
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Images of the Natural State

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ABSTRACT : Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a German Expressionist artist and a founding member of the Die Brücke modernist movement. Kirchner was motivated by an impulse to revolt against the social restraints and conventions of Germany's Wilhelmine era. This prompted his unconventional lifestyle, which included seasonal outdoor excursions during which Kirchner visually documented his friends cavorting in the nude. This essay analyses the multifarious influences that informed Kirchner's depictions of outdoor nudes, such as Germany's naturalist movement, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and poems of Walt Whitman, the Fauvist aesthetics of Henri Matisse, the escapism of Paul Gauguin, and the visual idioms of non-western sculpture. Although Kirchner's depictions of nude figures synthesized many sources, the artist added his own touch and made a unique contribution to the art history canon expressing a distinctly modern mindset.

KEYWORDS -Die Brücke, German Expressionism, Kirchner, Nietzsche, Whitman

I. INTRODUCTION

During the summer months of 1907-1911, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), a German Expressionist artist and founding member of *Die Brücke* (German for "The Bridge"), vacationed at the three Moritzburg Lakes, in the forest northeast of Dresden, Germany. On these excursions, Kirchner was joined by his lover and frequent model Doris ("Dodo") Grosse (born 1884), fellow founding members of *Die Brücke* Erich Heckel (1883-1970) and Max Pechstein (1881-1955), and several female friends from Dresden who often posed as models. The Moritzburg Lakes were a popular destination for urbanites seeking a respite from the noise and congestion of Germany's bustling cities. Vacationers rented red wooden bath houses, bathed in warm waters, and spent time communing with nature. Kirchner and his entourage came for a more specific purpose, though. They sought out the most isolated coves, where they stripped off their clothes and frolicked in the nude. As they cavorted in an idyllic setting, Kirchner and the other artists sketched the *joie de vivre* (enjoyment of life). Returning to his studio in Dresden at the end of each summer, Kirchner created a memorable series of paintings and prints based upon his sketches, which included *Bathers Throwing Reeds*, a woodcut pulled in the autumn of 1909 (Fig. 1).



Figure 1.
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. *Bathers Throwing Reeds*, 1909, woodcut.

The theme of nude figures in a landscape has a long history in western art, stretching from ancient Greek vase paintings through the imagery of Die Brücke's immediate *avant-garde* predecessors, including the Post-Impressionists Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) (Figs. 16, 20-21). What sets Kirchner's figures apart, however, is their sense of complete freedom, the lack of restraint they exude as they revel. Without the slightest trace of inhibition, they soak in the summer sun and soak in the convivial spirit of their playmates. Kirchner's figures seem unable or unwilling to control their exuberance as they delight in their pastoral paradise. The Moritzburg Lakes must have been a type of libertine and cathartic oasis for Kirchner and his friends, who during their day-to-day lives in Dresden were constantly subjected to the prohibitions of Germany's *Wilhelminian* social norms (ca. 1890-1918) [see generally 1; 2]. Disrobing and playing in the sun was one way of escaping repressive middle-class urban *mores*, and it was all in keeping with ideals of the youth, beauty, and nudist subcultures and countercultures that ran alongside Germany's social and cultural mainstream during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kirchner, a devotee of the anti-establishment writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and the hedonistic poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-1892), embraced the spirit of these sub- and countercultures. And judging by the aroused state of the central figure in *Bathers Throw Reeds* (perhaps Kirchner's self-portrait), romping outdoors in the nude also helped fulfil the artist's most basic instincts.

Although bared human anatomy is a major *genre* that runs throughout western art, Kirchner's *modernist* bathers differed from the ideal nudes of *Classical* artists, such as archetypal Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) (Fig. 2) [on Classicism generally see 3; on the Renaissance see 4]. Michelangelo's almost superhuman nudes descended from a prestigious line of Greek and Roman artistic predecessors; Kirchner's bathers, on the other hand, were drawn directly from life and seem more particular and *naked* than *Classical* and *nude* [see 5; 6]. The Moritzburg bathers are neither ideal, graceful, nor heroic. They are quotidian, even awkward, both in their poses and in their attitudes. There is a deliberate crudeness to Kirchner's drawing reflecting both his indifference to traditional academic standards of beauty and draughtsmanship, and, simultaneously, reflecting his appreciation for expressive properties found in non-European artistic modes that were once derogatorily described as "primitive" [7]. Kirchner's harshly angular style and his use of non-descriptive colours reveals a distinct indebtedness to sculptural traditions of Cameroon and the Palau Islands, which were each German colonial possessions at the beginning of the twentieth century. Also, by 1909 Kirchner had fallen under the spell of *Fauvism*, and the shrill colours and reductivism of *Bathers Throwing Reeds* undoubtedly reveals the influence of French Expressionism. For Kirchner, non-western "primitivism" and western modernism (particularly Fauvism) were soulmates: each effectively conveyed emotions and passions.



Figure 2. Michelangelo, *The Deluge* (detail), 1508-1509, fresco.

As an aside, the art critic Louis Vauxcelles (1870-1943) coined the term *les fauves* (French for “wild beasts”) to describe the work of Henri Matisse (1869-1954), his associates, and his followers. In 1905, Vauxcelles was sent to review Paris’ *Salon d’Automne* exhibition. In one of the galleries sat a Classical sculpture by the early Italian master Donatello (1386-1466). It was surrounded by the latest paintings of Matisse and his circle. In his review, Vauxcelles praised the Donatello but lamented that it was placed amongst the wild beasts [8]. Vauxcelles conveyed his confusion and disapproval of the Expressionist paintings to his readers.

II. SOCIALLY PROVOCATIVE ART

By contemporary standards, the impish naked merrymakers portrayed in *Bathers Throwing Reeds* may not seem all that disturbing. In Kirchner’s day and society, however, such a frank portrayal of young German men and women brazenly answering hedonistic yearnings represented an affront to prevailing moral norms. Kirchner’s Moritzburg Lakes images invited viewers into a liberated subculture where sexuality was openly discussed and where the naked body was neither hidden nor feared. *Wilhelminism* is a term used to describe the prevailing social and cultural climate that characterized the reign (1888-1918) of the last German Emperor Wilhelm II (1859-1941). Wilhelmine society tended to be rigidly conservative and, in many ways, resembled contemporaneous Victorian society in the United Kingdom [see 9]. In fact, Emperor Wilhelm II was the grandson of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom (1819-1901). Detractors saw the Wilhelmine moralist mainstream, particularly in the decade before the First World War, as unnecessarily rigid, prudish, and even hypocritical.

Scholars, social observers, and art critics were on the lookout for subversive modernist troublemakers who might seek to subvert “decent” Wilhelmine society. A few cultural critics went as far as to link German modern art and Expressionism with pornography, seeing both as debasing to women. For example, the Munich-based psychiatrist and sexologist August-Henri Forel (1848-1931) wrote, “There are few great artists, but thousands of charlatans and plagiarists. Many of those who have never had the least idea of the dignity of art pander to the lower instincts of the masses and not to their best sentiments. In this connection, erotic subjects play a sad and powerful part. Nothing is too filthy to be used to stimulate the base sensuality of the public ... In these brothels of art, the most-obscene vice is glorified” [10, p. 491].

Doctor Forel’s comments appeared in his book entitled *The Sexual Question: A Scientific, Psychological, Hygienic and Sociological Study for the Cultured Classes*. Interestingly, the debate concerning “the fine line between art and pornography” continues unabated today. However, whereas in the past, criticism and attempts to censor “explicit images were often motivated by conservative and religious values and fears of moral corruption,” today critics more often “challenge objectifying sexual imagery [and seek] equal rights for women,” and suspect the distribution of “objectifying images is detrimental to that cause” [11].

Following the German Empire’s humiliating fall at the end of the First World War and Wilhelm II’s abdication, The National Socialist German Workers’ Party (or “Nazi Party”) ascended to power under the leadership of Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). As Wilhelmine critics had done earlier, the Nazis again singled out

modern art and Die Brücke specifically for critical derision. In the 1930s, the Nazis began systematically confiscating from German museums and private collections modernist works they deemed *Entartete Kunst* (or “degenerate art”). In 1937, the *Reichskammer der Bildenden Künste* (“Reich Chamber of Visual Art”) organized an exhibition of the confiscated artworks, which was held in Munich between July and November 1937 and travelled to many other German cities thereafter. More than six hundred works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner were seized and judged as “un-German” and “insulting to German feeling” [see 12], and twenty-five of Kirchner’s paintings were included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition. Kirchner could not overcome the psychological trauma of being labelled a degenerate nor could he come to terms with the confiscation of hundreds of his works. He fell into a deep depression, and in 1938 Kirchner finally committed suicide. Ultimately, Kirchner paid a terrible personal price for his quest to free art “from the prudishness of German bourgeois society” [13].

III. INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE “WANDERING BIRDS” MOVEMENTS

The German Empire became much more industrialized and urbanized between 1871 and 1910. In 1871 approximately 5 percent of Germans lived in large cities; by 1910 more than 21 percent did [14, p. 52]. In Germany’s increasingly sprawling cities, the working-class were often forced to endure miserable working and living conditions. This set the stage for social conflicts and the rise of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and the Nazi Party. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread opinion that Germany’s overcrowded urban schools were overintellectualizing children and stymying their physical health and enjoyment of the outdoors. The German philosopher and social critic Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, for example, asserted that within the constraints of German’s urban society, humanity had drifted too far from its natural origins, sacrificing instincts and inborn power in pursuit of the comforts and conveniences of modern civilization [see 15, p. 230].

Around this time a *back-to-nature* movement emerged called *Wandervogel* (German for “wandering bird”), in which young Germans fled from industrialized cities to commune with each other and to appreciate the natural environment [16]. *Wandervogel* groups were part of the much larger *Die Deutsche Jugendbewegung* (“German Youth Movement”), a turn-of-the-century social phenomenon that positioned young people in opposition to the repressive social norms and authoritarianism of the older generations. Two of the more extreme manifestations of the Youth Movement were the *Nacktkultur* (“nudist movement”) and *Freikörperkultur* (“free body movement”), a network of associations “that promoted nudism as a way of linking the modern body more closely to nature, giving it a freer presence in the great outdoors” [see 17, pp. 30-39]. *Nacktkultur* and *Freikörperkultur* participants intentionally and “provocatively” challenged “traditional moral concepts and clothing norms” [18]. Early twentieth century journals such as *Die Schönheit* (“Beauty”), which was founded in 1903 by Karl Vanselow (1876–1959), “presented nudism as an extension of modernism in the visual and performing arts” [17, p. 57] (Fig. 3). Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and his cohorts should be understood as informal participants in the *Wandervogel*, nudist, and free body movements.

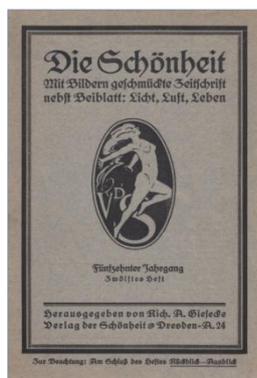


Figure 3. *Die Schönheit*, Volume 15, Issue 12 (December 1918). Dresden.

The German naturalist clubs shared many of the goals of Die Brücke artists. The naturalists found liberation from Germany's regimented and increasingly claustrophobic urban culture by embarking upon extended forays in the countryside, sharing the scenery and wildlife, and interacting with rural workers and *peasants*. Wandervogel clubs eventually began to take on a quasi-religious relevance, with decidedly pantheistic and Dionysiac overtones. They even helped revive the *Sonnwendfeier*, an ancient German festival of the sun that celebrated the summer solstice and could feature orgiastic singing and dancing around outdoor fires [see 19]. The spirit of romantic idealism and intoxication experienced at such festivals can be found in the imagery and style of German Expressionist art, including that of Die Brücke and *Der Blaue Reiter* ("The Blue Rider") [see for example 20]. German modern art movements were often driven by "utopian agendas," aimed at overcoming social and political limitations by embracing "ideal visions of human life" [21].

IV. KIRCHNER'S CITY

Kirchner's back-to-nature images, however, cannot be fully understood by placing them within the general context of nature clubs' romantic idealism nor can they be explained away by the artist's seemingly intrinsically rebellious temperament. Deeply seeded in Kirchner's pictures of nudes in nature was an indictment of the urban bourgeois lifestyle, particularly the materialism and moral hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie who lived in Dresden and in the capital city of Berlin [see 22]. In his well-known visual critiques of Berliners (Fig. 5), Kirchner characterized middle-class urban existence as dehumanized and decadent; the city was populated by hypocritical bourgeois men and objectified female prostitutes initiating and carrying out anonymous, commercial sexual transactions. The artist thematized the objectification of human relations and the "thingification" (in German *Verdinglichung*) of modern life and society [see 23; 24]. Tapping into the same vein as the Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch (1863-1944), Kirchner portrayed sinister urbanites who no longer belonged to a coherent or integrated community, but rather functioned as depersonalized actors carrying out covert supply-and-demand transactions, alienated from each other and from nature. The contrasting tones of Kirchner's city and country images could scarcely have been more extreme (Figs. 4, 5).

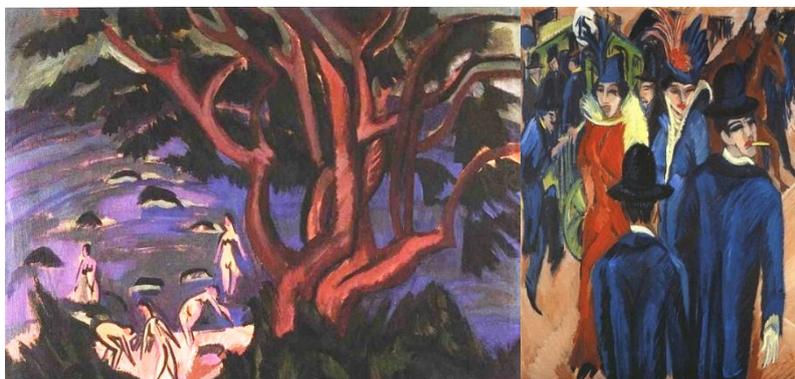


Figure 4. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Red Tree on the Beach*, 1913, oil.

Figure 5. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street Scene Berlin*, 1913, oil.

Other leading German intellectuals felt the same way as Kirchner. In his 1903 essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, German sociologist, philosopher, and critic, Georg Simmel (1858-1918) argued that "under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd" [25]. Austrian novelist and poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1895-1926) agreed [26, p. 136]. In his collection of poetry entitled *The Book of Hours*, Rilke wrote,

The big cities are not true; they betray
the day, the night, animals, and children.
They lie with silence, they lie with noise
and with all that lets itself be used.

Friedrich Nietzsche's 1883 work of philosophical fiction entitled *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (or *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) was a primary source that inspired the Expressionists' rejection of urbanity [27]. Nietzsche gave words to the ancient Persian prophet Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) that foretold of an impending cataclysmic social change. In Nietzsche's story, Zarathustra descends from his mountain solitude and finds a great city where he wishes to share his wisdom, but the inhabitants are unwilling to listen. In the mind of Zarathustra (and apparently in the mind of Nietzsche), the metropolis was a "hell for hermits' thoughts," a wretched place steaming "with the fumes of slaughtered spirit[s]." Zarathustra proclaims his hatred of the "great city," and predicts that in a coming "noontide" all cities would be consumed by a "pillar of fire" [27, pp. 167-170]. Then, urban decadence and alienation will be supplanted by a new order and humankind and nature will "regenerate" and live again in communion and in a comradeship overseen by *übermensch* (or "supermen"). The noontide upheaval that Zarathustra/Nietzsche augured is perhaps best represented by Ludwig Meidner's (1884-1966) tumultuous paintings of ca. 1913 [28], but Kirchner's more sedate images of outdoor bathers referenced the other side of Zarathustra/Nietzsche's prophesized utopia (Figs. 6, 7).



Figure 6. Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1912-1913, oil.

Figure 7. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Girls Bathing in [a Moritzburg] Lake*, 1909, oil.

In *Girls Bathing in [a Moritzburg] Lake* (*Im See Badende Mädchen*), Kirchner intimated the appearance of Zarathustra's post-apocalyptic Arcadia (Fig. 7). Three women (including Kirchner's girlfriend Dodo in the foreground) bathe in soothing summer water. Their graceful poses and gestures suggest their states of mind: carefree serenity. There is no indication of the *weltschmerz* ("world-pain") or existential *ennui* (an annoying boredom) that may have clouded their lives back in the city [see 29; 30]. All is tranquil. Kirchner's palette and technique, though, contrast dramatically with the women's peaceful pursuits. Violent orange and red highlights, garish green shadows, as well as the artist's agitated, energetic brushwork overwhelm the viewer's visual sense, creating a discordance between *what* is depicted and *how* it is depicted. Kirchner explained that his works of this period were "not coloured form ... but constructed with colour," and his creative process began not with a "linear drawing of objects, but rather with areas of colour from which the forms of the objects gradually [took] shape" [31, p. 73]. Kirchner's sensual treatment of his models and his animated Expressionist style of "arrestingly gestural streaks and explosive splashes of bright, unmixed colour" seem to signify competing psychic states [32]. The viewer is presented with dual expressions that seem not wholly compatible: the artist clearly appreciated physical beauty, but he depicted such beauty with a self-conscious and aggressive visual language that is not the least bit comforting.

There are obvious parallels between Kirchner's indictment of urbanity and embrace of the *nude-in-nature* theme and Paul Gauguin's earlier rejection of city life and insistence on the moral superiority of so-called primitive peoples and their ways of life. One of the leading Kirchner scholars, German critic and historian Will Grohmann (1887-1968), made precisely that argument. In his early biography of Kirchner, Grohmann wrote that the artist's "aversion to the bourgeoisie and its morals made [Kirchner] search for relationships with people who were equally unconventional. He lived with his models; Moritzburg is his Tahiti: untouched nature and naïve

human beings” [33]. Grohman equated Kirchner’s escapades at the Moritzburg Lakes with Gauguin’s escapes from "everything that [was] artificial and conventional" about France and Parisian bourgeois society. Gauguin first left France for Panama and French Martinique in the Caribbean (1886-1887) and then went on to the more distant colonial outposts of French Polynesia and Tahiti in 1891 and 1895 [see 34, pp. 157-167]. In 1890, Gauguin wrote to his friends Emile Bernard (1868-1941) and Odilon Redon (1840-1916), “I feel I can revitalize myself out there. The West is effete at present, and even a man with the strength of Hercules can ... gain new vigour just by touching the ground of the Orient. A year or two later you come back robust. ... I will get to Tahiti, and I hope to finish out my life there. I believe that my art, which you love, is but a seed, and in Tahiti I hope to cultivate it for myself in its primitive and savage state” [35; 36, p. 193]. In his adopted “primitive” and “savage” locales, Gauguin continually drew and painted the same theme: young, often unclothed women, whom he thought embodied a type of basic, unsullied spirituality (Fig. 8). In Kirchner’s iconographic choices and quest for purity of form, he often resembled Gauguin, though there was a key difference.



Figure 8. Paul Gauguin, *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, 1891, oil.

Unlike many of his Expressionist cohorts, including Emil Nolde (1867-1956) and Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner did not have a complete aversion to the city or to all its inhabitants. Though his portrayals of Dresden and Berlin are often socially critical, at times their messages may be better described as ambivalent. In *Street Scene Berlin* (Fig. 5), for instance, it is possible that Kirchner chose to portray streetwalkers, whom many read as symbols of amorality or immorality, simply because he saw them as free spirits representing nothing more than sexual excitement and temptation. Perhaps, as Kirchner scholar Donald Gordon has suggested, Kirchner’s urban prostitutes were symbolic of forbidden sin, both desirable but guilt laden. They were emblematic of Wilhelmine urban environments: vital and electric, but decadent as well [37]. Kirchner did not condemn the city simply for its toleration of prostitution, he condemned bourgeois men for their moral hypocrisy. Whereas Kirchner openly cavorted with his female friends at the Moritzburg Lakes (as Gauguin did in Tahiti), middle-class urban men lurked on darkened street corners in Berlin and Dresden like sexual predators. Kirchner shared their interest in carnal pleasures but chafed at bourgeoisie pretence.

V. THE INFLUENCE OF WALT WHITMAN

Kirchner could be fairly described as a *bohemian hedonist*; he was a creative nonconformist who believed in the pursuit of pleasure. Libidinal impulses played a prominent role in his choice of artistic subject matter, though his choices were the result of more than mere self-indulgence. Kirchner’s sexual freedom should be understood as a manifestation of his conscious rejection of prevailing moral codes and their constraints on conduct. In this, Kirchner found inspiration from both Nietzsche and another bohemian hedonist, the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) [see 38]. Nietzsche insisted all art reflected instinctual, especially sexual longings, and in *The Will to Power* asserted, “Everything perfect and beautiful works as an unconscious reminder of ... aphrodisiac bliss. The demand for art and beauty is an indirect demand for the ecstasies of sexuality communicated to the brain” [39, p. 424]. There is no question sexual desire informed Kirchner’s

paintings of the nude. To a degree, however, Kirchner practiced *sublimation*, the channelling of socially unaccepted sexual impulses into constructive, more accepted forms. He was quoted as saying he “often got up in the midst of [intimate moments] to put down a movement or an expression [on canvas]” [40].

Kirchner owned two copies of Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, and he owned and cherished a copy of Whitman’s famous collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*. Like Nietzsche, Whitman was an outspoken critic of the salacious urban milieu, and he championed the wholesomeness of the outdoors. Whitman’s writings often conveyed a bucolic idealism and his support for naturalism, as in a passage from his late prose work *Specimen Days* entitled “A Sun-Bath—Nakedness.” Whitman lamented, “Sweet, sane, still Nakedness in Nature! -ah if poor, sick, prurient humanity in cities might really know you once more!” [41, pp. 150-152; see 42]. Whitman’s impact on Kirchner came not simply from his critiques of city life, but, rather, from his exuberant celebration of *joie de vivre* in the countryside. The people portrayed in Kirchner’s Moritzburg Lakes images flirt, and romp, and relish existence, oblivious to worldly concerns. They are quite in keeping with the general tone of Whitman’s poetry. Kirchner’s hedonist brand of Expressionism is much more about highly charged pleasure and vitality, than, for example, the psychological agony and contortions of Edvard Munch and Max Beckmann (1884-1950), or the spiritual obsessions of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Franz Marc (1880-1916) [see 43; 44; 45]. There were diverse types of expressions within the Expressionist movement.

On April 17, 1937, a year before his death, Kirchner wrote a letter to his friend, the art dealer Curt Valentin (1902-1954), addressing his early days as an artist and his various inspirations. Kirchner wrote, “Dear Mr. Valentin ... did you know that as far back as 1900 I had the audacious idea of renewing German art? Indeed, I did, and the impulse came to me while looking at an exhibition of the Munich Secessionists in Munich. Their pictures were dull both in design and execution, the subjects uninteresting, and it was obvious that the public was bored. Indoors hung these anaemic, bloodless, lifeless studio daubs, and outside life, noisy and colourful, pulsed in the sun. In those days I was a strong and healthy lad, not like I am today when the spirit is still active, but the body often fails me. I was filled with the desire to try and grasp what they had missed ... That great poet, Walt Whitman, was responsible for my outlook on life. During my dismal days of want and hunger in Dresden, his *Leaves of Grass* was and still is my comfort and encouragement” [46, no. 3324].

Whitman, who died in 1892, a decade after Nietzsche began formulating his concept of “the will to power,” was seen by many as a prototype of Nietzsche’s “supermen.” The first German edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1889, under the title *Grashalme* (literally “Blades of Grass”), and was well received, but only after Johannes Schlaf’s translation appeared in 1907 did Whitman emerge as a hero for the entire Expressionist generation. Schlaf was a “leader of the German Whitman cult [and] German literary history credits Schlaf with the introduction of the ‘naturalist’ literary principles into German literature” through his Whitman translations [47]. Whitman’s poetry collection set a precedent for the “new pathos” of German Expressionist literature and German Expressionist art [47].

In one precise way, Whitman’s often erotic poems corresponded to certain of Kirchner’s often erotic images. Whitman refused to distinguish between the libidinal energy of males and females, which made him a “sexual rebel whose poetry stood in opposition” to the proprieties of “Victorian America” [48, p. 195]. Although Kirchner usually followed convention by prioritizing the “male gaze” and male *voyeurism* (Figs. 4, 7) [see 49], in some of his paintings and prints Kirchner portrayed males and females as relative equals (Figs. 1, 13), as did Whitman’s poetry. This progressive outlook distinguished Kirchner from other Die Brücke artists, such as Kirchner’s friend and colleague Otto Müller (1874-1930). Müller prioritized the male gaze in his Moritzburg Lakes images (Fig. 9), and he tended to use a somewhat more traditional style, avoiding the “harsh angularity” of Kirchner’s figures in favour of “softer, more rounded forms which accentuate the ideal of a harmonious return to nature” [50].

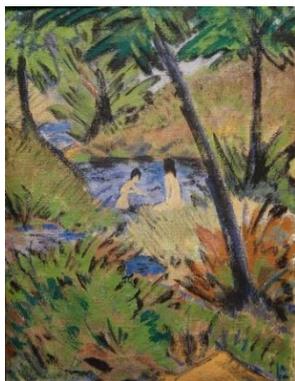


Figure 9. Otto Müller, *Badende Mädchen im Waldteich*, undated, oil.

VI. A SYNTHESIS OF FORMS

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner first visited the Moritzburg Lakes in 1907, and he then returned during the following summers until 1911. Over this time, his artistic style evolved. From 1907 to 1910 Kirchner's work reflected the direct influence of French Fauvist Henri Matisse and began to incorporate non-western "primitive" idioms [see 7]. When Kirchner moved from Dresden to Berlin in 1911, he gravitated toward a new manner that evidenced his growing interest in the formalism of the Post-Impressionists Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. In Berlin, Kirchner finally synthesized his various influences and developed a singular, distinguishing style that in many ways encapsulated the spirit of Die Brücke and comprised Kirchner's unique contribution to early German Expressionism. His second stylistic phase lasted several years, until 1917, when Kirchner left Germany for good and moved to Switzerland, and when the nude-in-nature theme virtually disappeared from his repertoire.

Beginning in 1901, Kirchner studied drawing, art history, and architecture at Dresden's Königliche Technische Hochschule (Royal Technical University). He completed his degree in 1905. During his first semester at the university, Kirchner met Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966), who would be a founding member of Die Brücke. Kirchner and Bleyl spent much of their free time together visiting Dresden's modern art galleries, such as the Ernst Arnold Gallery, Richter Art Salon, and Saxon Art Association, to study the latest avant-garde trends [51]. In these galleries, Kirchner first saw works by French Symbolists, Post-Impressionists, and Neo-Impressionists, including Georges Seurat (1859-1891), and he first encountered Fauvist paintings by Henri Matisse.

In 1904, Kirchner took a hiatus from his studies in Dresden to attend classes at Wilhelm von Debschitz (1871-1948) and Hermann Obrist's (1862-1927) art school in Munich, which served as a model for the later Bauhaus [52]. During this interlude, Kirchner visited a major Neo-Impressionist exhibition mounted by Wassily Kandinsky and his *Phalanx* group that featured the latest paintings of Seurat and Paul Signac (1863-1935). Kirchner was attracted to Seurat and Signac's *pointillist* technique and their use of chromatic *divisionism*, which was based upon the optical theories of Michel Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889). Kirchner was aware that Matisse was experimenting with Seurat's style at the same time (Fig. 10), and Kirchner's earliest Moritzburg Lake works directly mimic the brushwork and compositional strategies of Matisse's Neo-Impressionist phase (Fig. 11).



Figure 10. Henri Matisse, Sketch for *Joy of Life*, 1905, oil.

Figure 11. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers Under Japanese Umbrellas*, 1907, oil.

In many ways, Matisse's formative Neo-Impressionist stage culminated in his painting entitled *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* of 1904, but it lingered on into his preparatory studies for the monumental *Joy of Life* (*Bonheur de Vivre*) of 1905 (Fig. 10). During this time (as Kirchner would do a bit later), Matisse intentionally broke down the dividing line separating object and ground, utilized nondescriptive emotional colours, and refused to conceal his brushwork. However, unlike both Seurat and Signac, who had firm grasps of complex colour theories, neither Matisse nor Kirchner used their palettes in a purely scientific way. Rather, they exploited colour for its emotional capabilities, co-opting the appearance of Seurat and Signac's paintings, but skipping over their reasoned sources and prodding, deliberate processes. Still, Matisse's reinterpretation of the Neo-Impressionist style encouraged Kirchner to push the envelope of his own art at Moritzburg and beyond.



Figure 12. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers at Moritzburg Lake*, 1908, pencil and watercolour.

Another, simpler work also betrays Matisse's influence on Kirchner: a small drawing (27 x 34 cm) known as *Bathers at Moritzburg Lake*, in which a trio of female figures are rendered with the most austere means (Fig. 12). Although Kirchner described the three bodies with a minimum of lines, the viewer still gets a sense of their general placement within the landscape, their action and poses, and even their attitudes. It is a decidedly two-dimensional rendering that nonetheless gives sufficient information to suggest the environment and to clarify relationships. As Kirchner well knew, Matisse was the acknowledged early modernist master of minimalist, sensitive figure drawing, and he possessed an unparalleled ability to represent the human body with seemingly little effort [see 70]. Kirchner's drawing, and similar works, reveal his indebtedness.

The sharp, summary marks and lines of *Bathers at Moritzburg Lake* or the contemporaneous print known as *Three Bathers on a Beach* (Fig. 13) read almost like written communication. Rather than through any associations with words, though, the marks and lines provide meaning symbolically and purely visually. Kirchner called these types of fragmented calligraphic drawings "hieroglyphs," in reference to the pictographic writing system of ancient Egypt. Kirchner's hieroglyphs were small unmediated notational linear sketches drawn on the spot and characterized by their spontaneity [53; 54, p. 38]. These sketches could later be

transferred to paintings, etchings, or lithographs (as in Fig. 13). Kirchner's hieroglyphs represented natural forms (like bodies) in simplified ways that visually emerge from what may at first seem to be little more than a confused mass of strokes [see 55]. It must again be mentioned that although Kirchner's austere, yet informative hieroglyphic sketches may have had various historical precedents, they were most intimately derived from the draughtsmanship of Henri Matisse, who was a virtuoso in fusing economic drawing (a form of personal expression) with sophisticated compositional schemes (Fig. 14).



Figure 13. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Three Bathers on a Beach*, lithograph.

Figure 14. Henri Matisse, *Bathers by the River*, 1909-1917, oil.

By 1907, Kirchner knew the style and tone of Matisse's work were in a state of flux. Matisse had left behind the genteel decorativeness of *Joy of Life* (Fig. 10) to explore the blunter aesthetics of Northern and sub-Saharan African sculpture [see generally 56; 7]. He was fascinated by the freedom and individuality with which non-European artists treated the human body. Rather than striving for a perceptual, "anatomically Classical [European] ideal," non-western artists gave the [non-European] body a "conceptual or symbolic" form [57]. Following in Matisse's footsteps, Kirchner too fell under the spell of art objects returning from Germany's colonies [58; 59]. In *Three Bathers on a Beach*, Kirchner borrowed directly from Matisse's fluidly reductive new style and incorporated the angularity of the non-western sculpture he had grown to admire. In his desire to return to nature, Kirchner co-opted conceptual "primitivism" as a shortcut to representing what he perceived as a simpler way of life. Kirchner was particularly interested in carvings from the Palau Islands (*Belau*) in the Micronesian region of the southern Pacific, and religious statues from Cameroon [see 60]. Palau (part of German New Guinea) and Cameroon were both German colonial possessions before the First World War. Kirchner saw objects from Palau and Cameroon on exhibition at the forerunners of the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Dresden [61], and he even assembled a collection of colonial sculptures in his Dresden studio for daily inspiration (Fig. 15). To some degree, Kirchner's appropriation of elements of colonized cultures also followed the lead of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who in 1907 was transitioning to his Cubist phase with the monumental canvas *Les Femmes d'Alger*, which included references to African tribal masks, Oceanic art, and pre-Roman Iberian sculpture [62]. Like his friend Matisse, Picasso spent considerable time studying non-western work at Paris' Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro.



Figure 15. Kirchner in studio surrounded by non-western objects, n.d. photograph.

The hieroglyphic style of *Three Bathers on a Beach* belongs to Die Brücke's *hard phase* (ca. 1910-1913), when Kirchner and his associates were most influenced by the jagged linearity and disruptive patterning of non-western sculpture. The hard phase is distinguished from the earlier *soft phase* of 1907-1909, with its comparatively rounder shapes and more flowing contours (see Figs. 1, 7, 11-12). During Kirchner's hard phase, he took some cues from one of Matisse and Picasso's key predecessors, Paul Cézanne. In November 1909, Kirchner and Die Brücke co-founder Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884-1976) attended an exhibition of Cézanne's paintings at Berlin's Galerie Cassirer, where just a few months earlier they had also seen Matisse's paintings [63]. After experiencing Cézanne's depictions of outdoor bathers first-hand (Fig. 16), Kirchner started emulating elements of his style, most notably by making forms more monumental, systematically dissolving contours, and fusing figures with their surroundings (Fig. 17). Kirchner's new approach was more spontaneous, and he could finish paintings more quickly with a limited number of strong expressive strokes. During his hard phase, Kirchner's paintings began to resemble his "hieroglyphic" drawings more closely.



Figure 16. Paul Cézanne, *The Bathers* (detail), 1904, oil.

Figure 17. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers by a Bay*, ca. 1910-12, oil.

It is probably no coincidence that in the same year he saw Cézanne's paintings of monumentalized *sculptural* forms, Kirchner began producing monumentalized, sculpted figurines and busts. Between 1909 and his untimely death in 1938, he created more than one hundred sculptures, usually in wood and usually of the female form. When sculpting, Kirchner felt "a sensual pleasure when blow by blow the figure grew more and more from the [tree] trunk." In 1911, he wrote, "There is a figure in every trunk, one must only peel it out" [64, pp. 114; 115-149]. In *Standing Nude* of 1913 (Fig. 18), Kirchner carved his favourite subject from a material to which he assigned primal attributes. The figure was roughly hewn from a piece of driftwood that Kirchner found while visiting Fehmarn Island in the Baltic Sea. In 1912, Kirchner wrote a letter describing Fehmarn's "wonderful coast," with its "fabulous flowers with fleshy stems" and its "rather degenerate population due to intermarriage" [65, p. 125] [it is ironic that the Nazis also later described Kirchner and his art as "degenerate"]. Art historian Jill Lloyd has suggested that Kirchner's sculptures "drew on the regenerative associations of the

primitive and the rejuvenating forces gained from a vital and direct confrontation with nature” [65, p. 116]. The same may be said for his two-dimensional nudes. In *Standing Nude* and *Bust of a Woman*, both of 1913, and in contemporaneous paintings (Figs. 4, 13), Kirchner’s technique is uneven, details are omitted, and surfaces are jarring and harsh (Fig. 19). “Rawness coexists with nuance, distortion with a real sense of gesture and emotion” [66].



Figure 18. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Standing Nude*, 1913, wood.

Figure 19. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bust of a Woman*, 1913, wood.



Figure 20. Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Girl*, ca. 1895, wood.

Figure 21. Paul Gauguin, *Jeune Tahitienne* (Young Tahitian Girl), ca. 1895, wood.

Kirchner’s sculptures have obvious parallels with the carvings of the Post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin, of the preceding generation (Figs. 20, 21). There were also obvious similarities in the artists’ social attitudes and their life choices. After Gauguin established himself as an avant-garde painter in Paris and provincial France, in 1891 he left Europe for the South Pacific and the remote island of Tahiti, in the colonies of French Polynesia. In his book entitled *Noa Noa*, Gauguin explained that he had left “everything that is artificial and conventional,” and in Tahiti had entered “into Truth, [and] become one with nature. After [suffering through] the disease of civilization,” Gauguin explained, “life in this new world is a return to health” [67, p. 53]. That was precisely Kirchner’s attitude, when over and over he fled from the artificiality of Dresden and Munich’s spiritually draining Wilhelmine society to “become one with nature” at the Moritzburg Lakes and then on Fehmarn Island in the Baltic Sea. Once they had escaped “the disease of civilization,” both Gauguin and Kirchner chose the female nude as their primary subject. It was a subject that personified for each artist their desire to live in a more natural and more stimulating “alternative reality” [68].

VII. CONCLUSION

Kirchner and his Die Brücke colleagues were motivated to a large degree by their shared impulse to revolt against society’s restraints and to achieve freedom from established forces. For Kirchner this led to an unconventional lifestyle and to the creation of unconventional art. Speaking of the formative years of Die

Brücke, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner said, “[Those] years were filled with free and fanatical work on the naked figure, either in a meagre studio or at the Moritzburg lakes. This constant work finally brought results and the solution, with new means, to the problem of representing naked figures, free in the great outdoors of Nature. In unbroken colours, blue, red, green, and yellow, people’s bodies now glowed in the water or between the trees” [69, p. 46].

Among Die Brücke artists, Kirchner was most adept at absorbing influences, and his anxious form of Expressionism owed various debts, to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Walt Whitman, to the French Fauvist Matisse, to the escapism of Gauguin, and to the exciting directions offered by non-western visual styles. In Kirchner’s drawings, paintings, and sculptures depicting the female form, however, he synthesized all that he had learned, added his own voice, and contributed something truly unique to the artistic *canon*. Kirchner’s somewhat crude but vigorous portrayals of female figures are both distinctive and memorable. In these works, he extracted primordial signs and “hieroglyphs” directly from nature and from the natural form and used harsh, disconcerting, but beautiful means to express his modern mindset.

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