

Post War German Art

Expressionism is an art form whose emergence in Germany was simultaneous across different cities in the country. This form of art became popular in the pre-World War I period because it was a response to the anxiety caused by the discord in human relations across the world plus the feelings that accompanied the loss of both spirituality and authenticity. Expressionist art also characteristically opposed the values supported by academic art and Impressionism, drawing most of its inspiration from Symbolist principles that were exhibited in art during later years of the Nineteenth Century. Expressionist artists advocated for alteration of form and use of bold colors as a means of conveying an array of yearnings and anxiety. Germany experienced this art form in two phases; the Classical Expressionism phase and Abstract Expressionism phase. The classical phase lasted for about fifteen years between 1905 and 1920 and it spread throughout Europe. It created the base on which Abstract Expressionism was established, the influence of which was felt in Germany for the remaining part of the century (Anderson, 2011 p. 3-5). Indeed, Expressionist art in Germany was a therapeutic implement that allowed both its artists and viewers to better cope with their depressive living conditions at the time.

One of the artists that made a great impact during the German Expressionism era was Mark Rothko. He created a piece that he named Colour Plate 15 Black on Maroon. To begin with, the painting was large with dimensions of 4.6m x 2.7m. This painting was one of those created in a series, which when hung together create a mood that is somber and would be considered ideal for spiritual meditation. At the center of the picture, there are two oblongs painted purple. When viewing the painting, the oblongs look like an opening into another realm that makes the viewer feel like they could go through them into the world they appear to open into. From a different perspective, the oblongs look like they are floating relative to the back sections of the painting.

The main color in the painting is maroon, onto which both black and purple are painted. The shape's edges appear blurred and soft, thus, adding to their ambiguity. The edges that are painted black on the extreme right and left parts of the painting to appear blurred against the maroon color in the background, creating the impression of "a black window frame with space beyond." In totality, the size of the picture makes a viewer feel like they could step into it and become part of it. However, the meanings thereof are not certain (Acton, 2004 p. 106).

The series of paintings, mentioned above, were created as decorative features of the Four Seasons Restaurant in New York. Eventually, Rothko terminated the project because he felt that the kind of art that he was producing did not match the characteristics of art that should be displayed in a fashionable restaurant with consumerist and materialistic qualities. Such concepts make Rothko's work appear to have a similarity with Kandinsky's ideas on the spiritual value of art (Acton, 2004 p. 106). Both artists were of Russian origin, and Rothko's fixation on the spiritual aspect of art is undeniably expressed in his statement indicating that he perceived art as a spiritual anecdote, and the only means of determining the purpose of its stillness and quickness. This evidences the Abstract Expressionist belief that paintings can act as a liaison between the soul and the spirit; which in turn leads to Rothko's belief that the size of a painting matters. He explained that he created his large pieces so that they could elicit an intimate and humanistic feeling from their viewers, allowing them to feel like they are in them and can command them. Rothko's view on immersion in a painting synchronizes with Jackson Pollock's beliefs, which also lean towards the idea that a series of paintings when viewed together are likely to have a cumulative effect thanks to the total involvement of the viewer (Acton, 2004 p. 107).

~~In recent~~ ^{In the 1960s} years, German postmodernist artists have decided to confront their country's harsh past through artistic expression that has redefined German Expressionist art and self-

expression in a variety of ways. Joseph Beuys, in that spirit, created The End of the Twentieth Century.^{year} His piece is an installation spawned using clay, felt and basalt. The basalt used is not traditionally crafted. It is left in a natural form and is laid out randomly on the floor of the gallery where it is exhibited. The circles on every basalt piece are stone cones that are fixed in their positions with felt and clay. The use of felt in Beuys's expression is symbolic of an experience in his days as a *Luftwaffe* pilot when he was shot down and his rescuers used fat and felt to cover him and nurse him to recovery. The lack of order in the arrangement of the basalt lumps is meant to not only elicit the feeling of the world being in an uncontrollable state but also to enlighten viewers on the moral, philosophical and political aspects that affect the state of the world and the responsibility that man has within it (Acton, 2004 p. 108).

Moreover, Beuys' artistic expression is ~~personalized~~ because he lost most of his family during the Holocaust. The End of the Twentieth Century is an art piece that is comprised of forty-four basalt pieces and Beuys has distinctly chosen historically resonant sites for its installation. Once the piece was installed in a gallery that was built by Hitler meant to accommodate art that was officially approved in Nazi Germany. As one walks among the basalt pieces, in such cases, they are reminded of the victims in the concentration camp and the streets littered with skeletons and bones, evidencing the destructiveness of humanity (Acton, 2004 p. 108-109).

Joseph Beuys was also a firm believer in the need for ^{German}Germany to confront the horrific past of their country. He felt that artists had a role to play in the confrontation process, an idea that resonated with younger German artists like Gerhard Richter. Therefore, considering his political activity and affiliations as one of the founding members of the Green Party, the basalt he uses in the art piece discussed above is symbolic especially because it contained traces of radioactive material (Acton, 2004 p. 108-109). Perhaps, the use this type of basalt was Beuys' means of

confronting Germany's harsh past associated with the Holocaust when chimneys bellowed smoke for thousands of days, spreading the ashes of Jews to all corners of the earth (Totten et al., 2004). Additionally, Beuys was a member of the Huxus movement that was based on the belief that art had the power to change the world through actions. In his move to confront his past through his art, he emphasizes the movement's belief and exemplifies the kind of action that should be taken through art to allow healing among Germans that lived through the Holocaust period. Thanks to such acts, Beuys inspired other artists like Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Oddly, when studying Abstract Expressionism in Germany, Daniel Libeskind is mentioned as one of the contributors to this form of art. This is unusual because he was not an artist but an architect; who defined architecture as the 'space of encounter.' He designed the Jewish Museum in Berlin. This building is a form of Abstract Expressionism considering that Libeskind had lost most of his family during the Holocaust. The way he structures the museum seems to encompass the entirety of Jewish history in Berlin in a symbolic manner. The organization of space and the building's lighting allow the spectators to feel the Jewish history in Nazi Germany (Acton, 2004 p. 110); especially during the Holocaust when Jews were murdered because of their Jewish affiliations (Bernstein, 2004 p. 21).

Finally, it is safe to assume that German Abstract Expressionism allowed the people of Germany to connect with art and each other on a deeper level. It offered the much-needed connection between the soul and the spirit, especially in the period after the Holocaust, when people needed to heal from the obscenity of humanity and believe in the goodness of life again. Expressionism created a therapeutic atmosphere that the German citizens needed then; allowing them to heal from the horrific history of their country.

Exposition 1905 - ca 1920

Ab. Exp. 1945 - 1960

Berys 1960's - 1980's