

Wilhelm Lehmbruck Biography

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Biography

The German sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck (1881-1919) revitalized the image of the human figure in northern Europe. His particular innovation in treating the figure was his use of attenuated proportions.

Wilhelm Lehmbruck, the son of a miner, was born in Meidereich on Jan. 4, 1881. He studied at the School of Applied Arts in Düsseldorf (1895-1899). When his father died in 1899, Lehmbruck worked part time as a draftsman. In 1901 he entered the master class of Karl Janssen at the Düsseldorf Academy. Lehmbruck's work of this period thematically related to the naturalist literature of Émile Zola and Gerhart Hauptmann, and he depicted the urban industrial worker.

The 1904 International Art Exhibition in Düsseldorf included many sculptures by Auguste Rodin, which had an immediate impact on Lehmbruck's work. He began to concentrate almost exclusively on the female form, executing portraits, nudes, and mother and child groups. When the government purchased his *Bather* (1905), Lehmbruck was able to travel to Italy. On his return the following year, he completed his education at the Düsseldorf Academy and continued to model the female form, now exploring the more fragmented image.

The major change in Lehmbruck's style came as a result of his stay in Paris (1910-1914), interrupted only by another visit to Italy in 1912. He exhibited at the Salon d'Automne (1910) and the Salon des Indépendants (1911/1912). During this period his figures began to assume their characteristic elongated proportions, best represented by the *Kneeling Woman* (1911) and *Standing Youth* (1913). But Lehmbruck did not direct his interest only to Gothic attenuations, for he simultaneously examined in greater detail the possibilities of the incomplete figure. His compositions also reveal his interest in exaggerated gesture and in kneeling, standing, and bending poses, which express his desire to transform the nude from academic artifice to relevant image.

Lehmbruck returned to Germany in 1914, and he continued to refine those artistic problems first stated in his Parisian works. The increasing interiorization of his figures and the more reflective and inward-turning poses betray his own anxiety about World War I. And while his sculpture attempts to state a more universal image of reflection, even despair, it is in Lehmbruck's drawings that one sees the greater affinities with the German expressionist painters. He committed suicide in Berlin on March 25, 1919.