Book Review: Franz Marc and August Macke: 1909-1914

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Below, art historian, Jean Marie Carey PhD, reviews the Neue Galerie's exhibition catalogue, Franz Marc and August Macke: 1909-1914 - a beautifully produced introduction to the relationship between these two artists. Read her thoughts below.

By Vivian Endicott Barnett, Erich Franz, Ursula Heiderich, Annegret Hoberg, Isabelle Jansen, and Olaf Peters. (New York City: Neue Galerie / Prestel, 2018); 208 pages with 159 color illustrations. Translations by Steven Lindberg. The corresponding exhibition runs through 21 January 2019 at the Neue Galerie in Manhattan.

The art historian and curator Vivian Endicott Barnett, who has assembled and organized the Franz
Marc and August Macke: 1909-1914 exhibition at the Neue Galerie as well as the contributions to the eponymous catalogue, is a foremost expert on Wassily Kandinsky, and like Kandinsky, demonstrates in her work and words that she believes it was artists who had the power to change society in Germany and Russia before the First World War. Endicott Barnett has had sustained curatorial and collaborative partnerships with both the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan and the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, which between the two institutions hold significant numbers of works by Kandinsky and his circle. With the support of the Lenbachhaus it was Endicott Barnett who compiled the four-volume Kandinsky catalogue raisonné and its addendum in 2015, a reflection of the esteem in which her work is held.

 Nonetheless, and perhaps a sign of the curator-author's generosity of spirit, it is the artwork of Franz Marc (1880-1916) and August Macke (1887-1914) that dominate this catalogue to the point of being a stand-alone feature. The centerpiece opening to a spread of Marc’s Die Wölfe (Balkankrieg) (pgs. 156-157) is breathtaking. In two of Marc’s later large paintings, this one and Vögel from 1914, the artist used unusual shades (for him) of warm lilac and brilliant teal. Luminous in person, these faceted palettes have been impossible to reproduce in print – until now. The presentation of Marc’s well-known primary-coloured horses is also masterfully done as is the firefly-green that is necessary for an appreciation of August Macke’s handling of his trademark hue.

 Though I do not subscribe to the notion that Macke’s work is not well-known in the United States, this is the first major exhibition in the U.S. to showcase the artist from the Rhineland who by turns idolized his Blaue Reiter colleagues and fretted over being thought of as a mere follower of Kandinsky and Marc. Here we see Macke’s halting creative progress as well as his peerless handling of sensual figurative painting, including some little-known works, such as the elegant and erotic portrait of his frequent subject, his wife Elisabeth Macke, in 1911’s Weiblicher Akt von rückwärts auf rosa Grund (pg. 122). This privately-held canvas is rarely seen.

 The catalogue offers more than 60 page of full-color plates of oil and watercolour paintings by Marc and Macke, and the text components of the book are wonderfully typeset over single-columns interspersed with photographs, documents, and more colour pictures.
Endicott Barnett gives a straightforward overview of the career arcs of Marc and Macke in a 20-page introduction. The driving motivation, ostensibly, for this exhibition (and the one that preceded it, held at the Lenbachhaus in 2015 titled *Franz Marc and August Macke: An Artist Friendship*), is the compelling relationship between Marc and Macke. Yet reading through other parts of the catalogue made me long for the great Alex Danchev, who died a few years ago, leaving behind definitive biographies of Georges Braque (2005) and Paul Cézanne (2012). In these volumes, Danchev
explored, through both the meticulous reconstruction of correspondence, property records, and even train schedules, the relationships between Braque and Pablo Picasso and Cézanne and Émile Zola. Danchev detailed the intimacies of these relationships, from the inevitable rift over politics and exhaustion of talent between Picasso and Braque to Cézanne’s eventual heartbreaking perception of his boyhood friend Zola as a hypocritical libertine. By examining masculine interactions as primary relationships that were passionate but not sexual, Danchev elevated the role of friendship itself both in general and in how we think about the significance of these bonds in the lives of artists. Certainly, the intensity of feeling between Marc and Macke is what makes their entwinement so fascinating. A few interpretive errors – Marc’s oft-quoted letter to Macke on colour theory being taken as an edict rather than a riposte and a serious misunderstanding of Marc’s final letter to Macke and the simmering jealousies and perceived abandonments and betrayals that led up to it, combined with the detached tone of much prose – prevent an appreciation of Marc and Macke as much more than a paper romance.

Annegret Hoberg, the chief Blaue Reiter curator at the Lenbachhaus, is the best-known expert on Marc’s career and her chapter on what is deemed his “mature” phase from 1910-1915 offers a trenchant analysis of the breakthrough stimulated by meeting not just Macke but Kandinsky, as well as Robert Delaunay and the literary circles around Else Lasker-Schüler and Herwarth Walden in Berlin. Ursula Heiderich occupies a corresponding position with regard to August Macke and gives an exacting account of Macke’s artistic evolution. Similarly, Erich Franz (whose 1992 Franz Marc. Kräfte der Natur. Werke 1912 – 1915 is a classic on Marc’s pantheistic motivations) is both perceptive and analytical in “August Macke: Pictures and Thoughts.”

What is missing to some extent in these informative passages is a sense of the extreme highs and lows of the Marc-Macke chemistry, which ranged from altercations involving broken crockery to tender confessions about depression and loneliness to hilarious misadventures. The months that Helmuth Macke lived with Marc during 1910 and 1911 are especially madcap, almost as if someone had dropped a scene from A Midsummer Night’s Dream into the middle of Hamlet.

Though Endicott Barnett, Hoberg, Franz (and Isabelle Jansen, another longtime Lenbachhaus curator who contributes a chapter on the influence of French art on Marc and Macke, the longtime focus of her research, which contains a charming notation from Helmuth Macke on the meeting of August and Franz (pg. 31)) are the closed-shop chancellors of German Modernism, other voices have begun to form the backbone of what are becoming accepted revisionist interpretations of the artists’ characters and behavior and how this is reflected in their artistic output. Sherwin Simmons, for example, has written brilliantly about Macke’s “shopping” paintings as harbingers of commodity fetishism. Maria Stavrinaki, David Morgan, and Hal Foster have presented convincing arguments that Marc never intended for his work to be seen as nonobjective in the same way as Kandinsky’s subtraction of referents in the physical world. Marc is also an ideal subject for reevaluation through the framework of the environmental humanities and animal studies (the focus of my own research).
A little less gatekeeping would offer a lot of encouragement to the inheritors of Expressionist research.

Still given the number of qualities that make Marc and Macke so original and stimulating to historians of 20th Century art, it would be impossible to demand that one catalogue address them all, and taken as a whole the Neue Galerie publication offers an imaginative and creative response to the exceptionally wide range of cultural material encompassed by the exhibition.

The most surprising chapter in the catalogue is “Franz Marc and August Macke: Notes on their Reception, 1916-1940,” by Olaf Peters. The art historians, collectors, curators, and journalists who evaluated the oeuvres of the two artists during the years between the wars produced an interesting collage of thought that was by no means uniform in its assessment of either. The voices of Carl Einstein, Curt Glaser, and Alois Schardt, Marc's first biographer, emerge as thoughtful but sometimes misguided hagiographers who continued the work of thinking through German Modernism begun by Alfred Döblin, Adolf Behne, Hans Tietze, and Julius Meier-Graefe. Peters’ tone seems to be a good match for the translation work of Steven Lindberg which comes across as very free in other chapters. “It would certainly be tempting to speculate counterfactually about the course that German modernism would have taken after the end of the war if these two protagonists had returned from the field…” begins Peters, before doing the opposite.

Succumbing to the temptation Peters resists – the “what if” factor – means confronting the grief we feel over the deaths of the artists. Meanwhile, interest in the relationship and work of Marc and Macke deepens our understanding of the complexities of the historical avant-garde and its network of relationships.

Jean Marie Carey earned her PhD in Art History and German from the University of Otago with the dissertation How Franz Marc Returns (2018). Her previous and ongoing research has been supported by fellowships from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, the Robert Gore Rifkind Center for the Study of German Expressionism at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Musée National d’Art Moderne/Centre Pompidou. Her next project is with the Arkeologisk Museum in Stavanger, connecting Aurignacian cave paintings and Marc’s animal images through studies of Einfühlung.