Ludwig Meidner, "An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis," *Kunst und Künstler*, 1914*

In November 1912 the Sturm exhibition of the "Pathetiker," the group Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966) formed with Richard Janthun and Jakob Steinhardt, brought Meidner significant attention from the press. While much of it was hostile, the notices from the critics and poets associated with Expressionism were laudatory. Meidner's Berlin studio soon became a focal point for a number of young poets and painters, among them Conrad Felixmüller, Wieland Herzfelde, and George Grosz. Meidner's drawings (fig. 14) and prints appeared in *Der Sturm*, *Die Aktion*, *Die Weissen Blätter*, and other Expressionist periodicals.

In this essay, written for an issue of *Kunst und Künstler* devoted to statements from contemporary artists (Heckel and Macke among them) about their goals, Meidner urges artists to focus on the urban environment to find new techniques and subject matter. Influenced by the Italian Futurists as well as the French Cubist Robert Delaunay, Meidner explains that the modern artist has to use creative techniques such as emotive colors, geometric constructions, and diagonal lines to capture the vitality and complexity of the metropolis. Meidner's essay forecasts the emphasis on urban life that would dominate the painterly and graphic output of late Expressionism.

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The time has come at last to start painting our real homeland, the metropolis that we all love so much. Our feverish hands should race across countless canvases, let them be as large frescoes, sketching the glorious and

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the fantastic, the monstrous and the dramatic—streets, railroad stations, factories, and towers.

A few pictures of the '70s and '80s represented big-city streets. They were painted by Pissarro or Claude Monet, two lyricists who belonged out in the country with trees and bushes. The sweetness and softness of these agrarian painters can also be seen in their cityscapes. But should you paint strange and grotesque structures as gently and transparently as you paint streams; boulevards like flower beds?

We cannot solve our problems by using Impressionist techniques. We have to forget all earlier methods and devices and develop a completely new means of expression.

First: we must learn how to see more intensely and more honestly than our predecessors. We cannot use the vagueness and fuzziness of Impressionism. Traditional perspective inhibits our spontaneity and is meaningless for us. "Tonality," "colored light," "colored shadows," "the dissolving of contours," "complementary colors," and all the rest of it are now academic ideas. Second—and this is just as important: we must begin to create. We can't simply carry our easel into the middle of a furiously busy street in order to read off blinking "tonal values." A street isn't made out of tonal values but is a bombardment of whizzing rows of windows, of screeching lights between vehicles of all kinds and a thousand jumping spheres, scraps of human beings, advertising signs, and shapeless colors.

It is emphatically not a question of filling an area with decorative and ornamental designs à la Kandinsky or Mattisse. It is a question of life in all its fullness: space, light and dark, heaviness and lightness, and the movement of things—in short, of a deeper insight into reality.

Above all, three things help us to structure a picture: light, point of view, and the use of the straight line.

Our next problem is how to use light—but not exclusively because we don't react to light as the Impressionists did. They saw light everywhere; they distributed brightness over the entire picture; even their shadows were bright and transparent. And Cézanne went even further. He created a hovering solidity that gave his pictures that Great Truth.

We don't perceive light everywhere in nature; we often see, close up, large planes which seem unité and motionless; here and there we feel weight, darkness, and static matter. The light seems to flow. It shreds things to pieces. Quite clearly we experience light scraps, light streaks, and light beams. Whole groups undulate in light and appear to be transparent—yet in their midst, rigidity, opacity in broad masses. Between high rows of houses a tumult of light and dark blinds us. Simple planes of light rest on walls. Light explodes over a confused jumble of buildings. . . .

The focal point is vital for the composition. It is the most intense part of the picture and the climax of the design. It can be located anywhere, at the center, right or left from the center, but for compositional reasons one generally puts it a little below the center of the picture. You should also make sure that all things in the focal point are clear, sharp, and unystmnical. In the focal point we see those lines which are upright as vertical. The farther these lines are from the focal point the more these lines become diagonal. For example, if we stand looking straight ahead in the middle of the street the buildings at the end of the street all appear to be perpendicular with their windows corresponding to ordinary perspective. But the houses next to us—we see them with only half an eye—they seem to totter and collapse. Here lines, although actually parallel, shoot up, steeply cutting across each other. Gables, smokestacks, windows are dark, chaotic masses, fantastically foreshortened and ambiguous.

In the focal point area use a small brush and paint short, violent lines. They must all hit the mark! Paint very nervously, but as you get closer to the edge of the picture paint in a more broad and general fashion.

Formerly people kept saying: there are no straight lines in nature, free nature is unmathematical. People had no use for the straight line and Whistler dissolved it into many small parts. . . .

But modern artists are the contemporaries of the engineer. We see beauty in straight lines and geometric forms. Incidentally, the modern movement of Cubism has a pronounced preference for geometric forms. In fact they consider these to be more important than we do.

Our straight lines—especially those used in prints—should not be confused with the lines which master masons make with T-squares on their plans. Don't be fooled. A straight line is not cold and static! You need only draw it with real feeling and observe closely its course. It can be first thin and then thicker and filled with a gentle, nervous quivering.

Are not our big-city landscapes all battlefields filled with mathematical shapes. What triangles, quadrilaterals, polygons, and circles rush out at us in the streets. Straight lines rush past us on all sides. Many-pointed shapes stab at us. Even people and animals trotting about appear to us as so many geometric constructions.

Take a big pencil and cover a sheet with vigorously drawn straight lines. This confusion, given a little artistic order, will be much more vital than the pretentious little brushings of our professors.

There isn't much that has to be said about color. Take back all the colors of the palette—but when you paint Berlin use only white and black, a little ultramarine and ochre, and a lot ofumber. Don't bother about "cold" or "warm" tones, about "complementary colors" and such humbug—you aren't Divisionists—but let yourself go—free, uninhibited, and without a care in the world. What really matters is that tomorrow hundreds of
young painters, full of enthusiasm, throw themselves into this new area of expression. I have offered only a few suggestions and ideas here. One could just as well do it in a different way, perhaps better and more convincingly. But the metropolis has to be painted!

The Futurists have already pointed this out in their manifestos—not in their shabby goods—and Robert Delaunay three years ago inaugurated our movement with his grand visions of the “Tour Eiffel.” In the same year, in several experimental paintings and in a few more successful drawings, I put into practice what I advocate here in theory. And all the younger painters should get to work immediately and flood all our exhibitions with pictures of the metropolis.

Unfortunately, all kinds of atavistic ideas confuse people these days. The stammerings of primitive races have impressed some of the young German painters and nothing seems more important to them than Bushman painting and Aztec sculpture. Some also echo the pompous speeches of sterile Frenchmen about “absolute painting,” “the picture,” etc. But let’s be honest! Let’s admit that we are not Negroes or Christians of the early Middle Ages! That we are inhabitants of Berlin in the year 1913, that we sit in cafes and argue, we read a lot and know quite a bit about art history; and we all have developed out of Impressionism! Why then imitate the mannerisms and points of view of past ages, why proclaim incapacity a virtue? Are these crude and shabby figures that we now see in all the exhibits really an expression of the complicated spirit of modern times?

Let’s paint what is close to us, our city world! the wild streets, the elegance of iron suspension bridges, gas tanks that hang in white-cloud mountains, the roaring colors of buses and express locomotives, the rushing telephone wires (aren’t they like music?), the harlequinade of advertising pillars, and then night... big city night... 

Wouldn’t the drama of a well-painted factory smokestack move us more deeply than all of Raphael’s “Borgo Fires” and Battles of Constantine?