

# Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: 1880 - 1938

by Donald Goddard

<http://www.newyorkartworld.com/reviews/kirchner.html>

In a letter of July 3, 1919, from Davos, Switzerland, Kirchner wrote, "Dear Van de Velde [the Belgian architect Henry van de Velde] writes today that I ought to return to modern life.



*Self-portrait as a Soldier, 1915.*

Oil on canvas, 27 1/4" x 24".

Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College,  
Oberlin, Ohio. Charles F. Olney Fund, 1950.

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." Modern life for Kirchner had been the streets of Dresden and Berlin; his own and other artists' studios; the summer beaches of Fehmarn in the Baltic; the Die Brücke group of avant-garde artists and the Expressionist movement, in both of which he was the central figure; and, finally, the First World War. Now he was in Switzerland, near the Austrian border, where he would remain until his death in 1938.

The exhibition I saw at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. did have some of the later work, though the version subsequently mounted at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, titled "The Dresden and Berlin Years," did not, perhaps for the reason that Kirchner's paintings, woodcuts, and other works of these years have almost universally been considered less important than those of his earlier years, a conclusion that is in some respects misleading and unnecessary in view of the world's history, the artist's history, and the peculiar power of some of his later work. It seems apparent that he was severely shaken by the Great War, but it would be strange not to honor the profound vitality with which he continued to realize his vision and develop his craft.

Kirchner himself wanted not to be seen as "a tame landscapist," but rather as a figure painter, which ironically allies him with academic tradition. But, of course, as much of a landscapist as he was, he was not a tame one. He was very much part of the places in which he landed: Dresden, Berlin, Fehmarn, the Alps. The war was real to him despite the fact that he was declared ineligible to serve and was never at the front. He was nonetheless horrified and saw himself as dead or maimed, as

in *Self-portrait as a Soldier* of 1915, in which his right hand, his painting hand, has been cut off (fictitiously). In cities he did a lot of interiors, but he also did specific views of buildings and streets, like the Bellevue Dance Hall in Dresden, the Potsdamer Platz and Nollendorf Square in Berlin. They were essential to his understanding of how people come together, how life is formulated in the city.



*Winter Landscape by Moonlight*, 1919.

Oil on canvas, 47 1/4" x 47 1/4". The Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Curt Valentin in memory of the artist on the occasion of Dr. William R. Valentiner's 60th birthday

He sees the same surge and collision of forces in his landscapes. The mountains and trees and cabins and skies are not simply there, they come from somewhere, just as do the people that inhabit his city streets. The place they come from is him, not as a matter of self-centeredness but of ecstatic perception. They are products of his colors, the movements of his hand. They move into place only at his insistence that they are there already. Even more than Van Gogh, whose work he revered, he inhabits the intensity of the color and light he sees. *Winter Landscape by Moonlight* of 1919 is apparently a view from his window, again near Davos, experienced on one very feverish night. The colors are primary--red, yellow, blue--sky and trees, moon and clouds, mountains--the images shaped and arranged in the simplest possible way. Yet the effect is of infinite complexity, because the brush has put down what is in fact there, and one perceives the enormous leap that has been made from the brush to as far away as the moon and beyond. A prodigious energy pushes the landscape into existence, with yellow clouds racing across the sky and red trees madly choreographed, like the figures in the streets or dancehalls of Berlin. And there buried in the bowels of the landscape, is to be rediscovered the source of self.

Art is therefore understood as a means of engaging the world's energy, not as it is but as it is constantly becoming. It is a process of encompassing over time what is in fact instantaneous. In Kirchner this is encouraged, I suppose, or at least is preceded by Van Gogh's emphatic compulsiveness, Munch's exhilarating inwardness, Toulouse-Lautrec's swirling fatalism, and even Vuillard's psychological intricacy, and parallels, or slightly follows, the Fauves, and particularly Matisse's, freeing of color from representation, though in a much more emotionally incisive way. Sources of energy early in his career are the studio (usually his own) filled with all forms of art, the bodies of young women and men, lovemaking, sprawling children, circus and cabaret performers, people in the streets consciously unconsciously performing, bathers on the shore in summer. In Dresden and Berlin, from 1905 into 1915, surrounded by other artists nearly as smitten as himself, Kirchner drew obsessively, painted, made woodcuts, and carved "primitivistic" figures of nudes from tree trunks.



*Nude Dancers, 1909.*

Woodcut, 13 3/4" x 22 1/2". Private Collection, Germany

Except for two small figures pirouetting and crouching at the left, *Nude Dancers* of 1909 is taken up by the torso of a woman looming into the foreground in what seems like a large oval black hat. No artist has ever used the medium of woodcut more imperiously. The given is blackness, the surface of the wood as it is. Carving away the wood enables us to see, and the act of carving pushes the image further and further into our consciousness. The woman looms and brings the dance to life. White pushes against the blackness to create the image but it is in fact the blackness, what has not been carved, that is more important in defining the image. This is the essence of engaging the world's energy, the grain of wood.



*Potsdamer Platz, 1914.*

Oil on canvas, 78 3/4" x 59 1/4". Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

Kirchner's paintings reverse the procedure but partake of the same energy. In *Potsdamer Platz* of 1914, two women, drenched in elegant severity and sadness, grow from their circle of pavement, their pedestal floating in the green streets, and tower like trees over the other figures, and even the streets and architecture. Their platform is circular and the arches behind them are semi-circular, but almost everything else in the painting is angular, down to diagonally slashing brushstrokes, so that the overall structure has a pronounced feeling of space being rent by jagged shapes epitomized by the dagger of sidewalk from which a man, in his own jagged movement, is intent on bridging the green river of street to the women's circle. This last is a contradictory play into deep space behind the women. There is something here that Kirchner learned from Cubism, as it had been played out recently in Paris, about the fragmentation and geometric reorganization of space, but his concern is

with its dramatic possibilities. Whatever tensions or movements toward chaos there are, such as the man stepping into the street, they also define the structure itself. The painting is an abstraction in green, blue, red, and shades of black and white, but one that is filled with human presence and interplay. It is a miracle somehow that everything holds in this "wealth of outer forms."

But of course it didn't hold. The war came, and Kirchner became severely, indefinably ill and went to another place. Until he shot and killed himself in 1938, before another war, he remained in Davos, 25 miles from the Austrian border. In 1937 the Nazi regime confiscated 639 of his works in Germany and showed some of them prominently in the "Degenerate" art show in Munich. In 1938 Austria was incorporated into the German Third Reich. After his turbulent confrontations with the Swiss landscape in 1919 and into the early 1920s, his work became less jagged and more lyrical, as though more hopeful, even as his own condition improved and became as attuned as possible to mountains and pastures and farmers and cows, a world alternative to the horrors that were coagulating. There is something heroically at odds in much of this work not only with the spirit but also with the subject matter of the times. In his early work, like no one else, Kirchner had exposed himself (not the other way around) to the rawness of experience, to sexuality and the tremendous commotion of life. Figures that were once mutable and haunted and terribly present are now stolid or gracefully curvilinear. One doesn't look into faces anymore, or at bodies, but rather at profiles, shadows, and double images in the manner of later Cubism. The forces of which he was so aware earlier, the mutable surfaces of things, have moved back, into the landscape, and his people are in some strange way absolved, and even made less "degenerate," hoping against hope that there is an alternative.

The dilemma is beyond any consciousness that Kirchner had of it, but his consciousness remained kaleidoscopic to the end, like the space in *Mountain Studio* of 1937, which, with its interplay of perspectives, particularly the plunging forward of the abruptly joined walls at the left, is something like *Potsdamer Platz*. Only here the perspectives project and contain contradictions that are even more pronounced. The door at the left (to the past?) is closed, and everything in the space reflects Kirchner's life in Switzerland. The floor flows, like the streets of *Potsdamer Platz*, through the space from the closed door to the open one on the right, which indicates vaguely in shape but certainly in color, a bright landscape. Scenes appear, of Kirchner himself at the left, a nude woman and two seated visitors in the center, a man with a cow in the upper right, and even the open-door landscape at the right, all of which presumably represent paintings by Kirchner as they hung in his house, but are also ambiguously, and not so ambiguously, views into other spaces. The only definitively living creatures are two cats that embrace at the forward-plunging apex of the joined walls. The whole embraces the architecture of one's yearning soul, the arc of life.

Donald Goddard © 2003



*Mountain Studio, 1937.*

Oil on canvas, 35 1/2" x 47 1/2".

E.L. Kirchner Stiftung (Kirchner Museum Davos).

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