

JAWLENSKY. FACE AS LANDSCAPE

9 February to 9 May 2021

Fundación MAPFRE Salas Recoletos. Madrid

JAWLENSKY. FACE AS LANDSCAPE

Exhibition dates: From February 11h until May 9th 2021

Venue: Fundación MAPFRE Sala Recoletos (Paseo de Recoletos, 23. Madrid)

Curator: Itzhak Goldberg

Exhibition organised by Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid; the Musée Cantini, Marseille; and La Piscine, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André Diligent, Roubaix.

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High-resolution images:

<https://noticias.fundacionmapfre.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/JAWLENSKY.zip>

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Front cover image:

Alexej von Jawlensky

Princess Turandot, 1912

Oil on canvas

Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern. Private loan

INV. 91389

Photo: Zentrum Paul Klee, Berna

ALEXÉI VON JAWLENSKY (1864-1941)

A pioneer in the development of a type of autonomous painting that moved towards abstraction in the early years of the 20th century, Jawlensky created an extensive oeuvre based on series and almost obsessive reinterpretations that relate to the language of music, an art form which inspired numerous visual artists of this period. Jawlensky participated in some of the most important artistic events of the 20th century: together with artist friends such as Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter and Marianne von Werefkin, he was one of the leading figures in the foundation of German Expressionism as well as a co-founder of the Neue Künstlervereinigung [New Association of Artists] in Munich in 1909. Jawlensky also moved in the orbit of the Blaue Reiter [Blue Rider] group, although he never fully embraced abstraction.

During his early years Jawlensky's work focused on the depiction of still lifes, landscapes and portraits in a style indebted to the Post-impressionism of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. This gradually evolved towards a more intense and autonomous use of colour with a certain Fauvist element. Obligated to take refuge in Switzerland during World War I, at this period the artist initiated what would be his characteristic mode of serial work, focusing his attention on a single landscape scene to which he repeatedly returned with enormous freedom and an interest in chromatic investigation. These are the Variations, which make use of a vertical format to rethink the horizontality characteristic of this genre.

But it was the portrait, and more specifically Jawlensky's investigation of human features and their essential lines that most clearly distinguishes his pictorial output. The presentation in the exhibition that spans the "pre-war heads", the Mystical Heads, the Geometrical Heads and the Meditations reveals a body of painting in a constant state of tension between the depiction of the image of an individual and its reduction to an archetype.

Despite the profound evolution of Jawlensky's art over the successive phases of his career, his entire output is underpinned by a spiritual, almost religious quest which, from the early years of the 20th century, made him one of the most important innovators in a type of free, expressive language in which form and colour reveal inner life. In his memoirs, dictated four years before his death, Jawlensky repeatedly emphasised the importance that two religious episodes had on the outset of his career. Recalling the first, he spoke of the impression made on him as a child of a famous icon of the Virgin in a Polish church. The second relates to his first contact with painting, at an exhibition held 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 as a result. Since that day art has been my only passion, my holy of holies, and I have devoted myself to it body and soul.”

The association between the spiritual and art is particularly deep-rooted in the mindset of Russians, for whom religious icons embody an abstraction of the divine. It could be said that Jawlensky devoted most of his creative practice to producing modern versions of icons, from the ones that mark his starting point at the outset of his career to those he returned to in his final years; the Meditations, in which he was able to fuse two fields that the history of art has always considered mutually exclusive, namely the figuration inherent to icons and its formal execution based on abstraction.

As the exhibition’s curator Itzhak Goldberg observes in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, it is possible to see how “the two events that left a profound mark on Jawlensky are located midway between art and religion, indicating the short distance that separated these two fields for him.” With regard to his persistent investigation of the human face, Jawlensky wrote: “I found it necessary to find form for the face, because I had come to understand that great art can only be painted with religious feeling. And that I could only bring to the human face.” The painter’s tenacity in his focus on a single motif - the face - is particularly significant for us at the present time as it draws our attention to the contemplation of other people’s faces precisely at a time when they are covered over and concealed from us.

EXHIBITION

Jawlensky. Landscape of the face offers a survey of the career of the Russian painter Alexej von Jawlensky (1864-1941), from his early training and the outset of his career in Munich to the transformation that his painting underwent in Switzerland and his final years in the German city of Wiesbaden.

This selection of more than 100 works offers an extensive chronological survey of Jawlensky's career organised into six sections, while also establishing specific dialogues with paintings by various artists who shared his artistic concerns or who had a particular influence on him. They include the French painters Pierre Girieud, Henri-Edmond Cross, André Derain, Henri Matisse and Maurice de Vlaminck, all of whom, like Jawlensky, participated in the Post-Impressionist and Fauvist period; the painter Marianne von Werefkin, Jawlensky's companion until 1921; Gabriele Münter, one of the few women associated with German Expressionism; and Sonia Delaunay, who shared Jawlensky's vibrant use of colour.

The exhibition, which is organised by Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid; the Musée Cantini, Marseilles; and La Piscine, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André Diligent, Roubaix, has benefited from generous loans from important private collections and leading international institutions, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Pompidou (Paris), the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, the Albertina (Vienna), the Kunsthalle Emden, the Zentrum Paul Klee (Berne), and the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz - Museum Gunzenhauser (Chemnitz).

EARLY YEARS

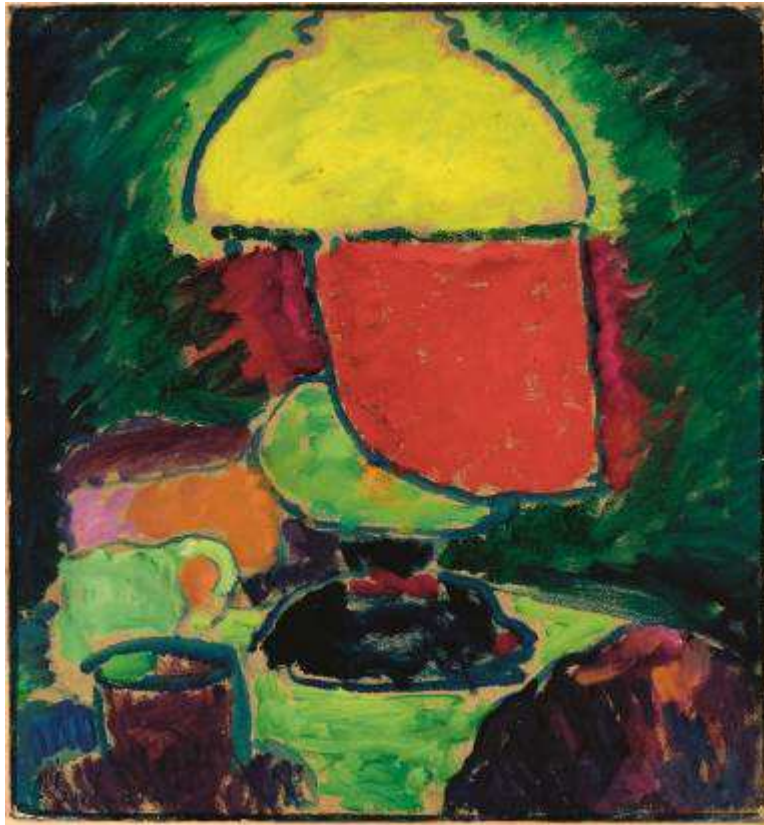
The landscapes, portraits and still lifes that illustrate the direction taken by Jawlensky's early work reveal the influence of the Saint Petersburg Academy, in addition to the teachings of his realist master Ilya Repin but also the first signs of his own, personal style influenced by Van Gogh, as evident in Self-portrait in a Top Hat of 1904.

Colour floods the artist's work from 1903 onwards. In 1905 he visited the Salon d'automne in Paris where the artists who would come to be designated the Fauves [wild beasts] were exhibiting. That same year Jawlensky wrote in a letter: "To me apples, trees, human faces are not more than hints as to what else I should see in them: the life of colour, comprehended by a passionate lover."



Alexej von Jawlensky
Self-portrait in top hat, 1904
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Photo: Alexej von Jawlensky-Archiv
S.A., Muralto

The artist returned to Paris in 1907 where he focused on Cézanne, whose influence is evident in many of his works, such as Helene in a red Waistcoat of 1907. Another influence is that of Gauguin, from whom Jawlensky derived the idea of painting flat surfaces with intense colours and precise outlines, as seen in The Lamp of 1908. It should also be remembered that colour played a key role within the complex evolution evident in the final decades of the 19th century following the crisis of the pictorial image generated by Impressionism, an evolution that simultaneously produced the framework for artistic creation in the 20th century.



Alexej von Jawlensky
The lamp, 1908
Oil on cardboard mounted on wood
Private collection
Photo: Alexej von Jawlensky-Archiv S.A.,
Muralto

Impressionism freed colour from its exclusively referential role while also introducing a series of issues that had not been referred to until that point. Colour thus ceased to be an attribute of things and the debate on its status and perception now expanded to encompass themes such as its autonomy, meaning and possible symbolism, its constructive and expressive nature and its musical character. Pure colours also became a focus of interest and their application is evident in the work of Jawlensky, who transcended the traditional limits of the debates on colour and associated them with mysticism, transcendence, philosophy and religion while also seeing them in relation to their influence on individuals.

While Paris was important for the artist, Munich was equally so. Jawlensky lived there from 1896, meeting some of the most influential avant-garde artists of the first half of the 20th century. In the company of Kandinsky, Münter and Werefkin he spent time in Murnau in Upper Bavaria during several summers from 1908 onwards. The following year, 1909, would be crucial for the artist; the lines in his paintings became increasingly confident and the force of colour was now almost overwhelming. This expressivity reached what might be considered unsustainable levels over the following years and Jawlensky used it to take his formal and chromatic quest to its ultimate consequences.

THE PRE-WAR HEADS

The theme of the face was an artistic concern that the German Expressionists shared with Jawlensky. But while for the former the human presence, imbued with a powerfully vitalistic charge, gave rise to the intensity of their works, over the years Jawlensky eliminated all traces of a psychological dimension from his heads. In 1908-09 he embarked on a process of de-personalisation and of reduction to the essential, and while his portraits still reveal the sitter's age and gender the titles of his works very rarely refer to identifiable individuals. The key issue was now the visual aspect of the painting rather than achieving a faithful likeness of the model.

The "pre-war heads" established the basis for Jawlensky's future serial approach in that they focus on a single theme, although the concept of the series cannot yet be applied as they do not yet make use of repetition based on a defined visual vocabulary. These are busts that reveal numerous similarities in terms of both stylisation and the intensity of the strident, dazzling and densely applied colours. In these faces the wide-open, almost bulging eyes, which are heavily outlined and have pronounced pupils, look sightlessly through the viewer as if the artist was searching for something that lies beyond us.

Starting in 1913, Jawlensky introduced various changes into his heads; the colours begin to move towards brown and ochre, the chins become more pointed and the eyes and nose are increasingly angular, as if the artist needed to come close to icons in order to achieve a type of serenity that would distance him from his previous, more brightly coloured compositions. In 1913 he painted *Byzantine Woman* (pale lips) while this early period also saw various paintings of Spanish women. Given that Jawlensky never visited Spain, he may have been attracted by the costumes he saw in some of the Ballets Russes's performances on Spanish subjects which he attended when Diaghilev and his company visited Munich in 1912.

VARIATIONS ON A LANDSCAPE THEME

In his memoirs Jawlensky recalled: "We had to leave our apartment with all our furniture and works of art and we could only take what we could carry with us. We couldn't even take our poor cat. Between the station at Lindau and the boat - it was a short distance and there were twenty of us surrounded by soldiers with rifles - the crowd started to insult us and spit on us while trying to get close to us." This happened in 1914 when all Russian citizens were given 48 hours to leave Germany. The artist and Marianne von Werefkin went into exile in Saint-Prex near Lake Geneva where a friend had found them an apartment to rent.



Alexei von Jawlensky
Variation: The road, mother of all Variations,
1914
Oil on linen finish paper laid down on cardboard
Private collection
Photo: Alexej von Jawlensky-Archiv S.A., Muralto

In this total isolation Jawlensky embarked on a new direction in his work. He abruptly abandoned the theme of the face which had prevailed in his painting and now opted for landscape, a motif that had in fact already been present in his work; in Murnau he had painted landscapes in which the descriptive aspect gave way to semi-abstract compositions. It was in the context of this free experimentation that Jawlensky now began his Variations, a title suggestive of the musicality of the works and which initiates serialism in his output.

These small-format paintings, of which between 350 and 400 are now known, are painted in bright colours although more muted than those seen in the artist's

previous works. The subject is the view of the landscape of Saint-Prex that Jawlensky saw from

his window, a motif which he first turned to at the age of fifty and which led on to his later works. Variation: The path, Mother of all variations of 1914 is emblematic in terms of the landscape elements, which are those to be found in the series as a whole: a path flanked by trees and shrubs which runs down to a lake depicted in the background; a fir tree on the left and some surrounding houses.



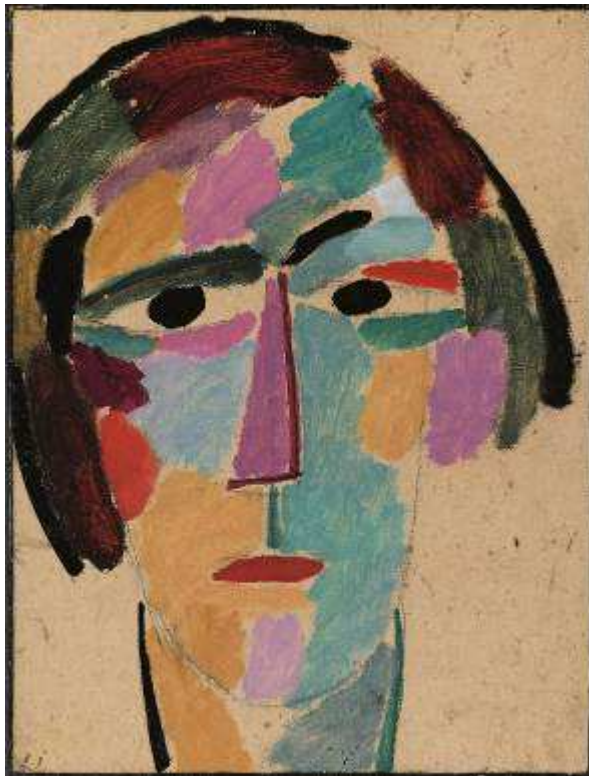
Alexéi von Jawlensky
Variation: Early summer, 1919
 Oil on linen finish paper laid down on cardboard
 laid down on wood
 Private collection
 Photo: Alexej von Jawlensky-Archiv S.A., Muralto

Other paintings reveal variations: in some cases there are mountains visible on the opposite bank while in others a horizontal blue line suggests the presence of the lake. In other variants the shrubs are reduced to a patch of colour. Similarly, the Variations at the start of the series differ from the later ones and over time the subject matter becomes increasingly reduced as it moves towards abstraction, as evident in Variation: Inclination (triptych) of 1919. Jawlensky gradually reduced the forms of these compositions, almost always maintaining the oval that indicates the presence of a tree which becomes increasingly important while allowing the colour to act freely in order to suggest the emotion

that the painter himself felt before the colours of the landscape on each occasion. For some art historians such as James Demetrion, a specialist in Jawlensky's work, the Variations are "a series of relatively fixed structures in which the only thing that changes is the colour." Here landscape acts as a mere

pretext for the exercise of painting. Among the most important paintings in the series, which Jawlensky continued until 1921 when he permanently returned to Germany, are works executed in Zurich and later in Ascona where he spent a lengthy period after leaving Switzerland.

MYSTICAL HEADS



1918.

The origins of this new investigation on the artist's part are generally considered to lie in Jawlensky's meeting in 1915 with Emmy Scheyer, an art student fascinated with his work who abandoned her studies to become his muse and representative. Her markedly oval face, recorded in photographs of the time, is reflected in Jawlensky's portraits of this period, of which good examples are *Mystical Head*, *Anika* of around 1917 and *Mystical Head: head of a girl of*

Alexéi von Jawlensky
Mystical head: Anika, c. 1917
 Oil and pencil on cardboard mounted on wood
 43 x 30 cm
 Kunsthalle Emden
 Photo: © Martinus Ekkenga

The *Mystical Heads* coincided for a period with the *Variations* in Jawlensky's work; the two series share motifs such as the oval, a formal element that structures the composition in both cases although the new series consists almost entirely of female heads. Painted on card and generally measuring around 40 x 30 cm, in these elongated faces the nose is definitively reduced to an "I" shape and the mouth is suggested by a simple line. The ears are no longer present, as if Jawlensky wished to achieve a single model for all these faces, with their large, almond-shaped eyes that are now sometimes closed. All these solutions continue in the *Saviour's Faces* which he embarked on at this period. These are paintings with religious titles that Jawlensky produced until 1922: works in which the faces become increasingly rigid and occupy almost the entire pictorial surface, thus anticipating the structure of the next series, entitled *Geometrical Heads*. As Angelika Affentranger-Kirchrath has observed, in these works the artist "emphasised frontality and a symmetrical arrangement, conferring a dignity on the work [...] close to that of an icon." In both the *Mystical*

Heads and the Saviour's Faces Jawlensky introduced symbols of the other world in a reflection of the occultist and theosophical interests of the circle of Rudolf Steiner, who expounded his ideas in Munich between 1905 and 1910 and whom Jawlensky knew.

GEOMETRICAL HEADS OR ABSTRACT HEADS

"For years I painted these Variations and then I needed to find a way for the face, as I had realised that great art had to be solely painted with a religious sentiment. And only the human face could transmit this. I understood that through forms and colours, in his art the artist had to express the divine within him. For this reason a work of art is God made visible and art is yearning for God. I painted faces for many years. I sat in my studio and painted, and nature was no longer necessary to inspire me. It was enough to delve into myself, praying and preparing my soul in a religious state."

With these words of 1938 Jawlensky reaffirmed the need he had felt to return to the face, the motif that in fact occupied him throughout his life. In the case of the Geometrical Heads, which he began in Ascona in 1918 and continued to paint until 1935, the geometrical aspect becomes increasingly pronounced. These face-ovals are crossed by vertical and horizontal lines, the hair only suggested and the eyes now seemingly sealed shut. This is the first time Jawlensky created a series of paintings in which there are no open eyes, as if both he and the depicted face were looking at an interior world that had a spiritual contact with the viewer rather than one based on reality. The symbols relating to south-east Asian religious traditions that began to appear in some of the heads from 1911 now become more apparent. The precision of the forms emphasises these patches of paint, which are free elements within almost architectural compositions. It is as if Jawlensky were creating icons in a process that first started with this type of artistic expression in order to finally return to it. As he himself said: "The way I see it, the face is not just the face, but the entire cosmos [...]. The entire universe manifests itself in the face."

MEDITATIONS AND STILL LIFES

With the aim of ensuring his permanent separation from Marianne von Werefkin, Jawlensky left for Weisbaden in 1921 where Emmy Scheyer encouraged him to present his work in a solo exhibition from which he sold 20 works. He also participated in a group exhibition in 1924 with Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Lyonel Feininger as part of the “Blue Four” group. It was Scheyer who promoted Jawlensky’s work in both Germany and the United States, starting in San Francisco, initiatives that significantly helped the artist’s precarious financial situation which was also affected by his health problems.



In 1928 Jawlensky began to suffer from rheumatoid arthritis and embarked on courses of treatment at various hospitals and spas with the aim of relieving his symptoms. In the early 1930s he worked on a series of still lifes that he returned to with greater intensity in 1935. These are compositions devoid of any anecdotal element, in which the artist created free associations between forms and colours with a more plastic than descriptive approach.

Alexei von Jawlensky
Meditation (Velázquez), 1936
Oil on paper laid down on cardboard
Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt, Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale)
INV. MOI02259
Photo: Punctum/Bertram Kober

This, however, was primarily the period of the Meditations and Jawlensky painted around 700 of them in just 4 years. As he wrote in his memoirs: "I have suffered from an extremely painful disease which gets worse every year. Little by little my arms and hands have become stiff and bent and I have terrible pain. This stiffness in my elbows

and wrists has tremendously hindered my painting and I have had to find a new technique.

My art in the last period has all been in small format, but my paintings have become even deeper and more spiritual, speaking purely through colour. As I felt that in the future, I would no longer be able to work, I obsessively created these Meditations of mine. And now I leave these small - but to me - important works to the future and to the people who love art."



In this series the human face experiences a final process of metamorphosis. The forms are reduced to the minimum, contrasting with the colour which retains an enormous expressive force. The tones become increasingly darker, often reddish-brown, applied with broad, dense brushstrokes and often completed with the pointed end of the brush or with a scraper that Jawlensky used to reveal the underlying weave of the canvas. The face, when still present, completely fills the pictorial surface but as the chin is truncated by the frame only a very reduced part of it remains visible, giving rise to a composition that fuses icon and cross. This can be seen, for example, in Meditation (known as Velázquez) and Large Meditation, both of 1936.

Alexei von Jawlensky
Large Meditation, 1936
Oil on cardboard
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź
INV. MS/SN/M/199
Photo: Museum Sztuki

With these works Jawlensky completed the evolving cycle of his work as if over the course of his career he had gradually shed any narrative and expressive content that might distract from the true essence of the painting and from the spiritual and ascetic quest that accompanied it. While the artist himself gave the Variations the additional title of "Songs without words", his granddaughter Angelica Jawlensky Bianconi referred to them as "Prayers without words."

THE CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue that reproduces all the works on display and includes a principal essay by its curator, Itzhak Goldberg, an art historian and leading expert on the artist's life and work. There are additional texts by Angelica Jawlensky Bianconi on the importance of music in the artist's work; by Angelika Affentranger-Kirchrath on Jawlensky's still lifes; and by Isabelle Jansen on parallels and divergences in the work of Jawlensky and Gabriele Münter. The publication is completed with a chronology of the artist's life illustrated with excerpts from his memoirs.

The version of the catalogue in Spanish is published by Fundación MAPFRE while the French version is produced by Gallimard.

PREPARE YOUR VISIT

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OPENING HOURS:

Mondays (except hollidays): 2 pm - 8 pm

Tuesday to Saturday: 11 am - 8 pm

Sunday and Hollidays: 11 am - 7 pm

AUDIOGUIDES

Availables in spanish and english, both in online access ("Bring your own device") as in audio device to rent at the hall

PREVENTING MEASURES AGAINST COVID-19

The exhibition halls and the conditions applied to visits are adapted to comply with the health protection measures established by the authorities to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The health and hygiene measures are:

- * Reduction of capacity.
- * Mandatory use of a mask
- * Keep social distancing.
- * Regular cleaning and disinfection.
- * Hydroalcoholic gel dispensers.

IMPORTANT:

The locker service is not available

Any drinks and food items will be confiscated before entering the exhibition area and cannot be recovered at the exit.

It will not be allowed to enter with backpacks, bags or other objects whose size might represent a safety risk to the items exhibited.