

## QUICK VIEW:

### Synopsis

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.

## DETAILED VIEW:

### 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 palate. 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 palate 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, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 <p><b>Albrecht Durer</b></p>	 <p><b>Erich Heckel</b></p>	 <p><b>Symbolism</b></p>
 <p><b>Edvard Munch</b></p>	 <p><b>Karl Schmidt-Rottluff</b></p>	 <p><b>Fauvism</b></p>
 <p><b>Rembrandt</b></p>	 <p><b>Fritz Bleyl</b></p>	 <p><b>Oceanic Art</b></p>
 <p><b>Vincent Van Gogh</b></p>		 <p><b>Buddhist Painting</b></p>



**Henri Matisse**



**Primitive Art**

**INFLUENCES  
ON ARTIST**



**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
Years Worked: 1902 – 1938



**INFLUENCED  
BY ARTIST**

**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."

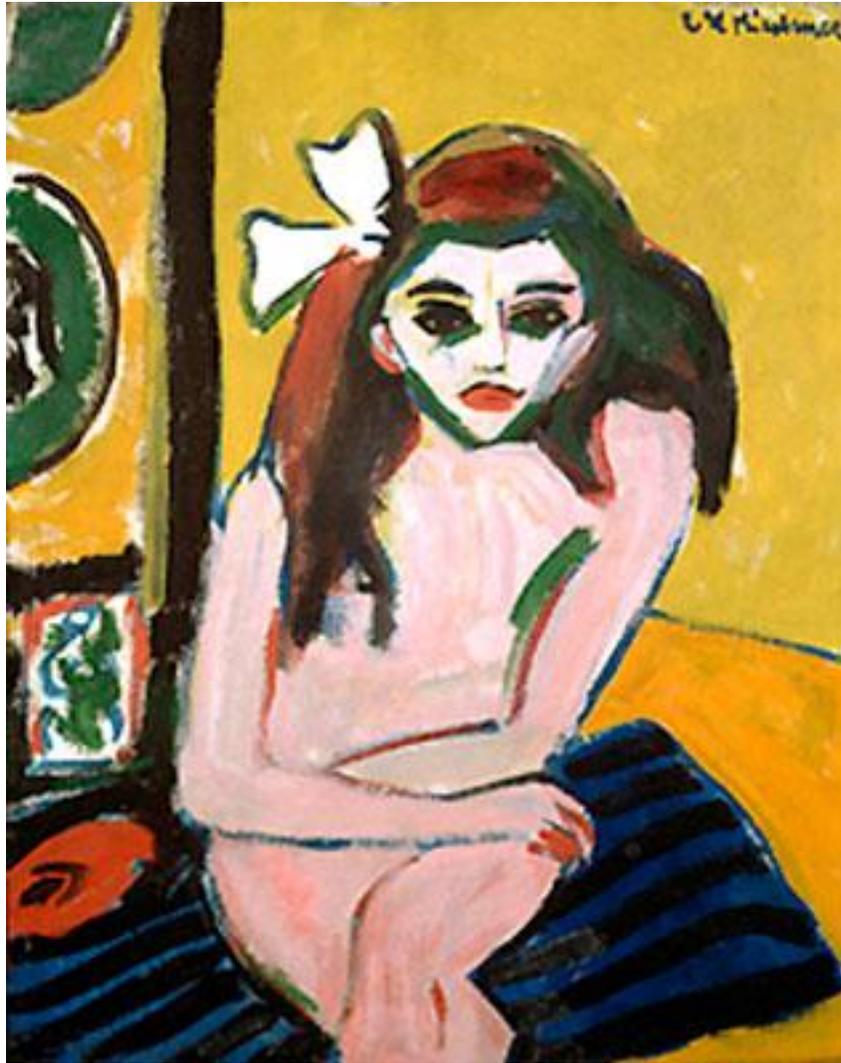
## Major Works:



*Nude Dancers (Nackte Tänzerinnen)*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1909, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Woodcut print

This woodcut print features a group of voluptuous nude female dancers on stage. Created during the Die Brücke era, the work exemplifies the energetic atmosphere of a meeting in Kirchner's studio, a recurrent scene in his pictures. In an attempt to revive the traditional printmaking, Kirchner created expressive, dynamic black lines by aggressively carving away the woodblock; the large areas of light and dark create an ambiguous sense of spatial depth on a two dimensional surface. Kirchner renders a balance between the two extremes (light and dark, bold and delicate) to create a

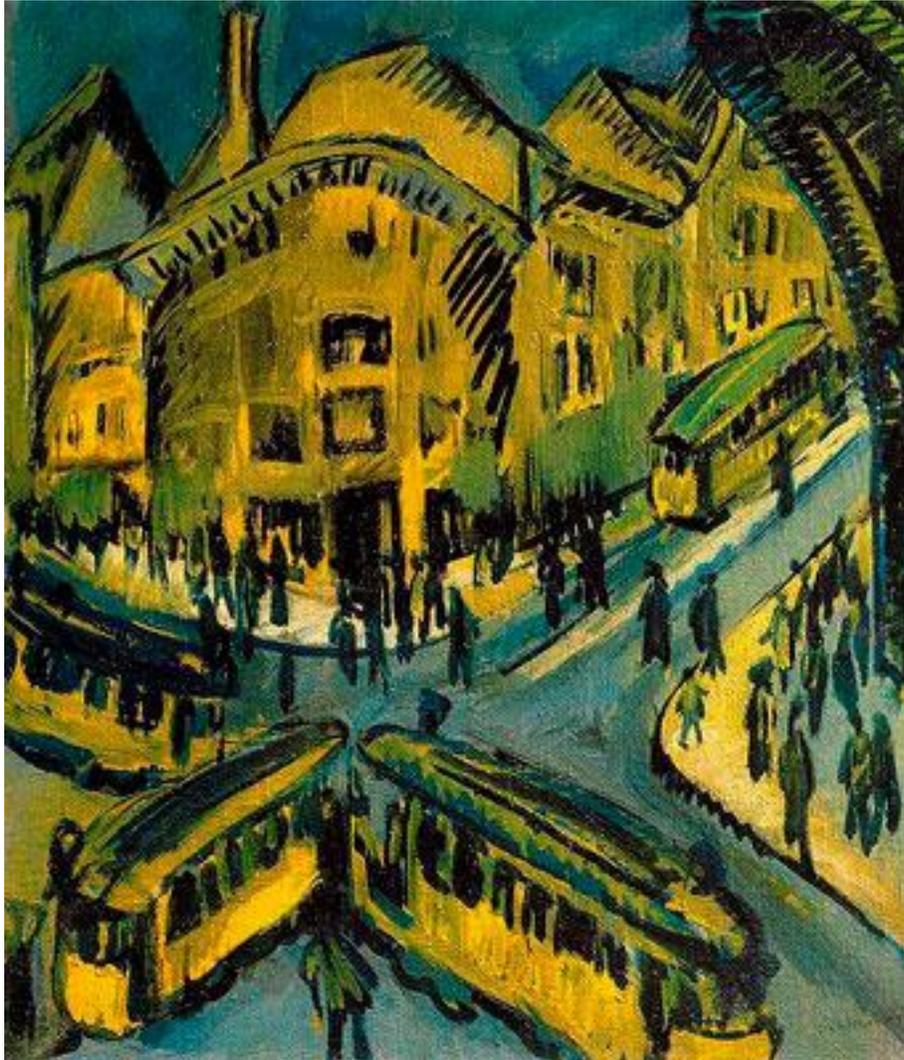
harmonious composition, allowing the eye to sweep across the picture plane. The conscious decision to leave white areas unrefined, making the process of carving visible, is a rejection of conventional academic teaching, a philosophy typified by Die Brücke.



*Marzella*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1909-1910  
Oil on canvas

Around the time this picture was painted Kirchner was spending time around the Moritzberg lakes, and the girl depicted was the daughter of a circus artist's widow that he met there. Emblematic of the Die Brücke phase, *Marzella* is a provocative depiction of a young, pre-pubescent girl. The youth of the figure, coupled with the intense gaze and heavily made-up face, give the appearance of uncanny maturity. Unnatural colors and self-conscious body language add to the unease in the composition. The painting is an example of a technique of rapid sketching used by members of Die Brücke, who believed this process allowed them to capture the "soul" of the subject. The picture is also

indicative of the influence of Edvard Munch on Kirchner's work, since the composition would appear to be based on Munch's *Puberty* (1892).



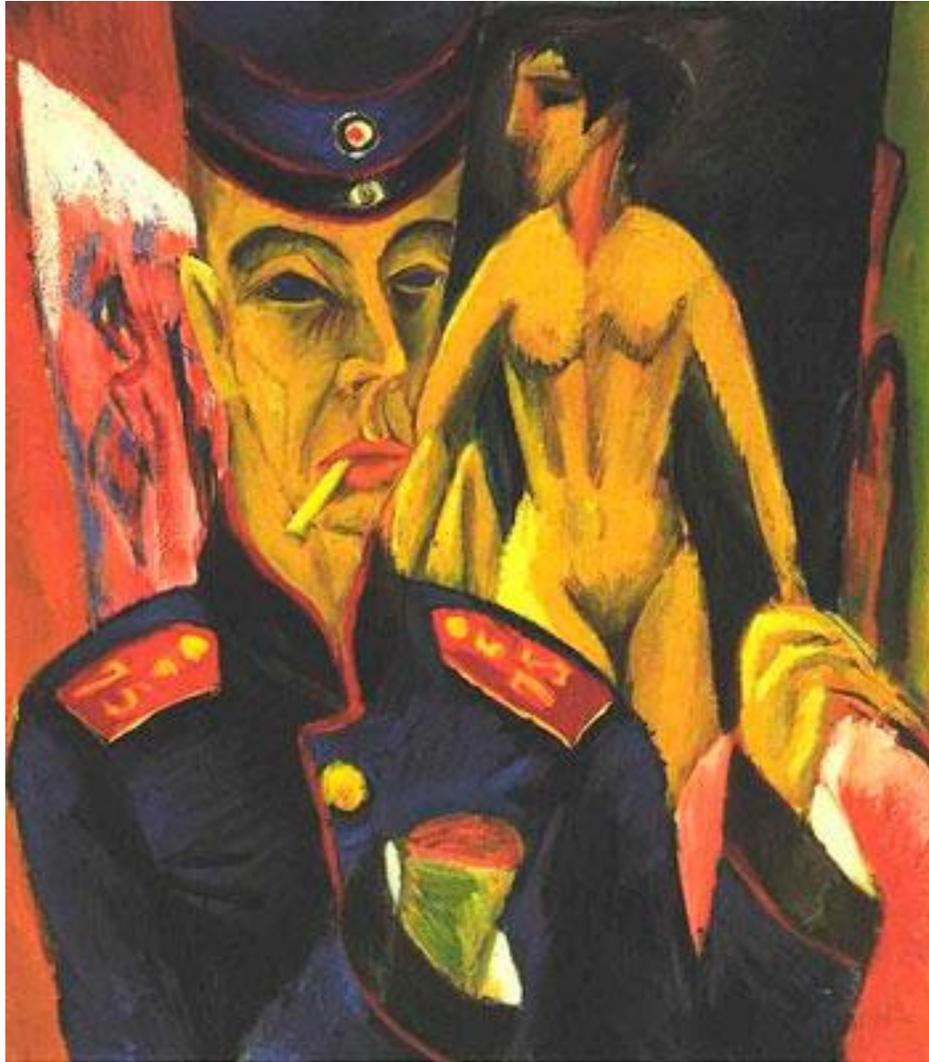
*Deutsch: Nollendorfplatz*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1912, The Museum of Modern Art  
Oil on canvas

*Deutsch: Nollendorfplatz* reveals Kirchner's shift in subject matter from the female nude to depictions of the metropolis. Here, the perspective is skewed, a clear rejection of his previous study of architecture. The quick, gestural use of line creates a sense of immediacy and speed within the piece, capturing the essence of a busy German city. The use of clashing blues and yellows to depict the cityscape is typical of Kirchner's style during the Die Brücke years, though the distorted imagery of the city may also have been inspired by an exhibition of Italian Futurist art that he saw in the year this was painted.



*Street, Berlin*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Oil on canvas

The vigorously painted *Street, Berlin* explores the figure of the city prostitute: chic streetwalkers who have angular, masklike faces. The two women proudly walk down the busy, tilted street of cloaked men with more sullen expressions. *Street, Berlin* accentuates the hidden sensuality beneath the prostitutes' haughty fashion. The luxury and anxious energy in painting also serve as a commentary on a pre-WWI German culture, as Kirchner believed increasing political tensions further detached urban individuals from society. The *Streetwalker* series, of which this is a famous example, is one of the most admired areas of Kirchner's art. The models for the series may have been a dancer, Gerda Schilling, and her sister, Edna, who later became the artist's lover. He once described the two women as having "beautiful, architecturally structured, rigorously formed bodies", and his encounter with them undoubtedly influenced this series of figure paintings.



*Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1915, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Ohio  
Oil on canvas

*Self-Portrait as a Soldier* examines the psychological distress experienced by Kirchner during his service in the military. He was a reluctant soldier and soon became preoccupied with avoiding service, and following a self-induced psychosis, aided by his use of alcohol and drugs, he was discharged. The painting displays a uniformed Kirchner standing in his studio, smoking a cigarette. His right hand is severed, symbolizing his trauma, and possibly also his anxiety at loss of manhood; the motif is based on Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with a Bandaged Ear* (1889), a picture the artist painted after he too had inflicted injuries upon himself. In the background of Kirchner's picture stands a nude who bears a resemblance to his lover of the time, Erna Schilling



*Blick auf Davos*, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1924  
Oil on canvas

After being discharged from the military in 1918, Kirchner took refuge in Davos, where the Alps surrounding his home provided a new kind of bucolic inspiration. The painting depicts a cool mountain range embracing a small town, a pictorial sigh of relief following the end of WWI. Inspired by van Gogh's landscape paintings and the work of the Fauvists, Kirchner used pulsating shades of violet, blue, green, and yellow to depict the rural scene. The swooping perspective is similar to Kirchner's early paintings of urban life.