

Gerda



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) is one of the major links in a line of modern painting that begins with Van Gogh and Munch, and that has not seen a conclusion as yet. Among the themes this current has addressed is the degree to which the artist's vision is a metaphor of man's position in the world. Kirchner said that "the new art is no longer selfishly romantic. Its tone and content know of human suffering.... Instead of the romantic self-perfection of the artist its message is the elevation of man." (Gordon, 464) Personal vision, in this context, is to be understood as the enhancement of the individual against the backdrop of an over-mechanized and impersonal society. Pictures by artists of this line of thought - including, after Van Gogh, Munch and Kirchner, such people as Appel, Soutine, Bacon and De Kooning - can be read as the shrieks of mankind attempting to reestablish the human condition within the pantheon of modern concerns.

The relevance of Kirchner to contemporary artists is as a model of the preoccupations that have not disappeared but grown in significance. The great seriousness of Kirchner's art, his engagement with philosophy, the eclecticism of his sources, his dilemma over what relevance art might possess and how to develop its potential, the uncompromising quality of the images, and finally his social commitment are all aspects of the contemporary scene. At the same time Kirchner, along with Matisse and others of his contemporaries, helped establish color as an independent element within a picture, one which could be manipulated toward greater and greater non-literal meaning.

Kirchner is best known as one of the founders of a group

of artists in Dresden called the "Brücke," or the "Bridge." While an architecture student, Kirchner joined together with Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff and Bleyl to form this group in 1906. These artists lived communally and developed their expression as a group. Chief among their sources were Van Gogh, Munch, early German woodcuts and non-Western art including Indian, African and South Seas sculpture. These sources were wedded to an art that stressed inner necessity, passion, and an anti-bourgeois stance to form icons of a new age. Stylistically the group combined colors in a harsh and strident fashion, while employing the gouged, thick lines of their woodcuts. The group, which disbanded in Berlin in 1913, at various times included Nolde, Pechstein, Van Dongen and Mueller.

Red Houses; Red January II of 1910 typifies the formative stage of Kirchner's development in its adaptation of sources from outside Germany, namely the Fauve color harmonies of France. After 1911, Kirchner's compositions became increasingly complex. Suburb of Berlin 1912 shows Kirchner's attainment in the handling of space, mass and compositional tensions. Kirchner's subject-matter, after 1911, changed as well, assuming the characteristics of what Donald Gordon called his "metropolitan psyche." The street scenes of ca. 1913, of which Gerda is an outgrowth, are the greatest examples of this tendency.

The war contributed to a series of breakdowns Kirchner suffered during the 'teens. Thereafter he spent a great deal of time in Switzerland painting landscapes, and his work grew increasingly monumental. The 20's and 30's were a considerably more relaxed time for Kirchner. The ever-present "decorative logic"

(Gordon) of his art took hold and Kirchner began to compare his pictures to Persian carpets.

Kirchner is not represented in the Atheneum's permanent collection, and opportunities to view his work in Hartford have been rare. Because he is one of the founding spirits of the modern sensibility, we are showing him in MATRIX.

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Works in MATRIX:

Red Houses; Red January II, 1910, oil on canvas, 29 1/2" x 35 3/4", anonymous loan.

Suburb of Berlin, 1912, oil on canvas, 28 1/2" x 39", anonymous loan.

Gerda, Half-Length Portrait, 1914, oil on canvas, 39" x 29", anonymous loan.

Portrait of Edwin Redslob, 1924, oil on canvas, 47 1/2" x 29 1/2", anonymous loan.

"With faith in development and in a new generation of creators and appreciators we call together all youth. As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against the long-established older forces. Everyone who with directness and authenticity conveys that which drives him to creation, belong to us."

from Kirchner, Brücke Manifesto, 1906 (Reprinted in Selz, German Expressionist Painting, Berkeley, 1957, p. 95)

Selected one-man exhibitions:  
Folkwang-Museum, Hagen, Germany '13 (first); Kunsthaus, Zurich '18; Kronprinzenpalais, Berlin '21; Kunstmuseum, Bern '33; Institute of Art, Detroit '37; Busch-Reisinger Museum, Cambridge '50; Curt Valentin Gallery, NYC '52; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '55; Art Museum, Seattle, Art Museum, Pasadena, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston '68-'69 (retrospective).

Selected bibliography by the artist:

Programme der Brücke,  
Dresden, 1906.

Chronick K. G. Brücke,  
Berlin, 1913 (reprinted Sel  
German Expressionist Paint:  
Berkeley, 1957).

Selected group exhibitions:  
Kunstsalon E. Richter, Dresden  
Brücke '07, '08, '09; Armory of  
the 69th Infantry, NYC Inter-  
national Exhibition of Modern  
Art '13; Kunsthalle, Bremen  
Munch und die Künstler der  
"Brücke" '20; Art Club, Phila-  
delphia 24th International  
Exhibition of Paintings '26;  
Museum of Modern Art, NYC  
German Painting and Sculpture  
'31; Baltimore Museum of Art  
German Expressionism '45;  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
Expressionisme '51; Musée  
National d'Art Moderne, Paris  
L'Oeuvre du XXe Siècle '52;  
Tate Gallery, London XXth  
Century Masterpieces '52;  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery,  
Buffalo Fifty Paintings 1905-  
1913 '55; Tate Gallery, London  
Painters of the "Brücke" '64.

Selected bibliography about  
the artist:

Barr, Alfred H. German  
Painting and Sculpture, Museum  
of Modern Art (New York) '31.

Valentiner, W. R. "Expres-  
sionism and Abstract Painting,"  
The Art Quarterly, vol. IV,  
no. 3 (summer, '41), pp. 210-39.

Myers, Bernard. "Postwar  
Art in Germany," College Art  
Journal, vol. X, no. 3 ('51),  
pp. 251-56.

Grohmann, Will. E. L.  
Kirchner, Arts (New York) '61.  
Gordon, Donald E. "Kirchner  
in Dresden," The Art Bulletin,  
vol. XLVIII, no. 3-4 ('66),  
pp. 335-66.

Gordon, Donald E. Ernst  
Ludwig Kirchner, Harvard Uni-  
versity Press (Cambridge) '68.