

Franz Marc / August Macke.

The adventure of the Blue Rider

"Today art is taking directions that our fathers could never have imagined; looking at new works, it is as if we are plunged into a dream in which we can hear The Horsemen of the Apocalypse hurtling towards us; we can feel an artistic tension spreading across the whole of Europe. Everywhere, new artists are signalling to each other: a look, a handshake is all we need to understand one another! "
Franz Marc, *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, January 1912

In 1912, at the height of the artistic interactions between Futurism, Cubism and Expressionism, Munich painter Franz Marc expressed his eagerness to found a European avant-garde movement with his friends, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, Frenchmen Robert Delaunay and Apollinaire, Paul Klee from Switzerland, and his young friend, Auguste Macke.

Despite this extremely fertile and lively cosmopolitan network, an Apocalypse was indeed approaching, but not in the form foreseen by Marc. In August 1914, Germany declared war on France. Marc and Macke were called up in Germany, as were Braque, Apollinaire and Duchamp-Villon in France.

The brief careers of these two German artists, who both died at the Front, epitomise these paradoxical years characterised by the struggle to forge a powerful and radical European culture at a time when pressing questions were being asked about national identity, which also encompassed artistic identity. Both men were imbued with French references – Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso and Delaunay. They shared a need for an in-depth renewal of their art through a spiritual and highly personal relationship with nature, incorporating new sources – non-western art, popular and ancient art, the outsider art of children and the mentally ill – and radical formal inventiveness.

As exponents and founders of the Expressionist movement *Der Blaue Reiter*, Marc and Macke, who shared a deep friendship, occupied a central place on the German and European art scene. They both produced powerful and poetic work. Marc, the elder of the two, developed a lyrical and spiritual feeling for art and his relationship with nature; the younger artist, Macke, took a more rational, ordered and naturalist approach.

This is the first monographic exhibition of their work in France.

Section 1

A friendship between painters

August Macke met Franz Marc after discovering his works on 6 January 1910, at the Brakl Gallery in Munich. Excited by Marc's work, the following day Macke went to his studio.

August Macke, who was born in North Rhine-Westphalia and was seven years younger than Franz Marc, trained at the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Applied Arts. His more stylised approach to painting reflected the influence of Art Nouveau and Japonism.

Franz Marc, born in Munich, abandoned his vocation for the priesthood and his philosophy studies to attend, at the turn of the century, the Munich Academy of Fine Arts at a time when the Bavarian capital was one of the most important European centres for Symbolism and Esotericism.

He visited Paris several times in 1903 and in 1907, where he admired paintings by Gauguin and Van Gogh. Macke, who travelled there in June 1907, had already become fascinated by Cézanne, informed by Julius Meier-Groefe's writings on Impressionism.

Marc, who was the heir to the German Romantic tradition, soon chose animals as his main pictorial motif to express his deep and lyrical feeling for nature. Macke, for his part, prioritised the use of colour, adopting a more rational, formalist and naturalist approach. And yet, these two very different personalities forged an instant and lasting friendship through common artistic interests. The two artists' relationship enriched their respective work, and they gradually softened their style of painting under the combined influence of French Post-Impressionism and leading contemporary painters such as Matisse.

Section 2

The *Blaue Reiter* Years

The result of a meeting between Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, the *Blaue Reiter* [the Blue Rider] adventure began in 1911. Having lived in Munich since 1896, the Russian artist occupied a prominent position on the German art scene as the founder, in 1909, of the Neue Künstlervereinigung München (NKVM) [New Association of Munich Artists], an association aiming to promote contemporary creative works. In the summer of 1911, Kandinsky made plans with Marc to publish an almanac, the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*, with the aim of uniting the artistic avant-garde. In December 1911, the two friends organised the first *Blaue Reiter* exhibition, which featured fourteen artists, with works by the founders of the movement, three pieces by Macke, and also contributions by Robert Delaunay, the Douanier Rousseau and Arnold Schoenberg. A second *Blaue Reiter* exhibition entitled "Black and White" was organised a few weeks later, in February 1912, featuring mainly graphic art, including works by the Die Brücke group, as well as Picasso, Braque, Vlaminck, Goncharova, Larionov and Malevich. It sketched out the contours of a European blend of Cubism, Fauvism, Orphism and abstraction. This project strengthened the bond between Kandinsky and Marc, who shared the same spiritualist conception of the creative act and a desire to form an art collective. Macke was more reserved and favoured a formal and technical understanding of the colour spectrum and of the deconstruction of volume. He discussed this in his regular correspondence with his friend.

Focus

The *Blaue Reiter* Almanac

Published in Munich in May 1912, and entirely written by the artists, the *Almanac* resembled the popular rustic booklets printed in an artisanal style and coloured using woodcut techniques. The work aimed to forge connections between art, decorative and popular objects, literature and music, abolishing the traditional hierarchy of genres, and including non-Western art and children's drawings. Macke published his essay *Die Masken* (Masks) evoking sculptures from the Roman world, Easter Island, Cameroun and New Caledonia. Marc produced three texts, *Geistige Güter* (Spiritual Possessions), *Die Wilden Deutschlands* (The "Savages" of Germany) and *Zwei Bilder* (Two Paintings), referring to a popular illustration from a tale by the Brothers Grimm and a painting by Kandinsky dating from 1910.

"We came up with the name *Der Blaue Reiter* over coffee [...]; we both liked blue, Marc – horses and I – riders" Kandinsky later explained.

According to the symbolism of colours, blue refers to the celestial realm; while the rider figure refers to Christian eschatology, notably St George slaying the dragon. As an allegory of the battle between good and evil, the Blue Rider project embodies the fight against the artistic rearguard.

Section 3

A European Avant-garde

For both Marc and Macke, the year 1912 marked a turning point. In September, the two artists travelled to Paris together where they visited Delaunay's studio and saw his *Windows* series. Shortly after, in January 1913, Macke was visited by the poet Apollinaire, and by the painter himself, who was exhibiting his *Windows* at the Gereonsklub in Cologne.

Macke, to a greater degree than Marc, was receptive to the optical qualities and sensuality of Orphism. The vibrant colours of *Clown* and *Three Girls with Yellow Straw Hats* reflect the influence exerted by Simultanism on the young artist.

During this period, another influence appeared, that of the Italian Futurists, discovered by the two artists in the autumn of 1912 in Cologne. Marc swiftly emphasised the dynamic element in his pictures and introduced a stylistic synthesis, drawing on Orphism, and then Futurism. His style became less smooth; the surface of the canvas was diffracted like a kaleidoscope image divided into juxtaposed fields. His painting entitled *Stables*, produced in late 1913, is the fullest expression of this amalgamation of abstraction and Expressionism.

Section 4

Towards Abstraction

Macke's rejection of the spirituality advocated by Kandinsky gradually led him to move away from the *Blaue Reiter* and the artistic scene in Munich, exploring abstraction in geometric compositions, which were a long way from Kandinsky's expressive improvisations. During a trip to Tunisia in April 1914 with his friends Louis Moilliet and Paul Klee, he produced a series of watercolours and paintings offering a luminous, graceful and Orphic rendering of landscapes. The coloured compositions, arranged like chessboards, were produced both by Macke, as an extension of the prismatic decomposition which he introduced into his paintings in 1912, and by Klee, who also established his own system of representation.

On his return to Switzerland, his home since late 1913, Macke reconnected with the Impressionist tradition. Reviving the theme of the *flâneur's* city strolls, he celebrated the simple joys of living, in contrast to Marc's frenzied quest for an "elsewhere", which he never found. Motivated by a desire for an absolute and by a hatred for the creed of technological progress, he devised a system of representation, which excluded man in preference to animals, the sole custodians of original purity. In the months leading up to the war, Marc's formal simplification tipped over into abstraction. He moved ever further away from the visible, dislocating the bodies of his animals until, at the end of his life, he achieved pure, abstract forms.

On 3 August 1914, Germany declared war on France. Macke was drafted into an Infantry Regiment, and died on 26 September 1914, in Champagne. Devastated by his friend's death, Marc, too, experienced the horror of the trenches. He wrote and drew at the Front, and was killed near Verdun on 4 March 1916.