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The *Great War* exhibition, organised on the centenary of the end of World War I and Poland's recovery of national independence, is part of a wider programme called *Niepodległa* (Independent). It also continues a series of exhibitions organised by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź during 2017 as part of the celebrations of the centenary of the Polish Avant-garde, presenting its legacy in a modern context.

World War I, referred to as "the Great War" during the interwar period, was the first pan-European military conflict whose impact was felt well beyond the continent. Described by Arnold Zweig in his renowned series of German novels as "the great war of white men,"[1] the war lasted fifty-two and a half months, took the lives of nine and a half million soldiers from both sides, and left three million widows and six million orphans.[2] It was a momentous event in world history, marking the end of the *belle époque*, and leaving political, social, and cultural changes that can still be felt around the world a century later.

The term "world war" was coined in 1914 by Ernst Haeckel,[3] the German biologist, philosopher, and proponent of Darwinism. In October of the same year, H. G. Wells's book, *The War That Will End War*,[4] appeared, justifying Anglo-American engagement in the war. In his book, Wells demonstrated the world-wide scale of the emerging conflict, which he perceived as an international fight for democracy aimed against German militarism. The Germans called World War I "the War of the Nations," while the French and the Belgians referred to it as the "War for Justice" or the "War for Civilisation." Over time, with regard to its objectives and scale, Anglo-American historiography began to describe it as "the Great War," and the term soon spread to other countries of the Entente. As Andrzej Chwalba wrote: "...in France, Great Britain, Italy, and several other countries, World War I is called the Great War—meaning: the victorious. On the other hand, in the defeated countries, such as Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey, the term 'World War I' is favoured."[5] "In Poland, both terms are used interchangeably," adds Chwalba. "Neither of the two stirs up any particular emotions. But some authors strongly emphasise that the Poles, who were devoid of their statehood, did not recognise it as the Great War."[6] For a long time, in Polish studies on World War I, it was perceived as a passage to independence, regained mainly thanks to the Polish Legions. The war was depicted as a conflict of foreign countries and superpowers, with the Poles – caught up in the wheels of history – forced to fight against each other in the armies of the three occupying powers.[7]

Nonetheless, in European and global cultural history, World War I was a formative period. Having recognised the causes and consequences of the Great War as key events in the history of modernity, we decided to take its artistic representations—portrayals of military operations and their aftermath—as a starting point for the exhibition. We analysed the oeuvre of artists associated with the Avant-garde or those who aspired to create modern art, regardless of their support for the fighting factions. We also tried to determine how they perceived the war, and how the experience of war affected them.

The inquiry into the interrelation between cultural modernity and the breakout and trajectory of World War I was a recurring theme in our reflection. Is modernity, whose contradictions culminated in the war, destructive? Is destruction inevitably inherent in the project of modernity? Was it the processes of modernisation that led to the outbreak of war, or was it a result of reactionary tendencies?

These issues, although well known among historians of culture, are usually discussed in the context of World War II. The Great War was usually viewed as a turning point with a twofold cultural background: one of them being connected with the new cultural tendencies and the second stemming from the old model of culture. In this perspective, it was the clash of the "new" with the "old" that rendered this conflict unprecedented: World War I marked the boundary

between 19th-century Romanticism, the epoch of innocence, and the disillusioned, alienated world of the 20th century.[8] For many, it meant not only the break with the old epoch, but also a preview of the potential consequences of modernity. As Gertrude Stein once said: the Great War made Modernism readable.[9] By stating this, Stein validated the ongoing cultural transformations and the direction of the explorations of the prewar Avant-garde.

The war revealed the uncompromising and radical side of modernity. The same modernity that, while giving hope for rejuvenation and change, and rejecting the old world order, demanded sacrifices. The *Rite of Spring,* performed by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes one year before the eruption of the Great War, became a touchstone of the ongoing cultural changes.[10] It was not due to Stravinsky's cutting-edge music or Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography; it was due to the libretto in which the coming of spring depends upon the act of sacrifice: a selected girl must die during a ritual sacrificial dance in order to awaken the Earth. At the time, the sacrifices of war seemed necessary; it was only over time that the question arose about whether the price was too high.

Symptomatically, many artists wanted to participate or actually participated in the war, and for different reasons. Artists associated with modern artistic trends believed that war could contribute to the spiritual rejuvenation of society, stimulate technical advancement, and integrate it with the process of the construction of a new world. They believed that war would allow the replacement of anachronistic social structures with new ones, complementary to the idea of progress. Patriotic attitudes were widespread among those artists—including Poles—who cherished hopes for their countries' independence.

The frontline battle was often transposed into an artistic one. The French poet and artist Jean Cocteau attempted to trace the "German" elements in the visual arts in order to eliminate them, while glorifying the spirit of Gallic art.[11] Natalya Goncharova, an artist associated with Russian Futurism, depicted war as an apocalyptic battle of national symbols, modelled on the Apocalypse of John and combined with traditional Russian art. The German propaganda poster, on the other hand, referenced the tradition of 15th-century printmaking and Albrecht Dürer,[12] including his famous chalcography, *Knight, Death, and the Devil.*

The war, expected by both sides of the conflict to last until winter 1914, turned into a worldwide conflict of apocalyptic dimensions. The initial fascination and patriotic upsurge fuelled by official propaganda of unprecedented scale, clashed with harsh, unfathomable reality—a reality that re-evaluated all that was hitherto known. The scale of the destruction and the gargantuan number of victims resulted from anachronistic methods of warfare combined with technologically advanced weapons. The strategy of trench warfare, used starting at the end of the year 1914—especially on the Western front—forced many soldiers into these deep ditches. According to Peter Sloterdijk, the use of chemical weapons turned warfare into something more like terrorist attacks, targeting the whole environment instead of individual human beings.[13] Sloterdijk argues that the uniformed hero ceased to be the proper subject of warfare, replaced now by "massive military machinery."[14] He also wrote: "The war had consumed the 'warriors' physically as well as psychologically. The 'man' sank into the mud trenches, was torn to pieces by shells or mutilated."[15] Soldiers reminisced that at the end of the war they were so psychologically drained that they couldn't even cheer.[16]

Artists documented all phases of the war. Over time, fantastic visions of technical panache were replaced by visions of pervasive destruction and death. Many artists, including Umberto Boccioni, Franz Marc, Antonio Sant'Elia, and Raymond Duchamp-Villon, died, while others, including Georges Braque, Luigi Russolo, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Władysław Strzemiński, were

The Universe of Ruins and the Universe of Expressionism

Expressionism is often perceived as a strictly German artistic trend, as it was indeed dominant over classic Modernism in Germany, encompassing all disciplines and affecting the self-awareness of several generations. In reality, however, it was an international movement, not only because, for example, there were more Russians than Germans in the core set of Munich's Künstlervereinigung (the artists' association from which Der blaue Reiter later separated). In addition, the most famous galleries that promoted Expressionism in Berlin—Der Sturm and Die Aktion—also featured works from different countries, often including all the trends within the so-called "new art." Polish-Jewish critic Adolf Basler dubbed it the "universal new style," although he believed it to have sprung from Parisian Fauvism.

Assuming that Germany (first Dresden and Munich, and later Berlin) was the "centre" of Expressionism where its canonical forms were born, then its hybrid idioms, formerly referred to as eclectic or epigonian and today more often regarded as an emulation of the prototype, developed on the vast "periphery," where it became popular. One can mention Futurist Expressionism, promoted by the Romanian artist Max Hermann Maxy, Cubo-Expressionism, represented, for example, by the Czech Otto Gutfreund, the circle associated with the Danish magazine *Klingen*, or Belgian artists such as Joris Minne and Henri van Straaten, as well as geometric works by Estonians Märt Laarman and Jaan Vahtra. The Activist Expressionism of the so-called Second Generation, whose first grouping was the Poznań Bunt (rebellion), developed—apart from Germany—mainly in Hungary and Russia, but also in Finland, Bulgaria, the Baltic States, and the Balkans, becoming testimony of eyewitnesses to a military conflict of a hitherto unknown magnitude, impossible to express in academic forms. Meanwhile, far from the front line, in the milieu of emigrants in Spain and Portugal (grouped around Sonia and Robert Delaunay), Amadeo de Souza-Cardos painted optimistic orphic collages, whose aura was more reminiscent of the earlier "Arcadian" works by members of the Die Brücke and Der blaue Reiter groups than the contemporary evocation of suffering from areas affected by war and occupation.

Already during the war, Expressionists created a universal network, communicating transcontinentally by means of privately distributed magazines and focusing on shaping the international form and lingua franca, while in local communities the reception of Expressionist achievements had a specific character. In broader terms, the supra—or post-national, as well as regional perspective in the research on "new art" dates no more than twenty years back, and the departure from Eurocentrism in the study of the avant-garde universe is actually a fairly new development. This also applies to the revision of the art of the Great War and the short interwar era.

"Their War," "Our War," and the War of Images. Expressionists and Propaganda

To various nationals forcibly conscripted into the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian armies, the military conflict of 1914–1918 was a foreign war. At the same time, despite enormous human losses, the struggle for the (re)construction of "small" nation-states cemented faith in the significance of "our" liberation war and boosted optimism and readiness to suffer the necessary sacrifice. In most of Europe, where "new states" were to be established, the sense of a groundbreaking change was therefore motivated differently than in German society, which celebrated the fight against the previous generation. The borders of these new countries had to be established and consolidated with armed force, and even long after the war their new shapes were seen as a compromise between "our" and "their" vision. In the collective consciousness, the war did not end in November 1918; in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Finland, or the Baltic and Balkan countries, the struggle for independence continued by both military and diplomatic means.

One of the references to the Polish-Soviet war in the artistic output of the Poznań-based Bunt group is a metaphoric linocut of Polish *husaria* in the victory in the battle of Vienna in 1683, featured on a cover of the *Zdrój* magazine. In turn, Henry Ericsson's painting refers to the realities of the civil war in Finland, providing an interesting interpretation of the then canonical theme of a prisoner-of-war camp. Painted with broad brushstrokes in almost monochromatic tones of faded, earthy colours, individual figures are depicted as if through fog or rain, and the entire unusual, diagonal composition is set within the vertical format of the painting, thus giving the impression of an unreal or dreamlike vision, or perhaps memories. Edvard Munch also depicted the events in Finland in his Expressionist sketch (1918) and lithograph (1929) titled *Execution*, inspired by press photographs. In his woodcuts, he also featured scenes of executions as found in the documentation of the war in Serbia.

il. 1

In such a tense geopolitical situation, strengthening the spirit of societies by means of ideological imagery became a duty, from which neither artists nor writers could shirk. Soon after the outbreak of the armed conflict, the war of images began. Propaganda usually refers to unambiguous stereotypes of the enemy, so it rarely drew on Expressionist art. However, Kazimir Malevich painted pro-Russian propaganda posters in the *lubok* style, derived from the folk tradition. This is rather astonishing given that only a little earlier he had completed his *Black Square*, considered a metaphor of war and a work of its ardent opponent, not to mention that he almost simultaneously professed his Polish identity.

In 1915, in the occupied areas in the East, Germans began a propaganda war among their soldiers against the Russian enemy. One of the early suggestive anti-propaganda exceptions is the painting by Heinrich Maria Davringhausen, *The General* (1917), showcasing the contrast between the situation of starving soldiers and their sated leaders. However, such sentiments were expressed mainly among occupied nations, especially in cabarets such as Warsaw's Miraż, which saw the debut of Apolonia Chałupiec, later known as Pola Negri, the star of silent Expressionist cinema, including anti-Russian films co-produced by Polish and German companies to promote the image of Germany as a benevolent occupant. The latter theme was also promoted by the Film Office established in Warsaw in the spring

The battle-like nature of *Tree Felling. Fight* by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz seems to reflect the author's wartime experience. The artist builds a kind of a cosmic vision, in which the dynamics of mutual interaction between individuals takes the form of a sadomasochistic "battle of monsters." The formal structure of the painting is exposed by complicated divisions, strong colour contrasts, and diverging directional tensions. Mutual confrontation and an intermingling of shapes evoke the impression of movement.

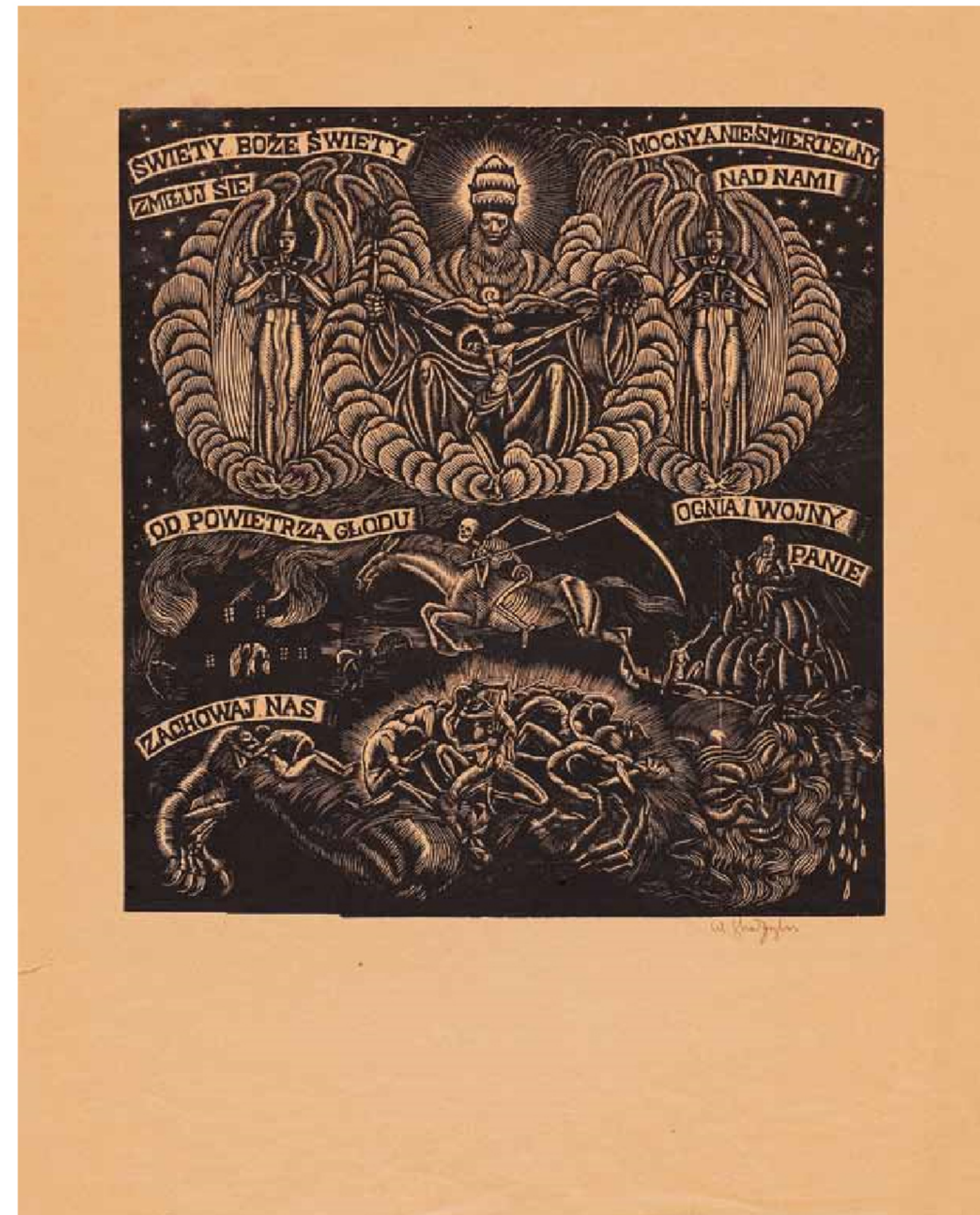
It was during the war that Witkiewicz was shaping the rules of his theory of painting and the basics of his ontology. In both areas of his theoretical reflection, the guiding principle is the rule of conflicting elements. The techniques, employed in *Tree Felling*, of the multiplication of forms and of their internal folding evoke associations with Witkiewicz's concept of existence differentiating into a multiplicity of individuals organising themselves into specific size ranges.

The contours of the bearded figure visible in the top-left corner of the painting, one that may be considered a personification of space-time, seem to initiate and at the same time amalgamate the circulation of forms and colours within the picture. The left leg of the figure, intermingling with the shapes of the rear limbs of a quadruped creature located in the centre of the picture, seems to initiate a kind of struggle among the other three figures. The quadruped figure rests on another one, located to the right and with its front limbs on the ground. From the tangle of their bodies emerges a figure holding in his muscular arm an axe crossed with another one, wielded by a bearded demon. Thus, in accordance with Witkiewicz's philosophical perspective, an individual (a single being) confronts the infinite multiplicity of existence (integrated into a unity by its dual spatiotemporal form) and stands up against it through his structural limitation and the resulting sense of isolation, while at the same time remaining involved in the process of the circular interaction of organisms based on the collision principle.

P.P.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939)

Rąbanie lasu. Walka
(*Tree Felling. Fight*), 1921–1922
oil, canvas, 99 × 108 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Władysław Skoczylas (1883–1934)

Święty Boże (*Holy God*), 1916
woodcut, paper, 21.1 × 31.1 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Alexej Jawlensky (1864–1941)

Das Grosse Schweigen N. 6. Heilandsgesicht (*Great Silence no 6. Face of the Saviour*), 1918–1919
oil, cardboard, 36 × 27 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

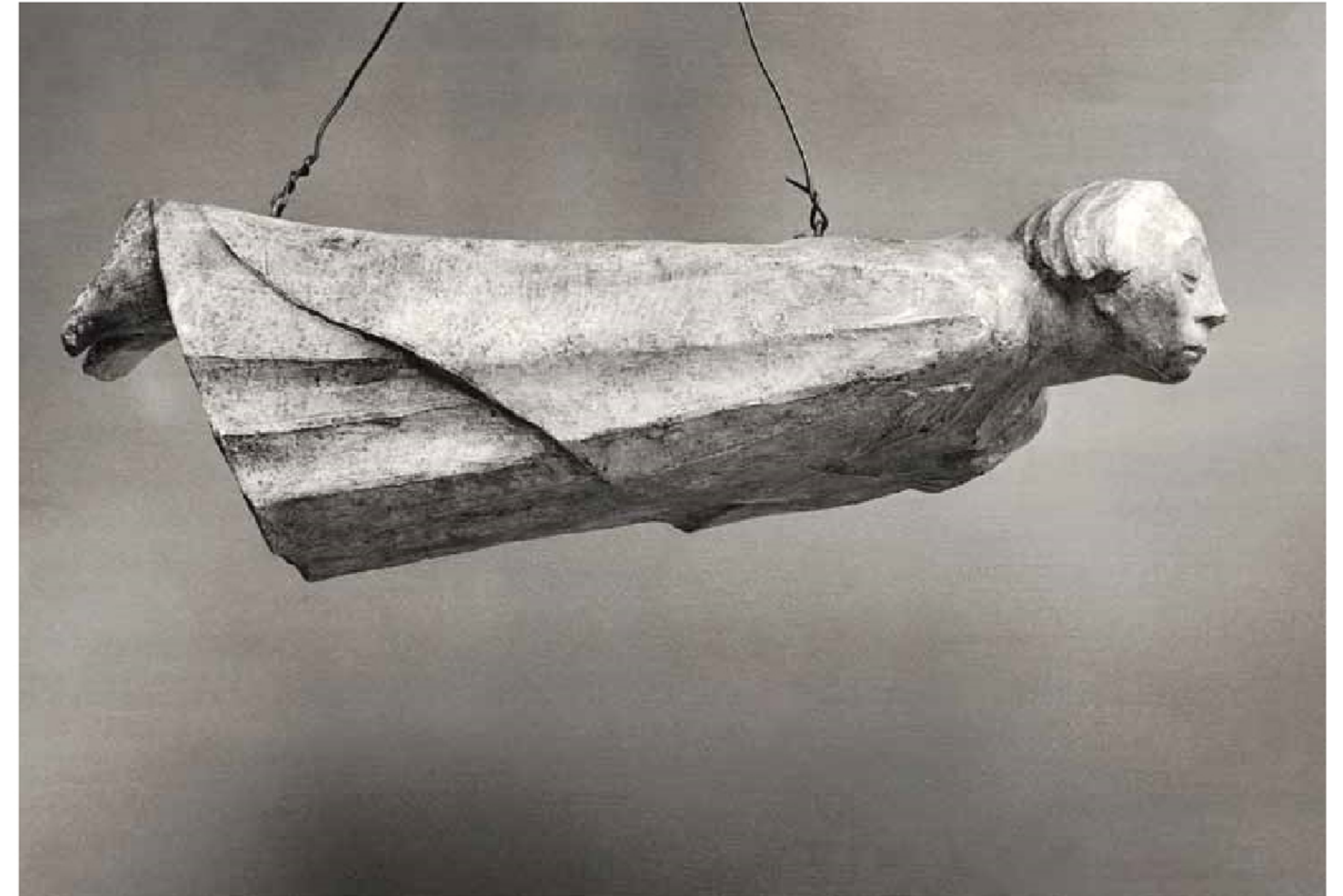
This elongated face painted in vivid colours is not a portrait but rather an attempt at a synthetic representation of the elements that make up the human face. The eyes are marked only with elongated lines, the long, narrow nose is only a vertical, black streak, thickened with dark-turquoise shadow, and the lips are marked with three horizontal brushstrokes: pink, yellow and green. Along the face, black strands of hair can be seen on both sides and on the forehead, and between the eyebrows there are four dots reminiscent of Hindu markings painted mainly on women's faces. Two diagonal lines, running from the middle of the upper edge of the painting down to the side edges, suggest an arrangement of hair separated in the middle by a parting or an outline of a turban. However, these references do not necessarily indicate an interest in Hinduism. This is one of many face studies painted by Jawlensky in 1917–1920 as part of two series: *Mystical Heads* and *Saviour's Face*.

The title reference to the silence of God in the face of the war that killed millions of people can be an expression of a loss of faith or, on the contrary, as a confession and supplication for forgiveness. Although the hostilities did not directly affect the artist, as a Russian he had to leave Germany. He found refuge in Switzerland. In the last paintings evoking the theme of the face, entitled *Meditations* and *Great Meditations* (1934–1937), the previously intense colours fade, darken, and the representation is restricted to the black cross of the nose and eyebrows, bordering on abstraction. At that time, the Nazis banned the artist from exhibiting, and his works herald another war soon to spread across Europe.

A.S.-G.

Ernst Barlach (1870–1938)

Güstrower Ehrenmal (*Monument for Güstrow*).
Initial model, 1927
plaster, 18.5 × 18.5 × 54 cm
Ernst Barlach Stiftung Güstrow
© Archiv Ernst Barlach Stiftung Güstrow
(Photo: Uwe Seemann)



The Güstrow Cenotaph is an airborne figure. It resembles a wingless angel—with hands folded at chest level and eyes closed—suspended horizontally above the ground. However, its elongated, oval form brings to mind a missile frozen mid-motion. The sculpture has the features of Käthe Kollwitz, a German sculptor whose son was killed at the front in World War I. The small gypsum figure is the model that served as the basis for the statue installed in the collegiate church in Güstrow. Known as the *Angel of Güstrow*, it was a monument dedicated to the victims of the Great War, a traumatic experience for Barlach and many others.

Struggling with what he saw and felt on the front lines, the artist designed several commemorative monuments. In the following years he made them for Kiel (1928), Magdeburg (1929), and Hamburg (1931), and designed others that were not completed. At the time, Barlach was already a well known and esteemed artist, member of the Preußische Akademie der Künste (Prussian Academy of Arts), author of many sculptures characterized by a classical, slightly simplified, monumental form. Employing religious and Christian symbolism, he depicted human, secular tragedies. However, his works did not meet the expectations of clients and audiences. The presentation of death and destruction and the evil of war were at odds with the political trends of the time. The context of martyrdom and a pacifist message instead of the heroism of fighting soldiers provoked objections not only from a large section of society but also from the Nazis, who were in the process of seizing power at the time.

Before World War I, Barlach thought that the coming war would bring a new order and new art to the world. Three months of service as a medic (he volunteered in 1915) changed this view radically and affected the message of his later work.

A.S.-G.

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945)

Mutter mit totem Sohn
(*Mother with Her Dead Son*), 1937–1938
bronze, 38 × 28.5 × 39 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture *Mother and Her Dead Son* portrays a sitting woman supporting the naked body of a young man, her son. This sculpture is also known as *Pietà*. Kollwitz refers to the Christian portrayal of Mary holding the dead body of Jesus on her lap, her pain and helplessness in the face of her child's death symbolising the plight of all mothers experiencing such suffering, including those whose sons have died a death commonly perceived as heroic, in an act of courage and devotion to their country. For a mother, her son's death is always unfair, tragic, and irrational. An enlarged copy of Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture was placed in 1993 in Berlin's Neue Wache, a classicist building designed as a royal guard house by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1816–1818). After the First World War, the building became a memorial to its victims, and after the Second World War a memorial to the victims of wars and tyranny. Kollwitz repeatedly returned to the subject of war in her works. She is the author of a cycle of woodcuts entitled *War* (1922–1923) and a poster *No More War* (1924), but it is this sculpture, placed in the central point of the Neue Wache, that has become the symbol of pain and suffering brought about by violence and aggression.

Käthe Kollwitz expressed herself through graphics (she made lithographs, copperplate engravings, etchings, woodcuts) and sculpture. Her sensitivity to social conditions, hunger, and the poverty of the proletariat and peasants, but also her experience of the First World War, during which her eighteen-year-old son Peter perished, were an inspiration for her work. In 1920, she became the first woman member of the Prussian Academy of Arts. The features of the figure represented in Ernst Barlach's sculpture *Floating Angel* (1927) in Güstrow Collegiate Church, dedicated to the victims of the First World War, resemble those of Kathe Kollwitz.

A.S.-G.