August Macke and Native American Imagery

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Although considered part of the German Expressionist movement, August Macke demonstrated relentlessly changing style and imagery in his search to represent paradise.[1] He was associated with almost every movement of his day, yet art historians have failed to discuss the development of primitivism in his work. As late as 1984 Donald Gordon summarily dismissed Macke's three major oil paintings of Native Americans as "a kind of 'Wild West' subject matter" in his essay for the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th-Century Art* at the Museum of Modern Art.[2] To redress this characterization and examine Macke's imagery in the context of the prevailing German cultural fascination with Native Americans is the objective of this paper.[3]

At the turn of the century, the concept of primitivism generally included African, Oceanic and Native American cultures. Few European artists incorporated images of Native Americans or motifs derived from their art.[4] Little, if any interest in American Indians' aesthetics and historical traditions is demonstrated by these artists. Macke, however, was attracted to the aspect of their Otherness, their allegedly primal dispositions and their intimacy with nature.[5] Macke sought out forms from his every day experiences to express the primitive.[6] He wrote that contemporary European movies, the cabaret and military marches were commensurate with primitive rituals and rites.[7] For Macke, as well as for most Germans, such public spectacles as well as ethnographic museums were means for viewing a primitive world no longer in existence, for by 1910, stereotypical images of Native Americans had become fully assimilated into German culture and urban life.[8] His representation of Native Americans is a mythic version of a European construct. Macke borrowed from long established European visual and literary images of America, a land and people that Europeans invented rather than discovered.

An immediate explanation for Macke's choice of primitive subject matter may be found in his association with *Der Blaue Reiter*. Each of Macke's three Native American paintings, *Indians on Horses* (Figure 1), *Riding Indians by a Tipi* (Figure 2) and *Indians* (Figure 3) date to 1911, the year that Macke first became involved with *Der Blaue Reiter*. Macke, however, was the only artist of the group to depict Native American imagery.

Macke's task for the first *Blaue Reiter* exhibition was to acquire ethnographic objects and to write an essay for *Der Blaue Reiter Almanac*. Among the artifacts displayed was a chieftain's

1 Janice McCullagh, *August Macke and the Vision of Paradise: An Iconographic Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1980) v.

2 Donald E. Gordon, "German Expressionism," ed. William Rubin, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, vol. 2 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984) 377.

3 The word "primitivism" is problematic in usage; the word itself is prejudicial. In this discussion, the term primitivism will refer to a modernist ideal and cultural construct in which references to anything non-European was a means for the artist to free himself from Western aesthetic traditions.

4 William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism," ed. William Rubin, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, vol. 1 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984) 3.

5 McCullagh 46. Several sketches of Indians occur; the earliest drawings are from a 1908 sketchbook. See McCullagh 48-53 for an interpretation of the American Indian in Macke's paintings.

6 Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 86.

7 Lloyd 86. Macke writes in *Die Masken* (translation from McCullagh 70): "In our complicated and confused era we have forms that absolutely enthrall everyone in exactly the same way as the fire dance enthralls the African or the mysterious drumming of the fakirs enthralls the Indian. As a soldier, the independent scholar stands beside the farmer's son. They both march in review similarly through the ranks, whether they like it or not. At the movies the professor marvels alongside the servant girl. In the vaudeville theater the butterfly-colored dancer enchants the most amorous couples as intensely as the solemn sound of the organ in a Gothic cathedral seizes both believer and unbeliever."

8 In 1895 the folk tradition of the Leipzig Fall Fair began to focus its celebration on Indians and the Wild West (Rudolf Conrad, "Mutual Fascination: Indians in Dresden and Leipzig," ed. Christian F. Feest, *Indians and Europe. An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* [Aachen: Edition Herodot, Rader Verlag, 1987] 464-465). The first Indian club was formed in Dresden in 1910. These clubs, in which members play acted as Indians, spread rapidly throughout Germany and are still active today (Christian F. Feest, "Europe's Indians," ed. James Clifton, *The Invented Indian. Cultural Fictions and Government Policies* [New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990] 327). The Dresden public seems to have been particularly affected by Indians (Lloyd 30, 115). During their Morizburg summers, members of *Die Brücke* cavorted about as Indians, playing with bows and arrows. Moreover, in 1910 patients of the Weisser Hirsch Sanatorium of Dresden dressed in Indian garb for a carnival.

cape from the Alaskan Tlingit tribe which was subsequently reproduced in the *Almanac*. References to Native Americans also appear in his essay, *Die Masken*, which celebrates the potent expression of primitive art forms.[9]

Although his affiliation with *Der Blaue Reiter* stimulated his interest in primitive art and attests to his interaction with ethnographic material, Macke's choice of Native American themes is most likely derived from childhood memories and popular German literature and culture. Born in 1877, Macke's favorite childhood activity was playing cowboys and Indians which was typical of European children of this period.[10]

James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* which appeared in Germany during a time of massive German emigration to America in the 1830s had a tremendous impact and spawned several German descendants. Left behind in Germany, relatives and friends of the immigrants were curious and anxious to know what their families faced in the New World; their most likely source of information was popular literature.

During the nineteenth century, books with American subject matter were more popular in Germany than anywhere else in Europe.[11] A new genre of illustrated "Wild West" adventure literature created by Europeans flooded the European bookshelves thrilling children and adults alike.[12] In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, over a thousand fictional books involving Native Americans were printed in Germany.[13]

Of all the Germanic writers of the American West, Karl May achieved the greatest popularity. May's influence on the German populace has been ranked with that of Goethe and Thomas Mann.[14] First published in 1875, May's frontier epics sold more than twenty-four million copies and are still printed today.[15] May's novels are the action-packed adventures of the Teutonic hero, Old Shatterhand, and his Germanized Apache sidekick, Winnetou. These tales of Western life are set in the time of the declining West. The Indians are portrayed as doomed to extinction, the noble victims of white civilization.

The painter, Georg Grosz, a contemporary of Macke's, who imaged America in his work, wrote of the tremendous influence of May's novels on his life.[16] Grosz describes a yearning for exotic adventures in America with Winnetou. For Macke also, America symbolized his land of dreams, a "paradise lost" of the Native American.[17] The "real" Indian was a remnant of America's past and could not exist in the technologically advanced present.

Macke's composition *Indians on Horses* (Figure 1) depicts the popularized literary image of the American Indian as a rapidly vanishing people unable to cope with the invasion of white civilization. The Indians, separated from the other bank by a deep chasm, look into a landscape with two prominent architectural structures, signifiers of civilization. Their view into the distance is blocked by the mountains, just as their natural way of life has been restricted and ultimately overshadowed by modern society.

Moreover, Macke has juxtaposed nature and the "civilized" world, updating a traditional European construct. By contrasting the Other against their own culture, Europeans could evaluate their culture in a positive or negative fashion. The image of the Indian was manipulated to suit Europeans and the political and philosophical climate of the time. A dichotomization of the Indian resulted. When threatening the life and morals of white civilization, the Indian became a brutal bloodthirsty sav-

9 Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 2, in Robert Motherwell and Jack D. Flam, Series Editors, *The Documents of Twentieth Century Art* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1982) 747.

10 McCullagh 22, 48; Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975) 245. Accounts abound of German children playing Indians. In the mid-19th century generic paper doll puppets of Indians were popular. By 1891 these cutouts showed quite distinctive ethnographic detail, distinguishing among Sioux, Comanches and Apaches. The Indian War of 1890 generated so much interest that cutouts were made with Indians on horseback as well as the opposing US Army troops. Additionally, painted lead or tin figures also representing battling Indians and American solders became popular toys. Perhaps an aftereffect of the novels and Wild West shows was the increasing numbers of European toys depicting Indians. A German response from 1891 to "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" also reflects the impact of the western novels (Peter Bolz, "Life Among the 'Hunkpapas': A Case Study in German Indian Lore," ed. Christian F. Feest, *Indians and Europe. An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* [Aachen: Edition Herodot, Rader Verlag, 1987] 481). "What would we have given in our own childhood days, when we pored over Ferry's 'Coureur de Bois' with glowing cheeks, to witness the romantic Indian figures in reality. Now that we have settled with our childhood dreams, comes this Colonel Cody, called Buffalo Bill, and floods us with all that we once so desired. Therefore, the rule of the day for anyone who wants to return to his childhood days or make his children happy is: Onward to the Friedenbaum! This show is truly an experience."

11 George R. Brooks, "The American Frontier in German Fiction," ed. John McDermott, *The Frontier Re-examined* (Urban: University of Illinois Press, 1967) 156.

12 Hugh Honour, *The European Vision of America* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975) 315.

13 Feest 316.

14 Richard H. Cracroft, "The American West of Karl May," *American Quarterly* XIX (1967): 249.

15 Honour, *The New Golden Land* 242.

16 Honour, *The New Golden Land* 242. Grosz wrote: "The reading of these books awakened in the youngster a yearning—that secretly exists in practically every German—for distant lands and exotic adventures. Yes, indeed, we certainly had a warm place in our hearts for our great, blond German-American hero, Old Shatterhand, who with one blow of a clenched fist could lay low a horse, not to mention a contemptible betrayer....[Winnetou] was one of the ideals of the German youth of my day. He actually became a national figure, even more famous than his renowned colleagues, Uncas and Chingachook, because there was something 'German' about him."

17 McCullagh 52-53. Macke quoted Goethe in a letter to his Uncle Bernard Koehler expressing his view of America as a better land than Europe.

age; when perceived as a dying race, the Indian became nostalgic and heroic.

Photographers, such as Edward S. Curtis, Gertrude Kasebier, Roland Reed, and Joseph Dixon at the turn of the century also wanted to capture the exoticism of Native Americans. These photographers saw themselves as virtual anthropologists and visual historians documenting a dying race. They, however, often disguised reality in that they attempted to recreate the history of the vanishing Native American they envisioned. Sentimental and romantic poses were staged, even to the point of requiring their subjects to disrobe or wear clothes that they deemed appropriate for Native Americans. The mythic Indian proved a more appealing image than a real one. The prevailing notion that the camera does not lie worked hand in hand to promote the popular nostalgic image of the Indian that perhaps never existed, except as a Western construct.

Curtis, whose work was distributed in Europe, exemplifies this group who idealized America's past.[18] His soft focus produced a romantic sensibility which combined with a primitivism to create stereotypical "Indianness."[19] Interestingly, several of Curtis' photographs show a similar imagery and composition to Macke's paintings, as *In Black Cañon—Apsaroke* of 1905.

Both Macke and Curtis subscribed to a post-Darwinian sentiment and scientific belief that North American Indians would become an extinct race. The presumed demise of the Native American was promoted to entice the European audience to traveling "Wild West" troupes. German crowds flocked to these attractions. From 1890 until 1914 as many as forty different "Wild West" shows patterned after Buffalo Bill's show travelled throughout Germany, enjoying tremendous popular acclaim and publicity.[20]

Motion pictures also made Indians an inescapable part of American culture. From 1903 through 1915 countless American western films focused on the most lurid tales of Native Americans. Silent films with suggestive titles such as the 1909 *The Half-Breed's Treachery* and 1912 *Broncho Billy and the Indian Maiden* were distributed throughout Germany to immense success.[21] The occasional "good Indian," a friend to the white man, was contrasted with more typical scenes of the bloodthirsty nature of the primitive savage. Indian portrayal broke down into four major themes: white women captured by Indians; the provocative Indian maiden; hostile Indians; and miscegenation.[22]

By the turn of the century, Native Americans could be found in major German cities performing in a variety of public attractions ranging from the sensational cabaret and circus acts to the ethnological exhibitions in *Völkerschauen*.[23] *Völkerschauen* generated much interest and enthusiasm for Native Americans in Germany. Typically, entire Native families came to Germany and re-created their lifestyle and environment in villages in the public zoological gardens.[24] Native Americans were displayed along with the wild animals in the zoo. Although praised for their educational value, these attractions also reinforced stereotypical imagery of the primitiveness of Native Americans. Carl Hagenbeck, famous for his ethnological displays, included Indian attacks on a stagecoach and a log cabin in his shows.[25] Frequently *Völkerschauen* Indians who had been separated from their original traveling troupes often joined other shows. This meant that there were Native Americans in inaccurate native attire performing activities not associated with their tribes.[26] Moreover, non-Indians were dressed and masked in Indian costumes to round out the troupe numbers for performances.[27]

The famous Sarrasani Circus of Dresden, noted for its spectacular and artistic performances, promoted ethnological shows with a collection of primitive peoples whose main attraction was the North American Indian.[28] Sarrasani stressed his purposes "to teach from real life" and to present "object-lessons in natural history."[29] Native Americans again performed as fighting warriors with their partially nude bodies decorated with bright paints in the Sarrasani arena. Sarrasani stated "Indians can ultimately be made with rouge and dyed feathers," but was quick to add that he "didn't want that. [I] wanted them for real and in person."[30]

18 Christopher M. Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions. Photographs of Indians by Edward S. Curtis* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982) 113.

19 Lyman 62, 76.

20 Bolz 483.

21 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) 20.

22 Raymond William Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian. Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982) 29, 40-41, 110, 157, 164, 258-260.

23 Lloyd x.

24 Feest, "Europe's Indians" 327; Lloyd x.

25 Bolz 483.

26 Wolfgang Haberland, "Nine Bella Coolas in Germany," ed. Christian F. Feest, *Indians and Europe. An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays* (Aachen: Edition Herodot, Rader Verlag, 1987) 353-356.

27 Haberland 353-354; Conrad 464.

28 Conrad 463-470. A published account of Sarrasani's circus events includes "caravans of Indians, Chinese, Japanese, negroes from the Sudan, Arabs, Moroccans, Boers and Eskimos; in his city prevailed a profusion of languages rivaling that of Babylon" (463).

29 Conrad 463.

30 Conrad 464. Buffalo Bill also emphasized the authenticity of his show as he purported to enact events "as they had occurred and been recorded in history" (Bolz 482). The first European performance of 1887 focused on the theme of the gradual march of civilization in America featuring "epochs of American history" (Richard Slotkin, "The Wild West," *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* [New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1981] 34). In the first epoch, Native Americans and wild animals inhabited

In *Riding Indians by a Tipi* (Figure 2) Macke presents a glimpse of an Indian village as "authenticated" by the popularized *Völkerschauen* and ethnological displays. Macke's snapshot view of an Indian village is vibrant with a life in harmony with nature. The environment is remote and pristine. Imagery of a nonagricultural existence and general simplicity of life created the impression of the Otherness of these people. Male figures on horseback fill the canvas with action and energy; two women and a child stand motionless next to a tepee. The males wear stereotypical feathered bonnets which were required native attire in the *Völkerschauen* or in "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," but highly unlikely to be seen in the everyday life of the Native American back home since they were worn only in ritual ceremonies. In painting "Indianness," Macke has misread Native American society. Macke's romanticized and stereotypical imagery comes directly from his own time and place.

In 1910, shortly before he painted his Native American compositions, Macke was part of an artistic circle that was interested in the popular culture. They met weekly to discuss art and literature and to experience cabarets, circuses, and movies.[31] Undoubtedly, Macke was aware of the attractions featuring Native Americans, if not an actual visitor. His travels to such capital cities as Berlin, Paris and London would also have promoted contact with the Indian road shows. Moreover, Macke's delight in the excitement and glitter of a big city's atmosphere would likely have made him familiar with the common attractions where exotic peoples were displayed. His well documented habits of visiting zoos may also have occasioned a glimpse of Native Americans who often performed there, as well as were housed there.

All of these shows stressed the desire and purpose to "educate" the public with their ethnographic authenticity. A careful reading of the performances in "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," the *Völkerschauen* and the circus demonstrates imperialist and Darwinist ideology of the period. The introductory remarks in Buffalo Bill's program exemplifies these beliefs: "the settlers of the West owe so much for the reclamation of the prairie from the savage Indian and the wild animals, who so long opposed the march of civilization."[32]

The Native American was the antithesis of the white man. Juxtaposing Native Americans to animals implied an inherent wildness of the American Indians who represented for European audiences a living exemplar of the "primitive" stage of their own evolution. Portraying them as violent also accentuated their barbarousness. Moreover, the inevitable defeat of the Indians in the performances, represented to the public the triumph of colonial conquest by a superior European civilization. Intellect and goodness defeated barbarism and evil. The imagery of these allegedly uncivilized peoples justified the imperialist invasion and colonization of their country. If the Indian tribes could not be assimilated, neither could they stand in the way of Manifest Destiny.[33] As portrayed in these public spectacles, the Indian's demise and death was inevitable and justifiable in the face of Western progress.

Perhaps the white viewer perceived the Native American as a model for other colonial enterprises. Just as the Native American was conquered and submitted to progressive Western civilization, so would other primitive cultures yield to colonialists' endeavors. Germany had extensive colonies in Africa and the Pacific. Colonial scandals erupted in 1906 and became an issue of intense and bitter debate in the general elections of 1907. This was followed by continuing colonial crises in 1911. Undoubtedly the display of Native Americans along with other primitive peoples provided propaganda for Germany's colonial policy and future foreign possessions.[34] The exhibitions of primitive peoples most likely validated the viewer's preconceived notions of primitivism and the rightness of bringing civilization to these "children of nature."

More than in the other compositions, the Native Americans in Macke's painting *Indians* (Figure 3) are an integral part of nature, upholding the belief that primitive peoples were at the beginning of our cultural evolution. Macke harmoniously envelopes the Native Americans in a "lost paradise" in a primal intimacy with the physical environment. *Indians* does not represent the dying race, but life primeval. Intermeshed with exotic vegetation and flowering plants, the Indians are empowered with a mystical, spiritual force. The Native American on the right, closes his eyes as his Indian companion gazes down,

the "Primeval Forest" untouched by the white man. Following epochs included the story of Pocahontas and the fight for the West. These acts featured Indian war dances, buffalo hunts and attacks on settlers and stagecoaches.

31 McCullagh 15, 84. Macke was an active member of the *Gereonsklub* in Cologne.

32 Slotkin 34.

33 Lyman 49. In the 1881 publication *First Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* an article entitled "Investigations Relating to the Cessions of Lands by Indian Tribes to the United States" expresses the implications of Manifest Destiny: "The great boon to the savage tribes of this country...has been the presence of civilization, which, under the laws of acculturation, has irresistibly improved their culture by substituting new and civilized for old and savage arts, new for old customs—in short, transforming savage into civilized life. The great body of the Indians of North America have passed through stages of culture in the last hundred years achieved by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors only by the slow course of events through a thousand years."

34 Slotkin 36-37, 42. Slotkin points out that "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" became more imperialistic and militaristic with time. Buffalo Bill changed the name of the show to include the "Congress of Rough Riders of the World." The conquering of the western frontier symbolized imperialist expansion. Contemporary conflicts such as the Boxer Rebellion and Spanish-American War were enacted along with the Western performances.

oblivious to the outsider who looks into their visionary world. Using a similar compositional strategy as in Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* a slanting tree separates both the outside world and the viewer as well. The viewer becomes a voyeur of this paradisiacal world or perhaps communes with nature and shares in its unifying forces.

Literature, ethnographic displays and the public appearances of Native Americans reaffirmed the Western construct of primitivism. Even in the early 20th century, America continued to symbolize a land without a civilized past as opposed to the cultural achievements of Europe's past. For Macke, this natural environment could only be inhabited by the Native American, whom he perceived as the embodiment of spiritual unity with the world in his simple primitive culture. The Native American expressed all that was pure and good in nature. Macke modernized the eternal myth of primeval paradise from the contemporary European composite image of the Native American, an image existing only in the mind of the viewer.

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Figure 1. August Macke, *Indians on Horses*, oil on wood, 44 x 60 cm., 1911, Lenbachhaus, München. In Rosel Gollek, Editor, *Der Blaue Reiter im Lenbachhaus München* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1982) Plate 276. Courtesy of Lenbachhaus, München.

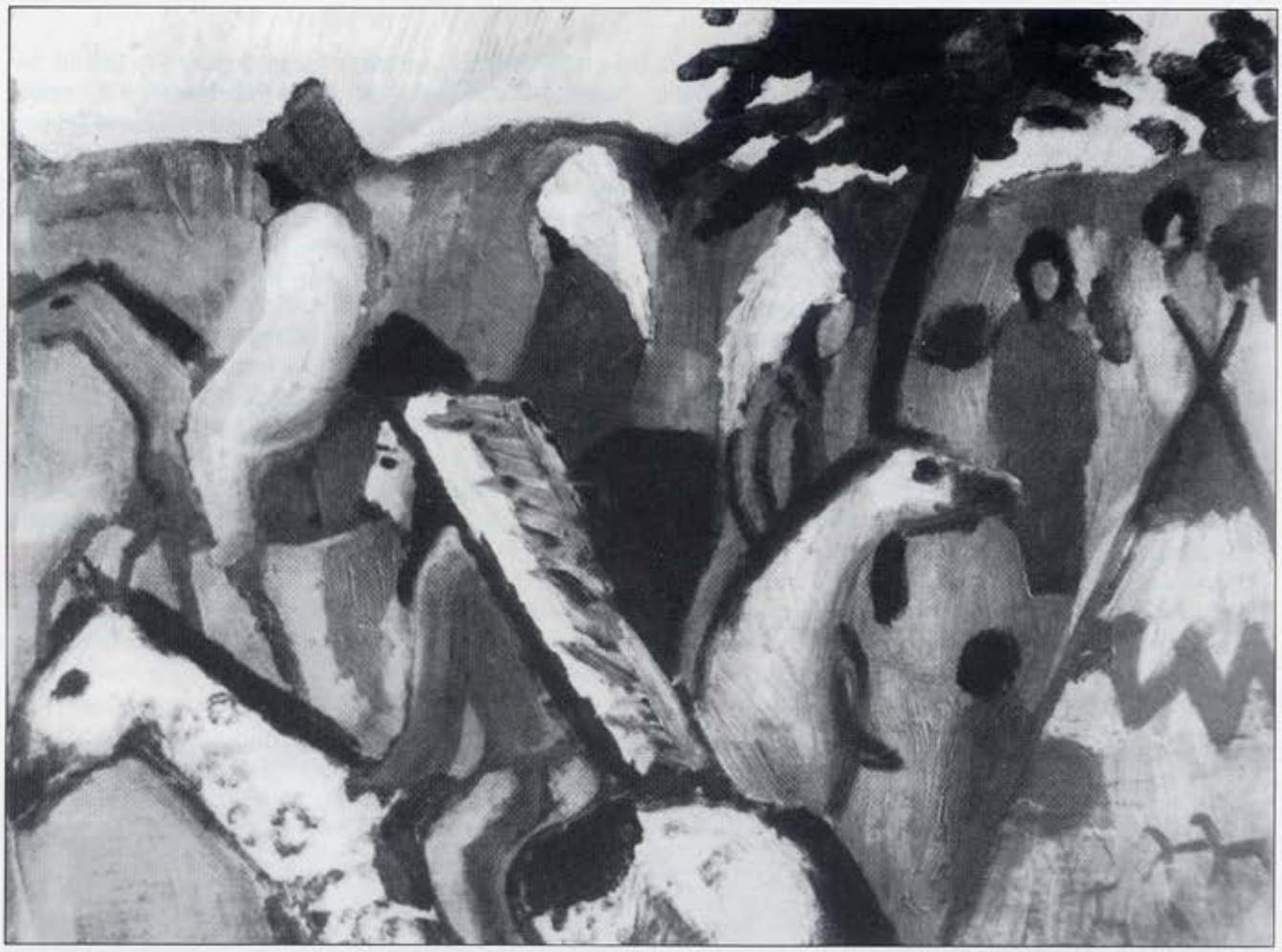

Figure 2. August Macke, *Riding Indians by a Tipi*, oil on wood, 26.5 x 35.5 cm, 1911, Lenbachhaus, München. In Rosel Gollek, Editor, *Der Blaue Reiter im Lenbachhaus München* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1982) Plate 275. Courtesy of Lenbachhaus, München.

Figure 3. August Macke, *Indians*, oil on canvas, 88 x 70 cm.,1911. Private Collection. In Ernst-Gerhard Güse, Editor, *August Macke: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen* (München: Bruckmann, 1986) Plate 69 on page 237. Courtesy of Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte.