composition. Despite his careful planning, Marc still allowed for spontaneity during the painting process, using small brushstrokes to create fluid, rhythmic interactions of color rather than sharply defined contours. This brings the painting to life. What do colors symbolize for you? How would you combine those colors to enliven the horses and landscape?
Franz Marc, *Grazing Horses IV*, 1911
Franz Marc’s Pigments for Grazing Horses IV

Grazing Horses IV is also widely known as The Red Horses. Yet the horses are not, strictly speaking, just red. “The colors are difficult to describe,” Marc wrote in a 1911 letter to his future wife, Maria Franck, while at work on the canvas. He went on to name some of the specific pigments he was using: vermilion, cadmium, cobalt blue, and carmine red. Staff in the museums’ Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies examined whether Marc did in fact use those pigments in this painting, and how he employed them. Their research confirmed the contents of Marc’s letter, also revealing that in addition to mixing colors, he often used intense pigments in their purest form—underscoring his decisive move away from naturalism. Even Marc seemed surprised at this development. He wrote to Franck about the Busch-Reisinger painting, “[W]hole stretches of it (e.g., a bush) in the purest blue! Can you even imagine that?” Find your own color inspiration in the Forbes Pigment Collection, which has some of the same pigments Marc used in its holdings.

A digital tool on the museums’ website delves into the technical research performed in the Straus Center. You can also read an Index article about the work carried out by conservation fellow Andrea von Hedenström on this painting.
Franz Marc’s Pigments for Grazing Horses IV

Cadmium Red
(Cd(S,Se))

Cobalt blue
(CoAl₂O₄)

Carmine Red
(C₉₂H₇O₁₅)

Vermilion
(HgS)
Max Pechstein, *Woman with Animals*, c. 1912

Like many expressionists, Brücke artist Max Pechstein had a background in the arts and crafts movement and continued to work in the applied arts throughout his career. He embraced a wide range of media: not only painting, sculpture, drawing, and prints, but also mosaics, murals, and stained glass. *Woman with Animals* is a rare surviving example of a window. The female figure at the center of this work has been variously understood as a personification of one of the four seasons (surrounded as she is by small deer and floral motifs) and as the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography, due to the characteristic red and blue of her robes.

Made around 1912 in collaboration with a glass manufacturer in Berlin, the window draws on a religious tradition of stained glass dating back to the Middle Ages. Such works were placed in architectural settings, allowing fluctuations in light and color from day to day and season to season. Forms are defined by the lead lines that connect the pieces of glass, and by further details that Pechstein added in paint. Put your own twist on this window by drawing new lines and patterns, or use your own palette of colors to personalize the figures.
Max Pechstein, *Woman with Animals*, c. 1912
Erich Heckel, *To the Convalescent Woman (Triptych)*, 1912–13

This work is an example of a triptych, or a painting comprising three parts. The central panel traditionally depicts the most significant figure or narrative: here, it is dancer Siddi Riha, convalescing after a long illness. Her then-fiancé Erich Heckel, a founding member of Brücke, depicted her in the apartment they shared surrounded by objects they owned. On the wall behind Riha is an African textile, a gift from the artist’s brother. The figure at far left and the vase with sunflowers at right are likely examples of Heckel’s own roughly hewn wooden sculpture, which was inspired by African art.

This triptych’s frame may have originated as part of a Christian altarpiece; its structure makes it possible to turn the outside panels inward. Heckel suggests this turning motion in the composition itself: the objects that flank Riha on the side panels face her, underscoring her importance. Despite the work’s tripartite form, Heckel treats it as a single composition, using the same color palette throughout. On the following pages, you’ll have a chance to approach Heckel’s triptych as a unified whole and as three separate canvases.
Erich Heckel, *To the Convalescent Woman (Triptych)*, 1912–13
Erich Heckel, *To the Convalescent Woman (Triptych)*, 1912–13
Erich Heckel, *To the Convalescent Woman (Triptych)*, 1912–13
Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Still Life*, 1913

*Still Life* exemplifies how expressionists reimagined even the most traditional of genres. Brücke artist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff got to know African and Oceanic material culture through ethnographic museums, and in 1913, he began collecting examples himself. This is one of several paintings the artist made that year—also the year Brücke dissolved—in which African figures, vessels, and pipe bowls are depicted among household objects.

Around this time, Schmidt-Rottluff began to define his forms using surprisingly thick black outlines. These dark lines contrast with what he paints inside, filling each form more naturalistically, with varying hues of the same color. The light, shadow, and volume inside the forms are cut off dramatically by the stark black borders, creating a palpable tension between the two. The outlines in this painting are great for experimenting with the relationship between color and three-dimensionality: to make the objects on the table appear flat and planar, try filling the lines with a single, consistent color. Want to create a sense of depth instead? Shade the forms with different hues.
Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Still Life*, 1913
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait with Cat*, 1920

As in the woodblock print *Bathers Tossing Reeds* (pp. 13–14), Kirchner makes the viewer of this work aware of the artist’s hand. Here he achieves this through his signature brushy painting technique. In this self-portrait, the artist pictures himself in a garish pink interior space, accompanied only by his cat; his face is a pale green color, and he eyes the viewer warily. An Alpine landscape is visible through the window. This work has often been connected with Kirchner’s mental state after suffering a breakdown during World War I. However, he had already been using non-naturalistic colors and vigorous paint application in the years prior, to suggest the frenetic experience of modern life. When artists depict themselves, audiences are sometimes tempted to read those works as a direct reflection of the artist’s psychology. Although expressionism is often equated with artists’ inner thoughts and feelings, the “symptoms” in this painting may not be what they seem. How might the application of different colors make us think differently about Kirchner’s mindset?
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait with Cat*, 1920
Alexei von Jawlensky, Composition No. 1, Sunrise, c. 1924

Russian painter Alexei von Jawlensky was a key figure in Der Blaue Reiter. He painted this work a decade after the group disbanded, as part of a series entitled Abstract Heads, in which the human face is greatly simplified, becoming a kind of geometric template. Even before it was framed, Jawlensky delineated his composition with a black rectangle. The face is sketched with a few cursory lines, which the artist subsequently colored in as if working on his own coloring book. Unlike the thick paint application of earlier portraits, the colors here are brilliant, but the paint is thinly and precisely applied. As its dual title suggests, Composition No. 1, Sunrise is more than an exercise in abstraction: often compared to Russian religious icons, Jawlensky’s abstract heads are meditations on spiritual concerns, emotions, natural elements, and times of day. What colors are your sunrise?
Alexei von Jawlensky, Composition No. 1, Sunrise, c. 1924
German Expressionist Frames

Frames are integral to expressionist paintings; they were conceptualized holistically in response to the work. Between 1910 and 1913, Brücke artists used “slat frames” with flat profiles, usually made of coniferous wood with visible knots and grain, either toned or painted. By the time Ernst Ludwig Kirchner painted Self-Portrait with Cat in 1920, the artist was working with carpenter Paul Müller, who built the frames and left them untreated so that Kirchner could determine the color himself. The original frame for Kirchner’s self-portrait was designed by the artist. Its corners joined at a diagonal, and it was finished with a gold-bronze pigmented paint. Der Blaue Reiter artist Alexei von Jawlensky designed his frames together with sculptor Josef Vinecky; the original frame for Composition No. 1, Sunrise had an ornamental molding that lent the painting a sculptural quality.

When these works came to the Harvard Art Museums, they had already been separated from their original frames. Today, both paintings are framed with historical replicas, which were created in 2014 to emulate the artists’ choices. As you push the boundaries of color, explore the synergy between paintings and their frames—or frames and their paintings.

In a June 2021 Art Talk available to watch online, curator Lynette Roth discussed the importance of frames to German expressionists and the project of reframing these works for display in the museums.
German Expressionist Frames
Emil Nolde, *Madonna amidst Flowers (Tulips)*, c. 1930

Emil Nolde is well known for his depictions of flowers, a subject he first turned to in 1903. Created three decades later, *Madonna amidst Flowers (Tulips)* reveals his skill as a colorist: tulips in red and purple surround a crowned female figurine, whose fiery orange and red robe is set against the empty white space of the paper. The artist’s inclusion of a devotional object—from his extensive collection—underscores the broader expressionist interest in domestic still life, which often included folkloric and Christian iconography. Nolde embraced watercolor’s ability to blur and bleed colors, producing dynamic forms that seep and flow into the paper and each other. This work takes its subject from the landscape of Nolde’s native North Schleswig, near the German-Danish border, and his own flower garden there. Try your hand at capturing the fluidity of watercolor as you bring Nolde’s blooms to life.
Emil Nolde, *Madonna amidst Flowers (Tulips)*, c. 1930
Credits

Drawings by artist Hannah Herrick, Ph.D. student in archaeology at Simon Fraser University.

Text and concept by Lynette Roth, the Daimler Curator of the Busch-Reisinger Museum and head of the Division of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Harvard Art Museums, and Jen Thum, assistant director of academic engagement and assistant research curator in the Division of Academic and Public Programs. Thum commenced her work on this project while serving as the Inga Maren Otto Curatorial Fellow at the museums.

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