

# Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

**Female Half-Length Nude with Hat, 1911**

**Fränzi in Meadows, 1910**

**Still Life with Tulips, Exotica and Hands, 1912**

**Five Women on the Street, 1913**

**Forest in Winter, 1925/26**

**An Artists' Group, 1925-26**

The wooden acrobat bends over backwards and balances a heavy vase on his belly, as if he wanted to impress the ghosts that hover in the air beside him. The red ghost holds up his hand in warning. Delicate women's hands lay a border of blue, green and black stripes on the table, as if they wanted to cast a protective spell – against the spirits, against the acrobat bending over backwards and against a casket in the shape of a house. This demarcation line separates two realities of different scale from one another: on one side are the hands and the tulips, whose dimensions correspond to those of the table, while on the other side are monumental miniatures.

A still life is generally regarded as a collection of inanimate objects. In his eerie painting **Still Life with Tulips, Exotica and Hands**, which is executed mainly in heavy, warm colours, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner has not kept to that convention. Instead, everything here is alive. Two tulips try to stretch their heads as far as possible out of the vase. They seem to be chattering with the owner of the hands, and, with this attempt at contact, the person, albeit unseen, becomes part of the picture.

Several photographs of Kirchner's studio in Dresden have survived. They show furniture that the artist has carved himself, a tree stump used as a stool, exotic containers, and erotic paintings on the walls and curtains. At the end of his architectural studies, Kirchner made the decision to become an artist. In 1906, together with Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, he founded the artists' collective Die Brücke, which additional artists would join in the following years. Their lifestyle and manner of working did not correspond to the conventions of the time. The artists took turns drawing each other with their girlfriends and models in fifteen-minute sittings, calling the results 'quarter-hour nudes'. During excursions to the Moritzburg Lakes, north of Dresden, they devoted themselves to the motif of the naked human in nature. Kirchner also found an important inspiration for his work in African wood sculptures from the Museum of

Ethnology. In 1911, he moved to Berlin. The famous painting **Female Half-Length Nude with Hat** was however created during his Dresden period.

As is characteristic for his pictures of this phase, the surface and material qualities reflect the speed and spontaneity of the painting process. In addition to the swiftly drawn lines and the fact that the glaze has run, the paint on the canvas is raw and rough. A preliminary sketch in orange-red shines through the later overpainting. Flowing veils of cerulean blue create a dynamic yet monochrome background. Kirchner has quickly painted the flowery cloth on the canvas, but for the pasty flesh tones of the upper body he has placed a number of minimally varying reddish-yellow tones over each other until the skin resembles ivory or porcelain. The blue plays into these tones and produces shadows that seem to have a greenish shimmer in places. Blue-black contours lend clarity to the forms – two jagged lines and two arcs for the armpits and breasts, two broad strokes for shoulder and hat, and a few lines for the face, neck and fingers. The mouth and the nipples entice the viewer with their bright red. The young woman's pose reflects a combination of cheekiness and seduction, but it is not clear how her movement will continue. Will she raise or lower her arms? Or to put it another way: Is the hat going on or coming off?

The reverse of the picture conceals a surprise. Here, the pure colours of the summer permeate both nature and people. Red, orange and even green venture into the ochre-coloured face of a girl. She is dressed in colours that look like they came from a child's paintbox. Her arms, delineated in pink and blue, frame a bright yellow-green bathing suit, over which dangle two dark strands of hair, shimmering in red. The arms, folded behind the back, remind the viewer of a jumping jack, but the hints of feminine breasts call the subject's childlike status into question. Just as he did in over a hundred other cases, Kirchner rejected this picture. He stretched the canvas and mounted it in reverse, with the result that **Fränzi in Meadows**, as the work is known, is hidden behind

the female half-length nude. The picture shows Fränzi, the famous child model of the Brücke artists, who is clothed in this picture, together with three naked adults and was probably created on a summer's day in Moritzburg. It is interesting to compare this picture with Max Pechstein's *The Black-Yellow Bathing Suit*, since it seems likely that both painters set up their easels side by side.<sup>1</sup> In Pechstein's work, Fränzi, who is wearing a black- and yellow-striped bathing suit, appears as an incidental figure in a tall and deep landscape. In the background, the members of a nudist group wade through deep grass.

Kirchner adds urgency to the scene. In his picture, three nude figures dance in a frivolous conga line. The ambiguous actions of the characters take place directly behind the girl's head. The space and distance between her face and the naked bodies, whose colour corresponds to that of the face, become lost in the flatness of the green background – the meadow looks like it has been raised up into a vertical position. Despite this connection, Kirchner does not allow the child to observe the events behind her back. He confronts her with an elevated observer – in other words, the adult – although she does not seem to be seeking direct eye contact. Despite the explicit nature of the image, the world of the child meets that of the adults without distress or harm.

With their feathered hats and collars, the figures in **Five Women on the Street** look like birds. The elongated black figures shimmer in blue, green and purple tones, their pointy shoes reminiscent of claws. The women's faces remain impersonal. With their black-rimmed hollow eye sockets and their pink complexions, overlaid by a greenish grey, they have a morbid air. In this, the first of a total of eleven so-called 'Street Scenes' he created between 1913 and 1915, Kirchner has chosen as his motif 'curb swallows' or 'courtesans', as Berlin's street prostitutes were called at the time. The prostitutes were prohibited by law from approaching potential clients directly, and so they had to behave discreetly on the street, while their conspicuous clothing acted as a badge of their profession.<sup>2</sup> During Kirchner's wanderings through Berlin's streets, he made a large number of swift, frantic drawings in sketchbooks, which served as a basis for his studio works.

The **Five Women on the Street** stand together as a group, and yet they remain isolated. The electric light from the shop window on the right falls yellow-green on the kerb. The left figure is the only one who is looking furtively at the dark car at the roadside. Her four colleagues, on the other hand, stare to the right, whereby, starting with the large figure at the front and moving rightwards, each of the women is bending over slightly more, as if the women were subtly heading toward the window display. In theory it should only be possible to represent the shop window – which both separates the coveted goods inside from the prostitutes outside, but also puts them on the same level – using a distorted perspective. But Kirchner found a surprising solution that allows him to insert the vertical dividing line between the two worlds as a harsh fact within the picture. The front-most central figure looks like she had been cut off, as if her body were growing behind an invisible border or as if she were pressed against a pane of glass that runs down the middle of the sidewalk. This functions as a symbol of the impossibility of contact and of unattainable desire.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Kirchner experienced a serious life crisis. He suffered a breakdown right at the beginning of his military training and was released from service to enter a sanatorium. His poor health prompted his friends to persuade him to go to Davos in Switzerland for a rest cure. In 1918 he rented a farmhouse there, where he settled permanently. Just as earlier in Dresden and Berlin, he found the subject matter for his paintings, graphic works and sculptures in his immediate surroundings. In this case, he was inspired by the mountains and the life of the mountain farmers and their animals. During the second half of his time in Davos, from 1927 onward, his work changed, and he began to combine different stylistic devices in his images. The defamation of his person and his work by the Nazi regime in Germany, the fear of impending war and his health problems are all seen as motives for Kirchner's suicide in 1938.

In the foreground of the picture **Forest in Winter**, a path gets lost behind a snowbank after a few steps. To the right in the background, the hill slopes downward.

Austere tree trunks as straight as candles, painted in violet and reddish brown, point up into the air. The needle-laden branches on the two pine trees on the left and on the group of spruces on the right hang down like heavy dark coats. They frame the row of spruce in the background, whose snow-covered branches look as if they were climbing steps leading upward. They seem to be rising up, as if seeking to bridge the gap between the towering trees in the foreground, even though these lie on a different spatial plane.

Depth and flatness are intertwined by the reddish-purple contour that frames the trees. This nervous fever curve of a line is like a lasso that lashes together the rear row of trees with the front one, so that they form a single picture plane. In addition, the red-violet has the effect of intensifying the colours it separates: the green of the pine branches and the turquoise of the sky. The colour palette Kirchner employs in **Forest in Winter** is typical of a large number of his paintings of the 1920s. Here, he only uses half the colour spectrum, namely from red via violet and blue to green. Kirchner's pictures of this period can be roughly divided into two groups: if he leaves out yellow, then he uses the above-mentioned half-spectrum, but if he uses yellow, then he includes the whole spectrum of colours.

Many of the notes in Kirchner's Davos journal testify to his carefully considered use of colour: 'The colours remain much more on the surface when they are found next to each other on the colour wheel, and I want to have the surface, despite the effect of depth and everything else.'<sup>3</sup> In another passage, he specifies the reason for preferring to use adjacent tones on the colour wheel, namely 'that a picture appears more colourful when one leaves it up to the eye to fill in the complementary colours'.<sup>4</sup> The decision to avoid using complementary colours is equivalent to the decision in favour of using the effect known as simultaneous contrast and helps to explain the special role of violet, especially in Kirchner's winter landscapes.<sup>5</sup> The white areas of snow form a kind of projection surface for yellow. In the picture's brightest spots, an unpainted yellow lies over **Forest in Winter** like the idea of warm light.

**An Artists' Group** occupies a unique position in Kirchner's oeuvre, as it is in fact a historical picture. Painted in 1926, it illustrates the dissolution of the Brücke group,

an event that had happened thirteen years previously. The cause of the break-up was an egocentric chronicle of the artistic community that Kirchner wrote, in which he declared himself to be the initiator of the group's artistic innovations. In the picture, the glaring white of the document disrupts the colour scheme of the painting with its orange, purple, blue and green. Four hands gesticulate wildly above the sheet of paper. In contrast, the group of four men in the narrow space do not show any signs of overt emotion. Their elbows, however, seem to jostle with each other.

In front of his three standing colleagues, Otto Mueller squats on a stool, his arms and legs tangled up. Withdrawn into himself, he sucks on his pipe and gives no attention to the provocative text. Kirchner himself seems spatially remote, as if in a depiction of the Annunciation. He is standing behind a sloping wall, whose blue goes into the depths of the painting, above the white foreign object that is the chronicle text and in front of a window with a view. With his open hand he points to the text in a gesture that impels the others to comment. Erich Heckel is giving Kirchner the cold shoulder, clenching his fists in his trouser pockets and looking to the right, as if he wanted to pass the buck to Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, who in turn stares into space through the reflective lenses of his spectacles. Although the two men's heads are close together, their eyes do not meet.

A photograph Kirchner pasted into his Davos journal shows the image at an earlier stage.<sup>6</sup> Previously, there had been white highlights on the collars, eyes and spectacles, which were later covered up to heighten the signal effect of the chronicle. The black-and-white photograph also shows strong contrasts in the tonal values in the upper part of the painting. The scene, which in its final form takes place in the quiet, restrained glow of twilight, was originally depicted in daylight. With Kirchner's decision to do without the light-dark contrast, and with the colour contrast between the blue background and the cold red shadows, the warm terracotta tones of the oversized heads develop an inner glow. Erich Heckel may be silent, but he can barely suppress his anger.

Thomas Pöhler

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- 1 Aya Soika, *Max Pechstein. Das Werkverzeichnis der Ölgemälde*, Volume 1, Munich 2011, p. 52.
  - 2 Magdalena M. Möller, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchners Straßenszenen 1913–1915*, Munich 1993, p. 26f.
  - 3 Lothar Grisebach (ed.), *Ernst Ludwig Kirchners Davoser Tagebuch*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1997, p. 104.
  - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
  - 5 In his Davos journal, *ibid.*, Kirchner expresses his fondness for violet. See pp. 31, 69 and 70.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, reproduction on p. 188.



Recto:  
**Female Half-Length Nude  
with Hat**  
1911  
Oil on canvas  
76 x 70 cm



Verso:  
**Fränzi in Meadows**  
1910  
Oil on canvas  
76 x 70 cm





**Five Women on the Street**

1913

Oil on canvas

120 x 90 cm



**Forest in Winter**  
1925/26  
Oil on canvas  
95.5 x 80.5 cm



**Still Life with Tulips,  
Exotica and Hands**

1912

Oil on canvas

78.5 x 68.5 cm



**An Artists' Group**  
1925/26  
Oil on canvas  
168 x 126 cm

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner