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Ernst Ludwig Kirchner by Maurice Tuchman, 1962

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[01:00] Impressionism came to Germany a generation late, too late to attract younger painters of progressive inclination. It arrived in a diluted form, and was shortly superseded by the introduction into Germany of the post-impressionist art of Cézanne, Seurat, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. [Munch?] painting and graphic art was also beginning to attract younger artists. Four of these receptive younger painters were enrolled architecture students at this time in the first years of the century in the Technische Hochschule in Dresden. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, born in 1860, was the eldest of this group.

In 1905, Kirchner drew the group together with almost dictatorial conviction [02:00] and messianic zeal. The immediate result was one of the great revolutionary movements in modern art, the formation of Die Brücke, "the bridge," which represents the first wave of German expressionism in the twentieth century. Kirchner was the initiative, the mastermind, and the spokesman for the group. He wrote Die Brücke manifesto of 1906 here on the screen, cut it in wood and printed it by hand. The title page of the manifesto reads: "With faith in development and in a new generation of creators and appreciators, we call together our youth. As youth, we carry the future and want to create for ourselves freedom of life and of movement against the well and established older forces. Everyone who with directness and authenticity conveys that which drives him to creation belongs to us. [03:00] The young artists here recall their commitment to an art full of life, an art that will be relevant to the daily existence of people everywhere, and art that will reflect the wide spectrum of human experience."

These young artists who included Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Firtz Bleyl, besides Kirchner, rejected the prevailing modes in art of the time. The impressionism they knew was not French, as here in the Monet painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but it was a watered down version being practiced by the older artists in Germany. Even had they known original works by the impressionist masters, however, they would doubtlessly have rejected it, as well, as being anemic, dull in design and execution, with uninteresting subjects which bored the public. That is, in fact, [04:00], those words are Kirchner's description of paintings by the Munich secessionists who represented German impressionism.

The second prevailing style that was rejected by Kirchner and the painters of Die Brücke was the ubiquitous and oppressive naturalist style, the formal, official style of the academies and of professors of painting. I have no illustration of this sort of work, but I think you can imagine a prototypical image, heavily glazed, minutely detailed, compulsively realistic renderings of mythological or classical subjects with a suggestion of sin or sex. And those two usually become confused.

The third prevailing style in Germany, at around 1905, was Jugendstil, the German name for the international style of art nouveau. The central element in art nouveau [05:00] or Jugendstil, in all countries, was the sinuous flowing, flora-like line, a line which took on a life of its own. This characteristic element contained possibilities of mysterious evocation. The line was related to the symbolist content of the pictures, and it was also related to the widespread movement of symbolism in literature at the time. The picture by Toorop, at the left, and van de Velde at the right, would indicate the reliance upon Broadway stylized [sweeting?] lines, as well as upon two-

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dimensionality on the picture plane. In Germany, this mannered style became [vulgarized?] and was made a feat by countless imitators.

Now, Kirchner rejected this manner for its excessive decoration, and its overbearing [ornamentality?]. But as we shall see later [06:00], certain Jugendstil characteristics appear in Kirchner's later work. This landscape by Kirchner was done in 1906, a year after the manifesto was issued. Considering the passionate declared aims of Kirchner and Die Brücke, we are surprised to see such a tame, almost conventional painting. This is actually just the preliminary step. But the paining is considerably advanced for its time and place. The stroking, for example, derives from impressionism, but it is far more active and aggressive, and so on. Especially there was a greater back and forth play than in impressionism, with respective elements that are alien to the French style. In the original painting, you can see a heightened, saturated use of intense colors, which are quite different from the quiet tones of the Monet, as we saw in the Poplars or in any Fusaro.

In this black-and-white [07:00] reproduction, we can detect another feature conceived independently of impressionism. That is the contrast and value. The contrast in darks and lights that make up the canvas surface. But most of all it is the tone and the tenor of the picture that indicates a new direction. Gone forever are the evanescent and pleasant purely visual sensations associated with impressionism. Here there is a personal element and increase in emotionality. The picture in this sense recalls Van Gogh, and it is possible that Kirchner knew his work at this time.

Kirchner's goal with *Japanese Umbrella* was also painted in 1906, and it is a more ambitious undertaking. We see here, for the first time in Kirchner's work, the taste for the exotic, the distant, and the colorful. In this connection I might point out [08:00] that Kirchner was the first Western artist to discover the art of primitive peoples, to discern in primitive Negro carvings high artistic merit, and to understand the relevance of this art to modern expression. In 1904, Kirchner had found such primitive sculpture in the Ethnographic Museum in Dresden, and had excitably informed his friends about his discovery. A similar discovery of primitive art by artists in France was made independently a couple of years later.

And no trace of primitive art appears in this painting, although other figure paintings done shortly after do reveal anatomical distortions of a primitive nature. The taste in this canvas is for the oriental, but of a certain specific kind. To characterize Kirchner's viewpoint, let me cite two earlier artists who were charmed by Chinese and Japanese [09:00] culture. When Degas was delighted by Japanese prints, he borrowed certain devices such as the elevated viewpoint and the use of figures cut off by the frame. And he presented a new view of his own Parisian world that got assimilated the Japanese element into a new pictorial order. When Whistler, on the contrary, was influenced by the Orient, he chose objects, like Chinese vases or sculpture or Oriental custom. And he conjured up an atmosphere of the Oriental, while retaining a traditional Western compositional manner.

Now we'll go back to the Kirchner for a moment. Kirchner strikes something of a middle ground between the two approaches. He uses a characterizing object in the Whistler fashion that here is the Japanese Umbrella. But he also uses Japanese ideas, the cut off [10:00] [view?] at the

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lower left, for example, as well as the two dimensional approach to the entire canvas. He also rejects, in Japanese fashion, the Western device of (inaudible) for modeling in tones of light and dark. This picture most recalls [they already showed?] the [Montese?], and bring back the Kirchner. The picture most recalls Martese's [obelisks?] which were being done independently at precisely this time in Paris in contrast to the hedonism and the open gaiety of the Martese. Kitchner's woman who exhibits a cramped posture and is delineated in sharp angles and opposing colors transmits a lack of ease and real relaxation. [11:00] This, of course, has to do with the essential characteristic of (inaudible) in France and German expressionism in Germany. Most significant in this Kirchner is the impulsive brushwork and the brilliant color in the *Umbrella*. This anticipates the more fully expressionistic style that would soon emerge in Kirchner's work.

In these transitional years, Kirchner struggled to develop his own personal statement, and his rapid accomplishment can be seen by comparing the women with red flowers here at the left, which is owned by the Museum of Modern Art, compared with the portrait of *Dodo and Her Brother*. The picture at the left was painted about 1903, the one at the right about three years later. The most important change concerns color. In the earlier picture, the color of the dress is modeled in traditional terms of light [12:00] and dark. There is no interplay between the blue shades in the dress and most of the canvas area. Color is applied in thick, heavily and pasted dobs of paint. Three years later, Kirchner makes the entire canvas vibrate and come to life. All of the tones display veracity and freshness, and even black is made to operate as a color. The lavender shades of the bag, a difficult color to harmonize, is used expertly. The paint is applied more freely and more thinly. There is greater psychological interest here, too. For example, the nude in the earlier picture is one of heavy melancholy. The subject's eyes, for example, drift off-center. The red flowers echo her saddened downcast spirit. In the double portrait on the right, while both figures catch our eye, there's nonetheless a consciousness in each figure of the other. The mood of the earlier [12:00] work is obvious. The mood of the later work is more subtle.

Speaking of mood, a mood of enthusiasm runs through most of the paintings of the Dresden years from 1905 to 1911. And these pictures of the dancers, the one on the left is from 1907; the one on the right is from 1909. This mood of enthusiasm is explicit. Kirchner clearly admires the subject of nightlife, admires them for their dash and (inaudible) for the way they get their performance across. He felt some measure of rapport with them in their role of public artists. In fact, as we shall see when we come to Kirchner's self-portraits, there is an unmistakable resemblance between the boy watching the dancer in the work at the right, and Kirchner himself. It is the dash, the color and the excitement, the element of spectacle that [14:00] that appeals to the artist in this subject. When he tries to capture the grace and elegance inherent to dancing, the result is a bit awkward, even unwittingly humorous.

In both paintings, it is the marginal element, the backdrop or the scenery, that is painted with greatest visual display. Kirchner has completed eliminated unnecessary detail. Shading and modulation of tons have been reduced, but not altogether successfully. For example, notice in the work at the right, the receding grey floor. Kirchner is attempting to compose two-dimensionally on the picture (inaudible) but cannot, as yet, free himself from the claims of three-dimensional reality. To make every area in his canvas operate with maximum intensity and life to create passages that operate simultaneously as surface elements, and as carriers of spatial

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movement, Kirchner had to absorb the (inaudible) experience of Gauguin. [15:00] The exotic type of woman in the Kirchner painting at the left recalls Gauguin's taste. But more important, it is the use of (inaudible) flatly painted colors at high pitch in distinct, outlined grids, such as we find in the Gauguin at the right.

This street of 1907 is Kirchner's most important painting in the Dresden period. And, curiously, it is quite atypical. It is only here that we can definitely sense the haunting isolation and loneliness that was to be so dramatically expressed later in Kirchner's Berlin pictures. In many ways the painting is inspired by (inaudible): the use of custom to make those compelling ground drab areas, the rigid frontality of the figures, and the manner [16:00] in which those figures claim our attention. Also the deliberate, unsettling asymmetry. The characteristic change is Kirchner's brilliant, clamoring colors, the rose-violet streak or the Chinese red coats and the yellow jackets, or the way in which the dark shapes cut deep holes into the canvas by virtue of their situation and brightness. Another important distinction is the search for a negative shapes, that is shapes made by the space between figures. These shapes are made as interesting, and are as expressively important, as are the positive shapes of figures and objects themselves. This is the first painting of Kirchner's in which we find this conscious search for negative patterns.

Kirchner went to Berlin in 1911. [17:00] The change in his painting was immediate and profound. This street scene, also in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, is one of a great series on the subject of the street. Everything in the picture is arrow-shaped, pointed [wicked?]. It is created from a single inspired vision, and all the means of the picture work together to the same end. A rich telegraphic nervous line touches every one of the figures, infusing them with the tension and scream the sophistication and the manners of big city life. Dresden, after all, had been a traditional center of culture. Dresden was stable and mature and bourgeois. The street painting of 1907 which I showed before was in Dresden, and it reflects the relative stability and the quiet temp of the town. Berlin was, of course, a different matter. It was famous throughout the world for its nightlife and it's street life. Its cultural and political activity [18:00] had made Berlin the single capital of Germany. Before 1870 when Germany did not have the equivalent of a London or a Paris, that is a single cultural and political capital, Dresden and Munich and beyond the borders, Vienna, comprised many centers. When Kirchner arrived, Berlin was in the ascendency as a great metropolis, a fierce and exciting place. It had a defined artist section with outdoor cafés and entertainment spots, as well. As a matter of fact, the café where the expressionist artists met was called the Grössenwahn Megalomania. The introduction of the [nervous?] charged line was no more important to Kirchner's development than another innovation that we find here, and that is the substitution of adjacent colors for complementary ones. Thus, the clash of bold yellows and reds in the earlier work gives way to shades closer to each other in the [19:00] painting here. I also might point out the rather rich psychological relationship among the three figures up front, the two women and the one man. The man looks in a window. The woman at the left observes him while the second woman watches her.

The pictures on the street theme occupied Kirchner, although not exclusively, from 1911 to 1915. I think many of these pictures belong to the very best of his huge output. Kirchner produced several thousand paintings and drawings and prints. The self-conscious mannered strutting of the prostitutes in this picture forms a brilliant crystalline image. In all of the street pictures, the figures move slowly or they are completely stationary, and the action and dynamism

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of the canvas comes not from gesture, but only from the exciting stroke, and often from the [20:00] reliance in the canvas upon key diagonal movements. Kirchner drew and sketched almost every hour of every day. One of his most exciting creations is this spontaneous impression of a street scene with controlled energy coursing through every stroke. Again, at the right, we see a brilliant deformation of a form imbedded in spidery, delicate, strong strokes. The picture interprets the emotional reality of night in the city with the unreal light of artificial lamps shining down in its peculiar frozen way on the hard faces and the cold streets. Harry, bring back the *Red Cocotte*.

Compositionally, most of Kirchner's [21:00] street scenes are based on a wedge shape of figures, a wedge shape projected into space. I am certain that he knew this lithographic by Munch. It is similar in theme and mood, and to some degree, in technique, as well as in composition. Kirchner has simply and brilliantly reversed, turned inside out, the group of men around the single women, and he has added one more dangerous looking individual to the foreground. The relationship between the Munch lithograph, and this and the other pictures, and Kirchner's Berlin street series, is a complicated one. It has never, to my knowledge, been investigated. I suspect that here, as in the Dresden street scene of 1907, which I compared to a Munch painting, Munch's work was the kernel of inspiration to Kirchner. There is insufficient time now [22:00] to discuss the direct relationship between Munch's woodcuts, his revolutionary woodcuts, and the important woodcuts of Kirchner and the Brücke artists. I hope to go into that in the next lecture, which is on (inaudible), another member of the Brücke group.

Just as Kirchner's subjects, rather, in this period, were not restricted to street scenes, so his style was not necessarily jagged or angular or flowed with splintered distortions. The *Nude with Hat* here, of 1911, is one of his most successful paintings, and one in which the eroticism is overt and straightforward. The lines are slow-moving, broad, and curving, suggestive of sensuality in themselves. The broad curve of a hat repeats in the lowered edge of the dress, and, again, appears reversed along her shoulders. The element of voyeurism [23:00] is made not only by the lowered dress, but also by the nude's right eye, which is emphasized as it touches the transparent rim of her hat. The painting is executed with the refreshing openness and spontaneity. And the color scheme, again, consists of adjacent colors with none of the violent clashes of opposing shades that are characteristic of his paintings in the Dresden period. Another change in style concerns the outlining. In his Dresden period, Kirchner made edges formed by the ends of color planes. The color plane extended to an edge, and the outline was marked by the end of that color plane. Here, and in most of the Berlin pictures, an independent, dark outline encloses a different colored color area. *Two Nudes by the Window* is executed in a radically different [24:00] style, although it was painted at about the same time as the *Nude with Hat* in 1911. It is here and in related pictures that one feels most strongly the influence of primitive art. In the figure at the right, for example, her breasts are seen as from the left. Her shoulder is seen frontally, and her right shoulder is pulled into view as if we were seeing a full view of her back. She also has six fingers, by the way, although that does not, as far as I know, come out of primitive expression. In the other nude, there is a primitivistic type of deformation in her arm, which is stretched this far as her leg. Every conceivable kind of liberty has been taken in the attempt at maximal intensity of expression. But except for a couple of passages, such as those dark curls over the woman's face at the right, or the suggestive way [25:00] in which the other woman's leg hooks into her companion's. Except for these passages, I don't think the painting achieves its desired

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end of maximum intensity. If we compare this picture to Picasso's great Demoiselles d'Avignon of 1907, whose nudes are also stylized under the influence of primitive sculpture, we immediately recognize the greater control and greater force of the Picasso.

Kirchner also painted nudes in nature at this time, as he had done earlier, in the environs of Dresden. He wrote about his strivings to achieve new strength through close bonds to nature. With his painter friends and a group of women, Kirchner spent several weeks in communal living in the forests around Berlin. The painting on the screen, as well as the experience that prompted the painting, is in line with contemporaneous [26:00] movements in Germany. The German Youth Movement, the Nudist Cult, and the philosophical worship of the freely moving human body as a part of the total conflicts of nature.

Like most expressionist artists, Kirchner made a continuing series of self-portraits. This one, done in 1913, displays the painters personal defensiveness and his aggressiveness. Behind his face there appears to be a concave mirror, and the distortions of the mirror image (inaudible) into his shirt and into the easel before him. When he made this painting, the Brücke group, which he, more than anyone else had created, had just broken up. And this dissolution was also largely his doing, a result of the dictatorial and unreasonable demands Kirchner made upon his colleagues.

At the age of 35, [27:00] Kirchner was drafted into World War I. He painted this self-portrait with the symbolic amputation of his right hand during the one year he was in service. In these months he also managed, somehow, to pain this image of satanism on the right, as well. It is a picture that calls to mind George Grosz's indictments of the military and other German satirical comments on the war, such as Hasek's *Good Soldier Švejk*. This self-portrait was prophetic and tragic, though not a literal fashion.

Kirchner soon suffered a mental collapse in the Army. Through the intervention of an old friend, he was released and spent the greater part of the following few years in sanatoriums in Germany and Switzerland. He was constantly productive [28:00] during the next two decades. But, as with Munch, his art completely changed. He turned to abstraction and synthetic cubism for a while. Then, again like Munch, he painted the working class and the peasant folk in Davos, Switzerland, where he had settled. Kirchner dressed as a peasant, lived and worked with the peasants, and though of himself as a creative worker with active workers. But the fire and intensity of his art of the brief Berlin years completely vanished.

In 1937, Kirchner was defamed by the Nazis in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich. In that exhibition, scores of great paintings by the outstanding masters of art in our time were ridiculed as being Jewish, communist, decadent. At that time, the Nazis confiscated over 600 of Kirchner's paintings then in German museums. A few months later, besieged by recurrent [29:00] mental lapses and physical illness, and thrown into turmoil by his defamation in Germany, Kirchner took his own life. Thank you.

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