

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

Featuring Watercolors and Drawings from the Robert Lehman Collection

Galerie St. Etienne

"Ecstatic drawing is the foundation of the new art"

E. L. Kirchner, 1919

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), cofounder and erstwhile leader of the North-German *Brücke* (Bridge) group, has been called the quintessential Expressionist. But Expressionism (a descriptor Kirchner himself repudiated) is remarkably difficult to define. It is believed that the first appearance of this label in a contemporary context occurred in the introduction to a 1911 catalogue featuring French painters like Braque, Derain and Picasso. The term refers most broadly to art that, in contrast to Impressionism, looks beyond surface appearance. Expressionism only came to be identified as a specifically German brand of modernism under the nationalistic pressures generated by World War I. Nonetheless, even in Germany the genre assumed different guises in different places and at different times.

German Expressionism can be divided into a pre-war, utopian phase, associated with *Die Brücke* and the Munich-based *Blauer Reiter* (Blue Rider) group, and a dystopian phase, associated with Weimar-era artists such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix and George Grosz. (Though the latter contingent also blends into the equally ill-defined movement known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* [New Objectivity].) Kirchner, whose personal and artistic life was fundamentally shaken by World War I, exemplified both the utopian and the dystopian tendencies that were central to German art of the period. Ultimately he transcended labels. "The man," Kirchner said of himself, "is simply a painter."

Neither Kirchner nor the three other *Brücke* founders were originally painters. In fact, neither he, Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel nor Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, who met while studying architecture at the Technical College of Saxony in Dresden, had much formal training in art. They taught one another as they taught themselves, sharing studios, models and influences in pursuit of common, albeit vaguely articulated goals. Kindred spirits were invited to join *Die Brücke* as active or passive members (who provided financial support by subscribing to the group's annual print portfolio). Additional artists, most notably Otto Mueller, Emil Nolde and Hermann Max Pechstein, came and went.

Some months after *Die Brücke's* establishment in June 1905, Kirchner created a pair of woodcuts setting forth the group's program. Like the slightly earlier Austrian Secession and the popular Munich periodical *Jugend*, the *Brücke* artists advocated a youthful new approach to art. "We call upon the young," they declared, "who will bear the future, who want freedom in our work and in our lives, independence from older established forces." The most frequently cited source for the group's name is a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "What is great in man is that he is a bridge, not a goal." The *Brücke* artists saw themselves simultaneously as a bridge to the future and a bridge between Germany and the rest of the world. Equally important for Kirchner were the linkages between art and life, and between the visible and the invisible. These metaphysical bridges would resonate in his work long after *Die Brücke* had disbanded.

The *Brücke* artists shared an idealistic belief in the transformative power of art and a contempt for bourgeois civilization. Common among *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals, the latter impulse can be traced to the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who had extolled the primordial virtues of "natural man." The *Brücke's* notion of progress was thus backward looking, entailing the return to an innocence that they recognized in the art of "primitive" societies (which influenced Kirchner's work and his self-made studio decor) and in the Edenic landscape at the Moritzburg ponds (where the group regularly vacationed). The urban studio and the rural retreat each offered a refuge from conventional society. Here naked women cavorted freely, seemingly unburdened by any residue of Christian shame. Young girls were portrayed as avatars of prelapsarian purity, titillating yet chaste. Like little Eves, they appear unaware of their nudity. The goal, in Kirchner's words, was to depict "free human beings in free naturalness."

The *Brücke* models—neighborhood children, friends and girlfriends—worked together with the artists in a spirit of bohemian camaraderie. Kirchner and his colleagues favored fifteen-minute poses, which forced them to make quick, shorthand notations. Rejecting the ponderous academic approach, the *Brücke* artists forswore interior modeling in favor of bold contour

drawing. To translate three-dimensional subjects into two-dimensional representations, Kirchner developed a vocabulary of abbreviated forms. He referred to these as hieroglyphs, “not in the sense of a word, in which a particular form invariably stands for the self-same object,” but rather as images that “suggest significance to the beholder as the written word ‘horse’ presents the form of a horse to the eyes.” Insofar as they were universally comprehensible, Kirchner believed his hieroglyphs could overcome the limitations of verbal language, erasing barriers of culture, nationality, race and religion.

Beyond their immediate circle, the *Brücke* artists favored subjects observed at cabarets, circuses and variety shows. The scantily clad, uninhibited performers evinced a disdain for bourgeois prudery that resonated with *Brücke* sensibilities. These entertainments instilled in Kirchner a lifelong love of dance, which evoked the same primal rituals he admired in non-Western tribal art. Crucially important for him was the opportunity to sketch the human figure in motion, building upon the spontaneity of the fifteen-minute studio studies. “My painting is a painting of movement,” Kirchner declared. “I find the observation of movement especially inspirational. From this comes a heightened feeling for life, which is the origin of all artistic creation.” The artist distilled the multiple views offered by a moving body into singular forms. Noting that movement takes place in time as well as space, the scholar Gerd Presler remarks that Kirchner proceeded organically from the three- to the two-dimensional, and then on to the fourth dimension.

Just as he preferred moving models, Kirchner himself moved as he drew, changing position or walking through town with a sketchbook in hand. He drew every day and nearly everywhere he went, filling at least 180 sketchbooks, over 12,000 sheets. Most often he used pen and ink, which facilitated expressively inflected lines; or pencil, or both. Color might be added later. Emotional emphasis frequently overrode realistic proportions. The artist strove to capture what he repeatedly referred to as “the ecstasy of first sight”: the feelings evoked by an initial visual encounter. “Sometimes,” he explained, “the great secret that lies beneath all the happenings and things in our environment becomes fleetingly perceptible.... We can never express it concretely, but only give it symbolic form.” Kirchner wanted to “make visible the invisible.”

Drawing is the key to Kirchner’s art, and his sketches are the key to his drawings. But the sketches should not be viewed as studies per se. Rather, the sketches birthed new forms, conceived in the throes of “ecstatic” experience, that “crystallized and hardened” in subsequent pictures. As Kirchner worked through the initial forms, he hoped to develop images that had even more strength

and impact than the triggering experience. The artist’s search for “definitive forms” led him into printmaking, which he believed released “energies that remain unused in the much more lightweight processes of drawing or painting.” Worked on over a period of time, the plate, stone or block allowed a consolidation of “individual stages... into a single result... achieving the ultimate in expression.”

Kirchner was acutely sensitive to the characteristics specific to each printmaking medium: the texture of the wooden block; the spongy surface of the lithographic stone (which he enhanced with turpentine); the use of both single and multiple matrices to add color. His first love was woodcut, because of its kinship to tribal carving as well as its relationship to the illustrious German tradition of Dürer. Etching plates, which could be carried as easily as sketchbooks, facilitated a more spontaneous, “hieroglyphic” approach. Lithographic stones had the disadvantage of being costly and heavy. But they were reusable and thus could be shared among the *Brücke* artists. Kirchner eschewed transfer processes and always pulled his own prints, producing very small editions. “Only an artist who brings love and skill to the craft should make graphics,” he opined. “Only if the artist pulls the prints personally does the work deserve to be called original.”

In 1908, Pechstein moved to Berlin, a much larger city than Dresden with many more professional opportunities. Nevertheless, *Die Brücke* continued to function as a unit. Pechstein joined his comrades for their summer excursions to Moritzburg, and the Dresden-based contingent made regular visits to Berlin. In 1910, after *Die Brücke*’s submissions were rejected by the Berlin Secession, Pechstein brought the group into the *Neue Secession*, of which he was president. The following year, Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff decided to join Pechstein and Mueller in Berlin. Kirchner rented a studio in the same building as Pechstein, where the two planned to open an art school.

The move to Berlin in 1911 did give *Die Brücke* more exhibition possibilities, but the competitive environment fostered new tensions. Kirchner’s and Pechstein’s art school failed within a matter of months. Already in 1907, Bleyl and Nolde had resigned from the organization. In 1912 Pechstein was forced out because he had violated *Brücke* policy by exhibiting without the others. The final blow came in 1913, when Kirchner was accused by the remaining members of writing a self-serving history of the group. *Die Brücke* officially disbanded in May of that year.

The dissolution of *Die Brücke* sent Kirchner into an emotional tailspin. Gone were his dreams of creative camaraderie, his hope of seamlessly melding art and life. Furthermore, without the *Brücke* brand, Kirchner

found himself eclipsed on the Berlin art scene. The influential dealer Herwarth Walden passed him over in favor of the Italian Futurists and the more abstract variant of Expressionism practiced by *Der Blaue Reiter*. The frenetic pace of Berlin, streets teeming with people and cars at all hours, further exacerbated the artist's feelings of alienation. The primitivist fantasies of Dresden and Mortizberg dimmed before the inexorable forces of modern civilization. Kirchner later called this period the "loneliest" of his life.

Nonetheless, Kirchner executed some of his most iconic work in Berlin, transitioning from the communal *Brücke* style to a more personal mode of expression. In Dresden, the *Brücke* artists had admired the work of Van Gogh and Matisse (whom they unsuccessfully solicited for membership), but in Berlin Kirchner was exposed to a far broader range of contemporary art, including Cubism, Futurism and the attenuated, androgynous figures of the German sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck. Kirchner, who vehemently denied any suggestion of outside influence, attributed his change of style to a change of models: the "soft, Saxon physique" of his Dresden girlfriend, Doris ("Dodo") Grosse, was replaced by the "architectonically constructed, severely formed bodies" of a new girlfriend, Erna Schilling, and her sister Gerda. Kirchner's lines became more jagged, and instead of focusing on single subjects, he began to sketch the interactions among multiple figures, formulating what Presler terms "*Gesamt-Hieroglyphen*" (comprehensive hieroglyphs).

The foregoing emotional and stylistic upheavals reached their apogee in Kirchner's Berlin street scenes, the subject between 1913 and '15 of some eleven paintings and countless prints and drawings. More than mere depictions of a modern metropolis, these works capture the spirit of modernity itself. They are intensely and intentionally ambiguous, juxtaposing evocations of glamour and excitement with intimations of danger and disease. Once it becomes clear that the haughty, elegant women who dominate the streetscapes are in fact prostitutes, the commodification of desire emerges as a significant subtext. Yet unlike Dix and Grosz, who were obsessed with prostitution as an emblem of Weimar-era degradation, Kirchner avoids moralizing. He capitulates to the power of the city.

Despite the support of Erna Schilling, who would remain his lifelong companion, Kirchner's sense of crisis deepened during the Berlin years. His inchoate terror of modern civilization assumed specific focus with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. He began drinking heavily—Erna said, to avoid becoming "bourgeois"; others later suggested, to avoid military service. Fearing conscription, Kirchner voluntarily enlisted in the summer of 1915. Upon reporting for duty, he almost immediately

suffered a breakdown, and by November he had been declared unfit to serve. In December, he was admitted to the Kohnstamm Sanatorium at Königstein im Taunus for the treatment of alcoholism and addiction to the sleeping medication Veronal. Two further stays at the sanatorium followed in 1916. His physical and mental fragility notwithstanding, however, Kirchner produced a number of powerful self-portraits and portraits during this period.

Worried that he might still be recalled to active duty, Kirchner in early 1917 left Germany for neutral Switzerland, where he entered a sanatorium run by a friend's father-in-law. That summer, accompanied by a nurse, he rented a cabin on the Stafelalp, south of Davos. Though unable to leave his bed, Kirchner took solace from the landscape outside his window. "It is very peaceful here," he wrote. "The high mountains will help me." Gradually the artist's health improved, and when the war ended, he decided to remain in Switzerland. The Stafelalp would become his regular summer retreat. For the colder months, he found a spacious farmhouse at the base of the mountain, near Frauenkirch. Erna Schilling continued to take care of her lover's affairs in Germany, traveling periodically back and forth to Frauenkirch. In 1921, she joined the artist permanently in Switzerland, and the following year his Berlin studio was dismantled.

In the Swiss Alps, Kirchner discovered a harmony between humankind and nature that echoed his earlier primitivist ideals. "The contours of the mountains flow together with the clusters of people," he observed. "Their strong faces, partly covered by large black hats, have the same forms as the pine trees." In this setting, the *Gesamt-Hieroglyph* acquired a deeper meaning, the formal symbiosis of subject and ground suggesting a transcendent spiritual unity. The alpine way of life appeared timeless, and the giant Tinzenhorn loomed over everything like a protective roof. Kirchner compared this mountain to the ancient pyramids: an enduring icon linking the past to the present and future. The Tinzenhorn, Presler notes, was eternity made visible; it was the ultimate hieroglyph.

Many observers have detected a decrease in the eroticism of Kirchner's later work, seen already in the angular nudes and cool prostitutes of the Berlin period. To some extent, this can be attributed to the artist's maturation and to his deepening relationship with Erna Schilling. "The youthful, purely sexual connection to women has turned into camaraderie," Kirchner explained. In 1921, he met the dancer Nina Hard in Zurich and brought her back to Frauenkirch for the summer. She and Erna shared what must have been an awkward idyll, posing together naked in the mountain landscape. Kirchner's love of the moving figure was rekindled by a 1926 visit to Dresden, where he sketched the dancers Gret Palucca and Mary Wigman. However, there were no comparable

performers, avant-garde cabarets or variety shows in Davos. Kirchner drew the locals dancing at the Café Schneider, but their movements were rote, their bodies concealed by conventional clothing.

Kirchner was not totally isolated in Davos. He traveled to larger Swiss cities, and starting in 1925-26, back to Germany. His work was widely exhibited in both countries, and he was visited regularly by art-world luminaries. Prolific publications furthered his reputation, and in 1931 he was made a member of the Prussian Academy in Berlin. Though Kirchner refused to have anything to do with the former members of *Die Brücke*, he maintained an interest in contemporary artists, especially Pablo Picasso. Under the latter's influence, and also that of a local Swiss weaver, Lise Gujer (who made tapestries based on his designs), Kirchner's style became flatter and more abstract. Still, he never abandoned his commitment to recognizable subject matter. "All art needs the visible world and will always need it," he declared, "because, being accessible to all, it is the key to all other worlds."

The advent of Hitler in 1933 brought an end to Kirchner's professional efflorescence. The Prussian Academy immediately asked for his resignation, but did not forcibly expel him until 1937. That same year, 639 of the artist's works were removed from German museums and either sold abroad or destroyed. The Nazis reawakened all Kirchner's old fears: the critical rejection

of his art; the barbarism of modern civilization; the prospect of an annihilating war. After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, he no longer felt safe in nearby Davos. He began destroying his work. In May he proposed marriage to Erna Schilling, then hastily withdrew the offer. On June 15, following an unsuccessful attempt to enlist Erna in a mutual suicide pact, Kirchner shot himself twice in the heart. He died almost instantly.

Erna Kirchner, who obtained the legal right to use the artist's surname, became the keeper of his legacy. In 1943, when she was renovating their home near Frauenkirch, she gave a number of her late partner's sketchbooks and sketches to Lise Gujer. After Erna's death in 1945, Kirchner's remaining sketches were acquired by Gujer, and many were subsequently sold. The sketches that form the core of the present exhibition were purchased in 1959 from a Cologne gallery on behalf of Robert Lehman by his representative, Charles Lock. We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to Prof. Dr. Gerd Presler for his gracious assistance in dating and cataloguing these drawings. Warmest thanks also to Prof. Dr. Günther Gercken for his help cataloguing the Kirchner prints, to the family of Robert Lehman, and to an additional anonymous lender. The Galerie St. Etienne's Associate Director, Elizabeth Marcus, provided further invaluable research.

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