

**EMIL  
NOLDE:  
PRIMITIVE PURITY**

**Lucia Ortiz**  
Art and Spirituality  
Fall 2013

*"I observed the heavens and the large clouds; they were my friends."*

-Emil Nolde<sup>1</sup>

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought forth an array of turbulent and contradicting emotions that spread throughout the Western world. As industrialization and technology paved the way for metropolitan cities to become what they are today, nations were eager to utilize their new advances in warfare. Astonishingly, the arts took a drastic turn at the brink of war; the prospect of an oncoming doom allowed artists to free themselves from academic tradition and bloom through the pursuit of a heightened expression and spirituality. Some artists viewed the changing world as a sign of progress and prosperity, others, such as Emil Nolde, feared what this change would bring, as he perceived, a dehumanization of man and loss of spirit. Not surprisingly, he turned to the study of other cultures that he considered pure and unscathed by the amoral atrocities of modern man.<sup>2</sup> He found such spiritual purity through the active study and expression of "primitivism," and its link to Christianity.

After seeing the atrocities and exploitation the Western man inflicted upon the "African savages," Nolde experimented with their artistic styles as a way of giving back to them. He also developed this style as a way of celebrating the child-like, authentic vision of the surrounding world; he wanted to look at life the way children did, and experience pure spirituality. It was through this vision that he depicted Christian imagery. He wanted to get away from the rigorous practice and

---

<sup>1</sup> Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 13.

<sup>2</sup> Sieger, William B. "Emil Nolde's 'Legend: St. Mary of Egypt': 'Vita Activa'/'Vita Contemplativa'." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 1223 (2005): 103.

vision of a judging, all-powerful God, and experience his unconditional love. To illustrate Nolde's deep spirituality, it is necessary to explore his *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (1910), his connection to the Die Brucke and German Expressionism.

Nolde's *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (fig. 1) depicts a Biblical narrative from the Old Testament. The story represents a grave religious crisis: it is the conflict between prophetic and priestly leadership, a test to man's faith. It takes place during the absence of Moses (the prophetic leader), who had gone up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, and thus left the Israelites on their own for forty days.<sup>3</sup> When he left, the people asked Aaron (the priestly leader) to create visible gods, and so he did. Aaron collected jewels and other goods from the people and manufactured an idol in the shape of a golden calf.<sup>4</sup> In the weeks that followed, the Israelites sought to enjoy themselves by dancing, eating, drinking, and being lewd around the idol. Upon Moses' return to this scene of sin, he asked Aaron for an explanation, to which he replied that he merely did what was asked of him and it was the people's wickedness that led him to do so. Moses then destroyed the calf and asked God for atonement, and offered to take responsibility for the people's sin. This was denied under the grounds that God is benign, forgiving, and patient.<sup>5</sup> Emil Nolde was no doubt drawn to this scene because of his own personal spirituality and his view of Christianity and the modern man. To better describe the spiritual in this piece, context on Nolde's personal background, Die Brucke, German Expressionism, and Primitivism itself will be addressed next.

---

<sup>3</sup> Lewy, Immanuel. "The Story of the Golden Calf Reanalysed." *Vetus Testamentum*. no. 9 (1959): 318.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: 320.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 321.

Born near Schleswig, Germany, Emil Nolde grew up amongst pious peasants who would read their Bibles without question or doubt. From an early age, Nolde manifested his talent through sketches of everyday objects that in some way moved him- cows, flowers, barns. "Nature in these low moorlands has violent moods, and they left their mark on Nolde's temper and character."<sup>6</sup> He had an almost pantheistic relationship to his surroundings. Nolde saw himself as a natural man, and he "saw nature as alive and changing, an ongoing process."<sup>7</sup> In 1905 he joined the Die Brücke movement along with its founding members. Being much older than the rest of the members, and having been entirely self-taught, Nolde found that he was not suited for a communal art colony and left the group in 1907.<sup>8</sup> That is not to say that he was not greatly influenced by this group. After his departure his style became much more individualized; his colors became bolder, and his subject matter more fantastical.

Considered by some to be the founder of German Expressionism, Nolde was compelled to join Die Brücke for it spoke truth to him. He was drawn to this movement's tangible brutality; to its desire to expose the elemental vitality of the primal forces in life, to its rejection of the materialistic and morally restrictive modern world they deemed decadent.<sup>9</sup> This opposition led to the search for pure and elemental forms; to expose the human instinct and to revere it. "Expressionism means: projection of one's vital ecstasy into the outer world."<sup>10</sup> The expressionists were driven by the exuberance of their own way of seeing, their response to their

---

<sup>6</sup> Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ackley, Clifford S. *Nolde: The Painter's Prints*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995: 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*: 13.

<sup>9</sup> Schiff, Gert. "Arcadia and Human Wasteland." *Art Journal*. vol. 41 no. 1 (1981): 65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: 64.

surroundings, and sought to depict the terrific agony and melancholy inherent in nature. Their search for a vigorous vivacity led them to manifest their joy and awe into the world. They were unreceptive to Cubist influence. They were characterized by their use of coarsely simplified figures encapsulated by dense black outlines, aggressive contrasting colors (mostly primaries), a heavy application of paint on an unprimed canvas, and a consistent use of two-dimensionality.<sup>11</sup> They rejected any form of abstraction on the basis that “we are, after all, human.”<sup>12</sup> Before anything, the expressionist was passionate. He was driven not by his reason but by his emotions. They highly cherished emotions and thought of them as the truth, and were well aware of the value of sacrifice and sorrow for obtaining this truth. “The expressionists felt so strongly about human suffering, poverty, violence, and passion that the insistence on harmony and beauty in art was only born out of a refusal to be honest.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the driving influences for the expressionists was that of Primitivism. Jill Lloyd, a prime scholar of German Expressionism, beautifully captures the essence of what this meant for this group: “For the expressionists, primitivism constituted a mediating, synthesizing force, capable of transcending the rift between spirituality and materialism which Nietzsche’s philosophy had diagnosed as the tragic dilemma of modern man.”<sup>14</sup> This “tragic dilemma” can only refer to the inner struggle of artists to balance nature versus nurture. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century man

---

<sup>11</sup> Schiff, Gert. "Arcadia and Human Wasteland." *Art Journal*. vol. 41 no. 1 (1981): 64.

<sup>12</sup> Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 13.

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich, E. H. *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1950: 437.

<sup>14</sup> Salter, Ronald. "German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity by Jill Lloyd." *The German Quarterly*, 66, no. 02 (1993): 244.

(specifically the emotional man, the artist) was constantly finding himself in a paradoxical battle between what his society wanted from him and what nature wanted from him. For this reason, they turned to the active study and reverence of what they- and many scholars after them- called “Primitivism.”

The first interests on non-Western art- particularly from Oceanic islands- began to appear in the work of Post-Impressionists like Paul Gauguin. These works, along with the access to non-Western knowledge, guided the expressionists to fully explore and produce “Primitive” art. The year 1900 brought forth the first really universal texts on the history of art written by Karl Woermann. Further, in 1903 an art journal titled *The Studio* released an extensive article with the name of “The Art of New Guinea” written by C. Praetorius: “The Papuans of former days produced their artistic work from natural desire or instinct, not acquired by the influence of seeing the works of others.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, it stressed the importance on these people’s freedom from restraint or rule in order to create art that was full of human individuality, of what he called “savage beauty.”<sup>16</sup> There is evidence that Die Brücke painters had access to both of these literary texts, as they were circulating amongst the art world and were increasing in popularity.

More than the formal study of South Sea Islander art, the expressionists were drawn to the essence behind these works. They considered this art to be pure and free from external influence, leaving the Papuan artists to depict only what they saw and felt. It was here that instinct- an element so vital to our humanity- came into play. In the Die Brücke’s 1905 Manifesto, Kirchner writes: “we

---

<sup>15</sup> Ettlinger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 781 (1968): 192-195.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 195.

want to achieve freedom in life and action against the established older forces. Everyone belongs to us who directly and without falsification represents those things which make him create."<sup>17</sup> In other words, Kirchner and other Die Brücke artists, such as Emil Nolde, were attracted to an art that resulted from a spontaneous and unrestrained effort. They were not attracted to this art so much aesthetically as they were philosophically, and they wished to work from within their own impulses. "After all, "Expressionism means: projection of one's own vital ecstasy into the outer world."<sup>18</sup>

The influence "Primitive" art had on Emil Nolde is indisputable. Not only was he a part of these social circles of artists mentioned above, but from 1906 to 1911, Nolde often visited ethnographical collections at the Berlin Museum. Additionally, in 1913-14, he embarked on an scientific expedition as a draughtsman to German Protectorates in the Pacific South Seas, particularly to Papua New Guinea.<sup>19</sup> This voyage would change his artistic career for the rest of his life. He took them as role models and desired to live as them, as a "noble savage."<sup>20</sup> As a supporter (and later member) of the Nazi regime, he had very purist ideals about race, and saw unmixed cultures as authentic and virtuous. He saw in these people a "paragon of pure race, drawing strength for his art from blood and soil."<sup>21</sup> As he himself put it: "I

---

<sup>17</sup> Ettliger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 781 (1968): 195.

<sup>18</sup> Schiff, Gert. "Arcadia and Human Wasteland." *Art Journal*. vol. 41 no. 1 (1981): 64.

<sup>19</sup> Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid: 200.

<sup>21</sup> Ettliger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 781 (1968): 201.

wanted to see and find something primordial...the natives are magnificent people as long as they are not corrupted by contact with the whites."<sup>22</sup>

Now that a deeper context of German Expressionism, Die Brücke, and Primitivism has been explored, it is appropriate to discuss Nolde's *Dance Around the Golden Calf*, but first, a brief description of Nolde's religious spirituality is in order. As a fiercely devoted Christian, Nolde sought to depict what he perceived to be the essentiality of the Bible- a concept lost on many people. Nolde felt that traditional Biblical iconography had lost its meaning amongst Christians; it no longer evoked the intended response of the Biblical narratives. He felt as though he had a moral, prophetic responsibility to reintroduce the love of God into the modern civilization.<sup>23</sup> He wanted to allude to an Early Church, one that did not involve depicting dark images centered around God's judgment; he wanted to convey what the Bible and God (not the Church) were all about, thus humanizing the Bible. "Through his religious paintings, he sought to restore the purity, humanity, intimacy, and passion that Jesus introduced with Christianity."<sup>24</sup> He was drawn to the "grotesque sense of drama" within these ancient texts, and wanted to convey his message in the purest way he saw possible: through a child's eyes. Children, he thought, were untainted by knowledge and reason, and acted purely on instinct and emotion. This perception of the world was what Nolde successfully

---

<sup>22</sup> Ettlinger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 781 (1968): 200.

<sup>23</sup> Creamer, Victoria Blake. "Emil Nolde: Primitivism and the Revitalization of Christian Imagery." *Savannah College of Art and Design*. MA Thesis (2008): 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*: 8.



introduced in his work. “Nolde aligned his goals with Jesus’ message to the world.”<sup>25</sup>

*Dance Around the Golden Calf* is a painting of pure ecstasy. No matter whether the viewer knows of the Old Testament story, one immediately gets the sensation that there is much love, passion, and happiness found here. Off into the distance, the golden calf stands amidst- and almost forgotten- a frenzy of blurred nude dancers which move about freely, with no thought to what they are doing. They are guided merely by what they are feeling. This feeling of intense joy is greatly attributed to his use of and application of color. The use of mainly primaries stresses the significance of the primordial; these colors contain all colors, they are the essential hues found in all others.<sup>26</sup> There is a significant use of yellow here, which only contests to a dramatically joyous sentiment. The thick, jagged, even violent brushstrokes give the piece an a palpable texture and an extremely dynamic feel, as if the painting itself is moving. One can tell that the mere application of the paint was a dance in itself, as it was done so vigorously. The exaggerated bodies and movements of the dancers illustrate a childlike passion and exuberance. The white ground provides a striking vibrancy that alludes to immense light, this makes the piece even more chaotic. The legs of the dancers and their shadows convey a sensual rhythm that alludes to the idea that this is a scene depicting sin. Because of the nature of the scene, one cannot help but think

---

<sup>25</sup> Creamer, Victoria Blake. “Emil Nolde: Primitivism and the Revitalization of Christian Imagery.” *Savannah College of Art and Design*. MA Thesis (2008): 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*: 14.

of this piece as paradoxical; so much joy and happiness are emerging from a scene, which is meant to be an obscure moment in the history of man.

Furthermore, he does remind us of what makes us human: sin. The notion of a sinful act is present here in his contrasting use of navy blues, crimsons, and black. Nolde felt deeply and passionately. Much like Moses himself, he was oppressed by the burden of man's sin, as well as his passions, his loves, and his hates. "So intensely has he lived with the Bible that the agony of Christ and his humiliations are his own."<sup>27</sup> "...the shortsightedness and niggardliness of man fill him with bitterness and wrath, his human figures, as a result are sometimes almost morbid exaggerations of they symbolize, but he never moralizes."<sup>28</sup> Thus this piece is his own response to sin. It illustrates the Nietzsche-an idea of the tragic inner struggle: reason versus emotion, the desire to be sinful versus the desire to be holy. In a joyous frenzy of lines and colors, Nolde is able to come to terms with his (and mankind's) sinful nature as he is reminded that being sinful is an elemental force in human nature.

Although he was a devout follower of the Nazi regime, Nolde was later exhibited in the Degenerate Exhibition and was demeaned by his rejection of classical ideals. This would put a hamper on his career, as he did not understand why he did not receive the praise he deserved. "The German nation is endowed with the lowest and highest, gruesome instinct and noble spirituality. The range is

---

<sup>27</sup> Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 13.

<sup>28</sup> Creamer, Victoria Blake. "Emil Nolde: Primitivism and the Revitalization of Christian Imagery." *Savannah College of Art and Design*. MA Thesis (2008): 17.

wide, probably wider than with any other people...if the war had been won, spirituality- the most beautiful German attribute- would have vanished away.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Lipsey, the spiritual is a knowing, an intelligence, a sense of something greater than ourselves, and how our small lives play a part in the greater cosmos. It is a vision we have after looking at things again and again, an “incursion from above or deep within to which the ordinary human being in each of us can only surrender.”<sup>30</sup> The spiritual in art has constantly had the mission of depicting the sacred. The sacred is the “realm of the larger truths surrounding and conditioning our lives or dwelling within...[a] revelation.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that Emil Nolde painted religious imagery, he was able to convey a deep spirituality that evokes even the non-believers to leave reason and thought behind and simply experience his work, to let their emotions guide them when reading his paintings.

Emil Nolde was indeed successful in rendering God’s pure love on a society that is sinful by nature. His view of untainted racial purity let him to revere “Primitive” societies as they represented the essential man. He also worked with this subject matter as a way to celebrate this culture, as he was deeply distraught by the atrocities committed on the Papuans on behalf of Western white men who sought to colonize them for their own economic and political gain. His link with the Die Brücke group and German Expressionism influenced him to create work that explored man’s inner psyche. He was able to- through the use of color, line, and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ackley, Clifford S. *Nolde: The Painter's Prints*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995: 19 – 20.

<sup>30</sup> Lipsey, Roger. *An art of Our Own : The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. Boston: Random House, 1988: 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*: 12.

texture- *express* his inner struggles, his emotions, his passions, and his burdens as they were free from any rule, just as he thought civilization should be.

## REFERENCED IMAGE



**(fig. 1)** Nolde, Emil. *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (1910). Oil on canvas, 88 x 105.5 cm. Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich  
(image source: ARTstor)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackley, Clifford S. *Nolde: The Painter's Prints*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1995.
- Benson, E. M. "Emil Nolde." *Parnassus*. no. 1 (1933): 12-14.
- Creamer, Victoria Blake. "Emil Nolde: Primitivism and the Revitalization of Christian Imagery." *Savannah College of Art and Design*. MA Thesis (2008).
- Ettlinger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 781 (1968): 191-192 + 194-201.
- Gombrich, E. H. *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1950.
- Lewy, Immanuel. "The Story of the Golden Calf Reanalysed." *Vetus Testamentum*. no. 9 (1959): 318-322.
- Lipsey, Roger. *An art of Our Own : The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*. Boston: Random House, 1988.
- Lloyd, Jill. "Emil Nolde's Drawings from the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, and the 'Maskenstilleben 1-4', 1911." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 987 (1985): 380-385.
- Nolde, Emil. *Emil Nolde : Blickkontakte : frühe Porträts = eye contact : early portraits / Ulmer Museum, De Zonnehof Amersfoort..* New York: Ostfildern-Ruit : Hatje Cantz , 2005.
- Salter, Ronald. "German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity by Jill Lloyd." *The German Quarterly*, 66, no. 02 (1993): 243-245
- Schiff, Gert. "Arcadia and Human Wasteland." *Art Journal*. vol. 41 no. 1 (1981): 64-69.
- Sieger, William B. "Emil Nolde's 'Legend: St. Mary of Egypt': 'Vita Activa'/'Vita Contemplativa'." *The Burlington Magazine*. no. 1223 (2005): 100-107.