

Sex and the City: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Street, Berlin*

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“The German artist created out of his imagination, inner vision. The forms of visible nature are to him only symbol.”¹

-Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

In the years leading up to the first world war, German culture began to change quickly and drastically while trying to catch up with the industrial revolutions happening in England and France.² Cities expanded, industry boomed, and political tension increased. Naturally, artists reacted to these changes, and some, like German-born Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, generated an expressive style to profess the emotions being felt in this modern Germany.³ Under the umbrella movement of German Expressionism, a subgroup was formed by Kirchner called “Die Brücke,” or “The Bridge,” and included mostly former architecture students working together and apart from 1905 to 1913.⁴ Stylistically, the artists took inspiration from classic German artists in combination with modern avant-garde colors and abstraction, serving as a bridge between the two.⁴ From this, the group exhibited a painting style with “crude lines and a vibrant, unnatural color palette” in the hopes to express their own emotions as well as to evoke an emotional response from the viewer: this was in stark contrast to traditional academic art.³ This paper will assess how Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s painting, *Street, Berlin* (1913), reflects the chaos and eroticism seen throughout cities at the beginning of the twentieth century. Through color, line, and perspective, Kirchner was able to provoke a sense of awareness in the viewer using an

¹ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Quote, n.d., in “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 21, 2020).

² Smarthistory, “Kirchner, Street, Dresden, oil on canvas, 1908,” Filmed [n.d.], YouTube video, 09:55, Posted [October 2011], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ2a6nXEIkE> (accessed May 3, 2020).

³ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁴ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

expressive style — emblematic of the Die Brücke art group — and address the transition from the tradition of the past into the modern future.

Born on May 6, 1880, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner initially studied architecture before founding and leading the Die Brücke group in 1905 in Dresden, Germany with Fritz Bleyl, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Erich Heckel.⁵ The artists worked “in staunch opposition” of bourgeois Germany and the tradition of the Academy, not only in form, but also in subject-matter as they worked to express “feelings of alienation from the modern world.”⁷ From the period of 1905 to 1915, the world was moving past the Renaissance — and its many successors — as many international movements began to emerge, each with their own specific goals and manifestos.⁶ For Die Brücke, value was placed on their youth and intuition, qualities that could not be found in old masters or their traditional paintings.⁷ As a reflection of these values, the group painted “simplified or distorted forms” with “unusually strong, unnatural colors, and thick...brushwork” with the intent to “jolt the viewer and provoke an emotional response,” all of which was emblematic for the group and German Expressionism as a whole.⁸

Albrecht Dürer was one the group’s main classical influences as they took inspiration from his sixteenth century wood-cut prints which yielded paintings with dark, flattening outlines of scenes that would tell a story.⁵ Focusing mainly on German painters, the gory and provocative paintings and motifs of Grünewald and Cranach the Elder also influenced the group’s content and expressionist goals.⁷ When the group was formed in 1905, they were in Dresden, which was

⁵ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁶ Donald E. Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” The Art Bulletin vol. 38, no. 3/4 (1966): 335-337. doi: 10.2307/3048390.

⁷ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

⁸ Starr Figura, Heather Hess, Iris Schmeisser, Peter Jelavich, *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*, (Norway: Museum of Modern Art, 2011): 54.

a major artistic city in Germany — and the world — at the time, and hosted art shows with work from more radical, contemporary artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Edvard Munch.⁹ These contemporary artists were considered to be radical due to their expressive colors and “primitive” style that made simplified, slightly abstracted, forms with warped perspectives.⁹ From these modern artists, the Die Brücke group inherited a vibrant color palette that clashed and “[jolted] the viewer into the experience of a particular emotion.”⁹

Emotional provocation and expressionist painting techniques take their full form in a 1909 painting by Kirchner, *Marzella*, which shows a young girl with a heavily made-up face and an intense gaze towards the viewer (fig. 1).¹⁰ The colors are very unnatural as he uses fully saturated greens and reds as shadows. The imagery looks graphic in style with their dark outlines, and the perspective is unconvincingly warped, creating a somewhat dysmorphic figure. The colors, perspective, and content all work together to create a sense of unease in the viewer, combining classical influences with modern painting styles: and thus, the bridge is formed.

It is said that Kirchner had a decent photographic memory, so when he saw the works of old masters or radical contemporaries in museums, he could copy their work and styles well.¹¹ In 1905, there was an exhibit of Van Gogh’s work in Dresden, and of Munch in 1906, and then of Matisse in 1909, where Kirchner would have had access to their work and would then be inspired.¹¹ However, wherever Kirchner inherited the styles of these modern artists, everything was exaggerated. Where Van Gogh’s brushwork was impasto in texture and vibrant in color, Kirchner’s hues and brushstrokes were further amplified.¹¹ Edvard Munch was famous for his

⁹ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

¹⁰ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

¹¹ Donald E. Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” *The Art Bulletin* vol. 38, no. 3/4 (1966): 335. doi: 10.2307/3048390.

abstracted figures which morphed together with their background — flattening the perspective almost entirely — in combination with unnatural colors and heavy brush work to match more subdued subjects.¹² Kirchner's figures were then “so drastically flattened that they appear to be sliding off the canvas.”¹³ Matisse was gaining prevalence for his Fauvist nudes which took a simplified form using brightly colored brushstrokes, and so Kirchner's forms were further distorted, continuing the use of vibrant, clashing colors.¹²

Before moving to Berlin, Kirchner shifted his subject from nude figures towards urban metropolis scenes, like his 1912 painting *Deutsch: Nollendorfplatz* (fig. 2).¹⁴ Kirchner was initially an architecture student, and so it is safe to assume he knew how to render a building with proper perspective, but here that study is rejected as he skews and flattens the perspective almost as if it is leaning in towards the viewer.¹⁴ The colors are darker than his previous Matisse-inspired paintings — implementing a dark blue or black to outline as opposed to a vibrant green or red — but the gestural brushwork is stronger than ever as he uses quick, zig-zag strokes to form shadows and assumingly moving figures, “capturing the essence of a busy German city.”¹⁴ A bus comes swooping in from the left, and a piece of architecture arches into view from the right while blobs of people swarm the streets, showing less of what the city would look like naturalistically and more of what it might feel like to be in the midst of it all.

In 1913, Berlin was the third largest city in the world¹⁵, and so Kirchner moved the group there to pursue the “greater artistic opportunity” the city had to offer. Shortly after, Die Brücke broke up, and Kirchner was alone in the city and referred to the period from 1911 to 1914 as “the

¹² Donald E. Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” *The Art Bulletin* vol. 38, no. 3/4 (1966): 335. doi: 10.2307/3048390.

¹³ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” *The Art Story*, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

¹⁴ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” *The Art Story*, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

¹⁵ Museum of Modern Art, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Street Berlin,”” YouTube video, 02:20, Posted October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWivDUWFaX0>.

loneliest times of [his] life.”¹⁶ One year before the onset of the first world war, political tensions were growing throughout Germany. The industrial revolution had formed a society that yearned for luxury, and cities expanded to an unprecedented scale.¹⁷ It was under these circumstances that *Street, Berlin* was created as a part of Kirchner’s *Streetwalker* series (fig. 3).¹⁸

A frequent motif in *Die Brücke* painting was the idea of free sexuality — which was common in Fauvist paintings and was typically set in a private space — juxtaposed by city scenery “where human interaction is uncomfortably negotiated through prescribed social attitudes.”¹⁷ In *Street, Berlin*, the viewer is initially confronted by two women, both prostitutes, in the very foreground of the space.¹⁷ The man to the right of the women looks at the items for sale in a shop window, and behind the women are cloaked, somewhat masked, men, none of whom make eye contact with the women, and who swarm almost every occupiable space.¹⁶ To the left of the women is a car that is oncoming, or perhaps parked on the street, about to fall off the cliff that is the edge of the canvas. The perspective seems to extend from the bottom left corner outwards to the right of the picture plane before arching back in at the top of the canvas to crowd the space further. The foreground begins and ends so abruptly it feels as if the women, who are distractedly looking at each other, or maybe the surrounding men, are about to run right into the viewer. The women’s shoes do not foreshadow naturalistically, but rather are flat against the canvas and come to sharp, pointy ends. Almost every figure is wearing dark clothing, save the deep purple of the woman on the left. The clothing, the walls of the shop, and part of the street shift between extreme lights and darks of a saturated blue. This cold blue is broken up by

¹⁶ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

¹⁷ Museum of Modern Art, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Street Berlin,”” YouTube video, 02:20, Posted October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWivDUWFaX0>.

¹⁸ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

moments of vibrant pink in the street, the background, and the faces of the women. These clashing colors are difficult on the eye, making the viewer feel jolted and disturbed.¹⁹

The entire image itself is composed by vigorous, scratchy brushstrokes which create angular faces, shoes, hats, etc.²⁰ Since each sharp brush stroke is visible, no figure is actually smooth, and so the viewer gets no breaks from the jagged figures confronting them. Kirchner used a rapid sketching technique to render most of his paintings, so that he could “capture the ‘soul’ of the subject,” and not necessarily what the subject actually looks like.²⁰ In this way, Kirchner is not actually depicting a street in Berlin, but rather the *soul* of a street in Berlin, or what it must have felt like for him to be on a street in a crowded city. Like the actual streets of a city, the canvas is claustrophobic, with no room to breathe in between the swarms of people and towering architecture overhead which crowds the sky, similar to how the perspective arches the content into the viewers space in *Street, Berlin*. Kirchner was more or less all alone at this point in his life, and with a history of mental illness, the claustrophobic, anxious energy that filled the cities in tandem with the political tension growing throughout Germany fused to create a “destabilizing effect” on him, and therefore, the painting.²¹

Pre-war Germany was filled with luxury as a result of the industrial revolution. For Kirchner, the prostitutes “embodied not only glamour and alienation, but the sad reality of a culture where everything was for sale.”²² Here, the painting becomes much more psychological, as Kirchner works to combine Edvard Munch’s moodiness with the bright colors and brushwork

¹⁹ Smarthistory, “Kirchner, Street, Dresden, oil on canvas, 1908,” Filmed [n.d.], YouTube video, 09:55, Posted [October 2011], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ2a6nXEIkE> (accessed May 3, 2020).

²⁰ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

²¹ “Die Brücke Movement Overview and Analysis,” The Art Story, The Art Story Contributors, 21 May 2015, www.theartstory.org/movement/die-brucke/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

²² Museum of Modern Art, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Street Berlin,”” YouTube video, 02:20, Posted October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWivDUWFaX0>.

of Van Gogh and Matisse.²³ The entire painting becomes a symbol for “urban angst,” and his practice with Die Brücke techniques helps him to express these emotions.²⁴

Kirchner’s art “captures German culture at a critical point” as the country reels in the wake of an industrial revolution.²⁵ However, the culture becomes very consumerist and foreboding as political tension ensued before the war. The rest of the Die Brücke group had left Kirchner behind in this crowded city where he felt the alienation and anxiety that comes with it. It is here in Berlin that Kirchner paints *Street, Berlin*, a painting full of figures and cityscape crowding the canvas making the composition, and the viewer, feel claustrophobic and anxious. The intense color palette is unnerving, and the consistently jagged and angular brushstrokes evoke a sense of aggression. The outlined, simplified figures and warped perspective flatten the image further emphasizing the unnaturalistic quality of the painting, letting the viewer know this is not a depiction of the street, but rather an expression of the psychological experience of being in a city: it is only a symbol.

²³ Donald E. Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” *The Art Bulletin* vol. 38, no. 3/4 (1966): 340-348. doi: 10.2307/3048390.

²⁴ Museum of Modern Art, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Street Berlin”,” YouTube video, 02:20, Posted October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWivDUWFaX0>.

²⁵ Larissa Borteh, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner Artist Overview and Analysis,” *The Art Story*, 22 Nov. 2011, www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/ (accessed May 3, 2020).

Figures

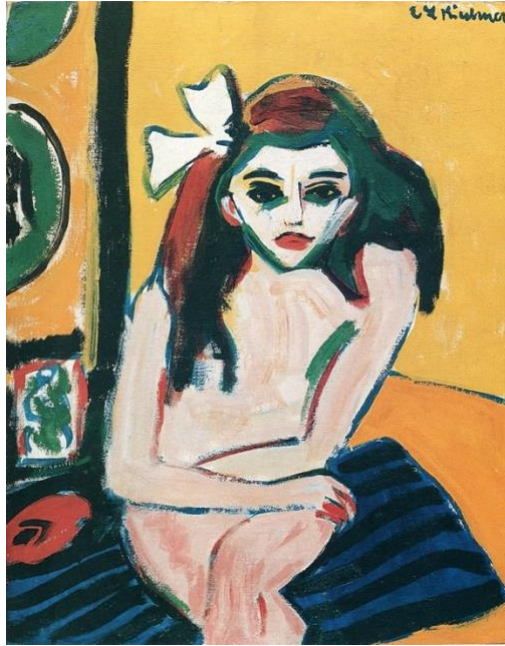


Figure 1. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Marzella,” 1909–1910. The Art Story. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/>.

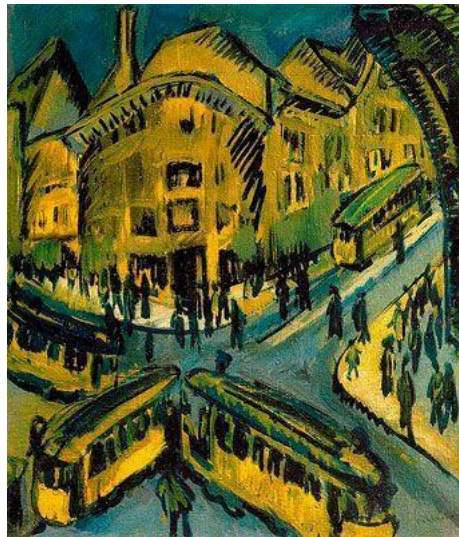


Figure 2. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Deutsch: Nollendorfplatz,” 1912. The Art Story. Accessed May 22, 2020. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/kirchner-ernst-ludwig/artworks/>.



Figure 3. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "Street, Berlin," 1913. The Art Story. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Accessed May 3rd, 2020. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79354>.

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