

Kirchner

Layout:

Baseline Co Ltd

61A-63A Vo Van Tan Street

Nam Minh Long Building, 4th floor

District 3, Hô Chi Minh-City

Vietnam

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“For me this is out of the question. Nor do I regret it... The delights the world affords are the same everywhere, differing only in their outer forms. Here one learns how to see further and go deeper than in ‘modern’ life, which is generally so very much more superficial despite its wealth of outer forms.”

— Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

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Self-Portrait, Double Portrait, 1914.

Oil on canvas, 60 x 49 cm,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie,
Berlin.

Biography

6th May 1880: Birth of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in Aschaffenburg, into a high-class family. Son of Ernst Kirchner (1847-1921) and Maria Elise Franke (1851-1928).

1886: The family move to Francfort-sur-le-Main, and then in 1887 they move to Perlen, near Luzerne.

1901: Following his father's wishes, he enrolls in the Technical College in Dresden to study Architecture.

1903-04: Leaves Munich to study Art, takes lessons at the school of Wilhelm von Debschitz and Hermann Obrist. His numerous visits to museums and art galleries confirm his decision to become a professional artist. In October he travels to Nuremberg to complete his studies.

7th June 1905: After returning to Dresden, he joins up with his friends Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmitt-Rotluff to form the group *Die Brücke*, giving themselves the job of reviving German art which has been suppressed by academic tradition.

Nov 1905: First exhibition of *Die Brücke* at the P.H. Beyer and Sohn Gallery in Leipzig. The group works together in the rented studio that they share.

1906: Meets Doris Große who will become his preferred model until 1911.

1-21st Sept 1907: Group exhibition at the Emil Richter Art Gallery in Dresden.

1907-11: Spends his summers in Goppeln, at Lake Moritzburg and Fehmarn Island with the other

members of *Die Brücke*, discovering the joys of sports and outdoor life that were very fashionable in the 1910s. They develop an ideal based upon a return to a primitive life which will illustrate their art through a new expressive form.

Jan 1908: Exhibition of Kirchner with Karl Schmitt-Rotluff at the August Dörbrandt, Braunschweig.

1909: Kirchner and his friends visit the Matisse exhibition at the Paul Cassirer Gallery in Berlin. The members of *Die Brücke*, influenced by this discovery of Fauvism, use it as a way to develop their already expressive use of color.

12th June 1909: The grand exhibition of *Die Brücke* at the Richter Gallery, Berlin.

Nov 1909: Kirchner begins to paint illustrations of the Dresden and Berlin night-life using cabaret, dancing and theatre scenes. Prostitution will become one of his most recurring themes.

1910-1911: Members of *Die Brücke* move to Berlin. Kirchner and Max Pechstein found the *Moderner Unterricht im Malen (MIUM)* - An institute teaching modern painting that will close prematurely in 1912 due to a lack of viability. The group continues to exhibit in the main towns of Germany (Berlin, Darmstadt, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Hamburg and Leipzig).

1910: The fifth port-folio of *Die Brücke* is devoted entirely to the work of Kirchner. He becomes a member of the *New Seccession*, run by Max Pechstein.

May 1910: Meets the artist, Otto Mueller, who becomes a member of *Die Brücke*. Spends his summer at Lake Moritzburg with Heckel, Pechstein and two young girls, Fränzi and Marzella who often pose for them as models.

Oct 1910: Kirchner's style evolves after having discovered Italian Futurism. He specializes in the representation of life in modern towns with their machines, their speed, and their continuous frenzy of activity.

1911: Makes links with the literary group *Neuer Club* (Kurt Hiller, Erwin Loewenson, Jacob van Hoddis). The magazine *Der Sturm* publishes 10 of Kirchner's engravings from July 1911 to March 1912.

1912: The group is invited to take part in the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne or Heckel. They exhibit in Moscow and Prague, and also at the second exhibition of *Blau Reiter* (with whom the group had a number of exchanges) at the Gurlitt Gallery in Munich and Berlin. Kirchner meets Erna Schilling, the sister of one of his friends, to whom he remains devoted to until his death.

27th May 1913: Kirchner, considered as the leader of *Die Brücke*, decides to write of its history in *Die Brücke Chronicles*. The other members rebel against his authoritarianism and the group dissolves.

04 Kintance

- 1913-15: During his years in Berlin, Kirchner produces an extensive series of representations of modern city life in the German metropolis while at the same time indulging regularly and excessively in the drinking of alcohol.
- 1915: At the outbreak of the First World War Kirchner fights wearing the “involuntary volunteer” badge. Unable to bear the discipline, he falls into a deep depression which causes him to be discharged and sent for rehabilitation to Taunus and later Davos in Switzerland. Despite a growing dependence on morphine, sleeping pills and alcohol, he still manages to produce some of his most important work.
- 1917: Kirchner moves to Davos for good eventually buying a farm in Mélèzes (the Swiss Alps) where he receives the support of the art collector Dr. Carl Hagemann, as well as that of the Belgian architect Henri van de Velde and the family of Dr. Spengler. He continues to work and his health improves. His works are exhibited in Switzerland and Germany.
- 1921: 50 of his works are shown at the Kronprinzen palace of Berlin where he receives positive feedback, cementing his role as the leader of Expressionism.
- 1925-26: Kirchner returns for the first time to Germany after his Swiss exile. His reputation grows as the first monograph dedicated to his work is published, as well as a *Catalogue Raisonné* of his main graphic productions, public reviews and works.
- 1928: Takes part in the Biennale of Venice which demonstrates his popularity within his own

country.

1936: Kirchner is profoundly affected by the increasing threat of Nazism since the invasion of Austria.

1937: The Nazis qualify his work as “degenerative art” and confiscate all his plates shown in German museums, causing him great suffering. The pressure of the war and a relapse of his illness force him into a new depression, during which he destroys most of his work. Despite this, his international recognition remains strong, with exhibitions of his works in the USA, in both Detroit and New York.

15th June 1938: Tired and exasperated by the political situation of Germany at the time, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner puts an end to his life.



What is Expressionism?

“Expressionism” has meant different things at different times. In the sense we use the term today, certainly when we speak of “German Expressionism,” it refers to a broad, cultural movement that emerged from Germany and Austria in the early twentieth century. Yet Expressionism is complex and contradictory. It encompassed the liberation of the body as much as the excavation of the psyche. And within its motley ranks could be found political apathy, even chauvinism, as well as revolutionary commitment.



Nude Girl in the Shadows of a Branch

1905

Oil on board, 37 x 30 cm
Kirchner Museum, Davos





The first part of this book is structured thematically, rather than chronologically, in order to draw out some of the more common characteristics and preoccupations of the movement. The second part consists of short essays on a selection of individual Expressionists, highlighting the distinctive aspects of each artist's work. Expressionism's tangled roots reach far back into history, and range widely across geographical terrain. Two of its most important sources are neither modern, nor European: the art of the Middle Ages and the art of tribal or so-called "primitive" peoples.

Nude Laying on a Sofa (Isabella)

1906-1907

Charcoal on pencil, 68.5 x 89 cm

Private collection





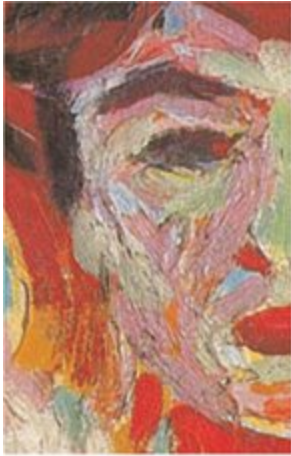
A third has little to do with visual art at all — the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. To complicate matters further, the word “Expressionism” initially meant something different. Until about 1912, it was used generally to describe progressive art in Europe, chiefly France, that was clearly different from Impressionism, or that even appeared to be “anti-Impressionist.” So, ironically, it was first applied most often to non-German artists such as Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse and Van Gogh. In practice, well up to the outbreak of the First World War, “Expressionism” was still a catch-all phrase for the latest modern, fauvist, futurist or cubist art.

Laying Nude (Isabella)

1906

Charcoal, 90 x 69 cm
Staatliche Museen, Kassel





The important Sonderbund exhibition staged in Cologne in 1912, for example, used the term to refer to the newest German painting together with international artists. Here though, the shift was already beginning. The exhibition organisers and most critics emphasised the affinity of the “Expressionism” of the German avant-garde with that of the Dutch Van Gogh and the guest of honour at the show, the Norwegian Edvard Munch. In so doing, they slightly played down the prior significance of French artists, such as Matisse, and steered the concept of Expressionism in a distinctly “Northern” direction. Munch himself was stunned when he saw the show.

Doris with a Ruff

1906-1908

Oil on board, 70 x 52 cm
Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Lugano





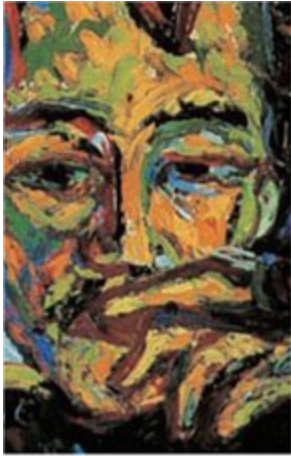
“There is a collection here of all the wildest paintings in Europe,” he wrote to a friend, “Cologne Cathedral is shaking to its very foundations.” More than geography though, this shift highlighted Expressionist qualities as lying not so much in innovative formal means for description of the physical world, but in the communication of a particularly sensitive, even slightly neurotic, perception of the world, which went beyond mere appearances. As in the work of Van Gogh and Munch, individual, subjective human experience was its focus. As it gathered momentum, one thing became abundantly clear; Expressionism was *not* a “style.”

Green House

1907

Oil on canvas, 70 x 59 cm
Museum moderner Kunst, Vienna





This helps to explain why curators, critics, dealers and the artists themselves could rarely agree on the use or meaning of the term. Nonetheless, “Expressionism” gained wide currency across the arts in Germany and Austria. It was first applied to painting, sculpture and printmaking and a little later to literature, theatre and dance. It has been argued that while Expressionism’s impact on the visual arts was most successful, its’ impact on music was the most radical, involving elements such as dissonance and atonality in the works of many composers (especially in Vienna) from Gustav Mahler to Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg.



Portrait of a Man, Hans Frisch

1907

Oil on canvas, 115 x 115 cm
Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum
San Antonio (Texas)





Finally, Expressionism infiltrated architecture and its effects could even be discerned in the newest modern distraction — film. Historians still disagree today on what Expressionism is. Many artists who now rank as quintessential Expressionists themselves rejected the label. Given the spirit of anti-academicism and fierce individualism that characterised so much of Expressionism, this is hardly surprising. In his autobiography, *Jahre der Kämpfe* (Years of Struggle), Emil Nolde wrote: “The intellectual art literati call me an Expressionist; I don’t like this restriction.”



Woman in a White Dress

1908

Oil on canvas, 113.5 x 114.5 cm

Private collection

