

# **THE BLUE RIDER**

**ALMA =**  
**NACH**  
DER  
**BLAUE**  
**REITER**



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**MASTERS OF ART**

# **THE BLUE RIDER**

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Front Cover: Franz Marc, Blue Horse I, 1911 (see pages 68/69)

Frontispiece: Wassily Kandinsky, Cover Illustration for the Almanac Der Blaue Reiter, 1911 (see pages 78/79)

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# INTRODUCTION

Today, more than a century after the group's birth, the Blue Rider (Der Blaue Reiter) is still an astonishingly resonant name in the history of art. Astonishing in that it was actually in existence only a mere three years, from 1911 to 1914 and equally astonishing because there were only a book and two exhibitions by that name. Yet these were so new and so innovative that they survived the initial poor reviews and incomprehension on the part of the public and have outlived them to this day.

The art of the Blue Rider, produced by the painters around Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Marianne von Werefkin, Franz Marc, and August Macke, thrives on colour and the novel use of it. Unlike the Impressionists, who were still painting after the Blue Rider had ceased to exist, they were not interested in reproducing outward impressions but in expressing themselves. They employed colour not to describe objects so much as to register feelings, for expressiveness. In this way the Expressionists, as they were ultimately called, sought answers to the question *What is the essence of art?* Although they were unable to provide a final answer, they offered much to think about, and especially with their turn to abstraction—an important step art-historically—opened up new possibilities.

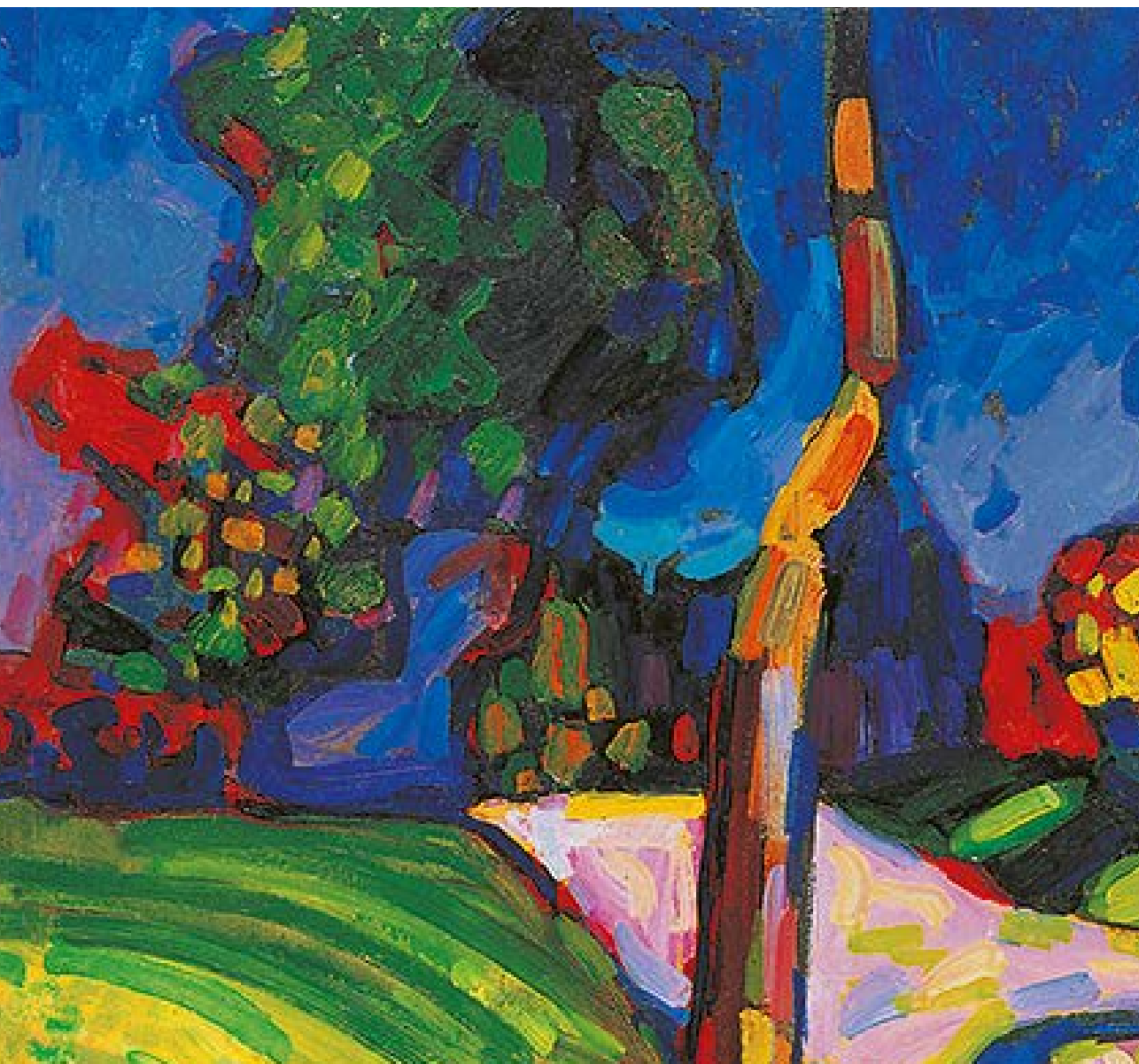
All this took place in Munich and the alpine upland. The capital and residency of the Kingdom of Bavaria had achieved an outstanding reputation as a city of the arts and sciences as a result of the passionate efforts of King Ludwig I (1786–1868). Since 1854 it had had its Glass Palace (destroyed by fire in 1931), which was first intended for industrial expositions but after 1889 used almost exclusively for art shows. Die Erste deutsche allgemeine und historische Kunstausstellung (The First German General and Historical Art Exhibition) was held there in 1858 and, starting in 1869, the International Art Exhibitions that made Munich not only an important marketplace for art but also bolstered its reputation as a city of culture and attracted any number of artists, even from outside Germany. And it was here, beginning in 1896, that two important journals were published: *Jugend*, which gave its name to Jugendstil, and the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*. Germany's first political cabaret, "The Eleven Executioners", was founded here in 1901. Yet in spite of all this, the city's general atmosphere, both political and cultural, tended to be conservative. To quote Hermann Obrist (1862–1927), one of the co-founders of Jugendstil around the turn of the century, "If Munich's bourgeoisie

would only realise what is going on here, that the first act in the drama of the art of the future is taking place, the art that will lead out of the arts and crafts to architecture, and from there on to sculpture and again to great painting — Munich's future as an art city will depend on it."

Munich's Königliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste (Royal Academy of Fine Arts), established in 1808, enjoyed an outstanding reputation internationally (though women were not admitted until 1920). Roughly a third of its students came from abroad, which, however, did not necessarily make Munich a city open to Modernism. "Painter princes" like Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904) and Franz von Stuck (1863–1928) dominated the art scene and Modernism was not particularly important. In 1897, for example, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) wrote to a friend: "If I had a son who wished to become a painter I would not keep him in Spain for a moment, and don't think that I would send him to Paris, . . . but to Munich, . . . where one [learns to paint] without regard to dogmatic concepts like Pointillism and such." This was an indication of the Academy's reputation: it was known for its thorough training in craftsmanship but not for any sort of "modern trends".

But that did nothing to stem the influx of artists and would-be artists. One part of Munich would become known for the sheer quantity of its painters of all kinds: as Kandinsky saw it, "The rather odd, somewhat eccentric and self-confident Schwabing, in whose streets a man or a woman—without a palette, a canvas, or at least a portfolio—seemed out of place. ... Everyone was painting . . . or writing, or making music, or dancing."

The First World War put an end to the Blue Rider group with expatriation and death. But its ideas persisted. The Third Reich's Nazi dictatorship, which wanted to destroy this art it considered "degenerate", lacked the power to wipe it off the art map. The Blue Rider's ideas and its use of art have proven to be stronger and more durable. That so many artistic documents from the time of the Blue Rider have survived to this day is in large part thanks to Gabriele Münter, who courageously hid many works at her house in Murnau through the Nazi years. In 1957 she donated this extraordinary collection, the largest and most important of its kind, to the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, and thus, after its unfortunate years as the "capital of the movement", again turned the city of Munich into the city of art it used to be when the "Blue Riders" got together.





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