

Arts

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“Max Pechstein: Expressionism of the Soul” Exhibition in Padua

On view till March 14 in Palazzo Zabarella, five decades of the German artist's work

*Italian Hours*

Lucy Gordan



Resting at the Sea (1950), one of his happy memories of Palau, Private collection (no location).

On until March 14, 2027, at Padua's Palazzo Zabarella is "Max Pechstein: Expressionism of the Soul", the first monographic exhibition in Italy dedicated to this leading German Expressionist painter (b. 1881 in Zwickau – d. 1955 in Berlin). The over 120 works—including 40 paintings, drawings, watercolors, photographs, sketches, letters, and personal artifacts—span more than five decades of Pechstein's career. The artworks are displayed in chronological order in three sections: "Searching: Early Works and Studio Pieces"; "Finding: Travel and Nature as Inspiration" and "Finding: The South Seas. Max Pechstein and Palau"; and "Reflecting: Late Works and a New Colorism".

Pechstein was influenced by Klee, Kandinsky, Matisse, Cézanne, and Munch, but especially by Van Gogh's bright colors and his brushstrokes thick with paint, and by Gauguin's South Seas female figures. Portraits (several of himself and his immediate family) and still lifes were the most vital creative areas of Pechstein's oeuvre.



At Lake Garder in Pomerania near Rostock, Germany (1924), Private collection (no location).

Preceding the three artwork sections is "Photographs—Through Pechstein's Eyes". Its wall panel tells us: "In 1927 Pechstein made his first forays into photography. That year, he took a 6×9 folding camera with him to Pomerania for the first time, documenting his painting residency in the small fishing villages of Rowy and Łeba on what is now the Polish Baltic coast. Over 300 small-format black-and-white prints have survived, some presented here as enlarged prints. They show people engaged in their daily routines: fishermen hauling and unloading their boats, sorting and distributing their catch, mending and folding nets; farmers harvesting and resting in their fields." Pechstein considered photography another "tool" of artistic expression.

"Searching: Early Works and Studio Pieces" opens with his very first work "Geierwally" ("Vulture Wally")

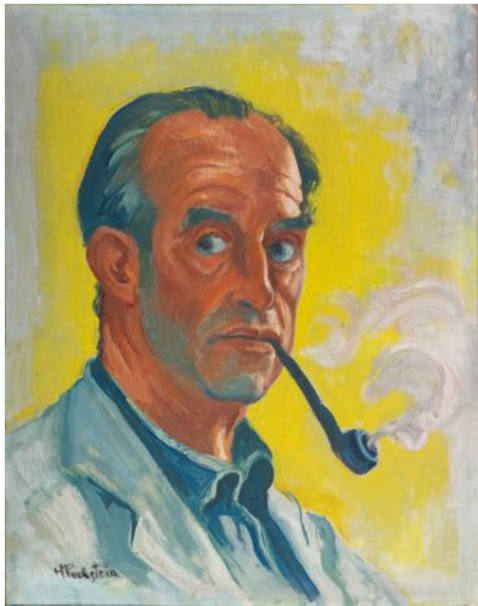


Portrait of Marta, Pechstein's much younger second wife (1949), Max Pechstein Foundation.

(1895) and includes his first vibrantly colored still lifes and especially his portraits, which secured his livelihood. The year 1906 was a major turning point in Pechstein's career. He joined "Die Brücke" (The Bridge), a group of fellow young artists who wanted to be the bridge between tradition and the art of the future. With a spontaneous style of painting, strong unmixed colors, and simplified physical forms, they rebelled against academic rules and bourgeois norms. In addition, he won Saxony's "Rome Prize", a three-month scholarship and use of a studio in Rome. Instead, he preferred not to use the studio, but to travel, which became another lifelong passion. He visited Verona, Padua to see Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel, which ever after he considered "the world's greatest work of art", Venice, Ravenna, Bologna, Florence, Pisa, Siena, Rome, and Naples. His favorite Italian destination, where he later sojourned several times, was Monterosso al Mare in the Cinque Terre to paint the sea, another of his favorite subjects.

The works in the two sections of "Finding..." illustrate his peripatetic life. In 1914 he traveled with his first wife Charlotte and baby son Max to the South Pacific island Palau, then a German colony, where he remained for four months, avidly painting its uncontaminated scenery and Gauguinesque female figures, several on display. They'd have stayed longer in this "heaven" except the First World War broke out and Pechstein was called to arms, for him a tragic experience.

After the war Pechstein started spending months at a time in Pomerania and in Nidden on Lithuania's Baltic coast painting the seascapes and local fishermen—his eternal quest not only for untouched nature,



Self-portrait with pipe, (c. 1946), Private collection in Hamburg,
Courtesy of the Max-Pechstein-Museum in Zwickau.

but for authentic life. This bliss ended in 1933 when the Nazis, who considered his art degenerate, banned him from exhibiting his paintings and fired him from his professorship at the Berlin Academy. A total of 326 of his paintings were removed from German museums and many destroyed. Sixteen of his works were shown in 1937's *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition, so Pechstein went into seclusion in Pomerania.

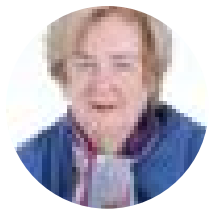
Reinstated in 1945, he returned to Berlin, and his late paintings—many still lifes and beach scenes on display in “Reflecting...”—are rich in color and steeped in light. “My last works,” he wrote, “are travel reminiscences: I try to redesign what comes back to me in nuanced dreams. I wish to give expression to my nostalgia for happy experiences.”



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Italian Hours

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A Multigenerational Brueghel 'Happening' and More in Milan

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