



Chazen Museum of Art

Fall 2020 Faculty Curriculum: Resiliency and Surviving Trauma

Erich Heckel, *Portrait of BL (Bildnis BL)*, 1915



Woodcut, 14 7/8 x 11 1/2 in.
Gift of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2017.14.11

It is so beautiful to see how much love and respect people have for artistic things...

—Erich Heckel ¹

¹ Translated from the original German. Quoted in Aya Soika, "Erich Heckels Madonna von Ostende (1915): Eine vergessene Ikone des Berliner Kronprinzenpalais," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* (2016), 102



Artist Biography

Erich Heckel (German, 1883—1970) was a painter, printmaker, and sculptor. He began painting and drawing as a child in a small industrial town in central Germany. In 1904, he moved to Dresden to study architecture and began making woodcut prints. A year later, he and three fellow architecture students—Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Fritz Bleyl, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff—founded the artist group *Die Brücke*: The Bridge. Largely self-taught as artists, the founders of *Die Brücke* viewed themselves as innovators, seeking to revitalize art and connect it to modern life with directness and authenticity. Their 1906 manifesto states: “As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against the long-established older forces.” The name *Die Brücke* signified the ‘bridge’ they would create as they linked past, present, and future, and progressed into a new world. *Die Brücke* was influential in the development of a broader artistic movement known as Expressionism. In general, expressionist artists strove to depict a subject’s perceived essence or the emotions it aroused, rather than objective reality. Many adopted the technique of woodcut printing, and its relation to late-Medieval German art, as a sign of authenticity. During this time, Heckel’s paintings and prints featured landscapes, cabaret scenes, and female nudes. Heckel’s first exhibition was in Berlin in 1913, the same year *Die Brücke* disbanded due to disagreements among its members.

At the onset of the First World War in 1914, Heckel joined a German medical unit located in Ostend, Belgium, near Bruges on the North Sea. He continued his practice during the war, focusing on portraiture and self-portraiture, along with images of Belgium’s canals and cities, such as Antwerp, Bruges, and Ghent.

World War I ended in November 1918 with the defeat of Germany, prompting Heckel’s return to Berlin. There, he was briefly part of the *Novembergruppe*, an activist group of socialist artists, formed at the end of 1918 in response to the November or Weimar Revolution that brought about the creation of Germany’s first democracy, the Weimar Republic. In 1919, he co-founded the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (the Workers’ Council for Art), an artist union. Between the wars, Heckel focused on painting and his work became more spiritual than in the past. He taught at Berlin’s Academy of Art until 1933 and traveled throughout Europe.

Under Nazi rule of Germany in the mid-to-late 1930s, Heckel’s art (along with that of many modern artists) was declared to be “degenerate,” confiscated from museums, and banned from public exhibition. In total, 700 of his artworks were confiscated by the Nazis and under political pressure, he was dismissed from his teaching position. In 1941, he fled to Carinthia, a state in southern Austria, to wait out the war. Although he returned to Berlin in 1944, Allied bombs destroyed his studio and its contents the same year, destroying much of his early work that was not already in public and private collections.

After World War II, the artist continued to paint and returned to making prints. In 1949 took a position teaching at the *Kunstakademie* (Academy of Fine Arts) in Karlsruhe, a position he held until 1955. He ultimately retired to a village on Lake Constance (Bodensee), and passed away at the age of 86. By the time of his death, he was considered to be one of Germany’s most significant artists.



Location

Portrait of BL (Bildnis BL) is currently installed in the passage between the Chazen Museum Mezzanine gallery and the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 13. To view this work in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Portrait of BL is a woodcut print created by Erich Heckel in 1915. The small black and white print measures fourteen and seven-eighths inches by eleven and one-half inches and depicts a portrait of a man. The man appears in three-quarters view from the shoulders up and looks off in the distance to the right of the print. His face appears stern as he is not smiling, and his eyebrows appear furrowed. There are many dark vertical hatch marks running along the middle of the man's forehead and stretching down through his nose. Horizontal hash marks run along his right cheek which are a combination of the artist's printmaking process and the woodgrain of the printing block. He wears a short, closely cropped hairdo that comes to a sharp point in the center of his forehead. This suggests either a widow's peak or a receding hairline giving us some clues about the man's possible age. He wears a uniform as evidenced by the shoulder strap on his right shoulder. Additionally, two rectangular white patches with black crosses adorn each side of his collar. Behind the man at the left, a series of irregularly parallel slightly diagonal lines run into a long vertical line. From this long vertical line, an additional series of irregularly parallel horizontal lines run varying horizontal lines that pass behind the man. This suggests the joining of two walls at a corner, thus an interior space. At the upper right of the image, to the right of the man's profile, is a dark rectangular shape that appears to be a window. In the background, to the left of the man, a silhouette of a lamp hangs on the wall. In the background of the image and to the man's right, a person sits at a table. This person appears to be wearing a cap, but additional identifying characteristics are unclear. In the background, a large rectangular white space frames the man's head which suggests a light source from either the lamp or a window.



Content and Context

Portrait of BL (or, by its original German title, *Bildnis BL*) depicts a nurse, whose identity is now known only by his initials “BL.” An inscription in pencil by an unknown individual in the lower margin of the paper (hidden from view) describes the man as “Pfleger B” or “Nurse B.” The cross insignia on B’s collar also indicate his role. In the background, a wounded soldier—perhaps one of Nurse B’s wards—sits at a table. This print is one of many Erich Heckel made during World War I while he was serving as a medic in occupied Belgium. Heckel’s location—Ostend—in Flanders (the northern section of Brussels) was a strategic port city and submarine base on the North Sea and was a collection point for soldiers wounded in battle. The Germans had gained control of the city soon after the start of the war and it suffered frequent bombardment by the British in the first year of the war. The commanding officer of Heckel’s medical unit was an art historian who encouraged Heckel, along with another Expressionist artist in the unit, Max Beckmann (1884–1950), to continue their artistic practices in their free time.

Printmaking, especially the creation of woodcuts, was an apt technique, as it did not require extensive tools or materials or a large studio space in which to work; the artist could carve small woodblocks at his leisure, hand-printing them on a variety of found papers (as evidence shows Heckel did) or waiting to print and publish them until a later time. While Heckel had experimented with color profusely before the war, a slightly more complicated enterprise, most of his prints made during wartime employ only black ink.

For Heckel and Beckmann, the war presented them with images of pain and suffering, and both men incorporated their experiences in the medical corps into their art. Whereas Heckel continued to work as a medic throughout the war, however, Beckmann was severely affected by what he witnessed and was discharged for mental health reasons in 1915. Other woodcuts Heckel created during this period include portraits of fellow medics and nurses, wounded patients, soldiers, and friends and associates. As demonstrated by this print, Heckel’s specialty was interior scenes that “express melancholy and loneliness.”² He had a tendency to psychologize and “from early on, he displayed an affinity for marginal situations, life’s anxious or fearful moments.”³ Many scholars have noted the resonance between Heckel’s use of woodcut and the mental and physical wounds of those he depicted. For example, the Portland Art Museum notes that “the fractured forms of the woodcut echo the broken and bandaged men.” In addition to the way the woodcut appears, the artist’s act of carving away wood from the block recalls gashes in wounded skin. Examining the print closely, the viewer can get a sense of the dimensionality of the gouges and shapes Heckel hand-carved into the block by the embossment of these shapes into the paper.

Heckel used art as a way to connect with life and to forge connections to the people he worked with and the wounded he tended. For a Christmas celebration held in 1915, Heckel painted the *Madonna of Ostend*, depicting Mary and the Christ Child, on two pieces of canvas sewn together.⁴ He dedicated it to

² Gunther Thiem, *Prints by Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff: A Centenary Celebration*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1985), 8

³ Ibid

⁴ Although the painting *Madonna of Ostend* was destroyed in World War II, Heckel made a woodcut of the same subject in 1916



the wounded soldiers unable to return home for the holiday. In a letter to a friend, he wrote: “How glad I was to paint that for the soldiers [...] how much respect and even love for art there is in human beings, in spite of everything.” Perhaps it was this hopefulness and interest in shared humanity that helped Heckel through this traumatic moment.

World War I—known as the Great War at the time—began in July 1914. From Germany to England and France, many progressive artists were initially enthusiastic about the conflict, seeing it as a way to topple inflated, outdated, out of touch, and callous monarchies and empires, and the ushering in of a new, democratic era. Many enlisted early on. Others volunteered as medics to avoid active service or in lieu of service if they were deemed unfit to serve. The brutality of war and death of many artist-soldiers soon dampened the fervor at the war’s outset. With the end of the Great War, many artists felt dismayed by the degree of malevolence present in human beings that the fighting had revealed. Some turned to portraiture, as Heckel had, to recapture a sense of humanity. In addition, between the war and the international Spanish Flu epidemic that accompanied its final years, many identified the human body as a site of trauma. In the wake of these events, abstraction gained hold over figurative art, along with movements like Dada that celebrated the absurdity of life, and Surrealism, that looked to dreams and the inner psyche to seek answers.



Discussion Questions

1. Describe how the artist has depicted BL. What might the artist's depiction suggest about him, his circumstances, or how the artist felt? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Heckel's use of black and white creates a bold contrast and in many ways, exaggerates the reduction print process. What was the artist trying to convey through the use of such expressive marks?
3. When you hear the word "nurse", what do you see? What images come to mind? How does Heckel's interpretation of a nurse differ from yours?
4. In what ways, are nurses and other medical professionals "heroic"?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Erich Heckel (German, 1883—1970). [*Two Wounded Soldiers \(Zwei Verwundete\)*](#), 1915. Woodcut, 13 13/16 x 11 1/8 in., Gift of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2012.9.27. On view in the passageway between the Chazen Mezzanine and the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 13.

This woodcut was made by Heckel the same year as *Portrait of BL* and depicts two wounded soldiers with whom the artist likely interacted.

Erich Heckel (German, 1883—1970). [*Head of the Killed \(Kopf des Getöteten\)*](#), 1917. Woodcut, 10 1/4 x 13 in., Gift of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2013.37.36.

This woodcut, from two years later, toward the end of the war, is very different in style from those of two years earlier, perhaps indicating the mental toll Heckel's work as a medic had taken.

Max Beckmann (German, 1884—1950). [*Self-Portrait with a House Gable \(Selbstbildnis von vorn, im Hintergrund Hausgiebel\)*](#), from the portfolio *Faces (Gesichter)*, 1918. Drypoint, 12 1/16 x 10 1/16 in., Bequest of Barbara Mackey Kaerwer, 2017.14.2.

Beckmann was a fellow medic of Heckel's but stepped down in 1915 following a mental breakdown. This self-portrait was made the year the war ended, but likely before its conclusion. Scholars have noted in Beckman's work a shift toward greater use of distortion and abrupt angularity following his wartime service.



Additional Resources

Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1994). [Kohler Art Library Regular size shelving, N9150 C67 1994]

Jennifer Farrell, "World War I and the Visual Arts," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* vol. 75, no. 2 (Fall 2017) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Galerie St. Etienne, "Erich Heckel," *Galerie St. Etienne* website, <https://www.gseart.com/artist/erich-heckel/bio> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

MaryAnn Wilkinson, "Erich Heckel's Woman (Portrait of the Artist's Wife)," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* vol. 83, no. 1: Portraits (2009) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Baroness Williams of Crosby, "World War One: The many battles faced by WW1's nurses," *BBC News* magazine (April 2, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26838077> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Christoph Zischek, Erhard Grunwald, and Michael Engelhardt, "Organization of the German Army Medical Service 1914–1918 and the role of academic surgeons," *Canadian Journal of Surgery* vol. 61, issue 4, (August 2018) [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

What is a woodcut?

Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Woodcut," <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/drawings-and-prints/materials-and-techniques/printmaking/woodcut>

A Chazen Museum-produced video featuring Van Vleck Works on Paper Curator James Wehn will be forthcoming and available on the Chazen's Canvas page