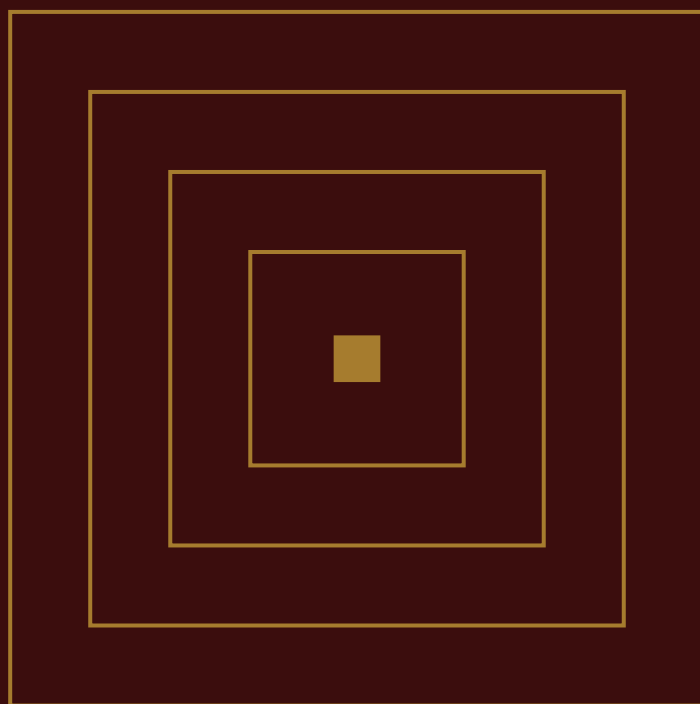




CATASTROPHE

Apocalypse, War and Ruin in the Art of the Early Twentieth Century

A Survey of 59 Works

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Introduction: The World Overturned

If cosmic awe looked outward at the stars, catastrophe looked at the ground beneath one's feet. Between about 1900 and 1935, European and American artists confronted floods, fires, ruined cities, mechanised slaughter and economic collapse, in images that range from prophecy to eyewitness testimony. This book gathers some sixty such works under a single heading: **catastrophe**, the sudden overturning of an order once taken as permanent.

The period supplied abundant reasons. Scientists had revealed a planet with a violent geological past and a sun that would one day die; the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 punctured faith in technological mastery; and above all the First World War (1914-18) delivered an industrial scale of destruction. Shell-torn landscapes, gas, barbed wire and mass graves were new forms of horror, and the veterans among the artists, Paul Nash, C. R. W. Nevinson, John Nash, William Roberts and George Grosz, struggled to find a visual language equal to them. The revolutions in Russia (1917) and Germany (1918-19), the influenza pandemic, hyperinflation and, in 1929, the Wall Street Crash extended the sense of a civilisation in collapse.

Many artists had anticipated it. Symbolists such as Fernand Khnopff and Hugo Simberg painted silent, abandoned or wounded worlds before the war; Kandinsky, working with the Book of Revelation and the Flood narrative, treated catastrophe as a necessary cleansing before a spiritual rebirth, in a theosophical spirit that also marks the cosmic works of this period; Expressionists such as Ludwig Meidner painted burning cities in 1912-13 with a prescience that startled him after 1914. The apocalyptic was not only a response to events but a shared mood of anticipation, fed by Nietzsche, Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918) and a widespread fear of the machine.

After 1918 the response diversified. Berlin Dada and the Neue Sachlichkeit turned to satire and savage social caricature; Walter Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novus* gave the century its most famous image of history as a pile of wreckage; the Metaphysical painters, then the Surrealists, translated trauma into empty piazzas, petrified forests and ossified stations. This book arranges its works in four chapters: *Apocalypse and Deluge*, *The Western Front*, *Burning Cities and Broken Societies* and *Aftermath: Uncanny Worlds*. A note on method: where precise dates are uncertain I say so and mark them 'verify'; the commentary is interpretive and should be checked against museum catalogues.

I. Apocalypse and Deluge

Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), a Russian painter in Germany, led the move to abstraction. His Munich years (1908–14) were obsessed with apocalyptic themes, which he saw as the violent birth-pangs of a new spiritual age.

Sketch for Composition II, 1910

A preparatory work in which colour masses and fragmentary figures, including riders and a mountain, hint at upheaval. It documents the move from landscape to abstraction.

All Saints' Day II, 1911

A reverse-glass painting influenced by Bavarian folk art, showing saints and angels in a swirl of colour; it stages the Last Judgment as a vivid, almost naive vision.

Rider of the Apocalypse, 1911

A galloping figure from the Book of Revelation on glass, in intense colour. It is one of the most direct visualisations of a coming catastrophe by a pre-war artist.

Improvisation 28, 1912

A turbulent canvas thought to refer to the Flood and the Last Judgment, with a boat and cannon-like forms. Kandinsky's 'improvisations' were spontaneous responses to inner events.

The Last Judgment, 1912

Another glass painting, made as Kandinsky edited the *Blue Rider Almanac*; trumpets and collapsing forms present the end as a spiritual summons.

Composition VII, 1913

The artist's most ambitious pre-war canvas, built around the themes of Flood, Resurrection and Last Judgment. Its violent dynamism makes it a climax of early abstraction.

Improvisation: Deluge, 1913

Waves of colour overwhelm the canvas. The Flood, a recurrent cleansing myth, becomes a pure play of dissolving form.

Black Increasing, 1913 (verify)

Dark forms grow within the composition, a visual premonition of the oncoming war.

Several Circles, 1926

A Bauhaus-era painting in which luminous discs float in a deep dark field. It is a postscript: the cosmic calm that followed the catastrophic years.

Heavy Circles, (verify)

A weighted arrangement of circles, probably from the 1920s, in which geometry carries emotional pressure.

M. K. Čiurlionis

Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911) was a Lithuanian composer and visionary painter whose symbolist cycles blend music, myth and cosmology.

Deluge (IV), 1904

From a cycle on the Flood, in which water engulfs the world in a vast, ominous rhythm. It anticipates by almost a decade the apocalyptic themes of the Blue Rider.

The Past, (verify)

A melancholy vision of a lost, ruined world, expressing the Symbolist sense of time as erosion.

Aaron Douglas

Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) was the foremost visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance.

Noah Built the Ark, 1927

An illustration for James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*. Douglas's silhouetted figures and concentric rings render the Flood story with Art Deco clarity, as a story of survival.

Franz Marc

Franz Marc (1880–1916) was a German Expressionist and Blue Rider co-founder, who painted animals as pure, spiritual beings. He was killed at Verdun.

The Fate of the Animals, 1913

Animals in a forest are overwhelmed by fiery, splintered forms. Marc later inscribed on the back a line about all being flaming agony: a premonition of the war that killed him.

Paul Klee

Paul Klee (1879–1940), Swiss-German painter and Bauhaus master, made small and enigmatic works of great poetic force.

Angelus Novus, 1920

A watercolour of a wide-eyed angel, later described by Walter Benjamin as the angel of history, facing the past as a single catastrophe piling up wreckage while a storm called progress blows him away. It is perhaps the most celebrated meditation on catastrophe in modern art.

James N. Rosenberg

James N. Rosenberg (1874–1970) was an American lawyer who was also a painter and draughtsman, and who lost heavily in the Crash.

October 29, Dies Irae, 1929

Titled after the day of the Wall Street Crash, it depicts financial ruin as an apocalyptic Day of Wrath. It is a rare artist's eyewitness response to economic catastrophe.

E. E. Cummings

E. E. Cummings (1894–1962) was an American poet, famous for typographic experiment, and also a serious painter.

Apocalyptic Sunset, (verify)

A painting by the poet in which a blazing sky becomes a vision of the end, showing the period's Romantic apocalyptic imagery persisting in modernist hands.

Jean Charlot

Jean Charlot (1898–1979), a French-born artist active in Mexico, was a member of the muralist movement.

The Massacre in the Temple, 1922–23

A fresco-mural in Mexico City showing the 1520 Spanish massacre of Aztec nobles at the Templo Mayor. It brings historical catastrophe into the revolutionary art of the new Mexico, and is among the first modern frescoes there.

II. The Western Front

Paul Nash

Paul Nash (1889–1946) was an English painter and official war artist in both world wars. His landscapes of the Western Front fused eyewitness reporting with Surrealist-tinged poetry.

Sunrise, Inverness Copse, 1918

A blasted wood at dawn, with shattered tree trunks in a sea of mud. It sets a fallen natural world against the sun's indifference.

The Menin Road, 1919

Nash's major war picture for the planned Hall of Remembrance. Soldiers wander in a devastated, abstracted landscape beneath a crumbling sky.

The Mule Track, 1918–19

A line of men and animals struggles along a duckboard track through churned ground. The landscape itself becomes a participant in the suffering.

Void, 1918

A bleak waste of wrecked aeroplanes, the title naming the emptiness. Nash described such scenes as having a terrible beauty.

We Are Making a New World, 1918

The ironic title meets a landscape of craters and a blood-red sun. It is one of the most sardonic war paintings in British art.

Wire, 1918

Barbed wire dominates the foreground. The simple, brutal geometry stands for entrapment and for the war's new landscape.

John Nash

John Nash (1893–1977), Paul's younger brother, was an English painter and illustrator who served in the Artists Rifles.

Oppy Wood, 1917, 1918

Depicting the aftermath of the attack of 28 April 1917, with bodies strewn at the edge of a shattered wood. It is a restrained picture and an exceptionally moving one.

C. R. W. Nevinson

C. R. W. Nevinson (1889–1946) was a British painter who moved from Futurism to a harsh, disillusioned realism after serving as an ambulance driver.

After a Push, 1917

A desolate battlefield with a few figures. It shows the abandonment of Futurist excitement for sober witness.

William Roberts

William Roberts (1895–1980) was a British Vorticist known for his stylised, tubular figures.

The First German Gas Attack at Ypres, 1918

Painted for the Canadian War Records scheme, it commemorates the April 1915 chlorine gas attack. Soldiers become angular, mechanised bodies in flight, linking Cubist form to chemical warfare.

Félix Vallotton

Félix Vallotton (1865–1925), Swiss-born and working in Paris, was famous for stark woodcuts and later became a war painter.

Landscape of Ruins and Fires, 1915

A desolate field of smoking ruins painted from the front. It is an early witness of the war's effect on rural France.

Verdun, 1917

A nocturnal vision of the battle, with a flat, bright cloud of explosions. It shows modern warfare as an almost abstract spectacle.

Châlons War Cemetery, 1917

Rows of white crosses stretch into the distance. The geometric repetition emphasises the sheer number of the dead.

Umberto Boccioni

Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) was the leading painter and theorist of Italian Futurism, who died after a fall from a horse in military training.

Charge of the Lancers, 1915

A swirl of lances and horses celebrating the energy of attack. It shows the early Futurist embrace of war, which was soon to meet reality.

III. Burning Cities and Broken Societies

Ludwig Meidner

Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966) was a German-Jewish Expressionist whose Apocalyptic Landscapes (1912–13) prefigured the war.

Apocalyptic Landscape, 1912

Tilted houses, bursts of light and fleeing figures dramatise the end of the world in a modern city.

Burning City, 1913

Skyscrapers and tenements ignite under a turbulent sky. Its prescience made it one of the most-cited images of Expressionist foreboding.

Egon Schiele

Egon Schiele (1890–1918) was an Austrian Expressionist, Klimt's protégé, known for raw, angular figures; he died in the influenza pandemic.

Dead City III, 1911

Part of a series on the medieval town of Český Krumlov (Krumau), its dark, tightly packed houses seem to crumble. It conveys a haunting, premonitory sense of decay.

Fernand Khnopff

Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) was a Belgian Symbolist, painter of silent, melancholy interiors and cities.

An Abandoned City, 1904

A view of Bruges' empty quays and still water. It evokes the dead-city theme in Belgian Symbolism, a quiet precursor of later catastrophe imagery.

Olga Rozanova

Olga Rozanova (1886–1918) was a Russian Futurist and Suprematist, who died at 32.

City on Fire, c. 1913–14 (verify)

A fractured urban scene in blazing colour, in which the Cubo-Futurist city is consumed by flames. It shows the avant-garde's romance with destruction.

Marianne von Werefkin

Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938), a Russian-born Expressionist in Munich and later Switzerland, treated colour as emotion.

Red City, c. 1909–10 (verify)

A town glowing in saturated red under a night sky, an expressionist image of unease.

Le Chiffonnier (The Rag-Picker), c. 1910 (verify)

A solitary figure of the poor in a hostile city. It reflects Werefkin's concern with social outcasts and the moral weight of the modern city.

David Burliuk

David Burliuk (1882–1967) was a Ukrainian-Russian Futurist and propagandist of the avant-garde.

Revolution, (verify)

A dynamic Futurist canvas of upheaval, in which political revolution is figured in fractured form and colour.

George Grosz

George Grosz (1893–1959) was a German Dada and Neue Sachlichkeit artist whose caricatures attacked militarism, capitalism and the bourgeoisie. He left Germany in 1933.

Suicide, 1916

A figure lies in the street beside a tilting, crowded city. It conveys despair on a human scale.

Metropolis, 1916–17

A frenzied city of crowds and lights under a red sky, in which Berlin becomes a hellish scene.

Explosion, 1917

A fragmented, apocalyptic cityscape in fiery colour, painted in the middle of the war.

The Funeral, 1917–18

A burial procession through a nightmare city, with grotesque mourners. It is among his great allegorical canvases, dedicated to Oskar Panizza.

Panorama (Down with Liebknecht), 1919

A satirical panorama of Berlin after the assassination of Karl Liebknecht. It reflects the savage political violence of the German revolution.

Hannah Höch

Hannah Höch (1889–1978) was a German Dada artist and pioneer of photomontage.

Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919–20

A giant photomontage of machine parts, politicians and dancers. It mocks the culture of the new republic, and has become a major image of Weimar's cultural turmoil.

Max Beckmann

Max Beckmann (1884–1950) was a German painter, traumatised by his experience as a medical orderly in the war.

The Night, 1918–19

A brutal scene of torture and murder in a cramped room. It is Beckmann's hallucinatory response to the violence of post-war Germany.

Mstislav Dobuzhinsky

Mstislav Dobuzhinsky (1875–1957) was a Russian painter and stage designer of the World of Art group, famed for images of the modern city.

The Kiss, (verify)

A work in the artist's dark, melancholy urban vision, where intimacy contrasts with the oppressive city.

Pinckney Marcius-Simons

Pinckney Marcius-Simons (1867–1909) was an American painter of visionary, Wagnerian subjects, active in Europe.

Stones of Venice, (verify)

A dreamlike vision of Venice, echoing Ruskin's meditation on decline. It extends the dead-city theme into Symbolist fantasy.

Bernarda Bryson

Bernarda Bryson (1903–2004) was an American printmaker and illustrator in the social-realist tradition.

Crash, 1930s (verify)

A work connected to the Great Depression's collapse, with its focus on the impact of economic disaster.

Józef Stawowski-Kluska

Józef Stawowski-Kluska was a Polish illustrator, little documented in English.

Cover for Michał Rusinek's Revolt in the Land of the Machines, (verify)

A cover for an early science-fiction novel depicting a mechanical uprising. It speaks to the fear of technology that runs through interwar culture.

IV. Aftermath: Uncanny Worlds

Giorgio de Chirico

Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), born in Greece to Italian parents, founded Metaphysical painting, with deserted piazzas and long shadows that deeply influenced Surrealism.

Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour, 1913

An empty arcaded square with a long shadow. The calm shows the world as a stage after something has gone.

The Anxious Journey, 1913

A train steams behind a wall, a distant promise of departure from a petrified world.

The Disquieting Muses, 1916–18

Faceless mannequin figures stand in a ghostly Ferrara square, painted during the war. It is among the founding images of the uncanny.

Max Ernst

Max Ernst (1891–1976) served in the German army in the First World War, and later became a leading Dadaist and Surrealist.

Forest and Sun, 1927

A forest petrifies beneath a dark, glowing disc, from his frottage period. Nature has the look of fossil and ruin.

Petrified Forest, 1927

Dense, stony growth fills the canvas, an image of the world frozen after catastrophe.

Salvador Dalí

Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), the Catalan Surrealist, developed the paranoiac-critical method of painting.

Premature Ossification of a Railway Station, 1930

A deserted station rendered in hard, dreamlike detail. The title suggests modernity stiffening into a fossil.

Alfred Kubin

Alfred Kubin (1877–1959) was an Austrian illustrator and Symbolist.

Man, (verify)

A dark drawing in his nightmarish vein, suggesting human fragility before unseen forces.

Hugo Simberg

Hugo Simberg (1873–1917) was a Finnish Symbolist painter.

The Wounded Angel, 1903

Two boys carry a bandaged angel on a stretcher through a bare landscape. Painted before the war, it became a national icon of Finland and an image of vulnerable innocence.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, known as Witkacy (1885–1939), was a Polish painter, playwright and philosopher who anticipated catastrophe in his novels and took his own life in September 1939.

Fight, (verify)

A violent, distorted struggle of figures, typical of his work, which sees civilisation as heading for collapse.

A Note on Sources

The list of works derives from a curated collection titled "Radium Age Art: Catastrophe". The commentary is an interpretive survey written without catalogue checking; dates marked "verify" are uncertain. Reproductions are omitted for copyright reasons.