



KIRCHNER

EXPRESSIONISM AND THE CITY
DRESDEN AND BERLIN 1905-1918

KIRCHNER

EXPRESSIONISM AND THE CITY
DRESDEN AND BERLIN 1905–1918

Sackler Wing
28 June – 21 September 2003

Supported by the RA Exhibition Patrons Group

An Introduction to the Exhibition
for Teachers and Students

Written by Nina Miall
Education Department
© Royal Academy of Arts 2003

Designed by Maggi Smith
Printed by Burlington

© for works by E.L. Kirchner by Ingeborg & Dr. Wolfgang Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/Bern

On the cover:
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
The Street, 1913
Oil on canvas
120.6 × 91.1 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 1939
Photo © 2002 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Cat. 1
Self-portrait with Pipe, 1905
Woodcut, 9,7 × 18,5 cm
Brücke-Museum, Berlin
Photo © Brücke-Museum, Berlin

It was lucky that our group was composed of genuinely talented people, whose characters and gifts, even in the context of human relations, left them with no other choice but the profession of artist...The way this aspect of our everyday surroundings developed, from the first painted ceiling in the first Dresden studio to the total harmony of rooms in each of our studios in Berlin, was an uninterrupted logical progression, which went hand in hand with our artistic developments in paintings, print and sculpture... and the first thing for the artists was free drawing from the free human body in the freedom of nature.

E. L. Kirchner, writing in his diary in 1923

INTRODUCTION

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) is widely acknowledged as the greatest artist of German Expressionism. Energetic and emotive, Kirchner's work is characterised by a bold use of colour, dynamic, often angular forms and a primitive vitality. In paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings, Kirchner sought to capture the inner experience of modern urban living – from colourful cabaret scenes to the lonely, alienating streets of the bustling metropolis – with a heightened expressiveness and penetrating intensity.

Kirchner's early years were spent studying architecture in Dresden where he became the leading spirit behind the artists' group Die Brücke ('The Bridge'). The Brücke group worked closely together in Kirchner's bohemian studio space, drawing freely from the nude and formulating radical ideas for a new art. In 1911, the Brücke artists moved to the more exciting, fast-paced city of Berlin, where their work became fascinated with the theme of the individual in the large city. Responding to the stimulating climate of the capital, Kirchner and the other members of the group began to explore different artistic directions. This led first to disagreements and eventually resulted in the group's formal dissolution. (The split was so acrimonious that Kirchner dissociated himself from Die Brücke for the rest of his life, later dismissing his work of that time as 'the nonsense of youth'.)

In his later years, Kirchner often wrestled with the complex relationship between art and life, a troubling preoccupation that deepened into a personal crisis against the backdrop of the First World War. Enlisted as an 'unwilling volunteer' in 1915, he was posted to Halle where he suffered a severe physical and psychological breakdown. He was forced to spend extended periods of time recuperating in clinics, first in Germany, where he produced some of his most powerful and graphic indictments against war, and then later in Switzerland. Sadly, Kirchner remained in fragile mental health and, after being declared 'degenerate' by the Nazis in 1937 and suffering ostracism in his native Germany, he finally committed suicide a few days after his 58th birthday.

Focusing on Kirchner's most creative and innovative years – between 1905 and 1918 – this exhibition explores how the dynamic, celebratory spirit of his Dresden scenes evolves into the darker, dramatic mood of the works painted in Berlin, and ends with a selection of haunting works from the beginning of the First World War. Including some hundred artworks in a variety of media (many from the dedicated Brücke-Museum in Berlin), it will be the first major retrospective of Kirchner's work in this country.

THE ORIGINS OF GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

'Up to the outbreak of the First World War, a new, modern kind of art emerged all over Europe. Germany's contribution to this many-sided development was Expressionism.'

Magdalena M. Moeller, Director of the Brücke-Museum in Berlin

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a disenchantment with old-fashioned academic styles of painting prompted a flurry of experimentation and innovation among artists all over Europe. These artists were searching for a new mode of expression that would respond honestly to the *zeitgeist* ('spirit of the time') and would convey their personal experience of the modern world – an exciting and vital place of advancing technology, expanding cities and increasing pace. Looking back, the poet Johannes R. Becher, wrote: 'We were possessed. In cafés, on the streets, in our studios,

‘The most recent movement in painting...seeks to simplify and intensify the forms of expression, to achieve new rhythms and colourfulness, to create in decorative or monumental forms...the movement [is] known as Expressionism.’

Catalogue preface for the Sonderbund exhibition held in Cologne in 1912

‘Visual art should give images, not impressions; instead of rapid impressions it should give deepened expression and intensification of being.’

Hermann Obrist, founder of an art school Kirchner attended in Munich

‘After the Gauguin exhibition, non-Western sources became for Kirchner the essential raw material for the ultimate attainment of a personal style.’

Donald Gordon,

‘Kirchner in Dresden’ article, 1966

day and night...poets, painters and musicians all working together to create “the art of the century”, an incomparable art towering timelessly over the art of all past centuries.’

In Italy, the Futurists reacted by celebrating technology and speed in dynamic compositions that often involved moving mechanical elements, while in France, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque suggested the dislocation of modern life by fragmenting forms in pictorial experiments which would later be given the name Cubism. At the same time in Germany, this impulse towards artistic experimentation yielded a surprisingly unified response in the form of Expressionism.

An influential art movement which emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century, German Expressionism reacted against the cold and austere classicism of the historical painting that had dominated the nineteenth century. Instead, it advocated a highly emotional and subjective response to modern, urban stimuli and strived above all to reveal the inner emotional truth of objects, people and experience. As Magdalena M. Moeller, the Director of the Brücke-Museum, remarks: ‘The German artist looks not for harmony of outward appearance but much more for the mystery hidden behind the external form. He or she is interested in the soul of things, and wants to lay this bare.’

In works which favoured brilliant colour and expressive forms, the German Expressionists took many of their visual cues from Post-Impressionism, at the same time anchoring their art deeply within the German tradition. The emotive style of the Post-Impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh – his turbulent brushwork and belief in the manipulation of colour for emotional impact – was in sympathy with the Expressionists’ aim to communicate a deepened expression of their subjects’ essence. Also highly influential was Paul Gauguin, whose lifelong interest in tribal sculpture and the art of the Pacific Islands was eagerly adopted by the German Expressionists. They were attracted by ethnographic art’s ‘primitive’ or ‘naïve’ qualities – in particular, its simplified, exaggerated forms – which appeared innocent and timeless in comparison with the modern world of technology and ephemera.

Cat. 7

Two Nudes

Oil on canvas, 1906/8

This exuberant depiction of two nudes was painted soon after the formation of the Brücke group, when Kirchner was just twenty-six years old. It is likely to have been painted in Kirchner’s Dresden studio which, although dingy, was exotically furnished with freshly-painted canvases, carved sculptures and colourful batik wall hangings. With its kaleidoscope of pure, bright colours and its thick, impasto brushstrokes, the painting is clearly Expressionist in its technique. If you compare it with Kirchner’s later works, you’ll see that it appears to have been painted at an interesting



point in his artistic development, before his forms became angular and his faces mask-like under the influence of 'primitive' sculpture.

What is the spirit of this work? In its depiction of the female figure, would you say it was conservative and restrained or liberated and celebratory? What sort of environment do you think Kirchner painted it in?

What do you think is the focal point of the picture? Is there a single point of interest or does your eye dart restlessly around the canvas, attracted by different smears and slashes of intense colour?

Notice the swirling, churning brushstrokes Kirchner has used to describe the dimples in the nude's lower back, the decoration on the rug on the floor, and the fantastic blue-black hat which the girls seem to share (like a pair of Siamese twins). Do you detect van Gogh's influence here? How and where, exactly?

Cat. 7
Two Nudes, 1906/8
Oil on canvas, 196.5 × 66 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Gift of Wilhelmina and Wallace F.
Holladay and Ruth and Jacob
Kainen, 1979

Kirchner is today seen as the ultimate German Expressionist, although in his own lifetime he objected to this categorisation and denied being influenced by anyone. In a letter written in 1937 to art dealer Curt Valentin, he explains the development behind his own Expressionist style:

Did you know that in 1900 I had the bold idea of renewing German art? Yes, I did: it came to me at an exhibition of the Munich Secession in Munich, where the pictures made the deepest impression on me because of the insignificance of their content and execution and because of the total lack of public interest. Indoors, these pale, bloodless, lifeless slices of studio bacon; outdoors, colourful, flowing, real life in sunshine and excitement... And I felt an urging inside me, 'You try it'; and I did, and I still do.

First of all I needed to invent a technique of grasping everything while it was in motion...I practised seizing things quickly in bold strokes, wherever I was...and in this way I learned how to depict movement itself, and I found new forms in the ecstasy and haste of this work, which, without being naturalistic, yet represented everything I saw and wanted to represent in a larger and clearer way. And to this form was added pure colour, as pure as the sun generates it.

‘What is most German about Kirchner’s art is the intense striving for expressiveness, which determines both form and colour. His inner sensibility, his own view of reality, gave rise to a new way of seeing the external world.’

Magdalena M. Moeller

THE FORMATION OF DIE BRÜCKE

Although Kirchner’s family had originally fostered his artistic talents through drawing and watercolour lessons at home, they did not support his wish to become an artist. Instead, Kirchner went to the Königliche Technische Hochschule in Dresden to study architecture (he later spoke of his architectural studies as a cover for his involvement and further training in art). It was during these years that he became friends with fellow architecture students Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Fritz Bleyl, all of whom shared Kirchner’s liberal attitude and revolutionary ideas.

In 1905, these four young friends founded an artists’ group they called Die Brücke, or ‘The Bridge’ (Fritz Bleyl was later replaced by Max Pechstein and Otto Mueller). The Brücke artists rebelled against traditional, academic painting and aimed to establish a new aesthetic which would serve as a bridge (hence the name Die Brücke) between the Germanic past and the modern present. They saw their work as belonging firmly within the tradition of German art – that of Albrecht Dürer, Matthias Grünewald and Lucas Cranach the Elder, in particular – and affirmed their national identity by reviving historic German media such as woodcut prints. However, they also studied contemporary movements in art abroad and held many of the ground-breaking beliefs of the international avant-garde.

THE DRESDEN YEARS

The earliest meeting place for the Brücke group was Kirchner’s first studio in Dresden, in a former butcher’s shop, which Fritz Bleyl described as ‘that of a real bohemian, full of paintings lying all over the place, drawings, books and artist’s materials – much more like an artist’s romantic lodgings than the home of a well-organised architecture student’. Here they composed a manifesto, written largely by Kirchner and engraved on wood. It read:

Believing in development and in a new generation both of those who create and those who enjoy, we call upon the young to come together, as young people, who will bear the future, who want freedom in our work and in our lives, independence from older, established forces. Anyone who conveys directly and without falsification the powers that compel him to create is one of us.

‘Dresden and Munich share the honour of being the birthplaces of the new art.’

Paul Fechter, in the first monograph on the subject of Expressionism (Munich, 1914)

Kirchner's studio was a free and liberal space in which social conventions were largely disregarded. Indeed, reports suggest there was much impulsive love-making and naked cavorting (see cats 20, 21, 37 and 42). In these bohemian environs, Kirchner and his friends met to study the nude in group life-drawing sessions (see cat. 4, Erich Heckel and Model in the Studio). Wanting to break away from the exactitude of academic life-drawing, they began to sketch quickly in quarter-hour sessions, capturing the essence of their subject in natural attitudes as spontaneously as they could. The nude models in these early works were not professionals, but rather the circle of artists, friends and girlfriends whom Kirchner gathered round him in his studio.

Cat. 50

A Visitor in the Studio with Dodo and Marzella Pen and black ink, 1910

This depiction of an elegant urban couple taking tea in the studio with two of Kirchner's regular models (his girlfriend Dodo and another girl Marzella) exemplifies the rapid sketching with which the Brücke artists were experimenting around this time. In just a few pen strokes, Kirchner fuses three layers of imagery into a single picture: in the foreground we find the fashionable visitors conversing, in the middle ground is a portrait of Marzella nude, and in the background is a schematic representation of Kirchner's cabaret painting *Tightrope Dance*.

Would you describe this drawing as 'Expressionist'? If so, why? What is Kirchner trying to do by conveying a complicated scene in a few hurried lines? Do you think he achieves his intention?

How does the naked figure of Marzella function in the picture? What does she stand for when juxtaposed with the civilised and well-dressed figures drinking tea? Notice the difference in their facial expressions. Do you detect the influence of primitivism in the simplified forms of her body and her stylised, mask-like face?

Around this time, Kirchner was making frequent visits to the Ethnographic Museum in Dresden, fascinated by tribal artefacts and carved wooden sculptures from Africa and the Pacific Islands. Their exaggerated, angular forms, unnaturalistic colours and rough contours quickly filtered into his own work, an impact which is perhaps most perceptible in his woodcuts and sculptures. Kirchner later wrote in his diary that he was also inspired by the 'monumental stillness of form' of sixth-century Buddhist murals in the Indian cave temples of Ajanta, which he had studied through reproductions.

The importance of tribal sculpture for the Brücke artists in general cannot be overestimated. They thought that the 'primitive' qualities of ethnographic art held the promise of a certain naïvety, often understood

'It was cold in there, as well as a bit uncomfortable; but the young artist's heart was beating full of courage and hope...in the grey atelier, in the grey suburban street, the waves of colour that issued from his vivid dreams poured forth.'

Journalist Ernst Köhler-Haussen, who visited Kirchner's studio in 1907

'They came together to work in Kirchner's studio. Here they had the opportunity to study the nude, the foundation of all visual art, in a free, natural state. From the drawing they did on this foundation arose the feeling common to all of them that they should take the impulse to create from life itself and subject themselves to experience.'

'Chronicle of the Brücke Artists' Group', written by Kirchner in 1913

Primitivism: a belief in the value of what is simple and unsophisticated, expressed through art or literature

‘The Brücke artists’ experience of the “primitive” was drawn from the living fabric of their lives in colonial Germany rather than simply from the dusty cases of the ethnographic museums.’

Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity*

Cat. 50

A Visitor in the Studio with Dodo and Marzella, 1910
Pen and black ink, 34.5 × 41.5 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
Kupferstichkabinett
Photo © Kupferstichkabinett.
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-
Preussischer Kulturbesitz/
Jörg P. Anders

as the innocence of childhood, in the complex world of the early twentieth century.

The two childish figures who feature prominently in the Brücke works from this period and who play an important role in their primitivist iconography are Marzella and Fränzi, the daughters of an artist’s widow who lived near Kirchner. They are often shown, both clothed and nude, in Kirchner’s studio, and are frequently associated with genuine tribal artefacts or African-inspired objects that have been carved by the artist (see cats 41–47, 51, 64). One of the exhibition’s curators, Jill Lloyd, elaborates: ‘In Kirchner’s mind, both the children and tribal art were symbols of a positive desire for regeneration and renewal’.

In 1909, shortly before the sketch of *A Visitor in the Studio with Dodo and Marzella* (below), Kirchner had been forced to move to a second studio in Dresden due to a lack of funds. He marked the occasion by sending Erich Heckel a comical postcard depicting himself dancing naked in front of a mirror in the corner of his new studio (cat. 37). The lawyer, collector and scholar Gustav Schiefler described Kirchner’s imaginative transformation of this unpromising small shop space into an artist’s atelier: ‘The rooms’,



he wrote, 'were fantastically decorated with coloured textiles which he had made using the batik technique, with all sorts of exotic equipment and wood carvings by his own hand. A primitive setting, born of necessity but nevertheless strongly marked by his own taste. He lived a disorderly lifestyle here according to bourgeois standards, simple in material terms, but highly ambitious in his artistic sensitivity. He worked feverishly, without noticing the time of day...Everyone who comes into contact with him must respond with a strong interest to this total commitment to his work and derive from it a concept of the true artist.'

As well as life-drawing sessions in Kirchner's studio, the Brücke artists began to make summer jaunts to the Moritzburg lakes (to the north of Dresden) where they would paint landscapes and nude bathers in natural settings. The appeal of these excursions lay in their departure from the decorum of civilised city dwelling. Like the permissive space of the studio, Kirchner and his friends viewed the Moritzburg lakes as an area in which the inhibiting boundaries between art and life were dissolved, and the artists encouraged each other to express themselves freely. Jill Lloyd explains the impact that these expeditions had on Kirchner's work of this period: 'Liberated from the urban throng, the men and women in Kirchner's bather paintings frolic beneath the trees, swim naked in the sea, play with bows and arrows or make love in the open air, cut loose from the constraints and taboos of civilisation.'

Cat. 65

Four Bathers

Oil on canvas, 1910

This painting depicting four nudes bathing in the Moritzburg lakes almost throbs with colour. The heat of the midday sun can be felt in Kirchner's use of hot colours (the rose-pink sky, the scorched yellow land and the red sunburnt limbs of the bathers) while the cool, pure blues and greens offer some shady respite. It is interesting that the detail of the scene – the faces of the nudes, the texture of the reeds, the background landscape – has been largely sacrificed by Kirchner in favour of communicating a keen and immediate sense of the bathers' experience. This is intensely expressed through his palette.

How has Kirchner's style and brushwork developed since the *Two Nudes* of 1906/8 (cat. 7)? Compare the small, thick daubs of paint in *Two Nudes* with the flat shards of pure colour in *Four Bathers*. In the first, the paint has been applied thickly using an impasto technique, while in the second, the paint has been applied thinly and apparently quite rapidly, with expanses of untreated canvas left to show through.

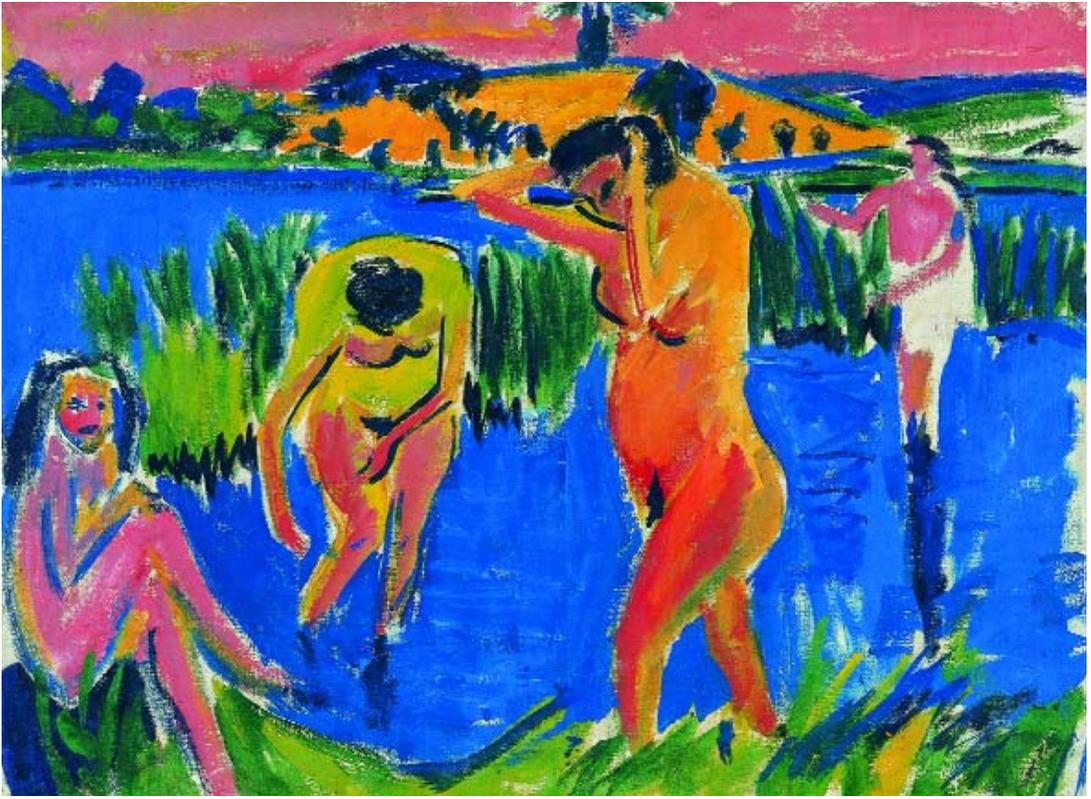
Which artists do you think have inspired Kirchner's composition and vibrant use of colour in this painting? Do you detect the influence of

'My space is somewhat more conventional than it was in Dresden, but some interesting things like the divan with a carved figure by me and the tea table with the three columns are still to be seen.'

Kirchner, writing in 1912

'Stripped of their clothes and civilised trappings, the artists and their models were at one with nature and led the lives of modern primitives.'

Jill Lloyd



Cat. 65
Four Bathers, 1910
Oil on canvas, 75 × 100.5 cm
Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal
Photo Medienzentrum,
Wuppertal/Antje Zeis-Loi

‘The liberated vitalism of Kirchner’s early Dresden studio scenes...gradually gave way in the course of 1910 and 1911 to a more complex, probing exploration of the relationship between art and life.’

Jill Lloyd

those ‘wild beasts’, the Fauves, in the brilliant hues and bold colour contrasts?

Critics often linked Kirchner’s work with that of Edvard Munch (a Symbolist and early Expressionist) and the celebrated Fauve artist Henri Matisse, whose work he had seen at an exhibition held at the Galerie Cassirer in 1908–09. Throughout his life Kirchner denied the influence of any other living artist on his development and took great pains to prove the contrary. He later back-dated many of his paintings and drawings from the years between 1908 and 1911 to before 1905, and in his chronicle and writings he moved the date of Die Brücke’s foundation to before 1902, as evidence that their works were precursors to those by the Fauves.

Kirchner and the other Brücke artists soon achieved success with a small circle of collectors. After an exhibition in September 1910 in one of Dresden’s most important galleries of modern art, the Galerie Arnold, the artists could regard themselves as truly belonging to the German avant-garde. The year 1911 saw Kirchner and his friends relocate from the relatively intimate, baroque city of Dresden to the larger cultural milieu of Berlin, where they thought they would find an even more receptive audience for their work.

THE BERLIN YEARS

'You'll be totally surprised when you set foot in Berlin. We've become a large family and you can get everything you need – women and shelter.'

Kirchner writing to Erich Heckel in 1911

For a brief couple of years, the fast-growing metropolis of Berlin offered the excitement and artistic stimulation that the Brücke artists were looking for. Together with his new girlfriend Erna Schilling, Kirchner re-created the atmosphere of his Dresden atelier by decorating his studio-apartment with primitivist hangings, Ajanta-inspired wall paintings and Africanised sculptures that he himself had carved. The Berlin studio was also the locus for a new venture, a private art school called the MUIM-Institut (which stands, in German, for Modern Instruction in Painting), founded by Kirchner with his Brücke colleague Max Pechstein. Unfortunately it wasn't the success they had hoped for, and only two pupils (close friends of Kirchner as it happened) enrolled.

Despite this setback, Kirchner responded with great fervour to his new environs, and his paintings of the early Berlin years are primarily interested in conveying the intensity and urgency of city living. These works frequently strike an uneasy balance between being a celebration of Berlin's dynamism and a melancholic reflection on the alienation and anonymity of life in the big city.

Cat. 79

Girl Circus Rider

Oil on canvas, 1912

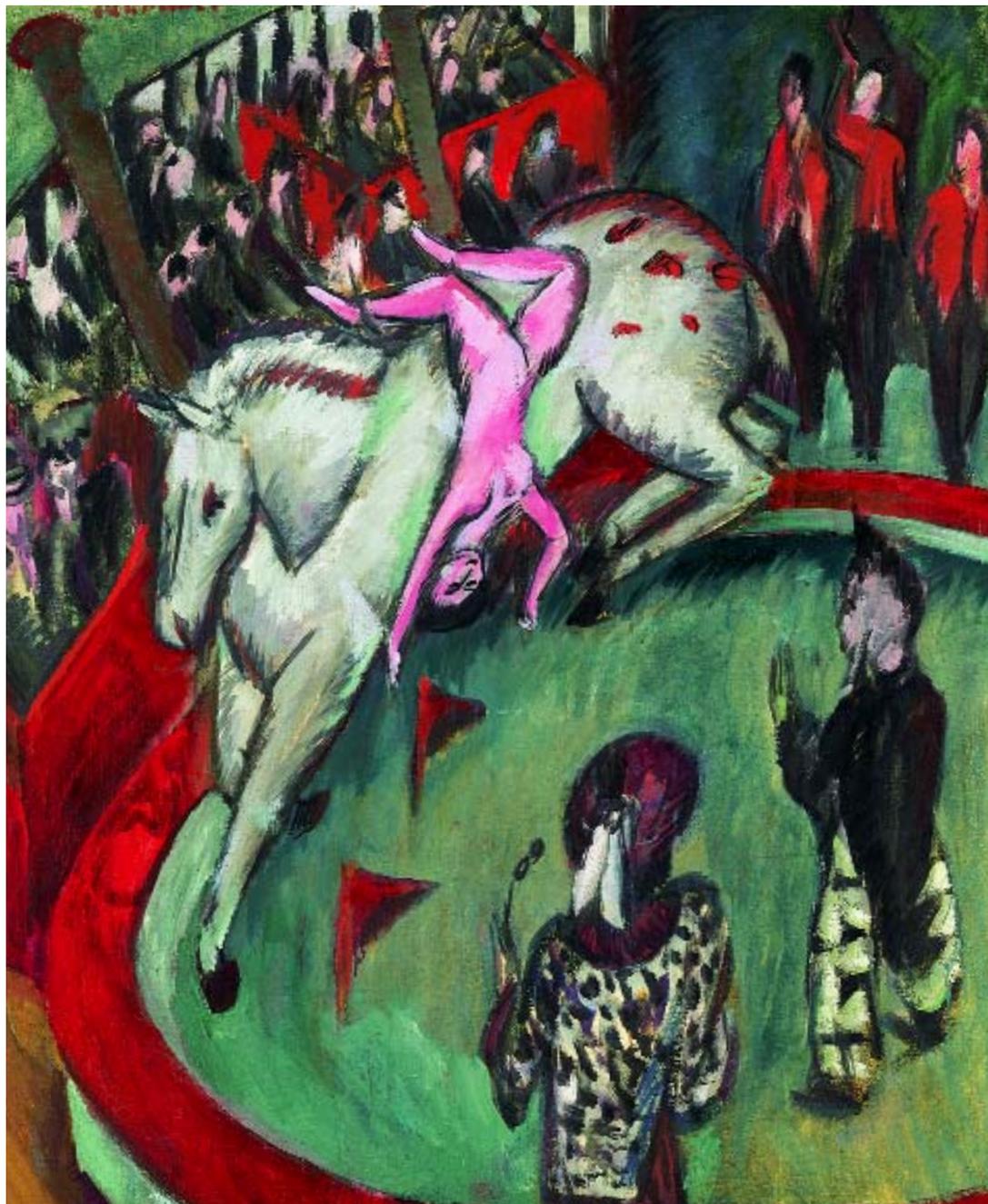
At first, Berlin's crowded cafes and lively circuses, cabarets and theatres proved very alluring for Kirchner, as can be seen in his outstanding work *Girl Circus Rider* of 1912. In the composition of this painting, the girl's clenched fist forms a pivot around which the rest of the circus ring spins, held together by the strong centrifugal force it exerts. Kirchner records the spectacle as though looking down from the rafters; when combined with the energetic brushwork and blurred faces, this lofty perspective creates a powerful sense of movement, almost vertigo, in the scene.

Notice how the use of flat, complementary colours in the Fauvist manner of the Dresden Brücke has given way to a style of pointed forms, nervous hatching and more muted tones in this work. How does Kirchner use his palette here and to what effect?

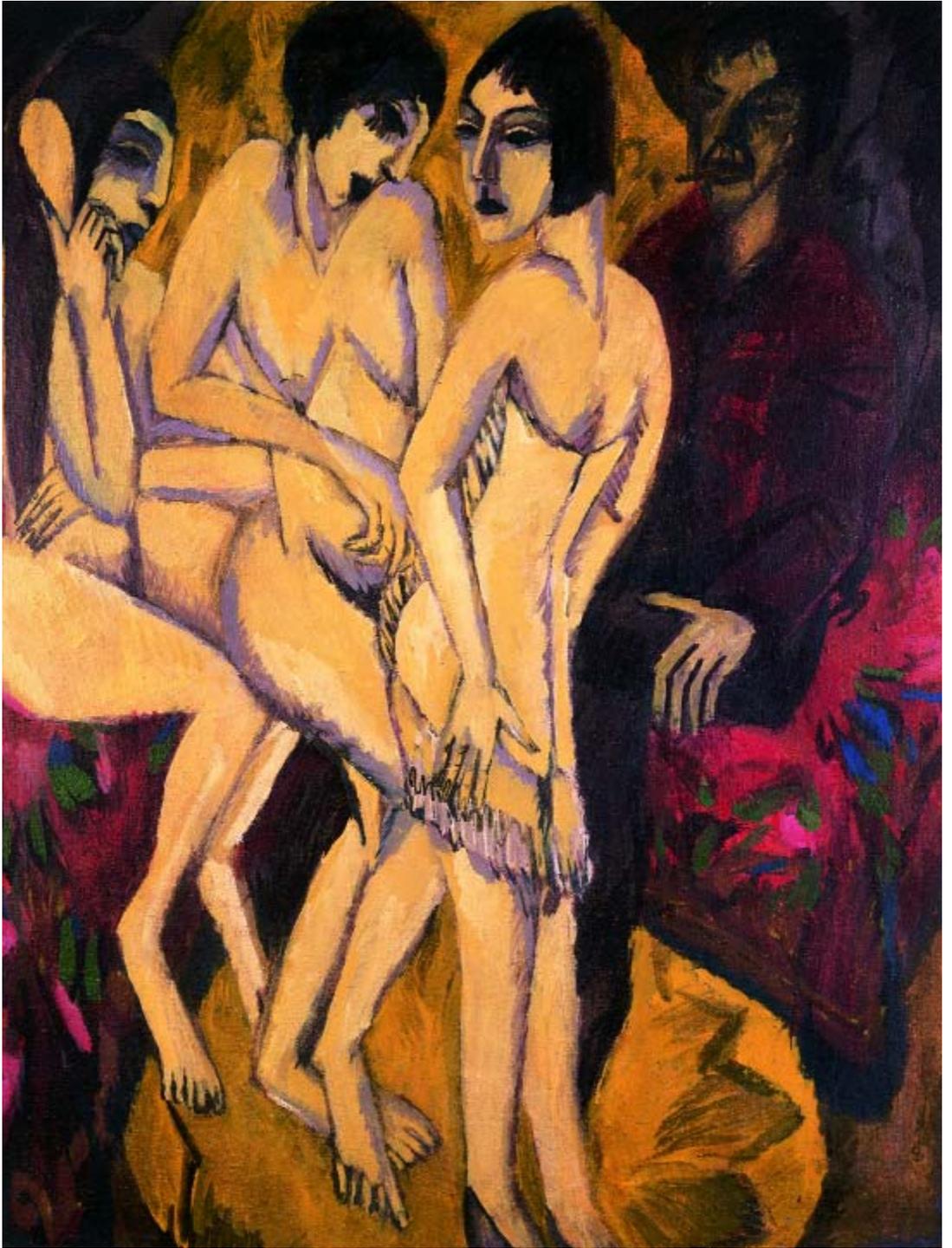
How does Kirchner express the daring and thrill of the performer's act, and the heated excitement of the big top? Do you get any sense of the audience's reaction to the girl circus rider even though they don't seem to have any facial expressions? What devices does Kirchner use to achieve this?

'Kirchner's artistic sensibilities, always stimulated by movement, were caught up in the breathtaking dynamism of the city and led to an increased sensitivity of form, colour and expression. Daring, difficult harmonies and angular forms of urban scenes characterised the Berlin years.'

Wolf-Dieter Dube,
Director-General of the
National Museums of Berlin



Cat. 79
Girl Circus Rider, 1912
Oil on canvas, 120 × 100 cm
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Munich, Pinakothek der Moderne



THE DISSOLUTION OF DIE BRÜCKE

In the early months of 1912, dissent within the Brücke group was irritated by the conflicting interests and fierce rivalries which characterised the Berlin art world. This competitive ambience eventually splintered the group in 1913. Although they had continued to mount joint exhibitions in Berlin, the close personal cohesion of the Brücke group had loosened as the members struck out in different artistic directions. These differences were aggravated by Kirchner's chronicle of Die Brücke, in which he was the prominent figure (referring to himself in the third person with a certain amount of pompous historical authority). The other artists, failing to find themselves properly appreciated in the Brücke chronicle, argued with Kirchner, resulting in Die Brücke's formal dissolution.

In the years that followed, Kirchner's relationship with the Brücke artists remained very difficult and he was to vehemently reject any association with them for much of his life. In 1919, for example, he declared: 'As the Brücke never had anything to do with my artistic development, any mention of it in an article on my work is superfluous.' Kirchner went on to develop a much more individual style around this time and his Berlin street scenes of alienated figures, in particular, reflect a new-found sense of creative isolation.

Cat. 91

Judgement of Paris

Oil on canvas, 1913

Kirchner's Judgement of Paris is a highly unusual and modern interpretation of one of the most popular of all mythological themes in art: the beauty contest between Venus, Minerva and Juno, which was judged by Paris and won by Venus (whose prize was a golden apple). Here, Kirchner depicts three modern, urban goddesses, their striking, mask-like features modelled on Erna, parading in front of a dark and mysterious Paris, who may or may not be Kirchner himself. The hand mirror has traditionally been understood as a symbol of vanity, but in this context, it also hints at Kirchner's sense of his own dislocated personal identity in the modern milieu of Berlin.

Examine the angular, jutting limbs and jerky movements of the three goddesses (the progression of their forms may remind you of Marcel Duchamp's Cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 of 1912*). Note in particular the rhythmical repetition of their fingers and toes, outlined heavily in black, and suggested elsewhere in Kirchner's elongated brushstrokes. How would you describe Kirchner's style of this time?

Think about how Kirchner's interest in 'primitive' sculpture has informed his treatment of the goddesses' bodies. How do these spiky yellow figures differ from the traditional representations of the myth you may have seen?

Cat. 91

Judgement of Paris, 1913

Oil on canvas, 113 × 91.5 cm

Wilhelm-Hack-Museum,

Ludwigshafen am Rhein

Photo Yan de Andres

SCULPTURE

'It is so good for painting and drawing to make figures. They bring unity to drawing and it is a sensuous pleasure to see the figure emerge blow-by-blow from the tree trunk. Every trunk conceals a figure, you only need to peel it out.'

Kirchner, 1911

Although it is less explored by art historians, Kirchner made a considerable contribution to modern sculpture during his lifetime, creating about 140 sculptural works, as well as some carved furniture, reliefs and a few utensils in beaten metal. The free-standing figurative sculptures for which he is best-known have been fashioned directly from tree trunks. They feature rough-hewn and exaggerated forms (which often delight in the knobbliness of the wood) and have been crudely painted by the artist. Within Kirchner's studio, powerful dialogues were often set up between the human nudes and the wooden figures against which they posed (see cats 46, 47, 62, 82).

Cat. 105

Dancer with a Raised Leg, 1913

Painted wood, 66.5 × 21 × 15 cm

Private collection

Photo © Joseph Loderer

Photographie

'They took tree trunks, which sometimes even had the stumps of branches still attached, and hacked a figure out of them, first with an axe and then with a knife.'

Dr Wolfgang Henze

Cat. 105

Dancer with a Raised Leg

Painted wood, 1913

This stylised and contorted *Dancer with a Raised Leg* stands in stark contrast to the tradition of graceful moving figures by artists such as Edgar Degas (1834–1917).

It was originally conceived entirely in blue to accentuate the dancer's distorted gestures and to lend a 'primitive' aspect.

What sort of dance does the figure appear to be doing? Is it a sophisticated and highly cultural form of movement (ballet, for example)

or a simple folk dance? With this in mind, do you think the content of the work is in keeping with its rough-hewn form?

‘The click of moving feet... remains a moment longer in the eye than the heels, which move constantly, so they become bigger in the picture. I myself move about, and single point perspective is cancelled out.’

Kirchner

Cat. 130

Friedrichstrasse, 1914

Oil on canvas, 125 × 91 cm

Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

Photo © Volker Naumann

Fotografie, Stuttgart

THE BERLIN STREET SCENES

The few years before the outbreak of World War I saw an intensification in Kirchner's art that culminated in his great 'Streetwalker' paintings, prints and drawings, executed between 1913 and 1915 (see cats 109–135). These arresting works depicted Berlin society – from affluent, well-heeled men and women to fashionable prostitutes ('cocottes') and their beaux – and were characterised by striking forms and vivid colouristic invention. Kirchner later described his subject matter as 'the nervous faces of people of our time' reflecting 'every smallest irritation'.

The 'Streetwalker' paintings were apparently conceived, after much street observation, in Kirchner's own studio with Erna and Gerda Schilling posing as models. One of the curators of the exhibition, Norman Rosenthal, notes that 'each of these works has a unique character...(they) convey a



sense of living dangerously in a great capital city on the edge of a catastrophe in a way that no other European painting did at the time.'

Cat. 130

Friedrichstrasse

Oil on canvas, 1914

One of Kirchner's most famous 'Streetwalker' paintings is the outstanding large-format work *Friedrichstrasse*. In it, three elongated women (probably prostitutes) confront the viewer like magnificently plumed birds whose feathers jut out showily in different directions. Behind them queue anonymous suited men, their blank expressions suggesting urban automatons. Kirchner has invested the scene with extreme erotic tension: the men's and women's forms interlock and mimic each other in a deliberately ambiguous manner.

Standing close together in a noisy, crowded street, none of the figures appear to be interacting with each other in any meaningful way. What comment do you think Kirchner is making about the isolated individual in the bustling metropolis?

Kirchner's style becomes increasingly dramatic during these years. Look at these works and examine his jagged, almost violent brushwork, the energetic composition, and the pointed figures with their unnaturally exaggerated limbs. The long black brushstrokes that extend from these figures' hands and feet give a Futurist sense of movement and speed. What other things would you comment on regarding Kirchner's method, approach, mood and influences in the 'Streetwalker' paintings?

WOODCUT PRINTS

'Kirchner, excited by the old woodcuts he had seen in Nuremberg, brought the woodcut with him from South Germany and took up the tradition again.'

Kirchner, writing in the *Brücke* chronicle in 1913

As Kirchner's work became more graphic and his use of line more striking, his interest in the traditional German medium of the woodcut was renewed (see cats 136, 144, 145, 148–156). Inspired by the masterly prints of Albrecht Dürer, Kirchner succeeded in revitalising the technique and giving it a new, innovative rhythm. He loved the expressive power of Dürer's woodcuts (particularly his *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* series) and emulated Dürer's use of hatching and richly contrasting light and dark values to give his woodcuts a painterly quality. Although he occasionally adapted German Gothic iconography, Kirchner also developed his own pictorial vocabulary, using a blockish, simplified language that would become the model for the other Expressionists.

'The greatest German master is Dürer, he embodies all other German painters of the Middle Ages, and the new German art will recognise him as its father.'

Kirchner

Cat. 152

Schlemihl Alone in his Room

Colour woodcut with monotype inking, 1915

Illustrating the macabre tale of a man who sells his shadow to the devil, Kirchner's great series of coloured woodcuts Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story (cats 148–156) is among his most powerful graphic work. The woodcuts took their inspiration from Adelbert von Chamisso's early nineteenth-century novella, which Kirchner described as 'the life story of a paranoid'. Interestingly, Kirchner carved the Schlemihl woodcuts in a sanatorium near Frankfurt in November 1915, while he was recuperating from a nervous breakdown. Having endured a period of severe depression brought about by poverty and a lack of genuine success in Berlin, it is often speculated that Kirchner identified with the tormented figure of Peter Schlemihl.

How does Kirchner employ colours in this woodcut? Black, for example, is used to powerful effect to delineate the ostracised figure of Schlemihl and the taunting band of tormentors behind him, and yet Kirchner also capitalises on its emotional impact in this scene. How exactly? What do the other colours convey and how do they affect the mood of the work?

Cat. 152

Schlemihl Alone in His Room, 1915

Colour woodcut with monotype inking, 33.4 × 24 cm

National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Century Gift Committee and Gift of Ruth and Jacob Kainen, 1999

Photo Ricardo Blanc



The technique of the woodcut allows Kirchner to illustrate the story with striking simplicity and directness to an almost theatrical emotional effect. What other devices does Kirchner draw on to heighten the drama of the scene?

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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. Swollen, I stagger to work, but all my work is in vain and the mediocre is tearing everything down in its onslaught. I am now like the cocottes I once painted: the merest brushstroke now, gone tomorrow. None the less I am still trying to put my thoughts in order and, from all the confusion, create an image of the times, which is my task after all.

Kirchner, writing in 1916

Despite Kirchner's artistic success during the Berlin years, a crisis of identity was brewing within the troubled artist. His neurosis was largely burdened by the impending war, which he had viewed with a tragic sense of foreboding and fear from the outset. In a state of nervous anxiety, and fearing that he would get called up, Kirchner began to drink absinthe and developed an increasing dependency on sleeping pills and morphine (see cat. 171).

In an effort to avoid conscription into the infantry, he signed on as an artillery driver – an 'involuntary volunteer' – and was billeted to Halle. Kirchner found military service very distressing and, suffering a nervous breakdown, was admitted to a sanatorium at Königstein im Taunus. He would return here twice more over the next year as his condition failed to improve. In September 1916, Kirchner wrote to Gustav Schiefler: 'I am half dead from mental and physical torments, and have placed myself in the care of a neurologist here, since I am unable to do anything but work.'

Cat. 159

Self-Portrait as a Soldier

Oil on canvas, 1915

Kirchner's portraits of this time are pictorial ruminations on the state of the human condition and on his own existential angst on the eve of World War I (see cats 157–166 and 167–172). Such psychologically intense subject matter demanded a painting of extraordinary communicative force, as can be seen in his terrifying work *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Here, Kirchner imagines himself in military uniform with his hand severed, unable to paint. The work is often understood as being closely modelled on Van Gogh's *Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear* of 1889, in which Van Gogh portrays himself in his studio after cutting his own ear off (the difference



Cat. 159
Self-portrait as a Soldier, 1915
Oil on canvas, 69.2 × 61 cm
Allen Memorial Art Museum,
Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.
Charles F. Olney Fund, 1950.
Photo courtesy Allen Memorial Art
Museum, Oberlin (OH)

being that Kirchner's amputation is imaginary, whereas Van Gogh's self-mutilation was very real).

Look at the female nude and painted canvas (Red Nudes, not in exhibition) that Kirchner has depicted prominently in the background. What is their significance when juxtaposed with Kirchner's current condition? In this

context, how do they contribute to the dialogue between art and life that so preoccupied Kirchner in his later years?

What is Kirchner expressing in this painting and through what manipulations of his palette, composition and self-depiction does he express it? Think about the irony that Kirchner has presented himself as powerless to paint and yet has produced one of his most powerful and meaningful works. What do you think is the role of the artist in times of war?

CONCLUSION

As Kirchner's crisis worsened, close friends helped him to emigrate to a log cabin near Davos in Switzerland where he remained for the rest of his life, receiving medical treatment at regular intervals. The move was accompanied by a radical change in subject matter for Kirchner. Although he continued to paint with the same vibrant nervousness, his new environs inspired him to depict alpine scenes of mountain farmers, rather than the urban milieu of Dresden and Berlin.

It was almost ten years before Kirchner returned to Germany, anxious to secure recognition of his importance for the artistic traditions of his native country. By this time, all the major museums of modern art had acquired works by him and he was regularly included in exhibitions. This official recognition ended, however, when the National Socialists came to power in 1933. A total of 639 works by Kirchner were identified as 'degenerate' by the Nazis and were subsequently confiscated from museums, before being sold abroad or destroyed. Others were displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937, prompting the first thoughts of suicide in Kirchner: 'The future before us looks very dark...If need be, I shall sacrifice my life for art.' The combination of his mental fragility and the painful realisation that he had been officially ostracised in his homeland drove Kirchner to shoot himself a year later outside his cabin near Davos.

In terms of vital, expressive realism, Kirchner was the great mediator between Vincent van Gogh and the art of the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, as the versatile and brilliant founder of Die Brücke, his work formed a bridge between the graphic and often folkloric art of traditional German artists, such as Albrecht Dürer, and the experimental artistic output of the international avant-garde. This exhibition, one of the first major retrospectives of Kirchner's oeuvre in this country, provides an exciting opportunity to view the distinctive early work of one of the foremost artists of the twentieth century.

'His optical experience is always also a psychological experience. He looks at the world with eyes that understand the hidden inner life, and it is only what he has understood there that he wants to capture in the picture. His concern is never the purely objective, but always the psychological.'

Archaeologist and art historian
Botho Gräf

The logo for the Royal Academy of Arts, featuring the text "Royal Academy of Arts" in white, stacked vertically, inside a teal square.

Royal
Academy
of Arts

28 June to 21 September 2003

This guide is given out free to teachers and students with an exhibition ticket at the Education Desk. It is available to other visitors from the RA Shop at a cost of £3.95 (while stocks last)