

Ludwig Meidner, “To All Artists, Musicians, Poets” (January 1919)

Abstract

Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966) was an important Expressionist painter and writer and a member of the artistic avant-garde of the Weimar Republic. After the First World War, he was temporarily involved in the revolutionary November Group and the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* in Berlin. The following text, in which Meidner calls on artists to support the socialist revolution in Germany, was published in January 1919 in the journal *Das Kunstblatt*, published by art historian Paul Westheim. It documents Meidner’s ultimately short-lived turn to socialism, which his emotionally formulated text portrays a beacon of hope for a fairer society.

Source

So that we no longer have to be ashamed before the heavens, we must finally get busy and help establish a just order in government and society.

We artists and poets must join in the first ranks.

There can be no more exploiters and exploited!

It can no longer be the case that a huge majority must live in the most miserable, disgraceful, and degrading conditions, while a tiny minority eat like animals at an overflowing table. We must commit ourselves to socialism: to a general and unceasing socialization of the means of production, which gives each man work, leisure, bread, a home, and the intimation of a higher goal. Socialism must be our new creed!

It must rescue both: the poor out of the humiliation of servitude, oppression, brutality, and malice—and the rich it will deliver forever more from merciless egotism, from their greed and harshness.

Let a holy solidarity ally us painters and poets with the poor! Have not many among us also known misery and the shame of hunger and material dependence?! Do we have a much better and more secure position in society than the proletariat?! Are we not like beggars dependent upon the whims of the art-collecting bourgeoisie!

If we are still young and unknown, they throw us alms or leave us silently to die.

If we have a name, then they seek to divert us from the pure goals with money and vain desires. And when we are finally in the grave, then their ostentatiousness covers our undefiled works with mountains of gold coins—painters, poets, composers, be ashamed of your dependence and cowardice and join as a brother with the expelled, outcast, ill-paid menial!

We are not workers, no. Ecstasy, rapture—passion is our daily work. We are free and knowing and must, like guiding banners, wave before our strong brothers.

Painters, poets [...] who other than we should then fight for the just cause?! In us the world conscience still throbs powerfully. Ever anew the voice of God breathes fire into our rebellious fists.

[...]

Painters, poets! let us make common cause with our intimidated, defenseless brothers, for the sake of the spirit.

The worker respects the spirit. He strives with powerful zeal for knowledge and learning.

The bourgeois is irreverent. He loves only dalliance and aesthetically embellished stupidities and hates and fears the spirit—because he feels that he could be unmasked by it.

The bourgeois knows only one freedom, his own—namely to be able to exploit others. That is the pale terror that goes about silently, and millions collapse and wither early.

The bourgeois knows no love—only exploitation and fraud. Arise, arise to battle against the ugly beast of prey, the booty-hungry, thousand-headed emperor of tomorrow, the atheist and Anti-Christ!

Painters, architects, sculptors, you whom the bourgeois pays high wages for your work—out of vanity, snobbery, and boredom—listen: on this money sticks the sweat and blood and life juices of thousands of poor, overexerted people—listen: that is an unclean profit.

[...]

Listen further: we must take our conviction seriously, the new wondrous belief. We must join with the workers' party, the decisive, unequivocal party.

[...]

Socialism is at stake—that means: justice, freedom, and human love at stake—at stake, God's order in the world!

Source: Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 175–76.

Source of original German text: Ludwig Meidner, "An alle Künstler, Dichter, Musiker," in *Das Kunstblatt* 1 (Januar 1919), pp. 29–30.

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