

# Riding high

As the centenary of Franz Marc's death is celebrated, CHRISTIAN WEIKOP reassesses the poetic paintings of this pioneer of German Expressionism



*Grazing Horses IV*, 1911, by Franz Marc

Franz Marc's reputation has suffered somewhat from mass reproduction, especially towards the end of the 20th century. On one hand, the commercial use of his iconic German Expressionist art has helped popularise his work throughout the world; on the other, the proliferation of cheap reproductions of his animal paintings has perhaps had a detrimental, 'kitschifying' effect.

The centenary of his death this year, however, offers a chance to re-engage with his art in the flesh at several German art museums with Marc holdings. Bavarian institutions have some of the best collections, including Lenbachhaus in Munich, and the Franz Marc Museum in Kochel am See, which marks the anniversary with major loans from Europe and America, including *Grazing Horses IV* (1911; above) on loan from Harvard Art Museum.

Despite his untimely death on the battlefields of Verdun in 1916, Marc was a prolific painter, especially between 1911 – when he helped form the Blaue Reiter group – and the outbreak of the First World War, when he produced many of his most stunning canvases. Work from this period includes the radiant and primitivistic *Red Woman* (1912), now in the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, which has the best German Expressionist collection in the UK. This is the only painting by Marc in a British art museum and it is worth making the pilgrimage to see this glowing jewel in the crown.

Marc represents the lyrical, harmonious and spiritual aspects of Expressionism, developed partly from his own aesthetic theory, which assigned emotional values to colours, and partly

in appreciation of the paradisiacal work of Parisian painters Henri Rousseau and Robert Delaunay, as well as the simplicity of folk art, a passion he shared with his Blaue Reiter collaborator Wassily Kandinsky. His pure Utopian depictions of animals in nature, places uncorrupted by man, show he was undoubtedly the poetic soul of the Expressionist movement.

His work does not possess the sexual vitality of the figurative Expressionism of the Brücke group, whose members included Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Pechstein. But he greatly admired the collective, and Marc and Pechstein were the links between the two art circles. Marc visited the Brücke studios in Berlin early in 1912, eventually persuading a rather prudish Kandinsky back in Munich to include examples of Brücke art in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*.

Marc also published an important essay, 'On the "Savages" of Germany', in the *Almanac*, which pulled together recent developments in German art, including the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (a precursor to the Blaue Reiter), the Berlin-based Neue Secession and the Brücke – several years before the term 'Expressionism' would really be applied to German artists. It was an important statement in presenting youthful regeneration and the overcoming of established forces, and also demonstrates that Marc was a radical figure, a point that might well be forgotten when, as spectators, we are seduced by his ideal worlds.

*Grazing Horses IV* Franz Marc Museum, Kochel am See, Germany, [franz-marc-museum.de](http://franz-marc-museum.de), 12 June–11 Sep

## EXPRESSIONISM EXHIBITIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

### MUNCH AND EXPRESSIONISM

Neue Galerie, New York

until 13 June

Saturated in anxiety and alienation as much as colour, the works of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch were a heady influence on German and Austrian Expressionism, as this standout show reveals.

### PAUL KLEE: IRONY AT WORK

Centre Pompidou, Paris

until 1 August

An affiliate of the Blaue Reiter group of Expressionists before he taught at the Bauhaus, Paul Klee was restlessly inventive, producing a dizzying range of work, now the subject of a vast Paris survey.



*Head of a Young Girl Wearing a Straw Hat*, c.1905, by Paula Modersohn-Becker

### PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER: AN INTENSELY ARTISTIC EYE

Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris

until 21 August

A revealing retrospective of the Dresden-born painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose highly sensitive still-lives, landscapes and portraits (above), produced during a tragically brief career, mark her out as an early exponent of Expressionism.

### MODERN MASTERS: 'DEGENERATE' ART

Kunstmuseum, Bern

until 21 August

Expressionists, including Marc, Macke Modersohn-Becker and Kirchner, feature in this overview of art in the Kunstmuseum's collection that was once denigrated as 'degenerate' by the Nazis and sold from German museum collections.