

**Kirchner, Ernst, *Modern Bohemia*, Acc. #55.3
German, 1880 - 1938
Gallery 337, Accession 55.3**



In *Modern Bohemia* Kirchner depicts his concept of the ideal creative environment. In this environment is everything needed to be creative: in the background the artist sits in his Adam and Eve carved chair; in the left lower corner is a pink nude; in the upper right is an African sculpture; the woman in the white long coat is an observer; to her right is an author. By combining nude figures with studio settings, Kirchner evoked the frank spontaneity and bohemian sensuality so admired by all the Brücke painters

Gallery Label:

In 1906, Kirchner co-founded the Dresden expressionist group known as Die Brücke (The Bridge), an avant-garde movement that investigated the realities and fantasies of a life lived with freedom, intensity, and eroticism. Modern and non-western arts were the means of their exploration—with study of the nude at the center of their practice. Kirchner brings all these elements together in *Modern Bohemia*—a depiction of his lodgings in Switzerland—to express the ideal creative environment. The forms of artist, author, nude, and female spectator are united with those of Caucasian carpets and sculptural objects inspired by tribal art in a complex balance of form, pattern and

color. The artist's modulation of color intensity and placement of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes evoke a woven surface effect that firmly places this painting in what is known as Kirchner's "tapestry" period.

From artsmia.org:

In 1906, Kirchner co-founded the Dresden expressionist group known as Die Brücke (The Bridge), an avant-garde movement that investigated the realities and fantasies of a life lived with freedom, intensity, and eroticism. Modern and non-western arts were the means of their exploration—with study of the nude at the center of their practice. Kirchner brings all these elements together in *Modern Bohemia*—a depiction of his lodgings in Switzerland—to express the ideal creative environment. The forms of artist, author, nude, and female spectator are united with those of Caucasian carpets and sculptural objects inspired by tribal art in a complex balance of form, pattern and color. The artist's modulation of color intensity and placement of horizontal and vertical brushstrokes evoke a woven surface effect that firmly places this painting in what is known as Kirchner's "tapestry" period.

From class lecture on 3/23/2011:

Regarding *Modern Bohemia*: All of the figures are isolated. The carpets are tipped up; different perspectives. The MIA Mali two figure sculpture is the basis for the orange table on the right. The artist is seated like the Camaroon throne figure.

The Nazis confiscated 100s of Kirchner's paintings and displayed them in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. As part of Nazi propaganda, comments were written on the walls surrounding the art, indicating why it was decaying to society and created by degenerate minds. The works were viewed by thousands, and had a devastating effect on the artists (and lead to Kirchner's suicide).

From the Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin:

Kirchner's *Modern Bohemia*, received by the Institute as one of several important bequests to American museums by the late Court Valentin, as a large canvas of a studio interior with four figures—a writer, artist, model, and perhaps, patron hostess—representing an artistic circle intimate of the period following World War I. Elaborate in detail and resplendent in color, it brings together many of the elements of the German Expressionist style which the artist helped introduce as a member of the Brücke group before the war in Germany and which he developed further as the basis of his personal style as an artist working alone after 1914. Expressionism is a term first used in 1911 by artists of *Der Blaue Reiter*, a Munich group which emphasized inner experience and imaginative vision for the subject matter of art in opposition to the impressionist approach of recording the outer world. As early as 1905 in Dresden, however, students of the Technische Hochschule organized themselves into Die Brücke, the first of the Expressionist avant-garde groups whose members, deeply interested in a new basis of pictorial form, sought their themes in the life around them and concentrated their efforts

on bringing out observed character through boldly simplified and exaggerated forms and unnatural combinations of color rather than using their subjects as a starting point for independent fantasy. Within this circle of resolute young artists, rebelling against the conventional symbol and story painting of the time and the prevalent taste for refinement in art, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner played a key role. He enrolled as an architecture student at the Dresden Technical School in 1901 at the age of 21. There he painted on the side, continued a boyhood interest in printmaking, and meeting the students Fritz Bleyl, Otto Heckel, and Karl Schmitt-Rottluff, began with them to explore theories of color, the art of the Pacific Islands, the techniques of printmaking, and the work of the Post-Impressionists as a basis for a completely new approach to art. To their subsequent five years' work and association in Dresden and three in Berlin under the Banner of Die Brücke, Kirchner made the most important contribution: his successful search for freedom of form within a closed composition leading the liberation of pictorial representation from the tyranny of perspective, the grand scale simplicity of his seeing, which showed the way to a deeper perception of essential character and form, and a new vitality of expression—elements that became permanent features of the German Expressionist tradition. The picture *Modern Bohemia* was painted in 1924, eleven years after the Brücke was dissolved and a decade after a physical and mental breakdown caused the artist's discharge from the German army and forced him to spend the rest of his life as a convalescent in or near sanatoria in Switzerland. From the original French title, "Bohème Moderne," exaggerated concentration of the writer at his books, the mock-serious pose of the model, and the lavish interior furnishings, one can believe that Kirchner was amused by his theme, so different from the lean bohemian existence of the Brücke group in the years before the war. Whether this is true or not, the painting presents, in their most mature form, essential aspects of the style which have established the artist's revolutionary importance in modern German art. The composition is conceived as a semi-montage with the main figures and surroundings arranged independently of their natural spatial relationships. Perspective is sacrificed to the broad ornamental design of the picture surface and the colors exaggerate or completely defy natural appearance. Within this scheme the artist concentrated upon the features, actions, and attitudes of his subjects in a way which emphasizes what he feels to be their intrinsic character both within themselves and the chosen setting. The resulting work of art has a formal grandeur as a whole and an incisiveness of character in its individual parts that carries to high articulation the Expressionist ideal of representing the world independent of its conventional appearance and through forms conceived and regulated through inner experience.

Referenced Works of Art
1. *Modern Bohemia* (detail). Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1924. Oil on canvas. Bequest of Curt Valentin. Writers and poets were constant associates of artist in European avant-garde circles before and after World War I.

2. *Modern Bohemia* Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880-1938), 1924. Oil on canvas 49" x 64". Bequest of Curt Valentin. A resonantly articulated pictorial composition presenting through freely arranged and brilliantly colored forms the surroundings and dramatis personae of a European artist's studio shortly after World War I.

The following is taken from The Art Story Foundation:

www.theartstory.org

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was one of the driving forces in the Die Brücke group that flourished in Dresden and Berlin before WWI, and he has come to be seen as one of the most talented and influential of all Germany's Expressionists. Motivated by the same anxieties that gripped the movement as a whole - fears about humanity's place in the modern world, its lost feelings of spirituality and authenticity - Kirchner had conflicting attitudes to the past and present. An admirer of Albrecht Dürer, he revived the old art of woodblock printing, and saw himself in the German tradition, yet he rejected academic styles and was inspired by the modern city. After the war, illness drove him to settle in Davos, Switzerland, where he painted many landscapes, and, ultimately, he found himself ostracized from the mainstream of German art. When the Nazis rose to power in the early 1930s he was also a victim of their campaign against "Degenerate Art". Depressed, and ill, he eventually committed suicide.

Key Ideas

- The human figure was central to Kirchner's art. It was vital to the pictures that took his studio as their backdrop - pictures in which he captured models posing as well as aspects of his bohemian life. For Kirchner, the studio was an important nexus where art and life met. But the figure also informed his images of Berlin, in which the demeanor of figures in the street often seems more important than the surrounding cityscape. And, most commonly, he depicted the figure in movement, since he believed that this better expressed the fullness and vitality of the human body.
- Kirchner's Expressionistic handling of paint represented a powerful reaction against the Impressionism that was dominant in German painting when he first emerged. For him, it marked a reaction against the staid civility of bourgeois life. He would always deny that he was influenced by other artists, yet Henri Matisse and Edvard Munch were clearly important in shaping his style. Fauvism was particularly significant in directing his palette, encouraging him to use flat areas of unbroken, often unmixed color, and simplified forms.
- Kirchner believed that powerful forces - enlivening yet also destructive - dwelt beneath the veneer of Western civilization, and he believed that creativity offered a means of harnessing them. This outlook shaped the way in which he depicted men and women in his pictures, people who often seem at war with themselves or their environment. It also encouraged his interest in Primitive art, in particular that of the Pacific Islands, for he considered that this work offered a more direct picture of those elemental energies. Primitive art was also important in directing Kirchner to a more simplified treatment of form. Primitive sculpture undoubtedly inspired his own approach to the medium, and his love of rough-hewn, partially painted surfaces.

Early training

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was born on May 6, 1880 in Aschaffenburg, Bavaria, and began studying architecture at the Dresden Technical High School in 1901 at the encouragement of his parents. While attending classes, he became close friends with Fritz Bleyl, who shared his radical outlook on art and nature. During this time, Kirchner chose to dedicate himself to fine art rather than architecture.

In 1905, Kirchner and Bleyl, along with fellow architecture students Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel, founded the artist group Die Brücke ("The Bridge"). The aim was to eschew traditional academic style and to create a new mode of artistic expression, forming a "bridge" between classical motifs of the past and present avant-garde. Die Brücke expressed extreme emotion through crude lines and a vibrant, unnatural color palette. The group would meet in an old butcher's shop that served as Kirchner's studio to practice figure drawing. (Studio meetings, however, would often devolve into casual lovemaking and general nudity.) Much of the artwork created by Die Brücke was a direct response to the graphic work of Albrecht Dürer and the bold color palette of the Neo-Impressionists. Kirchner held a particular interest in the wood carvings of Dürer, and sought to modernize them with his own unique style of pared down lines and dynamic compositions.

Mature Period

In 1906 Kirchner and Die Brücke held their first group exhibition in a lamp factory. The female nude, inspired by late night studio meetings, was the primary subject of the exhibition. Kirchner's woodcut print, *Nude Dancers (Nackte Tänzerinnen)*, exemplifies the energetic tone of the exhibition. The crude, graphic lines depict naked women dancing on a stage. Die Brücke ended in 1913 with Kirchner's publication of *Chronik der Brücke (Brücke chronicle)*, focusing on the "freedom of life and of movement against the long-established older forces."

Thereafter Kirchner desired to establish his own identity as an artist. He developed an interest in industrialization and the alienation experienced by individuals in cities. Gradually, he turned his attention away from the female nude and toward the Berlin streets with the creation of the *Großstadtbilder* series in 1915. These paintings focus on the energetic life of modern Berlin, as he observed the changing political situation of WWI and its impact on German culture. Kirchner depicted crowds of people with bold, expressive brushstrokes and in brash colors of blue, green, orange, and pink. Perspective was often skewed, the figures looming and teetering either toward or away from the picture plane, a rejection of the academic conventions learned in his architecture courses.

Late years and death

Kirchner voluntarily joined the military in 1915, though he was released shortly after due to a nervous breakdown. He recovered in several Swiss hospitals between 1916 and 1917. Scarred by his military experience, in 1918 he moved to a farmhouse in the Alps, near Davos, where his new residence inspired a series of mountain landscapes.

His reputation as a leading German Expressionist continued to grow with exhibitions in Switzerland and Germany in the 1920s. His first monograph and catalog of graphic works were published in 1926. He was commissioned to create several murals in the Folkwang Museum in 1927, and in 1928 was invited to take part in the Venice Biennale. In 1931, as his success continued, Kirchner became a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts.

In 1933, however, German Nazis branded Kirchner a "degenerate artist", forcing him to resign from the Berlin Academy of Arts. Over 600 of his works were detained or destroyed by the Nazi regime. The traumatic impact of these events led to his suicide on July 15, 1938.

Legacy

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a leading force behind the Expressionist movement in Germany. Since 1913, his work has gained international recognition, extending its popularity into America. His art captures German culture at a critical point in pre-WWI history. Although his work speaks to a specific culture, his expressive skill as a painter and printmaker has influenced generations. Many attempt to emulate Kirchner's distorted sense of perspective. The graphic, agitated lines and highly-keyed color palette are timeless and distinct to the artist. Kirchner's work continues to be exhibited and sold around the world. It has also been a significant influence on new generations of Expressionists, including artists such as Georg Baselitz and Jörg Immendorf.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's main influencers:

ARTISTS

- Albrecht Durer
- Edvard Munch
- Rembrandt
- Vincent Van Gogh
- Henri Matisse

CRITICS/FRIENDS

- Erich Heckel
- Karl Schmidt-Rottluff
- Fritz Bleyl

MOVEMENTS

- Symbolism
- Fauvism

- Oceanic Art
- Buddhist Painting
- Primitive Art

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
Years Worked: 1902 - 1938

The people and ideas that he influenced in turn:

ARTISTS

- Willem De Kooning
- Georg Baselitz
- Jorg Immendorff

CRITICS/FRIENDS

- Erich Heckel
- Otto Mueller
- Karl Schmidt-Rottluff

MOVEMENTS

- Expressionism
- Abstract Expressionism

Quotes

"A painter paints the appearance of things, not their objective correctness, in fact he creates new appearances of things."

"My paintings are allegories not portraits."

"The heaviest burden of all is the pressure of the war and the increasing superficiality. It gives me incessantly the impression of a bloody carnival. I feel as though the outcome is in the air and everything is topsy-turvy.. All the same, I keep on trying to get some order in my thoughts and to create a picture of the age out of confusion, which is after all my function."

From Stokstad (p. 1070):

"Die Brücke", or The Bridge took its name from a passage in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that spoke of contemporary humanity's potential to be the evolutionary "bridge" to a more perfect being of the future. The artists hoped that The

Bridge would become a gathering place for “all revolutionary and surging elements,” in opposition to the dominant culture, which they saw as pale, overbred, and decadent,” according to written testimony from one of the leaders. Among their favorite motifs were nudes in nature. The style is purposefully simple and direct, and is a good example of Modernist Primitivism, which drew its inspiration from the non-Western arts of Africa, Pro-Columbian America and Oceania. The bold stylization typical of such art offered a compelling alternative to the sophisticated illusionism that the Modern artists rejected, and it also provided them formal models to adapt. Many Modernists also believed that immersion in non-Western aesthetics gave them access to a more authentic state of being, uncorrupted by civilization and filled with primal spiritual energies. Nudism was also a growing cultural trend in Germany in those years, as city-dwellers forsook the urban environment to frolic outdoors and reconnect with nature.

Information compiled by Lin Stein