1914!
The Avant-garde and the Great War

7 October 2008 to 11 January 2009
Curator: Javier Arnaldo

From 7 October the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid are presenting a new joint exhibition entitled 1914! The Avant-garde and the Great War. It comprises a new analysis of avant-garde art – Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism and early abstraction – through more than 200 works of art loaned from museums and private collections around the world, with World War I as its backdrop. The exhibition will offer a new perspective on the development of international art between 1913 and 1918, a period that has never previously been the subject of a thematic exhibition on this scale.

Few historical events have been so decisive for the development of the early avant-garde movements as the 1914 war. The period immediately prior to the outbreak of the conflict coincided with the high point of creativity among these movements, whose rebellious spirit prefigured the militant stance of most of the artists with regard to the war. In addition, the experience of the war had a powerful effect on the work of many of them, not just with regard to subject matter but also as a new reality that highlighted ideological contradictions within the concept of modern art.

The exhibition brings together works by dozens of artists involved in the principal avant-garde trends. They include Klee, Kandinsky, Marc, Schiele, Brancusi, Chagall, Nolde, Balla, Goncharova, Boccioni, Léger, Zadkine, Severini, Popova, Grosz, Macke and many others up to complete a list of 68 names. Their creations reveal the prophetic mission that avant-garde assumed in relation to the events that would bring about its crisis; the capacity of the new artistic idioms to transform representations into the visual currency of war; the various types of apocalyptic art that arose and died out at this period; and the anti-war stance adopted by some artists at this time.

Among the works on display – 222 in total from around 80 lenders in sixteen different countries – there are a number of exceptional loans and groups of works that are outstanding with regard to importance and quality, while others are almost unknown to the wider public and have rarely been shown before.

Images from left to right:

More information and images:
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been displayed in the past. Among the former is the group of works by Umberto Boccioni comprising 3 major oils, as well as the group of works by Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, Sironi and Lehmburck and the series by Ossip Zadkine, never previously exhibited in its entirety and including the previously unpublished watercolour entitled Barracks. The list of little known and rarely exhibited works is completed with drawings by Marcoussis, various works by Sironi, Lothe, Lehmburck and Rouault and a curious sculpture made from the remains of a missile attributed to André Derain and recently rediscovered.

This is a **completely innovative survey**, organised into thirteen sections divided between the two venues of the exhibition: the exhibition rooms of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and those of Fundación Caja Madrid.

**MUSEO THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA:**

1. **The World darkens**

The exhibition opens with key works by Franz Marc, Otto Dix and Egon Schiele produced in the years immediately prior to the war. They offer a fatalistic vision of the world and are marked by a sense of desolation and by references to menace and death. The type of suffering, fearful natural world that they depict reflects the sense of despair felt by those who lived through these years.

2. **The Second Vision**

The role of painting as a vehicle that anticipated or revealed a higher reality and also functioned as a means of releasing spiritual values determined much of the new art produced around 1913. This second section brings together a series of paintings and sculptures by Kupka, Marc, Souza Cardoso, Epstein, Goncharova and Brancusi that explicitly respond to art’s ability to anticipate remote or future events in the form of visions, frequently using images derived from the natural world.

3. **The Last Days of Humanity**

The work of the Expressionists Ludwig Meidner and Jacob Steinhardt who founded the group “Die Pathetiker” offered disturbing visions that prophesied the collapse of the modern world, including Meidner’s so-called “apocalyptic landscapes”. This section brings together various examples of this type with contemporary works by Feininger, Nolde and Boccioni that also reveal the millenarian fears reflected in art just prior to World War I.

4. **The Avant-garde on Horseback**

The rider is a recurring motif in avant-garde iconography between around 1910 and 1915. Marc, Kandinsky, Macke, Boccioni, Severini, Duchamp-Villon and others produced numerous depictions of riders and horses. The horse frequently stood for...
dynamic force as an image of avant-garde art. The identification of the new art and the so-called avant-garde with horses and riders allowed for an association between the most important artistic concerns of the day and a pro-war belligerence that would be expressed in the events of 1914.

5. War Song

Taking Cubism as its pictorial starting point, a heraldic language evolved around 1914 that gave voice to militarism and patriotic insurgence. Various works by Hartley, Sironi, Popova, Gleizes, Léger and Duchamp-Villon on display in this section reveal how paintings were transformed into political discourse and into a visual or iconographic currency that would come to express the spirit of the various countries involved in the conflict.

Fernand Léger, The 14th of July, c. 1912-1913. Collection Triton Foundation, Netherlands

6. The Vortex of Destruction

The mechanisation and dynamism introduced into modern life by the machine occupies a central position in part of the work of the early avant-garde movements, principally that of Futurism. The outbreak of World War I revealed the destructive force of the machine, and when the artistic exploration of mechanisation adopted the theme of conflict as a subject it evoked and celebrated this new aesthetic inspired by automatism, seeing it as a synthesis of the destructive aspects of the machine. Various masterpieces by Man Ray, Léger, Epstein, Dix, Sironi and Severini produced between 1914 and 1917 and on display in this section reveal the martial spirit, strength and mechanical dynamism as images of the de-humanised tension of the key players in the war, of military advance and of destruction.

7. A War of Forms, An Aesthetic of Disappearance

The representation of tensed or shifting forces of energy, stripped of figurative references, is frequently found in abstract compositions around 1914 and on occasions acts as an analogy to the reality of the war. The reference to disappearance in the title of this section relates to the correspondence between artistic vision and the war in question. It would be difficult to describe the works on display here as battle paintings as such, but they are undoubtedly representations strongly connected to an exaltation of the conflict as well as being masterpieces of early pictorial abstraction by artists such as Giacomo Balla, Franz Marc, Pavel Filonov, Pierre Albert-Biot and Wassily Kandinsky, dating from 1914 to 1917.

8. Profound Expression

Paul Klee, Ossip Zadkine and Marc Chagall focused on the reality of war as a circumstance that expressed human misfortune and one that invites compassion. In this section we see a group of drawings and watercolours executed by three artists during the war in which they represented with an unparalleled profundity scenes that they themselves witnessed. These are enormously moving scenes of hospitals and of wounded and convalescent men. They depict military scenes as well as others that reveal the effect of the war on civilian life.

Marc Chagall, War Recruit, 1915. Centre Pompidou, Paris
9. Apocalypse in our Time

The theme of the Last Judgement, which was widely treated by various avant-garde artists just before the outbreak of World War I, reappeared in the first months of the conflict as an allegory of war. Two outstanding examples are the lithographic album by Natalia Goncharova entitled Mystical Images of War and Barlach's sculpture The Avenger, both indicative of a desire to return to and reuse medieval imagery in a modern way. While Goncharova and Barlach's primitivism had different origins, they coincide in the intention of their language, which contained within it a messianic mission (with the two artists on different sides in the war), giving their depiction of war an eschatological character.

10. Artist and Soldier

Among the numerous artists who were called up on the outbreak of war or who voluntarily enlisted there were some - particularly among the Expressionists - who depicted their new status as soldiers. The self-portrait of the artist as soldier is thus a particular genre within avant-garde painting during World War I and embodies an aspect of artistic life that was particularly contradictory and susceptible to an allegorical reading. The representation of the artist-combatant appears various times - particularly in Expressionist art - as an artistic manifestation of a provocative, even aggressive stance. On other occasions the artist depicted himself as victim, as in two works of the same title on display in this room: Self-portrait as Soldier, one by Otto Dix and the second, in which the artist depicts himself with his hand cut off, by Kirchner.


11. Cubism in the Trenches

The art of the front, in the form of sketches and drawings made in situ, documents the most immediate relationship between artists and the war. As a result, the frontline became a particularly rich place for artistic creativity. Cubism and other avant-garde idioms were used as interpretative guides that coincided with regard to the nature of their subject matter. As a result we find a unique symbiosis between the pictorial language of Cubism with its facets, superimpositions, lines of force etc, and the themes of the trenches, the combat, artillery action, explosions, field hospitals etc. The affinity between the style of these new idioms and the dynamic of the reality of war is evident in such creations, seemingly arising from the fact that the avant-garde artists moved physically out of their studios and onto the front line. As is to be expected, most of the works in this section are on paper, including works by Guillaume Apollinaire, Fernand Léger, Otto Dix, William Roberts, David Bomberg, Wyndham Lewis, Max Beckmann and many others.

12. Signs of Damnation

The 1914 war produced enthusiastic responses on the part of many artists but also gave rise to visions of human terror and degeneration. Such works, which have a notably grotesque character, prevail in the output of some of the German Expressionists, notably Erich Heckel, Lyonel Feininger, George Grosz and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. This section presents a group of works by these artists of 1915 and 1916 depicting notably pessimistic subjects of a type that could be described as allegories of condemnation, such as Grosz’s painting *Metropolis*. This painting does not derive its motifs directly from the reality of war but rather deals with themes that reflect its course, expressed with a merciless pathos that presents mankind not so much as the agent of war but as a collateral effect, a puppet at the mercy of crime and desolation.

13. C'est la guerre

The exhibition concludes with a group of paintings and sculptures whose intention was to denounce the war. These are by a wide range of highly differing artists: Lehmbruck, Rouault, Vallotton, Johansen, Permeke, Friesz and others, but they share two features: most of them were made while the artists were in interior or exterior exile and all are characterised by their anti-war stance. The legacy of Expressionism is also evident in most of them, but with an interest in realism in their critical stance and in the palpably human element contained within these works.
EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Title: 1914! The Avant-garde and the Great War

Dates: 7 October 2008 to 11 January 2009

Organisers and venues: Museo Thyssen-Bomemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid

Curator: Javier Arnaldo, Curator of the Museo Thyssen-Bomemisza and Head of the Department of Research and Further Studies

Number of works: 230

Publications: Catalogue with essays by Javier Arnaldo. Published in Spanish with English appendix. Educational Guide


Webpage: in Spanish and English

Audioguide

VISITOR INFORMATION

Museo Thyssen-Bomemisza. Paseo del Prado 8, 28014 Madrid

Opening times and ticket prices: Tuesdays to Sundays, 10am to 7pm. Ticket desks close at 6.30pm
Temporary exhibition: 5 Euros (reduced price: 3.50 Euros for students and visitors aged over 65)
Temporary exhibition + Permanent Collection: 9 Euros (reduced price: 5 Euros for students and visitors aged over 65)

Pre-booked tickets on the Museum’s website and on 902 050 121
More information: 91 639 01 51 and www.museothyssen.org

Fundación Caja Madrid. Plaza San Martín 1, 28013 Madrid
Opening times: Tuesdays to Sundays 10am to 8pm
Free entry. More information: 902 246 810 and www.fundacioncajamadrid.org

PRESS INFORMATION