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## Towards a re-definition of German expressionism : Emil Nolde's Woman in a bright light and Max Beckmann's The dream

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**"Towards a Re-definition of German Expressionism: Emil Nolde's  
*Woman in a Bright Light* and Max Beckmann's *The Dream*"**

University Honor's Program

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## ABSTRACT

German Expressionism is a much more complex and involved movement than it is often considered to be. The movement is often defined in terms of a few typical and concise characteristics. This approach undermines the dynamic and changing nature of the movement as a whole. Characteristics which typically function to define German Expressionism are subjectivity, rebelliousness, expressiveness, and wild distortions. While such characteristics undoubtedly reveal certain aspects of the art of the German Expressionists, they cannot alone wholly define the movement. In order to define the movement, one needs to pay particular attention to the historical, political, and social environment of the time. In doing so, we can go beneath the stylistic developments and try to define what caused such subjectivity, rebelliousness, expressiveness, etc. in so many different artists of this time in Germany.

In addition to expanding the definition of German Expressionist art, we also need to be aware of all of the art of the movement. It is extremely typical for scholars to ignore the later part of the movement since the movement was the most coherent before and around the time of the First World War, from about 1905 to 1914.

In this paper, I discuss primarily two works of German Expressionist art currently housed at the St. Louis City Art Museum, Emil Nolde's **Woman in a Bright Light** and Max Beckmann's **The Dream**. Nolde, a first-generation Expressionist, will be discussed in terms of his art's qualities which are thought to represent the Expressionist movement. From this point, I will discuss Beckmann, a later Expressionist, and defend his art as Expressionistic in just as true of a sense as Nolde's art even though these two masters' works are stylistically very different. Such differences are due, more than anything, to the way that Germany has developed artistically and historically, creating artists who tend to be very individualistic in character.

Lara Allison

12 December 1993

German Expressionism is a much more complex and involved movement than it is often considered to be. Attempts to define the movement by scholars have often focused on a few concise characteristics. Yet, this approach undermines the dynamic and changing nature of the movement as a whole. Such characteristics, which typically function to define German Expressionism, are subjectivity, rebelliousness, expressiveness, and distortions. While such terms are undoubtedly aspects of the art of the German Expressionists, they cannot alone wholly define the movement itself. In order to define the movement, one needs to pay particular attention to the historical developments of the time. In doing so we can go beneath the stylistic developments and try to define what caused such subjectivity, rebelliousness, expressiveness, etc. in so many different artists of this time in Germany.

In addition to the oversimplified definitions of German Expressionist art, many often fail to take into consideration all of the art of the movement. For example, Peter Selz in his book **German Expressionist Art** only considers the movement up until the First World War. Moreover, **Die Brucke** group including Kirchner and Nolde, in particular, are usually considered to represent the movement in its truest form. Yet Max Beckmann, a second generation Expressionist, has a very different style than the artists of Die Brucke and, in fact, before WWI, as **Die Brucke** was forming and

developing, Beckmann was working in a manner that stylistically coincides with Impressionism. Beckmann, along with Otto Dix and George Grosz, were later considered to represent a new artistic movement labeled the "New Objectivity." However, I believe, that Beckmann must be understood as an Expressionist.

In this paper, I will attempt to come to a wider and more all-encompassing definition of the German Expressionist movement, discuss the historical background of Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and look primarily at two works of art -- Emil Nolde's **Woman in a Bright Light** and Max Beckmann's **The Dream**, both of which are presently at the St. Louis City Art Museum. Nolde's work will serve as a basis to understanding the typical view of what German Expressionism is and how it manifests itself in painting. I shall then discuss and interpret Beckmann's **The Dream** and conclude why this work is indeed an Expressionist work even though stylistically it is very different from Nolde's work.

German Expressionism is an artistic movement that was formed in Germany around the turn of the century previous to World War I. This movement continued after the war and also spread into the other arts such as literature and music. It is usually agreed, however, that the movement reached its peak right around the time of the first World War. This is not to say that the German Expressionist art that comes later, such as Beckmann's, is inferior in any way. Rather, that the movement was the most coherent around 1912-1918.

German Expressionist art cannot be defined as a stylistic

movement in the way that Impressionism or Cubism, for example, largely can be. Within the German Expressionist movement there were many different styles ranging from representational to the nonobjective of the Munich-based group, **Der Blaue Reiter**. Yet it should be noted that all of the artists of the movement used stylistic tools, be it color or distortion, to make their works end in something that is most definitely expressive. But without a common stylistic basis among the German Expressionist artists, what links them together as a group? What characteristics do these artists and their art have in common with one another that allow them to fit under the umbrella of Expressionism? Perhaps the most universal aspects of the German Expressionists were (1) their turning inwards, resulting in the external manifestation of the subjective self (Note: this paralleled their rejection of classical and realist doctrines), and (2) their use of Germany as an artistic center as opposed to the more traditional France. Other characteristics often noted when defining the Expressionists are the influence of so-called "primitive" cultures, the influence of children's art, the influence of the twentieth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, rootedness to the German soil and a German past, intuitiveness, wild exaggerations, etc. While these and other such characteristics may define aspects of some of the German Expressionist artists and their works, they do not define the movement as a whole. Thus, in an attempt to avoid defining the German Expressionist movement in terms merely of qualities that do not extend over the whole movement or to every artist, we must use a wide definition in order to pin down the movement. Moreover, we

need to go beyond merely the qualities to the developments and causes behind the use of such qualities typically associated with German Expressionist art. To do so, however, it is necessary to turn to nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany represented a time of pessimism and fear. Many felt that Western Europe was declining rapidly. This fear was supported by intellectual ideas emphasizing such a decline, particularly of a societal, cultural, cosmic, or moral kind.

A significant contributor to the social environment of the time and ultimately to the Expressionists' fearful mood was Charles Darwin. Darwin was responsible for emphasizing not only the beginnings of societies, but their ends as well.<sup>1</sup> Yet it was Herbert Spencer who was responsible for transforming Darwin's "species" into human beings, thus suggesting that the progress of man is that of the survival of the fittest. Darwin's and Spencer's evolutionary struggle theory made it into mainstream thought by the 1880s and 1890s. Friedrich Nietzsche, in fact adapted Darwin's evolutionary model in two ways: first, Nietzsche argued that the key to the struggle for survival is intellectual, as opposed to physical; and second, he stressed that decline provided the basis for a renewal--an idea to which the Expressionists particularly attached themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to Darwinian predictions of social decline, there were the other scientists who predicted the end of the world through their theories of cosmic dissolution.<sup>3</sup> Around 1850, Rudolf

Clausius and William Thomson created the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Clausius proposed that the universe was heading in the direction of a state of thermal death in which the temperature and every other physical factor would eventually be the same everywhere and all natural processes would come to a halt.<sup>4</sup>

A third major contributor to the fear of decline that 19th and 20th Century Europe confronted was cultural degradation. The so-called "cult of decadence" began with **Fleurs du mal** by Charles Baudelaire, and indeed many French writers began referring to themselves as "decadent" by as early as the 1880s.<sup>5</sup> Edvard Munch was one of the first visual artists referred to as "decadent" by the 1890s.

An absolute pivotal figure in 19th and 20th Century Germany, and a major influence on the Expressionists as well was Friedrich Nietzsche. He commented on the degradation of European society from a philosophical, moralistic perspective and ultimately concluded that society's degradation was the result of "the death of god"--the loss of spiritual values. Such a loss, according to Nietzsche, resulted in the nihilistic mood of desperateness, hopelessness, and pessimism which permeated society.<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche's **Will to Power**, of which the second edition was published in 1906, begins:

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests?

...Distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect cannot itself give birth to nihilism (i.e., the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations. Rather: it is one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted.

...Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which

no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some beyond, leads to nihilism. "Everything lacks meaning" (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that all interpretations of the world are false).<sup>7</sup>

The Expressionists paid continual homage to Nietzsche. Erich Heckel executed a woodcut portrait of the philosopher, Otto Dix carved a portrait head of him, and the Dresden-based group, **Die Brucke**, took their group's name from the prologue to Nietzsche's **Thus Spoke Zarathustra**. Even the non-intellectual German Expressionist master, Emil Nolde, borrowed Nietzsche's notion of an instinctual foundation for art. **Der Blaue Reiter** group took the Nietzschean concept of creation through destruction and used such a concept in many of their artistic doctrines. Beckmann began reading Nietzsche in 1903 and also became fascinated with the redemptive qualities of tragedy.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to European intellectual theories of societal, cosmic, cultural, and moral degradation, Germany had special problems of its own, apart from the rest of Europe. Some of these more specific problems included Germany's rapid push toward industrialization, its late unification, and the extreme authoritarianism that permeated society.

Germany developed industrially and economically later than France and much later than England. By 1890, Germany, realizing that it was lagging economically behind its two great rivals, began pushing emphatically towards industrialization and urbanization. While such a push was undeniably successful in terms of its goals, such rapid industrialization left society in a state of "social,

psychological, and cultural shock."<sup>9</sup>

Another unique problem that Germany was forced to deal with was its late date of unification. According to Bernard Myers, nineteenth century Germany, which was defined by a loose federation of provincial towns opposed to Britain and France, which were already unified and reaping the benefits of the new capitalistic system, developed "more abstract and individualistic thinkers."<sup>10</sup> Indeed this resulted in philosophical thoughts and theories that had less to do with contemporary European life than the philosophies of France and England that were meant to have a direct influence on society.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, this disunified state of Germany had an enormous impact on the arts. With a lack of any monarchical patronage or central cultural center such as France and England had, Germany was forced to look to Paris for leadership.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was supremely France where all significant developments in art took place. Undeniably, however, eighteenth and nineteenth century German art leaves something to be desired.

In addition, due largely to Germany's historical conditions which negated the possibility of a national tradition, Germany remained locked into the Renaissance-Classical point of view.<sup>13</sup> The deterioration of German art began in the sixteenth century when its medieval tradition was quickly undermined by the Italian achievements.<sup>14</sup> From that point on, until around 1850, Germany searched, however unsuccessfully, for its own tradition.<sup>15</sup> Of course certain artists of this time were later recognized for their

importance. Artists representing bourgeois Romanticism such as Otto Runge and Casper David Friedrich were invaluable to later German art, especially Expressionism. Also, Classical Romanticism including artists such as Max Klinger, Anselm Feuerbach, Arnold Böcklin, and Hans Von Marees, signified another departure from the French tradition.<sup>16</sup> These men as well have a major impact on later German art.

A final individual aspect that distinguished Germany's nineteenth and twentieth century conflicts from the rest of the European world was the extreme authoritarianism that permeated German society. Such authoritarianism was found within the schools and universities, families, and the church. Indeed, unfulfilling relations within such institutions had an impact on the way the Expressionists chose to express themselves.<sup>17</sup>

From this background of nineteenth and twentieth century European pessimism expressed through theories of societal, cosmic, cultural, and moral degradation and Germany's uniqueness in terms of its own additional problems of rapid industrialization, late unification, and extreme authoritarianism, I will discuss Emil Nolde, the vigorous German and one of the most typically thought of representatives of the German Expressionist movement. More specifically, I shall discuss Nolde in terms of his 1912 painting, **Woman in a Bright Light**.

Emil Nolde is often viewed as representing the epitome of the German Expressionist movement. It is for this reason that I discuss him before Max Beckmann. In revealing, through Nolde, those aspects that are so typical of the German Expressionist

movement in its earlier stages I will be able to defend the second generation Beckmann as being an Expressionist in just as true a sense as Nolde.

**Woman in a Bright Light** holds many qualities that are typical of Nolde. Some of these qualities include the thick painterly technique, the unidealized aspect, the native aspect of the figure, and the element of destruction.

The thick painterly technique of paint application in this work recalls the quality of German Expressionist wooden sculpture and woodblock prints. The Expressionists' often preferred medium of expression was wood, in which the inherent expressive qualities could be exploited. More typically, wood was used for carving out wood blocks for prints, but at times these artists would attempt a three-dimensional sculptural work. The technique found in such works carried out in a wooden medium parallel the technique which is also seen in Nolde's painting and which lends itself to a strong emotional expressiveness. **Woman in a Bright Light** takes on a kind of crude, impulsive, and expressive quality that can be found in the Expressionists' sculptural and wood block works. Indeed, Nolde's painting looks almost as if it were carved out of wood with its short and harsh brush strokes and rough outlines.

Nolde, who did a few wooden sculptures himself and many woodblock prints, was very fond of working in this medium--particularly after he was re-introduced to it by **Die Brucke** artists around 1905. Much earlier, Nolde had gone to Sauermann Carving School and furniture factory in Flensburg and received training as a woodcarver.<sup>18</sup> This experience seems to be undeniable--and for

Nolde inescapable--when one looks at his rich oil paintings and their carved-like quality.

A second aspect of this work, typical of Nolde, is the unidealized aspect. **Woman in a Bright Light** does not represent any standard ideals of beauty. Nolde undoubtedly was aware that, without the figure's untamed hair and tired and worn face, her expressive power would be considerably lessened. And it is this expressive power that transmits the figure's feelings of isolation, alienation, and sheer helplessness or powerlessness. The Expressionists did not limit themselves to portraying traditional ideals of beauty. Quite the opposite, if an artist felt that it was to his best expressive interest to distort a figure in an unappealing way, it was unquestionably done.

The third aspect of **Woman in a Bright Light** that is exemplary of Nolde, and indeed the first generation German Expressionists in general, is the figure's obvious ethnic or native origin. The German Expressionists followed the Romantics in terms of turning towards the so-called "primitive", or non-European, lesser developed cultures and peoples. The Ethnological Museums in Berlin and Hamburg were often visited by many of the German Expressionist artists, particularly those involved with **die Brucke**. Beginning in 1911, Nolde would visit the Ethnological Museums and make intense sketches of what he saw there.

This fascination with less developed cultures had become quite typical starting with the Romantics, continuing with Gauguin, and developing even further with the German Expressionists. There would appear to be two logical or obvious reasons for this turning

towards non-European, less modernized societies: (1) the increased awareness of such societies due to imperialism; and (2) the contempt for the newly industrialized West that many of the artists felt.

Imperialism, which reached its height between the 1880s and 1914, brought with it much intrigue for other civilizations and cultures, particularly those of Africa and Asia. Imperialism typically bred notions of racial superiority and nationalism. Yet while Nolde is often noted for his racial and anti-Semitic feelings, they are not at all apparent in this work. **Woman in a Bright Light** is instilled with a sincere, yet alienated and lonely quality which arouses in the viewer intense feelings of empathy. The figure is isolated and alone, yet she is human, and Nolde makes no attempt to deny her such humanity.

In his notes from his 1913 journey to New Guinea, Nolde seems to sympathize with the exploited natives: "A magnificent people in so far as they have not already been spoiled by their contact with the white man... who is trying to bring the inhabitants of the whole world into servitude."<sup>19</sup> Statements such as these lead many to conclude that Nolde did indeed sympathize with these exploited people and therefore opposed imperialism. Nolde's "opposition" to imperialism, however, is not in terms of a socialist or humanist revolution, nor does he oppose it in terms of its well-documented, egotistical, policy of "enlightening" backwards peoples. Rather, Nolde held a sort of romanticized view of non-European and so-called "primitive" societies.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Nolde felt that these "less civilized" peoples could help him to understand his deep

German roots which undoubtedly had been covered up under layers of modernization.

Industrialization would also seem to play a crucial role in the way the artists at this time turned to ethnic cultures. As mentioned earlier in this paper, industrialization occurred very rapidly in Germany which caused many to turn away from the new, disgusting external world and towards either their inner selves or other non-industrialized cultures. Although Nolde only maintained or acknowledged an influence from a strong German past on his art, his native explorations and expeditions would seem to reinforce or support the intuitive, non-rational feelings that Nolde is typically noted for. Indeed Nolde appreciated the crude, enthusiastic, and honest qualities of non-European artifacts. Such artifacts were more relevant to Nolde and his art than the art of Classical Greece, the Renaissance, and the Salons.

The fourth and final aspect of **Woman in a Bright Light** that I shall discuss is its destructive aspect. The destruction carried out in this work is typical of Nolde, with bold, expressive, and emotional colors applied to the canvas in a seemingly harsh, angry and violent manner. The Expressionists, in general, represented quite a destructive group of artists--destroying form, traditional ideals of beauty, external realism, and objectivism. Destructiveness stems from intolerance of individual powerlessness and isolation. Its ultimate aim is the removal of the external object.<sup>21</sup> The Expressionist artists would remain loyal to their goal of inner, subjective expression if they could remove the external object, and some of them did just this, such as the

nonobjective artist, Wassily Kandinsky. However, many of the German Expressionists relied on the external object to lead them into the inner experiences (i.e. the reaction to external reality), thus they distorted the object rather than removing it or destroying it completely. Such distortion could indeed be viewed as merely a lesser degree of destruction than removal.

Expressionist destruction was not of a rational type, rather it was a type that was irrational and waited only for its chance to be expressed. The expression of destruction, however, requires an objective "reason" for such expression.<sup>22</sup> Most destructive impulses are rationalized in a way that results in an entire social group sharing in the rationalization so that it appears "realistic" to any one member of the group.<sup>23</sup> This, in part, explains Nolde's enthusiasm when asked to join **Die Brucke**, whose impulses were also marked by a certain destructiveness: "I was not alone! There were other young painters imbued with the future, with aims similar to my own."<sup>24</sup> This could also help to explain his later attraction to a far more destructive social group, the National Socialists.

In concluding, Nolde's work **Woman in a Bright Light** represents aspects of Nolde that clearly define him as a German Expressionist, namely, its harsh, almost carved-like paint application technique, its unidealized nature, its suggestion of other "primitive" cultures, and its element of destruction. Such characteristics are involved in many of the first-generation German Expressionists, but they cannot alone define the movement. Indeed, attempting to explain such a complex and disunified movement as Expressionism only in stylistic or narrow terms will merely lead to difficulties.

Expressionism needs to be understood as a historical, political and social movement in addition to an artistic one. Expressionism was a subjective reaction to society--a reaction to intellectual notions of decline, to scientific positivism, to industrial capitalism and to authoritarianism. The artists of the movement held an anticlassical, antirational, and anti-French stance. Indeed, the social and political involvement of Expressionism was of extreme importance.<sup>25</sup> The movement was associated at different stages and developments with socialism, communism, and Nazism. Thus, I feel that Expressionism, as defined by Douglas Kellner, as an "avant-garde artistic movement which responded rebelliously to the developments of bourgeois society in the era of industrial capitalism,"<sup>26</sup> captures the movement to the fullest extent. Although stylistic elements and developments represent an aspect of the movement, as does Gordon's definition of the movement as a "response to the fear of decline," they do not capture the whole of the movement. Kellner's definition allows for a variety of techniques and approaches among the subjective artists of the movement. Moreover, such a definition allows the movement to be viewed from a social, political, and historical perspective as well.

Max Beckmann, a second generation Expressionist, is usually considered apart from the earlier masters such as Nolde. A theory of "Two Expressionisms" was, in fact, developed by Wolfgang Paulsen in 1935 in his **Aktivismus and Expressionismus** and by Walter Sokel in his 1959 book, **The Writer in Extremis**. This theory distinguishes between an earlier, more critical and creative stage

and a later, more rhetorical, political "activist" stage of Expressionism.<sup>27</sup> However, such a classification or distinction seems arbitrary when one finds features of both "stages" in any given single work and faces the absolute difficulty of classifying individual artists into either one of these stages. Beckmann must not be separated by a false distinction from the earlier Expressionists. While his style is indeed individualistic, this is the result of the way that Germany developed artistically with no central artistic center or specific tradition. For Beckmann, under Kellner's definition--a wide definition which is essential for Germany with its tradition of individuality and the range of variations within any given movement--is allowed the same status, in terms of the movement, as Nolde.

Beckmann's 1921 masterpiece, **The Dream**, reveals Beckmann's Expressionist qualities--both idealistic and artistic. Idealistically, the work--although this is not evident upon first glance--represents hope through the possibility of transcendence or the hope of regeneration. Indeed, Beckmann's philosophical idealism, in conformity with the German Expressionist movement in general, borrows much from the nineteenth and twentieth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Artistically, **The Dream** incorporates wild distortions which superficially seem to parallel French Cubism. Such distortions or destruction of forms, as used by Beckmann, however, are carried out for very different reasons than those of Picasso or Braque (the two great Cubists) for doing what appears to be of a very similar nature. Such destruction when used by the Expressionists worked

towards an end of an understanding of what lies behind a given object--its deeper meaning or significance. The Cubists, on the other hand, destroyed form in an attempt to analyze its properties in an almost scientific manner.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, Beckmann's destruction of form is very expressive and emotional with its harsh, jagged contours and distorted perspectives. For example, notice the severe slanting ground which works effectively to bring the viewer into the miserable scene that Beckmann has created. Before discussing in more detail the ideological and artistic meaning and purposes behind this work which are essential to the Expressionist movement, I shall attempt to interpret this work in terms of its visible qualities.

The work revolves around the image of the central, innocent blond girl. The figure sits on a parcel of luggage suggesting that she has perhaps just arrived at the big city of Berlin from the country. This girl, significantly, is the only figure in the work who has open eyes and is surrounded by seemingly oblivious individuals performing a variety of senseless and meaningless activities. She is the only one who is awake to the harsh reality of her surroundings, yet she is confused by such an environment precisely because she is from somewhere else--she has not yet become immune to the bizarre and nonsensical nature of post-war Germany as the other figures have. This central figure's innocence is reaffirmed by the drum that hangs on the wall behind her forming a halo around her head. She holds an unreal, soulless puppet who seems to sit in mockery of the whole scene with its wide smile and

clapping hands.

The figure to the right of the central girl is a cripple who struggles to crawl with the help of his crutches. This figure most likely represents a war veteran. Crippled war veterans were indeed visible throughout the streets of postwar Europe. This struggling figure wears a purple, polka-dot, clown-like costume which seems only to further mock his reduced state after the horrendous crisis of war.<sup>29</sup>

The figure of the woman in the immediate foreground lies in an absolutely hysterical state. Her face is flushed as if she were drunk and a stream of urine escapes from under her dress. Regardless of whether this figure is laughing or crying, the sense of absolute despair is apparent by her total condition. She has no control over herself, nor the fate and conditions that she has been given. She holds a cello with no strings which further stresses her helpless and desperate state of being and her role in the meaningless activities of the world.

The blind beggar, directly to the left of the central figure and her hideous doll, wears a sign that reads: "Thank God for the light in your eyes, and don't forget the poor blind man"--suggesting that God has forgotten him.<sup>30</sup> This blind old man blows his horn and cranks his organ at the completely oblivious world around him. His activity is meaningless in a world in which humans are alienated from one another (not to mention from themselves); no one can hear him, nor do they realize his presence at all.

Finally, the figure which I find to be most intriguing is the man climbing the ladder. Some suggest that the costume that this

figure wears is that of a sailor, while others maintain that it is recognizable as a jail uniform. I would have to argue that the outfit worn by this figure is indeed that of an inmate. His own senseless activity--trying to escape--further suggests this. Perhaps this figure even represents a revolutionary.

I feel that the man on the ladder can be viewed as a revolutionary figure (or idea--he may not represent an actual revolutionary) for two reasons: (1)his apparent jail uniform, and (2)his sense of absolute powerlessness--symbolized by his amputated hands. Indeed, revolutionaries at this time in Germany, during the Weimar Republic, were typically associated with communism. Given Western Europe's fear of Bolshevism and communism during this time, revolutionaries were typically silenced into a state of powerlessness. The figure's face is one of incredible despair--he cannot even bear to open his eyes to see the degenerate and hopeless world that lies beneath him; he wants only to escape, yet this activity becomes meaningless as well when his ladder only reaches another ladder--in effect, he has no escape.

This revolutionary, if you will, also carries a fish, which is often used by Beckmann in his later works to symbolize the soul.<sup>31</sup> This fish is the clue to transcendence in this work. And it is exactly such transcendence--the possibility, and thus hope, of reaching a higher level of being--that instills this representation of a seemingly hopeless and meaningless world with a sense of optimism. Such transcendence may either be of a spiritual kind or of a material redemptive sort. In terms of defending this figure as a revolutionary, it is necessary, at this point, to discuss

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Beckmann's own political views.

In accordance with Beckmann's few statements about politics, many have concluded that he viewed the activities of the Left and Right, and indeed politics in general, with skepticism and thus typically treated them with savage sarcasm. Indeed, in his 1938 lecture, "On My Painting," delivered at the New Burlington Gallery in London, Beckmann starts his speech by making clear his non-political stance: "I would like to emphasize that I have never been politically active in any way. I have only tried to realize my conception of the world as intensely as possible."<sup>32</sup> Barbara Buenger, however, notes that with the First World War and its revolutionary aftermath, Beckmann was undoubtedly politicized.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Buenger argues that regardless of his antipathy for political extremes, Beckmann (as is evident in both the **Ideologues**--a lithograph from his 1919 **Hell** portfolio--and in his known background) was attracted to the ideals of pacifism, socialism, and radical change.<sup>34</sup> Due to Beckmann's inherent individualism and the humanism evident in many of his statements, it would seem that he sympathized with the revolutionaries who wanted to change the cruel and harsh world, not just for themselves, but for everyone.

The man climbing the ladder in **The Dream** wants to change the world around him yet is cut off from such a possibility due to the limitations enforced upon him. I am not suggesting that this work reveals Beckmann's political stance, nor that he, in fact, even has one. Rather, I maintain that the desperate activity of the revolutionary figure is consistent with Beckmann's apparent sympathy with the ideals of the Left. Moreover, as Buenger argues,

the omnipresent First World War and its following revolutions--a war in which Beckmann served as a medical officer--would unquestionably work to politicize Beckmann as it did most of the Expressionists.

As the war broke out in 1914, most Germans, including the Expressionists, were excited and optimistic, driven in many cases by their nationalistic goals. Many Expressionist writers confirm their support through their poems and texts which preach the necessity of a revolution or war in order to reach salvation.<sup>35</sup> However, such support waned rapidly as the Socialist International fell apart.

When the International shattered, it was indeed the Expressionists who led the violent protest against the war.<sup>36</sup> Expressionist journals, such as **Die Aktion** and **Der Sturm**, played a major part in the opposition to the war. Indeed, Expressionism did not recognize itself as merely an artistic movement. Rather, it claimed to represent the search for something "bigger"--a new reality and a new set of values.<sup>37</sup> The combination or overlapping of politics and art was exactly what led to such new sets of values, the new "ethic" according to the Expressionists.<sup>38</sup>

So it may appear after all that the notion of "two expressionisms" is valid with the split occurring right around World War I. The notion, however, of an earlier (pre-war) "creative" stage and a later (post-war) "political activist" stage of Expressionism is, at the least, far too over-generalized. While the war did politicize the Expressionists, as it did people in general, those working in the "creative" stage did not, after the

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war, necessarily change their art into some sort of political statement. For example, Nolde's work does not change at all visually during or after the war. My point is that such a distinction, as I maintained earlier, only leads to difficulties because there are many exceptions to such a rule.

So without such a distinction Beckmann's **The Dream** and Nolde's **Woman in a Bright Light** belong to the same category, that of Expressionism. **The Dream**, as I mentioned earlier, is Expressionistic both ideologically and artistically.

Ideologically, there is a sense of hope in this work--the possibility of transcendence or renewal--which is an integral part of the German Expressionist movement. Such a sense of hope seems typically to be absent from much contemporary art today.

As early as 1909, Beckmann refuted any association with Expressionism, yet his two early history paintings reveal that the association was inevitable. Both **Destruction of the Messina** of 1909 and **The Sinking of the Titanic** of 1912 reveal Expressionist ideals. Beckmann was undoubtedly attracted to such historic scenes of human struggle and suffering because he could use them to create a composition that could work as a metaphysical reflection of man's morality.<sup>39</sup> Such interest in the redemption or renewal that can come only from tragedy is a Nietzschean concept that can be found again and again in both the writings and works of the German Expressionists. The Expressionism of **The Dream** is, artistically speaking, however, of a very different kind than that of Beckmann's earlier works (I would, in fact label his two history paintings of 1909 and 1912 as proto-Expressionist); yet it does not have

entirely different aims.

The type of Expressionism found in **The Dream** is of a sort that parallels the work of Otto Dix and George Grosz and their satirical mockery of society. Beckmann was labeled the leader of the "New Objectivity" in the mid-1920s due primarily to his solid forms and their physical presence.<sup>40</sup> However, the extreme expressiveness and emotionalism found in all three of these artists' works is almost reason enough to label them "Expressionist". Their reaction to society and their fear of decline is also a reason for such a labeling.

**The Dream** was painted with distortions and ambiguities that result in something that is intensely expressive. Beckmann's own personal symbolism--the fish, the picture frame, and the lantern--work only to strengthen the expressive qualities of the work. Additionally, the way that Beckmann forces the viewer into the scene, with the slanting floor and other stylistic devices, lays the ground for an emotional response from the viewer.

To add to the intuitive, irrational effect (since it is not evident in the paint application technique as it is with Nolde), Beckmann includes elements, such as the chair in the right hand corner and the plant, that look as if they were just thrown into the composition. Indeed, the element of intuitiveness was essential to Expressionism and found support in Wilhelm Worringer's "Abstraction and Empathy" (1907).

In conclusion, **The Dream** by Max Beckmann, like Nolde's **Woman in a Bright Light**, is an Expressionist work in the truest sense. The difficulty in pinning down a movement such as German

Expressionism is largely due to the fact that it is a German manifestation. German artists (or artists who worked in Germany) tend to be very individualistic. Indeed, both Nolde and Beckmann evidence the truth of such a statement. Such individuality has much to do with the way that Germany developed both historically and artistically. Nonetheless Kellner's wide definition for Expressionism as a reaction to bourgeois industrial capitalism and its developments allows for the range of art and artists that one finds within the German Expressionist movement. Moreover, these artists were an inevitable outgrowth of nineteenth and twentieth century European and, more specifically, German life. These artists were reacting to the fear that they felt and that stemmed from intellectual notions of social, cosmic, cultural, and moral degradation. Their art, however, in its own clever, and always expressive, way provides a sense of hope for the future.

## NOTES

1. **Expressionism: Art and Idea.** pg.4-5.
2. Ibid. pg.6.
3. Ibid. pg.8.
4. Ibid. pg.9.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. pg.12.
7. **The Will to Power.** pg.9.
8. **"Max Beckmann and the Weimar Era"** from **Max Beckmann Prints.** pg.23.
9. **German Expressionism: A Generation in Revolt.** pg.11.
10. Ibid. pg.12.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. pg.15.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid. pg.12.
18. **German Expressionist Sculpture.** pg.163.
19. **Emil Nolde.** pg.33.
20. **Passion and Rebellion.** pg.301.
21. **Escape From Freedom.** pg.202.
22. Ibid. pg.203.
23. Ibid.
24. **Theories of Modern Art.** pg.147.
25. **Voices of German Expressionism.** pg.2.
26. **Passion and Rebellion.** pg.3.

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27. Ibid. pg.5
28. **German Expressionism: A Generation in Revolt.** pg.11.
29. **Max Beckmann.** pg.84.
30. Ibid.
31. Dossier from St. Louis City Art Museum.
32. **Theories of Modern Art.** pg.187.
33. **"Max Beckmann's Ideologues: Some Forgotten Faces".** pg.485.
34. Ibid. pg.455.
35. **Passion and Rebellion.** pg.115.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid. pg.83.
38. Ibid.
39. **"Max Beckmann and the Weimar Era", from Max Beckmann Prints.** pg.23.
40. **Voices of German Expressionism.** pg.106.

27. Ibid. pg.5
28. **German Expressionism: A Generation in Revolt.** pg.11.
29. **Max Beckmann.** pg.84.
30. Ibid.
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