

The creative output of Alexej von Jawlensky (Torzhok, Russia, 1864 - Wiesbaden, Germany, 1941) is defined by a simultaneously visual and spiritual quest which took the form of a recurring, almost ritual insistence on a limited number of pictorial motifs. In his memoirs the artist recalled two events which would be crucial for this subsequent evolution. The first was the impression made on him as a child when he saw an icon of the Virgin's face revealed to the faithful in an Orthodox church that he attended with his family. The second was his first visit to an exhibition of paintings in Moscow in 1880: "It was the first time in my life that I saw paintings and I was touched by grace, like the Apostle Paul at the moment of his conversion. My life was totally transformed by this. Since that day art has been my only passion, my *sancta sanctorum*, and I have devoted myself to it body and soul."

Following initial studies in art in Saint Petersburg, Jawlensky lived and worked in Germany for most of his life with some periods in Switzerland. His arrival in Munich in 1896 brought him closer contacts with the new, avant-garde trends while his exceptional abilities in the free use of colour allowed him to achieve a unique synthesis of Fauvism and Expressionism in a short space of time. In 1909 Jawlensky, his friend Kandinsky and others co-founded the New Association of Artists in Munich, a group that would decisively influence the history of modern art. Jawlensky also participated in the activities of Der Blaue Reiter [the Blue Rider], one of the fundamental collectives for the formulation of the Expressionist language and abstraction.

After an early period focused on still life and landscape, Jawlensky soon began to prioritise the face and this theme remained an obsession throughout his work. He devoted nearly three decades of almost complete attention to it, with the exception of the *Variations* which are landscapes of arbitrary colours in which he introduced another element that was central to his work and extremely important for subsequent artists, namely seriality. In his study of the human face, the place where human identity is lodged, Jawlensky gradually reduced the element of individuality in order to arrive at a form close to an icon or archetype. This omnipresent theme, both familiar and enigmatic, led the artist towards a process of paring-down that culminated in his use of a particularly recognisable and symbolic sign: the cross.

Jawlensky's uniqueness within 20th-century art lies precisely in his invention of an exceptional and paradoxical form: a face as the materialisation of his formal and spiritual concerns, in other words an abstract face.

Itzhak Goldberg
Curator of the exhibition

**EARLY
YEARS**

On the advice of his father, an army colonel, the young Alexej von Jawlensky embarked on military training in Moscow. During this period he regularly visited the Tretyakov Gallery where he would spend the day copying the Old Masters and looking at Byzantine icons. After moving to Saint Petersburg to continue his studies he visited the studio of the well known realist painter Ilya Repin and became his student. It was through Repin that Jawlensky met Marianne von Werefkin with whom he maintained a close relationship until 1921.

Jawlensky and Werefkin left for Munich, at that period one of Europe's most culturally advanced cities. They attended the studio of the Slovenian artist Anton Ažbe, which had a well established academic tradition, becoming acquainted with Kandinsky there. In 1889 Jawlensky began to paint independently in a quest for his own style. During a series of trips to France he became fascinated by Matisse's ornamental use of colour and by the landscapes of Henri-Edmond Cross, as well as Cézanne and Van Gogh's work. Remembering the period that followed those first encounters, he wrote: "In the spring of 1905 we all set out for Carantec in Brittany where I worked a great deal. It was there that I understood how to depict nature through colour, in harmony with the fire that burns in my soul. I painted many landscapes, the bushes I saw from my window, and also Breton heads. My canvases irradiated colour."

Focused entirely on landscape, still life and portraiture, Jawlensky aimed to convey the spiritual essence of his experiences by pictorial means. In this sense, the way in which he animated the objects and softened their outlines heralded the subsequent process of paring-down in his work. This is evident in the unusual composition of the interior view *Black Table* (1901) on display in this gallery.

YEARS OF TRANSITION

Between 1908 and 1910 Jawlensky embarked on a process of de-personalisation in his work, which took the form of an interest in the plasticity of painting itself rather than any faithful reproduction of the motifs. During these years the artist spent his summers in Kandinsky's companion Gabriele Münter's house in Murnau, a village in Upper Bavaria. All three artists worked on similar landscapes that were dominated by a marked level of expressivity achieved through colour. Jawlensky's remark that he wished to "translate the soul into colours" dates from this period.

The first exhibition of the New Association of Artists was held in Munich in 1909, a group that included Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Münter, Werefkin, Alexander Kanoldt and Alfred Kubin. The exhibition caused a considerable scandal among the press and visiting public who considered the works on display too daring and radical. Two years later the influential group Der Blaue Reiter [the Blue Rider] was formed and Jawlensky presented various works at their second exhibition. This period saw the height of German Expressionism, which ultimately culminated in abstraction. However, in contrast to many of his colleagues, Jawlensky never completely embraced the latter tendency. In fact, from this point on he devoted almost all his efforts to reflecting, albeit in a radically personal manner, on the face, a motif with deep roots in the figurative tradition.

PRE-WAR HEADS The "pre-war heads", which can more accurately be described as "busts", reveal a gradual disappearance of the sitter's individuality, replaced by a quest for the sacred face. This new direction in Jawlensky's work first took the form of the representation of archetypes. The heads increasingly renounce the psychological element and any individual characterisation. In the same way, the titles of these works do not refer to identifiable individuals; instead, most of them allude to the chromatic element that prevails in the canvas, such as *Dark Eyes* (1912), in which the pronounced outline in dark Prussian blue defines the features.

The bright colours that Jawlensky had used in such profusion up to this point are now gradually replaced by browns and ochres, the chin becomes more pointed and the eyes and nose increasingly angular. The result is to make the faces immutable, with a pronounced oval form that recalls the Virgins in Byzantine icons, and not by chance one of these works of 1913 is entitled *Byzantine Woman (Pale Lips)*. Notable among them is a group of Spanish women, but as Jawlensky never visited Spain it is thought that he was inspired by the costumes that he could have seen at performances of the Ballets russes when Serge Diaghilev's company visited Berlin in 1912.

VARIATIONS

In 1914 all Russian citizens were obliged to leave Germany in forty-eight hours. Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin left with their family for Switzerland, moving to the village of Saint-Prex near Lake Geneva. This forced exile marked a turning point in the artist's life and work and he abruptly but temporarily abandoned his focus on the motif of the face. As if chronicling his own isolation, he devoted himself to repeatedly and obsessively depicting the landscape in front of his window using a particularly free technique and with a sense of chromatic investigation. *Variation: The road, mother of all Variations* (1914) is the work that launches this group and defines the elements from which the series as a whole is constructed: a path leading to a lake, a pine tree with an oval form that would become increasingly reduced to its essentials, tree and bushes along the side of the path and a few scattered houses. The vertical format of these works is deliberate: while the genre of landscape has traditionally been expressed horizontally, the vertical format is more closely associated with the human figure and portraiture.

The *Variations*, which Jawlensky also called "Songs without words", allowed the artist to gradually dilute his motifs in favour of the pronounced rhythmical sense of the whole group and the emotion produced by the interaction of the colours. These works are the space in which the painter came closest to a non-figurative language and which initiated his interest in seriality, an aspect that would have an important influence on subsequent generations of artists.

MYSTICAL HEADS The origin of the *Mystical heads* is generally associated with Jawlensky meeting the young Emmy (Galka) Scheyer, an art student with whom he became acquainted in 1915 and who would become both his muse and representative. Her markedly oval face, which is recorded in photographs of the period, is reflected in the portraits that Jawlensky painted at this time, such as *Mystical head: Head of a girl* of 1918.

The absence of the rest of the body in these works probably reflects the fact that Jawlensky did not consider it relevant in the process of internalisation on which he had embarked. In paintings such as *Mystical head: Anika* and *Mystical head: Helene*, both of 1917, the androgynous, asexual face occupies almost the entire pictorial surface. Jawlensky gradually abandoned inessential elements in order to focus on the interplay of the patches of colour that construct the face, based on a softly defined line. This series thus represents a definitive step within his process of moving away from a conventional interpretation of the portrait.

ABSTRACT HEADS Jawlensky started this group of works, also known as *Geometrical heads*, in Ascona after he moved there in April 1918 due to health problems. He increasingly focused on formal reduction, constructing these face-ovals with their markedly geometrical appearance from vertical and horizontal lines and semicircles which undergo almost no modifications, thus reinforcing the works' serial nature.

The face now occupies the entire pictorial surface and even the ears are omitted. The eyes, which were open or closed in a natural manner in previous series, now seem to have their lids sealed. This absence of a gaze, evident in *Enlightenment* of 1927 or *Daybreak* of 1928, prevents any contact with the exterior, as if both the artist and the depicted face were looking inwards, towards an interior world which had a spiritual relationship with the viewer rather than one based on reality.

In 1916 Jawlensky began to read books on the lives of Hindu ascetics and to be interested in Buddhism and esoteric and anthroposophic issues. The symbols of south-east Asian religious traditions that had started to appear in some of the heads from 1911 onwards become more evident in this series. The precision of the forms draws attention to these patches of paint, which are free elements within almost architectural compositions. Jawlensky now seems to have decided to create icons, in a process that had started with artistic expressions of this type and would finally return to them. In his own words: "As I see it, the face is not just just the face, but the cosmos [...]. The entire universe manifests itself in the face."

MEDITATIONS In 1928 Jawlensky first detected the symptoms of the rheumatoid arthritis that would prevent him from continuing to paint in the coming years and would eventually prove fatal for his health. Having moved in the early 1920s to Wiesbaden, where he lived until his death in 1941, around 1934 he embarked on a series of heads that notably differs from the previous ones. His problems with making different movements and the need to paint sitting down with his brushes tied to his hands inevitably led to this change of style and format. The "small" *Meditations* thus evolved towards a more gestural language, to be seen for example in *Harmony in red* of 1937.

In the *Meditations* the head undergoes a final process of metamorphosis. Jawlensky reduced the facial features to the minimum while maintaining the expressive force of the colours, which are applied with dense brushstrokes then scored with a burnisher or scraper. The face, if still identifiable, now completely invades the pictorial surface while the fact that the chin is truncated by the frame means that only a very reduced part of it, now constructed from extremely simplified signs, can be seen. In compositions of this type, such as *Meditation (called Velázquez)* of 1936, Jawlensky achieved a fusion of the human face, the icon and the quintessential western religious symbol of the cross.

**LATE
STILL
LIFES** In parallel to the *Meditations*, during his final years Jawlensky returned to still life, the genre that had occupied his attention at the outset of his career. By stripping them of any anecdotal or narrative element these vases of flowers become the manifestation of spirituality, as had been the case previously with the heads.

During the period when health problems kept the artist to his room in his house in Wiesbaden, Jawlensky's wife Helene and his assistant Lisa Kümmel (to whom he dictated his memoirs in 1936) placed flower arrangements on his windowsill every day.

In these still lifes Jawlensky went beyond the representation of what he saw in order to convey the previously interiorised motif: the essence of the flowers, the vase or the bottle. Writing on these works in the catalogue of the present exhibition, Angelika Affentranger-Kirchrath has said: "For Jawlensky, who could barely leave his room, they were comparable to a type of guarantee of perception of the real world. In the manner of a mirror, the window now no longer projected the gaze towards the landscape but rather reflected the sick man's room, the close at hand interior space."