

Hermann Max Pechstein, *Still Life in Grey* (1913), oil on canvas, 100.3 x 74.6 cm
(Dr Camilla Smith, talk script, 2023, Barber Institute of Fine Arts)

Hello and welcome to this week's talk given by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts and at the University of Birmingham. I'm Dr Camilla Smith an Associate Professor in Art History, and I'll be talking today about an exciting new painting to enter the Barber Institute's collection – Still Life in Grey from 1913, by Hermann Max Pechstein.

In summer 1913 the expressionist artist Pechstein told a friend that next winter would be his last in Berlin. 'Berlin devours too much' [...], I do not have the ambition to play a role. To work, yes, but for that I need to be close to nature. Which I cannot be here on tarmac of streets. [I] use up too much energy.' (Fulda, 134) Before the war, Berlin's population had exploded and was hurling itself into the future – with artist haunts such as Café Grössenwahn (Café Megalomania) proudly carrying modernity in their names (Illies, 33). Some months later in May 1914, Pechstein would have his wish. The artist and his wife, Lotte, travelled to the South Seas – to the Island of Palau. They set off with 28 boxes and two shot guns, leaving a very young son behind them. But before this, the artist would of course need to raise some funds and that meant establishing himself in Berlin's thriving art scene, into which he launched himself with the utmost force.

Produced some months before the couple left, *Still Life in Grey*, already reveals some of Pechstein's longing for nature. By this point, the artist had lived in Berlin for almost six years. The large composition depicts a still life of fruit and vegetables. Lemons, apricots and a cauliflower have been arranged on a Cameroonian stool in the centre of the painting. Several apples have 'escaped' and lie in the foreground on a blue tapestry into which faces are woven, which are in turn evocative of totem masks. Carved around the stool is the repeated frieze of a stylised crouching woman-arms held aloft, with a cat beneath her. To the right, stands a blue and white vase bearing a design typical to that of pottery from Saxony, the area in eastern Germany in which Pechstein was born.¹ On the left, part of a table draped in pink cloth slopes away. Behind the stool and vase is another partial image of a female figure wearing a pink dress - a frieze or a mural perhaps?

The canvas is carefully composed, objects have strong, dark contours and are deliberately cropped by the edges. The organic forms of the stool, vase, and fruits contrast with the angular

¹ The vase appears prominently in several other Pechstein still lives from this period. See *Stilleben mit Fruchtschale* (1912/8) and *Stilleben* (1912/9). Soika, *Werkverzeichnis*, 380-81.

forms of the tablecloth and rug. The shortened perspective pushes the objects forward, inviting the viewer in. Pechstein used extra turpentine to dilute the colours allowing for the rapid, broad brushstrokes and bold sketchiness over much of the painting's surface. There is an intense luminosity to the work – the greens of the cauliflower leaves and lemons are offset by the orange apricots. Over the course of 1912 and 1913, Pechstein painted many still lives like this one— small sculptures, ceramic tiles, fruit bowls, jugs, flowers and even pipes were deliberately arranged in his studio. These works served as careful experiments in colour and composition, in which the important drive towards 'Gefühlserlebnis' (emotional experience) and 'Ausdrucks willen' (expressiveness) instead of the traditional painterly 'truth to nature', were paramount to how the canvases were conceived (Fechter, 22. For other still lives see: Soika, *Werkverzeichnis*, 370-76; 417-26). In many ways, *Still Life in Grey* reveals the artist's close ties with the German expressionist artist group – Die Brücke, (The Bridge). Who had formed some years earlier in 1905, in Dresden, the city where Pechstein had undertaken some of his artistic training. In 1906, this small group of artists – Fritz Blyl, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, asked Pechstein to join them.

The group often worked together in the studio, arranging objects and models to complete quick sketches that defied academic conventions. Their works were invariably dynamic and emotive, with strong use of bright colours and simplified forms. They also worked extensively outside – making trips along the Baltic coast or to the Moritzberg lakes near Dresden. They sought out the fishing communities, pine forests and sand dunes – in search of what appeared to be 'untouched'. They attracted a following of loyal admirers, who purchased limited-edition woodcuts that they produced, which helped subsidise their activities.

In 1912, Die Brücke had had their first major exhibition of works in Berlin. Yet later the same year, the group split. The group regarded Pechstein's increasing commercial success in the city with caution – perhaps even envy, and they were particularly unhappy about his entry into the Berlin Secession – an exhibiting society which represented many well-established impressionist-inspired artists, such as Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth. The Berlin Secession had in fact previously rejected works submitted by members of Die Brücke – their style was deemed too radical and raw. Pechstein admittance therefore felt like a betrayal.

Rather than using some of the bright acidic colours characteristic of Die Brücke works therefore, *Still Life in Grey* begins to reveal how the artist was moving away from the group. Pechstein wrote in a letter to a friend, 'the only things I worked on now is still lives [...] I was mainly concerned with the harmony of pink and deepest blue, to increase a green.' His unusual use of grey

ground to prime the canvas, visible through the weave of the tapestry, helps offset these colours further. Yet *Still Life in Grey* is far from a work simply of formal experimentation. It reveals the imperial grab for land in the South Pacific and West Africa and demonstrates the popularity for the collecting of ethnographic objects during this period in both the French and German Empires.

The German acquisition of Palau and Samoa in 1899, quickly transferred into subjects of artistic fascination. Even before this, collections of ethnographic objects began to be amassed in museums in both Dresden and Berlin, which Pechstein knew. He was particularly captivated by club houses and architecture from Palau in one of the rooms in Dresden's ethnographic museum and claimed that the roof beams and crossbeams from Palau houses 'instilled in me a longing as if I already anticipated this distant tropical world' (Fulda, 32). It became fashionable to collect ethnographic objects and exhibit them in the home as a statement of cultural avant-gardism. Die Brücke artists too, used such objects arranged in their studio as important subject matter in their artworks.

Cultural developments in France played a huge role in further inspiring such fascination for German artists. The discovery of African sculpture was crucial to the work of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and André Derain. 1907 also saw the German translation of parts of Paul Gauguin's autobiographical account of Tahiti 'Noa Noa' - as a type of untarnished paradise - published in the press, which Pechstein knew. Pechstein had himself spent almost a year in Paris - as all modernist artists aspired to do back then - soaking up the sights and sounds of the city in 1908. In this period the city was 'at the peak of its affectation and decadence, embodied in the experiments of the Ballets Russes and Sergei Diaghilev.' (Illis, 32) Pechstein visited the Louvre and the Salon des Independents, where he encountered the works of Matisse, Braque, Munch and Derain for himself. Indeed, it was at this moment that Braque and Picasso were experimenting with Cubism, and Pechstein rented a studio near the bohemian Montparnasse neighbourhood. Yet as a non-French speaker, he found it hard to integrate. Letters back home complained of isolation, and he did not forge many friendships or spend time hanging out in artists' studios. Nonetheless, the formative influence of the French avant-garde on *Still Life in Grey* - the shortened perspective and experiments with objects in space - is clearly palpable.

Whether Pechstein's fascination with the South Pacific and West Africa was *necessarily* generated by pro-colonial sentiments, is less clear-cut, however. Certainly, like many contemporaries, he appears to have been entirely taken in by the German media's widespread peddling of such places as a 'new paradise'.

Back in Berlin, in 1913, when *Still Life in Grey* was produced, Pechstein's reputation was growing. In February, he held his first solo exhibition at the renowned commercial art gallery of Wolfgang Gurlitt. He showed over forty paintings along with three large stained-glass windows. It was both a commercial and critical success. Ada, the wife of Brücke artist, Emil Nolde, claimed shortly after the exhibition opening: 'Bald steht er als gekrönter Liebling der Berliner' (soon he will be the crowned favourite of the Berliners) (Soika, *Zauberprinz*, 181). Indeed, by 1920, the artist and his work were singled out at some length out by the art critic, Paul Fechter, in his seminal art-historical text, as the 'Reinster Typus und kraftvollster Vertreter' of expressionism (purest type and most powerful representative) (Fechter, 25).

Showing work at Gallery Gurlitt was a 'big deal'. Wolfgang had continued to capitalise on his father's success in the city, by showcasing French and German modernism (Smith, 787). Paris and Berlin fostered close commercial links before the war. Gurlitt's commercial rival, Paul Cassirer, had held the first solo exhibition of Paul Cézanne's work in Berlin in 1912 (House & Stevens, 296). And Pechstein was a huge admirer. During this period, Pechstein was also busy working on some of the lavish renovations for Wolfgang Gurlitt's apartment, which was situated in the same building as his gallery. The entrance hallway contained an imposing sculpture by the fashionable, Rudolf Belling, as well as glass windows and frescos by the artist César Klein, and glass panels by the modernist architect, Bruno Taut. Pechstein designed several murals and wall mosaics in the hallways, as well as the stained-glass windows (Nowak-Thaller for photographs, 71-82). The renovations caused a sensation in the press. The art critic Paul Westheim noted in the magazine, *Das Kunstblatt*, that the décor was simply 'einzigartig' (unique) and demonstrated an open, non-prejudiced vision of the art world, which incorporated imperial styles with ethnographic objects and key examples of modern – particularly expressionist – art and design (Westheim, 373). After its completion, Gurlitt and his wife appeared in portrait photographs in the popular magazine *Die Dame*, Wolfgang elaborately dressed in the costume of a Maharaja (*Die Dame*, 2). Pechstein's paintings also hung prominently on the walls of Gurlitt's study and above two Cameroonian stools that are almost identical to the one depicted in *Still Life in Grey* (photograph, Soika, *Zauberprinz*, 179). Perhaps, then, Pechstein had conceived his still life with Gurlitt as a buyer in mind, for the art dealer certainly owned other still lives like this one (see painting 11 in Nowak-Thaller, 176 and Soika, *Werkverzeichnis*, 380). Moreover, the painting also advertises the artist's longstanding preoccupation with interior design.

Born and raised in Zwickau, as a young man Pechstein had been apprenticed to a painter and decorator. After that, he went on to study at Dresden's prestigious Royal School of Applied Arts – one of the Empire's most prestigious arts and crafts schools and then Dresden's Royal Academy of Art. In the School of Applied Arts, Pechstein developed his skills in all different departments –

furniture design, textiles, interior design, sculpture, and commercial decorative painting. And perhaps unsurprisingly, he excelled in all of them. Despite focussing primarily on his skills as a painter for much of his career, Pechstein did not relinquish his aptitude and passion for design. He was a practical and commercially-minded man and dismissed the idea as 'blödsinn' (nonsense) that the best type of art was produced by impoverished artists who suffered for their profession (Fulda, 58). In addition to Gurlitt's house, Pechstein also completed murals for the dining room of the civil servant and art collector, Hugo Perls between 1911 and 1912. Perl's house symbolised the epitome of modernism and was designed by the architect Mies van der Rohe. For his murals Pechstein depicted a series of dynamic figures in nature, dancing, sitting, and bathing. The angularity and rhythmical composition of the figures as the scene stretches across the walls is akin to the partial figurative image of the woman in pink, seen in the background of *Still Life in Grey* (photograph, Fulda, 123). Could this too be part of a mural?² *Still Life in Grey* acts like an artist calling card, or *resume* if you will, of an artist who wished to show the Berlin art market of what he was capable – a painter, yes, but also a creator of murals and textiles, who had a profound understanding of the decorative and interior spaces.

The art dealer Wolfgang Gurlitt was impressed. In fact, before leaving for Palau, Pechstein entered a financial contract with Gurlitt – who, it was agreed, would act as the sole commercial representative of the artist's work, and pay him a monthly salary. It was to be a contract that Pechstein would later learn to regret, and ultimately saw them end up in court. Nonetheless it was Gurlitt who subsidised Pechstein's travels, hoping they would inspire new artwork, and until 1922 this contract would remain in place. Indeed, it became particularly useful during the war, when Gurlitt was able to sell the artist's works in his absence and send money to his wife. In 1917 *Still Life in Grey* was exhibited in Leipzig. It is likely that it sold there too. The art historian Karl Lilienfeld, the then Head of the Modern Art at Leipzig's Kunstverein (Art Union) bought it. When the Lilienfeld family later emigrated to the United States, the work was exhibited in their gallery in New York. *Still Life in Grey* did not return to Germany until much later. It was not, therefore, one of the sixteen Pechstein works that were exhibited in the Degenerate Art Exhibition opened by the Nazis in Munich in 1937 (Barron, facsimile of the 1937 brochure, 356-91).

In the Barber institute, *Still Life in Grey* has found a perfect new home in the Blue Gallery, where it currently hangs near to the work of Pechstein's fellow Berlin Secessionist, Lovis Corinth, and close to

² Other still lives from this period also depict wall murals, for example *Blumenvase vor Wandbehang* (1912/2) and *Phlox* (1912/1), Soika, *Werkverzeichnis*, 370-71.

the paintings of artists André Derain, Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse, whose work played such a formative role in inspiring Pechstein's own painting in 1913 before the war.

Thank you very much for joining me here.

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Author biography:

Camilla Smith's research into aspects of German modernism is widely published in leading journals in the fields of Art History and German Studies. She has written essays for exhibitions at the Barbican, the National Gallery, Vienna Belvedere and Berlinische Galerie, Berlin. Her monograph on the German modernist artist, Jeanne Mammen, is published with Bloomsbury's Visual Culture and

German Contexts series. To hear Smith exploring Mammen's work alongside her artist contemporaries to celebrate the centenary of the Weimar Republic, go to BBC Radio 3's series 'The Essay' – The Weimar Years, broadcast in November 2019, available as a podcast:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000b7r9> or listen to Smith discussing the Barber Institute's

Louis Corinth portrait in a previous podcast in the Barber series of Tuesday talks:

<https://barber.org.uk/tuesday-talks/>