# Part One

## *Early Manifestations*

# I. FIRST IDENTIFIERS

## INTRODUCTION

For many artists and critics in Germany the term *Expressionism* came to be synonymous with modern art and its rejection of traditional Western naturalistic conventions. By the late fall of 1911 groups such as the Brücke and the Blaue Reiter and sculptors such as Ernst Barlach were beginning to be referred to as Expressionists. Critics committed to these new directions wrote of the Expressionist artist's ability to convey the cosmic, the eternal, the heroic, and described the art's revolutionary forcefulness. By the summer of 1912 several began to suggest Expressionism's superiority to other manifestations of modernism such as French Cubism and Italian Futurism.

Yet it was only in April of 1911 that the Berlin Secession, under the guidance of its director Lovis Corinth, had grouped young French painters—André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, and others from the circle around Henri Matisse—in one room and referred to them as "Expressionisten" in the foreword to its exhibition catalogue.[1] The grouping and catchy term took an immediate hold on the critics and the public. In his review of the Secession exhibition, the critic Max Osborn referred to the "Expressionisten" as ultramodern and commented on their break from Impressionism, the influence of Cézanne and Gauguin in their work, and the new directions they offered Berlin artists.[2] Walter Heymann, among others, considered this room to be "a showplace of the elements of our artistic cultural condition,"[3] but asked why German artists were not included in this grouping!

Heymann's question was eminently reasonable because artists in Germany had been experimenting with intense antinaturalistic colors, forms, and spaces several years before these qualities began to be associated with Expressionism. Moreover, they had exhibited alongside the same French artists in several earlier exhibitions. In Düsseldorf in the summer of 1910, for example, the Sonderbund had invited Matisse, Braque, Derain, Vla-

minck, and Symbolist artists like the Nabis (Maurice Denis and Edouard Vuillard) to exhibit with artists from the Dresden Brücke (such as Max Pechstein and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner), the Berlin New Secession (including César Klein and Georg Tappert), and the Munich Neue Künstler Vereinigung (led by Wassily Kandinsky and Alexi Jawlensky). In Munich the NKV had invited artists from Matisse's circle, as well as Le Fauconnier and Picasso, to their second exhibition in September 1910.

Even more significant, German critics had viewed the works of groups like the New Secession—to which the Brücke artists Kirchner and Pechstein heavily contributed in 1910, and which the NKV joined in 1911—as developing from van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse.[4] Moreover, writings by Matisse and Denis were frequently used to justify and explain the antinaturalism of the new style. The critic Max Raphael, who under the pseudonym A. R. Schönlank had written the foreword to the 1911 New Secession exhibition catalogue, quoted from Matisse's "Notes of a Painter" in a more concise essay for *Der Sturm*. He emphasized that the New Secession artists did not want to give a glimpse of the fleeting as the Impressionists had done but to evoke the enduring and the eternal in art.[5] The 1909 German translation of Matisse's essay, with its use of *Eindruck* in reference to Impressionism and *Ausdruck* as expression,[6] reinforced the concept that Impressionism was the antipode of Matisse's work.

At the same time, nationalist and provincial German artists and critics reacted negatively to the bright colors, flattened shapes, and distorted forms of the new style. Their anger and the confusion of much of the public helped to shape the particular nature of Expressionist criticism in Germany. In 1911 *A Protest of German Artists* (*Ein Protest deutscher Künstler*) (fig. 1) edited by the landscape artist Carl Vinnen, chauvinistically attacked modernism as un-German and too French in its orientation. A rebutting anthology, *The Struggle for Art: The Answer to the "Protest of German Artists" (Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den "Protest deutscher Künstler")*, vigorously denied the charges of conspiracy, snobbery, and aestheticism and asserted the importance of artistic criteria beyond national boundaries. The art historian Wilhelm Worringer, writing in *The Struggle for Art*, sought to relate the new artistic directions to a metaphysical and primitive tradition, explaining that Western rationalism was encouraging fragmentation and limiting experimentation.

The 1912 Sonderbund responded to the controversy by including artists from even more countries than before and referring to the works in the exhibition as Expressionist. Following in part the approach of Roger Fry in his 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition in London (which in 1911 had even been called Expressionist by several critics),[7] the Sonderbund saw its purpose as educational and selected artists who appeared to prefigure Expressionism. Unlike Fry, however, the Sonderbund emphasized North-

ern artists, particularly van Gogh and Edvard Munch, rather than the French artists, notably Cézanne and Gauguin—who, along with van Gogh, Fry had deemed the forerunners of modernism. Just a few months earlier Paul F. Schmidt, a museum curator and Brücke patron, had also pointed to Northern sources—Munch and Ferdinand Hodler—as contributing to the particular intensity of Expressionist art in Germany.

Nonetheless Expressionism continued to shock the public, and many supporters attempted to justify the new developments with two major arguments: the indigenous sources of Expressionism, which were either Northern artists or the Nordic past; and the universal, metaphysical, and transnational power of the new art forms. Although these arguments would eventually be used to dethrone Expressionism,[8] at the time they helped to establish it as the most powerful phenomenon of early twentieth-century German art.

## 1. Carl Vinnen, "Quousque Tandem," from *A Protest of German Artists*, 1911*

Carl Vinnen's polemic against modernism (soon to be called Expressionism in Germany) represents a long-standing aspect of German criticism in which internationalist influences were seen as the direct cause of the decline of German art and culture. In 1911 the purchase of a van Gogh by the director of the Bremen Museum, Gustav Pauli, was the catalyst for a number of bitter denunciations of the influx of foreign art into Germany. The essays in *A Protest of German Artists*, which Vinnen (1863–1922) organized and for which he wrote the preamble and the introductory essays, reveal the belief of many provincial artists in Germany in 1910 and 1911 that inferior French works were flooding the galleries and museums and were responsible for the commercialization of the German art market.[9]

Vinnen's organization of *A Protest* brought the fame that his paintings could not win him. As a young landscape painter, Vinnen had joined the Worpswede artist's colony near Bremen and had become a member of the Berlin Secession. In 1903, the year he left Worpswede, he won a gold medal in the Berlin salon, but he never achieved the recognition he felt his works deserved. Increasingly he grew to equate his personal failure with a national one.

*Carl Vinnen, "Quousque Tandem," *Ein Protest deutscher Künstler* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1911), 2–16.

In the essay translated here, Vinnen uses both sarcastic praise and invidious critiques to describe modern French painting as inferior. He also points to the French artists' lack of ability and ignorance of fundamentals, and complains that the German imitators of French artists have lost their indigenous "Nordic" qualities and hence their creativity. His essay reflects a thinly veiled antiurban and anti-Semitic bias.[10] His belief that internationalist influences led to the weakening and dissolution of German culture was to be used even more demagogically by the National Socialists against all aspects of international modernism.

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In light of the great invasion of French art that has been in progress in so-called progressive German art circles over the past few years, it seems to me that necessity bids German painters raise a warning voice, and not be daunted by the reproach that only envy motivates them.

For to be an artist also carries an obligation!

As the entire movement of the last quarter century had its beginning in France, admiration of its great masters—which is certainly justified—has led to certain excesses among us today that threaten to transform a blessing into its opposite.

In the violent battles for new direction, if one can speak of such a thing, the avant garde artist has a faithful ally, namely the modern art-author.

....

Recognizing, not incorrectly, that Rhineland art has fallen from its former position of power into obscurity, the "Sonderbund"—an artists' association there with many influential benefactors in its own province and beyond—is seeking intimate association with the latest Parisian extravagants—Matisse among others—and so is moving from one extreme to another.

....

Far be it from me to devalue the way in which our culture has been stimulated through the high culture of French art, and if I myself recently spent some time in Paris in order to learn, that should be proof enough of my admiration.

But speculation has become a factor in the matter. German and French art dealers have shaken hands, under the pretext of promoting artistic goals, and Germany is being flooded with great quantities of French pictures.

....

This tide of pictures enters the land through the flood-gates of art literature, and the literature becomes reinfatuated with it; the infatuation in the press in turn helps the dealers to unload the pictures on German collectors at exorbitant prices. By way of illustrating how much these values increase, one might consider the Lady in a Green-Black Dress by Monet, which netted the artist 700 francs and cost the Bremen Museum 50,000 marks.

Yet at the time, I myself supported Director Pauli, who has done so much for the development of artistic life in Bremen and for the formation of our gallery, when he suggested its purchase; and I would support him again, considering the high artistic value of the painting. There are exceptional cases, finally, in which money can be no object.

No real artists would want to quibble where real masterpieces—the achievements of a great man, of whatever nationality—are concerned.

But when we see how even the casual studies by van Gogh, even those in which an artist misses all three dimensions—draughtsmanship, color and mood—draw 30 to 40 thousand marks with no questions asked, how not enough old dregs from the studios of Monet, Sisley, Pissaro, etc., can be put on the German market to satisfy the demand, one must say that in general the prices of French pictures have been driven up to such an extent—of course France itself does not pay these prices—that we seem to be faced with an inflated esteem in which the German people should not cooperate indefinitely.

It's doubtful whether these prices, which today are driven to dizzying heights by means of market manipulation, will ever even approach stabilization.

One must distinguish between the ephemeral, that is, the art historical value of these pictures as evolutionary factors, and their permanent value, which they will also have for the sensibility of times to come, . . . .

More important is the other question:

**What constitutes the great danger of introducing foreign art, when speculation takes hold of it?**

Well, mostly in the overestimation of foreign nature so that our own, original character doesn't measure up.

Accomplishments since Monet are, to put it briefly, dedicated to the surface of things.

. . . .

The art of a Cézanne, a van Gogh, was too characteristic of its creator, with too little attention to structure to found a school and to make way for successors.

. . . .

A rush, a hunt begins, everybody wants to be modern, everybody searches . . . for his individuality in imitation.

. . . .

**Because let it be said again and again, a people is only driven to great heights by artists of its own flesh and blood.**

. . . .

There should be no doubt that we have *completely* lost the world market for art, which we formerly dominated. The reasons our modern painting was so inadequately represented in the last great World-exhibitions are certainly sufficiently well known. This lowered us into an art of second rank in the eyes of the world, especially the Americans. Now the great international stream of foreigners that flows through Germany every year sees how the often truly mediocre French pictures are enthusiastically praised, hung in the places of honor in our galleries and the windows of art dealers, how our illustrated art magazines are full of them, our youth zealously and diligently imitate them.

**How can we expect the foreigners to hold us in higher esteem than we do ourselves!**

And yet now would be the time to win a place in the sun for our art, ideally and materially, as we have been able to do for our crafts with such conspicuous success.

. . . .

Even if every true artist, everything great and beautiful of whatever heritage, should enjoy a right to hospitality at the German hearth, a great cultural people, a people possessed of such powerful aspirations as is our own, can not forever tolerate a foreign presence that claims spiritual authority.

And as this is being foisted upon us by a large, well-financed international organization, an earnest admonition is in order: to proceed no further in this way, and to be clear about what we are in a position to lose, namely nothing less than our own essence and our inherited native capacity.

Our art history tells us that this would not be the first time a great tradition had been lost for a long time, and it also tells us the consequences.—

So we must struggle in the best of faith, not in reactionary ways, not in sentimental ones, but in the spirit of the best that our art has achieved.

—Cuxhaven, early spring 1911

## 2. Wilhelm Worringer, "The Historical Development of Modern Art," from *The Struggle for Art: The Answer to the "Protest of German Artists,"* 1911*

The art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) was one of the first to provide a theoretical defense for Expressionism. His doctoral dissertation, *Abstraction and Empathy (Abstraktion und Einfühlung)*, published in 1908, had become a guide for many artists working in Germany. In the third edition of 1910 he acknowledged that his thesis had a "resonance" for young, practicing artists who were struggling to find "new goals of expression."[11] It is not surprising then, that Worringer would write for the anthology *The Struggle for Art* to defend the new artistic developments that were causing such a negative reaction among numerous German artists and critics in 1911.

As a rebuttal to Carl Vinnen's collection *A Protest of German Artists*, Worringer dealt with the charge that the new art was formless, decadent, and superficial by tying the antinaturalist tendencies of the new artists, whom he referred to as "new Parisian Synthetists and Expressionists," to a metaphysical and primitive tradition. He argued that the European, classical Renaissance heritage, with its focus on illusionism and rationalism, had prevented man from seeking metaphysical values by keeping him too close to the world of appearances. He urged the viewer to learn the secrets of primitive art[12] in order to move away from the individualism and fragmentary nature of past art.

Influenced by Riegl's concept of "Kunstwollen,"[13] Worringer informed the reader that the stylistic characteristics of art outside the European classical tradition were not the result of inferior skills but of different intentions. For Worringer, that art, particularly from the time prior to history, was elementary, mystically effective, and capable of providing a foundation for new directions. Reminding German museum directors that German artists in the past had achieved greatness through a dialogue with other cultures, Worringer called upon them to reflect the struggle of their times

*Wilhelm Worringer, "Entwicklungsgeschichtliches zur modernsten Kunst," *Im Kampf um die Kunst: Die Antwort auf den "Protest deutscher Künstler"* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1911), 92–99; reprinted in *Der Sturm* 2, no. 75 (August 1911): 597–98. 

by supporting the new experiments in international and German art.

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Vinnen's brochure is entirely understandable to me, psychologically, and I don't hesitate to regard it as a symptomatic phenomenon. I even welcome it as a timely call for an honest discussion of principles. The crisis in which we find our conceptions and our expectations of art cannot be kept quiet: it must lead to open and decisive discussions.

With these points in mind I must regret, however, that Vinnen's promotional piece fails to treat the basic questions seriously, only touching on them fleetingly here and there and using space instead for popular turns of phrase and emotional pronouncements that cannot be substantiated. Thus the main argument with which the attacking faction wishes to engage the public is not the sort of refutation of new artistic principles that could be discussed impartially, but an irresponsible denunciation of the personalities on the other side, transposed into every possible key. . . . For it is not right to cultivate, in a general public made gullible through innate inertia and an instinct for self-preservation, the gratifying conviction that the movement under attack consists of a senseless game among impotent, sensation-hungry artists, undiscriminating art writers swayed by every whim of fashion, and cunning art dealers who, suppressing their laughter, reap profits from this comedy.

. . . .

For besides such irresponsible hangers-on there stand artists who search in earnest, who for all their sober self-awareness remain perfectly modest; there stand serious theoreticians who preserve, despite their productive partisanship, a historical consciousness and with it, a critical discretion; there stand finally art dealers who, although they of course have business matters to consider, still foster, with inner conviction and understanding, a movement in which one's profits are at far greater risk than they would be in marketing some simple, recognized commercial product.

. . . .

If I understand Vinnen correctly, he wants German art, in finding a new artistic form, to guard against the influence not of the great classic Impressionists such as Manet, Monet, and Renoir, but of the so-called young Parisians, who follow Cézanne, van Gogh, and Matisse in searching for a new kind of artistic formulation.

. . . Where an unprepared and backward public sees and can only see the products of willful self-indulgence and idiotic sensationalism, we sense historical necessity. We see above all a unity in the movement that has something fundamental about it, before which everything that seems

to be self-indulgent disappears. Yes, I think I make no mistake in seeing the deepest roots of this new artistic drive precisely in the desire to conquer willful self-indulgence and personal limitations. This unmistakable striving for impartiality, for a compelling simplification of form, an elemental openmindedness about artistic representation, is bound up in the basic character of the new art, which some believe can be trivialized as primitive or childish comedy played before the adults of Europe.

But the only ones to be affected in this way will be those who have not yet come to understand primitive art and who see in it only a lack of skill over which one chuckles with the superiority of grown-ups. Today the cultural arrogance of Europeans is eroding, however, yielding to insights into the fundamental grandeur of primitive life and its artistic expression. The same need that makes us want to understand the new Parisian Synthetists and Expressionists has also developed in us a new eye for primitive art. How transparently clear it seems today that the stylistic character of primitive art is not determined by any lack of skill, but by a different conception of artistic purpose, a purpose that rests on a great, elementary foundation of a sort that we, with our well-buffered contemporary approach to life, can hardly conceive. We only vaguely sense that the grotesque distortion and compelling simplification of this primitive art (compelling, however, only for those who can distinguish between a compulsion for form and a compulsion for illusionary effect) emanates from a higher level of tension in the will to artistic expression, and we learn to recognize that the difference between our artistic achievement and the primitive is not one of degree, but of kind. A difference in kind that consists in reckoning art's achievements not in today's terms, namely in the release of a certain fine quality of feeling—sensual or spiritual, but in the release of a fundamental sense of the inevitable. An affirmation of the ambiguity of phenomena: in this lay the meaning, in this lay the essence, the mystique of this art. . . .

Of course today we can't artificially force ourselves back to the level of primitive people, but the subliminal urgency we feel today is finally not only a reaction against Impressionism, but also against the whole previous development in which we have been involved since the European Renaissance, whose starting point and direction is embraced in Burckhardt's concise statement about the discovery of the individual. The vast wealth of factual learning of the past epoch has left us poor, and out of this sense of impoverishment we are today demanding consciously from art approximately that which primitive people naively demanded. We want art to affect us again, to affect us more powerfully than does that higher, cultivated illusionism that has been the destiny of our art since the Renaissance. In order to achieve this, we are trying to free ourselves from that rationalization of sight which seems to educated Europeans to be natural

sight, and against which one may not transgress without being cast as a complete fool. In order to achieve this, we force ourselves to that primitive way of seeing, undisturbed by any knowledge or experience, which is the simple secret of the mystical effect of primitive art. We want to push external symbolism, hailed as a national trait of German art in particular, back into the innermost center of the artwork, in order that it might flow out from there of its own natural energy, free of every dualism of form and content. In short, the primitive art of seeing, to which we force ourselves, is only a means of approaching the elemental possible effects of art. . . .

Such a return to earlier, elemental stages of development, such a generating of creative force from the concentrated reserves of power of the past, is not new to one who thinks in historical terms. To him it is only the repetition of a historical pattern so regular it seems almost to follow some natural law. Only the length of the pendulum's swing changes. And it is only the best sign of the power and passion of our time that the pendulum has swung as far as it has, and that it is now going back to basic and most essential things, things from which we have been separated by the pride of our European-classical inhibition and the myopia of the European adult attitude. One goes back to the elemental stages of development because one hopes to again come closer to nature by doing so. And the unnaturalness that has been so ridiculed and disdained in recent painting is finally nothing other than the result of such a return to nature, although to a nature not yet filtered through the rationalizing optics of a European education, and from whose chaste purity and symbolic affective power the average European can know nothing.

. . . In the final analysis it is in the interests of future generations that we concern ourselves with the present. For this modern primitiveness is not supposed to be the last word. The pendulum does not rest in its extreme position. This primitivism should rather be understood as a long, deep breath, before the new and decisive word to the future will be pronounced. . . . Surrounded with such broad vistas, let us in any case retreat from the narrow sphere in which Herr Vinnen fights over French and German art, and tries to persuade us with financial statistics.

Apropos of which, just two words in regard to the national aspect of the question. He who really knows about being German, who knows above all the history of German art, he knows that it is not given to us, with our innate ambiguity and with our inborn, sensual, instinctive uncertainty, to find the direct route to a form, he knows that we always take our cue first from outside Germany, that we have always had to give up and lose ourselves first, in order to find our real selves. That has been the tragedy and the grandeur of German art from Dürer to Marées, and he who would cut our art from interaction with other art worlds is betraying our real national tradition. Such a statement of de-

pendency degrades our art only from a very childish and psychologically immature point of view; to me the characteristic quality of German art history has always been this theater of engagement and this passionate striving beyond one's own narrow bounds. I would not want to be without this tragedy, this ambiguity, for it has given German art its singular dynamic.

Still one short observation pertaining to the external impetus for the whole discussion: the position our museum directors have taken on the new movement. The problem from their point of view can be formulated briefly as follows: should they just buy good pictures, that is, good in terms of average taste, or should they now and then sacrifice such relative security in the interests of something that is historically significant, but that has not yet been sanctioned by the majority's taste? This question is only now becoming urgent for our museums because they themselves have just reached a historical crisis, and must decide which way to go. They were founded as institutions of courtly luxury: adventurousness and persuasiveness were not part of their nature. Should they retain this mature, culture-saturated, backward-looking character of luxury, or will they try to suit themselves to the rhythm of the times and make a dead herbarium into a living one? Should they only register history or should they make history?

. . . Whether these experiments lead to a positive result or turn out to be a useless expenditure of energy, a valuable piece of the actual inner life of our time has animated them. For this reason they deserve a place in our museums: a place not superior to, but certainly on a par with, the unproblematical art products that, as mentioned above, reflect the average character of our epoch and so force much of the finest and best into silence. Even failed experiments have their essential value and their historical meaning.

## 3. Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, "The Expressionists," *Der Sturm*, 1912*

First published in the fall of 1911 in *Das Rheinland*, Schmidt's essay defended Expressionism not only by deeming it a logical continuation of the work of Cézanne, Gauguin, Denis, and other artists associated with the French Post-Impressionist tradition, but also by

*Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, "Die Expressionisten," *Der Sturm* 2, no. 92 (January 1912): 734–36.