

Biography Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

1880-1905

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was born on 6 May 1880 in Aschaffenburg, where his father, Ernst Kirchner, was working as a chemical engineer in the paper industry. His parents had met and married in Gransee in Brandenburg, about 40 miles north of Berlin. His mother, a merchant's daughter, was descended from Huguenots, a fact of which her son Ernst Ludwig was often to refer later in life. His father was the son of an evangelical pastor, Ernst Daniel Kirchner, in Walchow, near Neuruppin. When not looking after the souls of his parishioners, Ernst Daniel was an avid historian taking a particular interest in antiquity and local history, and he was made a member of the Berlin Academy on the strength of his research activities. An appreciative account of Ernst Daniel Kirchner can be found in Theodor Fontane's *Wanderung durch die Mark Brandenburg* („On foot through Brandenburg”).

As a result of the father's profession, the Kirchner family moved home several times during Ernst Ludwig's youth. They moved to Frankfurt am Main in 1886 and to Perlen, near Lucerne, only one year later. At the beginning of 1890, the family found themselves in Chemnitz, where Ernst Ludwig's father became Professor of Paper Sciences at the college of technology.

Kirchner attended primary school in Frankfurt and Perlen. In the spring of 1890, he started attending the local high school in Chemnitz. In later years, Kirchner was always to think back with gratitude on his art master of the last four years in high school. Thanks to this man, whose name is handed down simply as Fischer, Kirchner mastered the theory of light and shade. Thus, though stemming from Prussian parents and born in Franconia, Ernst Ludwig – as was obvious from his speech – spent the adolescence in Saxony. In 1901 he passed his school-leaving examinations in Chemnitz. His parents had early recognized and welcomed the artistic leanings of their eldest son, but placed great value on completion of a formal education and professional training. Ernst Ludwig therefore started to study architecture at the Technical School in Dresden.

While attending a geometry course there, he made the acquaintance of a fellow student, Fritz Bleyl, who was the same age as himself. The two became close friends, and the first woodcuts are thought to have originated during this period. At the end of the 1903 summer term, Kirchner was awarded the preliminary diploma. He then moved to Munich for the 1903-1904 semester, studying under Professors Wilhelm von Debschitz and Hermann Obrist at the School of Art. He took a particular interest in the theory of composition and life-drawing. He returned to Dresden for the winter semester of 1904-1905, finally graduating as a fully fledged engineer and thereby satisfying his father's wishes.

1905-1910

Erich Heckel (born in 1883) had also been studying at the Dresden Technical School since the summer term of 1904. One of his friends was Karl Schmidt, who was born in Rottluff, near Chemnitz, in 1884. The ties of friendship binding Kirchner, Bleyl, Heckel and Karl Schmidt, and their shared artistic vision resulted in the formation of the artists' group as *Die Brücke* (“The Bridge”) on 5 June, 1905. From the outset, these artists were determined to create something new and exert a revolutionary influence on art. Important activities in 1905 included life-drawing sessions at which young models – mostly friends of the painters – were sketched in a variety of positions and singly or in groups. Since the artists made it a rule never to spend more than 15 minutes on any one drawing, these evening sessions became known as “quarter-hour nudes”. Many exhibitions of works by the *Brücke* artists were held, starting as early as 1905. The first travelling show was exhibited in a number of different German cities in 1906. From that year onwards, the group endeavoured to broaden its base. In order to enhance its significance and widen its sphere of influence, it began accepting sympathisers as “passive members” who, on payment of an annual sum of originally 12 marks, received membership cards and annual reports designed by the artists and, towards the end of each year, a portfolio of three or four graphic works.

New active members included the much older Emil Nolde and the Swiss Cuno Amiet, whose work the *Brücke* artists had seen at the 1905 exhibition at the Emil Richter Gallery in Dresden in 1905. Amiet was an enthusiastic member of the *Brücke*. By 1908 he had persuaded seven of his own collectors and friends to become passive members, and he participated in almost all exhibitions organized by the group. By then, Karl Schmidt was calling himself Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, after his place of birth. Large-scale exhibitions in Dresden introduced the *Brücke* artists to the works of,

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among others, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat and other neo-impressionists, as well as to the Fauves, Picasso and Munch, not forgetting the works of Matisse that were exhibited at the Cassirer Gallery in Berlin in 1909. Otto Mueller joined the *Brücke* group. Kirchner and other members participated in the exhibition of the *Sonderbund westdeutscher Kunstfreunde und Künstler* in Düsseldorf. Gustav Schiefler, patron of the arts and later editor of the catalogue of Kirchner's graphic works, visited Kirchner in Dresden and showed interest in his work.

In the summer of 1906 and 1907, Kirchner frequently worked at the Moritzburg Lakes near Dresden. In 1908, he made his first visit to the island of Fehmarn off the Baltic coast, accompanied by Emmy Frisch, who was later to marry Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. In the autumn of 1908, he became friends with Doris Grosse ("Dodo"), a milliner from Dresden. The summers of 1909 and 1910 were again spent at the Moritzburg Lakes, with that of 1910 being passed in the company of Heckel and Pechstein and, for the first time, the two young models Marzella and Fränzi.

1911

This was to be Kirchner's last bathing holiday at the Moritzburg Lakes. In the autumn, Heckel and Kirchner followed other *Brücke* artists to Berlin, while Dodo stayed behind in Dresden. From now on, the activities of the *Brücke* group were to be focused on Berlin. Together with Max Pechstein, Kirchner founded a small private school called the *MUIM-Institut* in Berlin, *MUIM* being an abbreviation for *Moderner Unterricht in Malerei* (Modern Teaching of Art). The address of both apartment and institute was Durlacherstrasse 14, Berlin-Wilmersdorf.

1912

In the spring of 1912, Kirchner participated in the legendary exhibition of the *Sonderbund* (see above) in Cologne. Besides exhibiting paintings, Kirchner – in collaboration with Heckel – provided murals for the chapel of the exhibition. While in Cologne, Kirchner met for the first time Cuno Amiet, who was responsible for assembling and organizing the Swiss contribution to the exhibition. Back in Berlin, he made the acquaintance of Gerda and Erna Schilling, Erna was to become his life-long companion. He spent the summer on the island of Fehmarn. He discovered the works of Cézanne and the Cubists.

1913

In May 1913, the *Brücke* was disbanded because of disputes about the publication of the "Chronicles of the *Brücke* group". Kirchner dissociated himself from Pechstein, and the *MUIM-Institut* was closed. He and Erna, in the company of Hans Gewecke and Werner Gothe, the last pupils of the *MUIM-Institut*, spent the summer on Fehmarn. In this year Kirchner painted the first of the Berlin street scenes which were to dominate his output between 1913 and 1915.

Now released from the ties that had bound him to his artist friends (he had in any case been "the first among equals" for many years), Kirchner was now free to go his own way, though he was now also obliged to arrange his own exhibitions. Thanks to the great interest shown in him by Karl-Ernst Osthaus, Kirchner mounted a large one-man exhibition in the Folkwang Museum in Hagen. In November of the same year, another major exhibition was held at the Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin.

1914

The Art Association of Jena held an exhibition of Kirchner's works in February and March at which the artists met, and later became close friends with, the philosopher Eberhard Grisebach, the archaeologist Botho Graef and other prominent members of the University of Jena such as the Swiss lawyer Hans Fehr, the biologist Julius Schaxel and the philosopher Rudolf Eucken, a 1908 Nobel prize-winner. Since his stay in Davos for treatment between 1904 and 1908, Grisebach had been married to Lotte Spengler, the daughter of the Davos lung specialist, Dr Lucius Spengler. On 13 February 1914, Eberhard Grisebach wrote to his mother-in-law, Helen Spengler, in Davos:

I had an exciting day today. In the morning I hung up pictures by E. L. Kirchner. That gave me great pleasure, because they are very good. At one o'clock, Graef came round to see them because he wants to give an introductory lecture on them at twelve o'clock on Sunday. Fortunately, he was also greatly taken with them. I didn't get around to eating lunch until two o'clock and then at half past two I had a telephone call from Kirchner who had just arrived from Berlin. At three, he came round here, looked at my pictures, I showed him the exhibition, then we drank a cup of coffee and chatted away. He's a likable, simple man, his hands are rough from woodcutting, which he's very good at. Apart

from his long artist's hair, he is free of all posturing, the atmosphere in Berlin makes metropolitans of these artists, but they see life there as only a small segment of the universe and they robustly maintain their independence. If Heckel reminds one of a tailor – his Saxon dialect alone gives him the contour of a tailor – Kirchner is a genuine cobbler, hard-headed, rough-edged... I rather believe that he is the most important member of the "Brücke", I like some of his pictures very much. If I sell anything, he wants to leave me a picture for the Kunstverein although he is as poor as church mouse.

In May, Kirchner visited Cologne and participated in the *Deutsche Werkbund* exhibition, where, among other things, Henry van de Velde, director of the School of Art Weimar, had built the *Werkbundtheater*.

Kirchner set up a new studio and apartment in the attic of Körnerstrasse 45 in Berlin-Friedenau and designed furniture for it. Erna completed substantial embroidery work to designs carried out by Kirchner. The summer was spent – up to the outbreak of war – painting and drawing on Fehmarn. The Kirchners returned to Berlin when Fehmarn was fortified after being declared a strategically important zone. The artist stayed in close contact with Botho Graef in Jena. He experimented attacks of nervous anxiety, and his consumption of absinthe was heavy – in this same year, he painted the famous self-portrait *Der Trinker* (The Drinker).

1915

After spending a restless 1914-1915 winter of mental crises in Berlin, Kirchner reported "voluntarily-involuntarily" for military service. In July 1915, the 35-year-old recruit was sent to Halle an der Saale to train as a driver in the reserve unit of the 75th Mansfeld Field Artillery Regiment. He was allocated a horse, which he was responsible for looking after, and learnt to ride. The drill, discipline, constant submission, loss of personal freedom and also the anxiety about being sent to the front after completion of the training period all led to a serious mental breakdown. His riding instructor, Professor Hans Fehr, formally of Jena (though a Swiss national, he also held a German passport through his professorship in Jena and subsequently in Halle), looked after Kirchner and arranged a lengthy leave for him, which was converted at the end of November into provisional discharge until full recovery. The artist returned to Berlin where he produced a number of superb paintings on subjects mostly connected with his military service (e.g., *Selbstbildnis als Soldat* (Self-portrait as a Soldier), and a series of coloured woodcuts to illustrate Chamisso's book "Peter Schlemihl's Remarkable Story". Through the good offices of Botho Graef, Kirchner was admitted to Dr Kohnstamm's sanatorium in Königstein in Taunus in mid-December.

1916

Kirchner's behaviour in 1916 was shaped by the serious aggravation of his symptoms and his great fear of being drafted once more. The anxiety that virtually paralysed the artist in this period certainly aggravated his condition, very likely induced him to simulate sickness, and fostered the idea he had later in the year of going to Switzerland.

Letter from Kirchner to Dr Karl Hagemann, friend and patron in Leverkusen and collector of his painting, January 1916:

"After lengthy struggles I now find myself here for a time to put my mind into some kind of order. It is a terribly difficult thing, of course, to be among strangers so much of the day. But perhaps I'll be able to see and create something new. For the time being, I would like more peace and absolute seclusion. Of course, I long more and more for my work and my studio. Theories may be all very well for keeping a spiritual balance, but they are grey and shadowy compared with work and life."

Kirchner survived largely on cigarettes and Veronal. The nightmare of the war and thoughts of the front preyed on his mind. Dr Kohnstamm was glad for every glass of milk the patient drank. He diagnosed strong dependency on Veronal (a powerful sleep-inducing drug), alcoholism and mild (at the time) dependence on morphine.

At the end of January, Kirchner returned to Berlin for several weeks, producing studies for a frieze proposed by Osthaus. He returned to Königstein for a further stay from mid-March to mid-April, during which he sketched designs of murals for Dr Kohnstamm's sanatorium and set about painting the well-house.

Letter from Kohnstamm to Osthaus, 23 April:

"Apart from general constitutional weakness, Mr Kirchner is suffering from nervous excitation in which insomnia and abuse of sleep-inducing drugs play a dominant role. His excitation is constantly

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nourished by the memory of his period of military service and everything that associated with it. He intends to return to us in June, which would be the best thing for him. Within the limits of his pathological predisposition, a cure, or at least a great improvement, is possible."

Letter from Kirchner in Berlin to Hagemann, 20 May:

"I want to return to Königstein, but first I need to make some progress with my new work here. I feel restless if a lot of things are left here unfinished, and I spend most of my time lying here in front of the pictures and in this way I can gradually finish painting them, which I wouldn't be able to do here. There you are constantly interrupted by treatment and meals and the other patients of the sanatorium. But the doctor is nice and I shall go there as soon as possible. Sun, air and sea on Fehmarn would certainly do me more good than the rather cold climate of Königstein, but Fehmarn is still off-limits for military reasons and the landscapes in the Taunus Mountains is of course very interesting and it's also very interesting to study the people there with their nervous ailments."

Kirchner's third stay in Königstein lasted from early June to mid-July, 1916. During this period, Kirchner completed – partly as a therapeutic activity – the murals and created a number of important graphic works. During the three stays in Königstein, he began and completed twenty oil paintings, besides producing a large number of drawings. After returning to Berlin, he made trips to Jena, Halle and Frankfurt. In September and October, he designed the catalogue for an exhibition of embroidery by his friend, Irene Eucken. On 8 October, through the good offices of Botho Graef, who also gave the opening speech, a comprehensive exhibition of his works was opened in the Schames Gallery in Frankfurt. Henry van de Velde attended the exhibition. From this time onwards, the intense interest he felt in Kirchner's work was to be shown in countless ways over the next few years. Many works were sold, and Kirchner was henceforth to stand on a sound financial footing. In December, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to Dr Edel's sanatorium in Berlin Charlottenburg.

1917

At the suggestion of Eberhard Grisebach, Helen Spengler invited the artist to Davos. A travel permit was issued with a promptness that surprised even Kirchner. He left Berlin on 18 January and travelled via Stuttgart and Gottmadingen to Davos where he settled down in the Pension Wijers, which was housed in the Villa Pravigan, directly opposite the Spengler family's house.

Letter from Helen Spengler to Eberhard Grisebach, January 1917:

"This evening I spent an hour with Kirchner... he lies in bed and so far eats absolutely nothing, only strong coffee and some fruit. ... His pulse is strong and he is not seriously ill. ... His toneless, forlorn way of speaking impressed me deeply. ... He told me that he no longer has the courage to live, and that he would joyfully welcome, rather than fear, an end to life. And yet he told me that it was the desire to become healthier and stronger that made him come to Switzerland. He has sold a lot recently and seems to have plenty of money. At the moment, he is still displeased with father because he doesn't give him any Veronal. ... He talks a great deal and never stupidly or boringly, it's all very abstruse, and I'm really interested in his ideas, which he explains with enthusiasm. ... He certainly won't stay long in Davos, he complains about the cold so bitterly that he is still blind to the brilliance of the sun. ... He ate nothing during the first few days, only smoked and drank coffee. Yesterday, I brought him some apples which he almost grabbed out of my hands, he was so famished.

He claims that he has a growth in his brain. I persuaded him that he was wrong, although I think it is quite possible. Or perhaps he has a screw loose. .. After every visit to Kirchner, I can imitate his Saxon dialect, which makes a remarkable impression, at least at first. He speaks intelligently about women, he must have been lucky in his choice of girl-friend. Yesterday he also talks about the studio, his life and his paintings. He must have masses of them lying around. I believe he is capable of being wildly emotional and I am rather afraid of experiencing this."

Kirchner's first stay in Davos coincided with a cold spell such as the Grisons had not experienced in twenty years. On 4 February, Kirchner travelled to Zurich, where he met the architect Karl Moser. He asked to be shown round the new building of the University and then viewed the Hodler painting in the *Kunsthau*s. Two days later, he returned to Berlin. In mid-March, Eberhard Grisebach visited Kirchner in Berlin and wrote to Helen Spengler on 23 March:

"I spent two mornings with Kirchner which I shall never forget. I found him sitting on a very low chair next to a small, hot stove in a yellow-painted, sloping-roofed attic. Only with the help of a stick was he able to walk, staggering around the room.

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... A colourfully painted curtain concealed a large collection of paintings. When we began to look at them, he came alive. Together with me, he saw all his experiences drift by on canvas, the small, timid-looking woman set aside what we had seen and brought a bottle of wine. He made short explanatory remarks in a weary voice. Each picture had its own particular colourful character, a great sadness was present in all of them; what I had previously found to be incomprehensible and unfinished now created the same delicate and sensitive impression as his personality. Everywhere a search for style, for psychological understanding of his figures. The most moving was a self-portrait in uniform with his right hand cut off. Then he showed me his travel permit for Switzerland. He wanted to go back to Davos... and implored me to ask father for a medical certificate. ... As the woman with him rightly said, though many people want to help him, nobody is able to do so any longer. ... When I was leaving, I thought of Van Gogh's fate and thought that it would be his as well, sooner or later. Only later will people understand and see how much he has contributed to painting."

A few days later, fate struck Kirchner a blow that was to change his situation in Germany for the worse. Botho Graef, his mentor and friend since 1914, died unexpectedly of a heart attack on 9 April. Henry van de Velde let Kirchner know that he would be travelling to Switzerland to found a new school there and to resume teaching.

Letter from Kirchner to Henry van de Velde, late April 1917:

"I heard you were in Switzerland on your way to Davos where I, too, shall go early next week to complete my treatment. I could be a great help to you by having wooden figures cut for the buildings and helping you generally with the buildings you will be constructing there."

Kirchner left Berlin on 6 May in the company of a nurse, "Sister Hedwig", whom Kirchner had taken along for the journey and who was to stay with him in Davos for some time. He again took a room at the Pension Wijers and put himself into the hands of Dr Lucius and Helen Spengler for medical and moral support. Lucius Spengler's initial diagnosis, which he communicated to his daughter in Jena, was rather tentative: *"Kirchner his here, a strange man. – he's not seriously ill but he doesn't eat."* Dr Spengler's treatment, strict adherence to the rules, and the good food would obviously have brought about a rapid improvement in the patient's state of health. But Kirchner knew how to prevent this and deceive those around him. Hans Fehr wrote in his memoirs that Kirchner, in a conversation with him, had recalled his stay at Spengler's in the spring of 1917 with regret. He had deliberately rejected the excellent food at Spengler's and had done everything he could to deceive the doctor. According to Kirchner: *"Spengler didn't know what to do with me, for my deception was totally alien to this excellent man's way of thinking."*

To avoid the daily supervision, Kirchner looked for accommodation for himself and Sister Hedwig in an Alpine hut in Davos for the summer of 1917. He found the Ruesch Hut on Stafelalp.

Letter from Helen Spengler to Eberhard Grisebach, 19 June:

"Now he has what he wants, and he'll stay there perhaps for two month. Now he can show whether he still wants to work and become well again. Since he has been deprived of sleeping drugs and alcohol, he is much more listless, these still used to stimulate him sometimes so that he was able to talk in a coherent and lively way. The day before yesterday he was just running his hands through his hair in desperation and trying to persuade me to get him some poison. ... Stafelalp will have a lot of clearing up to so..."

Before moving to Stafelalp, Kirchner was visited in Davos by Henry van de Velde, the first time the two artists had met. Kirchner was very impressed by his new, worldly, fatherly friend, and was happy that one of the leading lights of modern international design was taking such a keen interest in his work and his fate.

At the end of June, Kirchner and Sister Hedwig moved to Stafelalp, where they stayed in the Alpine hut belonging to the farmer Ruesch. At this time, nervous paralysis restricted Kirchner's use of his arms and legs.

Letter from Kirchner to Hagemann, end of July 1917:

"It's long time since there's been any improvement in my condition. I'm still confined to bed and I have to make do with what I can see from out the window. It's very beautiful up here when it's not raining or night time, and there's so much that I could paint if only I weren't so weak. ... I've got more than enough subject matter (for pictures) but I don't have the mind of the energy. Professor van de Velde was here recently, he was quite charming and said that I absolutely had to go to see Binswanger. It was a great pleasure for me to meet van de Velde in person. You know I think very

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highly of his architecture. ... I wish to remain in the world and for the world. The high mountains here will help me."

All this time, Erna Kirchner had stayed in Berlin, looking after the apartment and studio and making sure that commercial and personal contacts in Germany were not neglected. Towards the end of August, Kirchner had a further visit from Henry van de Velde, this time on Stafelalp.

Despite Kirchner's ill health, that summer of 1917 spent on Stafelalp was still a very productive one. At least 11 masterly woodcuts were completed; they included *Sennkopf – Martin Schmid* (Alpine Cowherd – Martin Schmid), *Das Dorli*, *Stafelalp*, *Kopf van de Velde* (Head of van de Velde), *Schlankes Mädchen vor offener Zimmertür* (Edith Spengler) (Slender Girl at Open Door, Edith Spengler), as well as numerous drawings and four oil paintings, including *Aufgehender Mond* (Moonrise) and *Stafelalp* (Gordon 561).

In early September Kirchner returned to Davos. On 15 September, he was admitted to the Bellevue Sanatorium of Dr Ludwig and Dr Binswanger in Kreuzlingen through the good office of Henry van de Velde. Sister Hedwig returned to Berlin.

Persistent ill health did not prevent Kirchner from working in Kreuzlingen, too. Henry van de Velde sent a large quantity of painting material. A number of pictures, particularly some very expressive woodcut portraits, were begun, mostly in the narrow, high format. Kirchner enjoyed personal contacts with the doctors, their families, the Winterthur collector Georg Reinhart and the poet Leonhard Frank. Erna Kirchner stayed at the Sanatorium for four weeks.

1918

Kirchner became close friends with Nele van de Velde, Henry's daughter, who also stayed on and off at the sanatorium. Henry van de Velde was planning to set up a new pedagogic centre at Uttwil on Lake Constance – a project that was, unfortunately, never realized, as van de Velde agreed to design a house for friends of his (the Köller-Müllers) in Holland in the summer of 1919. Kirchner completed a total of 17 woodcut portraits which rank among his most important graphic works.

On 15 July, in the company of the attendant Emil Brüllmann from Binswanger's sanatorium, Kirchner moved to Stafelalp, where he produced a large number of important oil paintings showing aspects of the life of Alpine farmers during the summer. He also produced large number of woodcuts, including *Stafelalp*, *Gesamtaussicht* (General View of Stafelalp). He received another visit from Henry van de Velde on Stafelalp as well as one from Eberhard Grisebach.

Van de Velde, who had moved from Berne to Clarens and then to Uttwil, reported that his efforts to open a school in Uttwil had come to nought for the time being. Kirchner now decided to look for somewhere to stay in the Landwassertal during the winter. One of the Alpine huts on the Stafel belonged to Andreas Müller and his family from the "In den Lärchen" farm above Längmatte. Kirchner had already met the Müllers in the summer of 1917 and now they offered him the upper "In den Lärchen" house as a home.

Letter from Kirchner to Henry van de Velde, en of August:

"Many thanks for your letter of 24 August. It makes me sad. Your activities have now been brought to a standstill, and for goodness knows how long. I shall be glad to visit you in Uttwil in the winter. ... But the cancellation of the school only strengthens my resolve to rent something for myself here. My wife can stay here until the move. Dr Ludwig Binswanger fully approves of my plan. He wrote such a charming letter. He understands the artist's life through and through, and what a good man he is. I'd like to spend my whole time here grasping all the lovely things."

Kirchner was given a residence permit in Davos and, happy with his new home, wrote to van de Velde on 13 October:

"Now I'm living down here in Frauenkirch quite quietly and well looked after in every respect and I'm doing my best to make the paintings produced up there legible enough for me to hold a decent exhibition. ... I'm living in a beautiful old Grisons house with a kitchen that looks like Rembrandt's studio. It would be wonderful if your family could come. How good it would be for you and particularly for Nele. Then you would both be able to work quietly in this wonderful, democratic country, where work itself and the individual are valued without prejudice, and once your school gets underway and you're training new, young forces for a new kind of culture, then you too will regain your zest for life. I would be glad to help you with it as much as I can."

Kirchner maintained close and friendly contacts with the Binswanger family. On 8 October, he expressed the wish to receive a visit from Mrs Robert Binswanger, writing to Kreuzlingen as follows:

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"If you came, you would certainly gain a quite different impression of our Bündnerland and its inhabitants than from the pictures and drawings. The people who live here are proud. The hard work, which is done with great love, the way they treat animals (you very seldom see an animal being mishandled) entitle them to be proud. In most cases, work here has reached the ideal standard of being done with love. You can see it in the movements of their hands. And that, in turn, ennobles the facial expression and imbues all personal contacts with a great delicacy. This is a country in which democracy has become reality. Here a man's word still counts, and you need have no fears about sleeping with your doors open. I am so happy to be allowed to be here, and through hard work I should like to thank the people for the kindness they have shown me."

Kirchner made himself comfortable within the limits of his modest circumstances. First he rented the lower floor and then, from January 1919, the rooms above as well. By the autumn of 1918, he already begun decorating the house with furniture he had designed and carved himself. Erna Schilling, his life-long companion, made occasional visits to Frauenkirch from Berlin, but only settled there permanently in 1921, calling herself Mrs Kirchner. Deeply impressed by his first winter in the mountains, relieved since mid-November of his fears about the war, cared for and integrated into a large farming family, Kirchner increasingly overcame the nervous disorders he had been suffering from and, by December 1918, was writing his letters himself. Though he was dependent on morphine, his physician, Dr Lucius Spengler, had begun reducing the dosage. In December, an edition of the woodcut *Kopf Karl Ludwig Schames* (Head of Karl Ludwig Schames), which had been commissioned by the Frankfurt *Kunstverein*, was issued. In the autumn of 1918, Kirchner wrote "A Painter's Credo".

1919

In January, the first shipments from Berlin arrived, including the printing press and a large number of carpets. Kirchner produced important oil paintings and woodcuts, including *Wintermondlandschaft* (Winter Moonscape) (Gordon 558). He completed two large reliefs *Der Tanz zwischen den Frauen* (The Dance between the Women) and *Alpaufzug auf die Stafelalp* (Moving up to Stafelalp). He created designs for embroidery work for Erna Kirchner and Lotte Spengler, and later also for Gret Gujer, the sister of Lise Gujer.

The summer was again spent on Stafelalp, and several magnificent Alpine studies, including *Stafelalp – Rückkehr der Tiere* (Stafelalp – Return of the Animals) (Gordon 577), stem from this period. In the autumn, he completed some of his most beautiful woodcuts, including *Wettertannen* and *Alter bärtiger Äpler in schwarzem Hut, Kaspar Cadiepolz* (Elderly Bearded Alpine Inhabitant in Black Hat, Kaspar Cadiepolz). After returning to "In den Lärchen" in the autumn, he completed a carved bed for Erna. Winter came early that year – there was already 90 cm of snow on the ground by the end of November. Kirchner worked on a number of wood carvings, including chairs and additions to his hallway. He worked on the illustrations for "Umbræ Vitæ" by Georg Heym and prepared for a large exhibition to be held at the Schames Gallery in Frankfurt in January and February 1920. Kirchner's health continued to improve.

In early November, he carved the wooden figure of *David Ambühl mit Stock und hohem Hut* (David Ambühl with a Cane and a Tall Hat), mentioning the sculpture in a letter to Nele van de Velde.

Letter from Helen Spengler to Eberhard Grisebach, 17 November:

"But he looked well, and was robust and talkative. It almost needs some imagination to recall the pitiful figure of two years ago."

1920

Kirchner's good neighbourly relations with the local farmers often led to dancing in the evenings. At a time when there were no radios, Kirchner's gramophone caused sensation. He often sketched the peasants as they danced on the first of the "In den Lärchen" house.

Letter from Kirchner to Helen Spengler, 12 January:

"If I manage to stop taking the drug (morphine) in the spring, then we shall be on a quite different plane and can make decisions. Because of the gramophone, we have had a lot of visitors these last few days. There has been dancing. These children of nature are intoxicated by modern dance music. There will be interesting things for me to sketch..."

To avoid becoming dependent on art critics for mentions in publications, Kirchner began to write about his own work under the pseudonym "Louis de Marsalle".

In the spring, he painted the stage curtain and backdrops for a theatrical production "Schüffeli the Tailor and His Stroke of Genius" performed by the Frauenkirch mixed-voice choir in the Restaurant Sand at the entrance to the Sertigtal. He paid many visits to the "Teehalle des Curhauses" on the promenade of Davos-Platz for the newly fashionable "Tango Teas".

His stay on Stafelalp this summer was a short one, and he was presumably accommodated in the Müller hut. In October, Nele van de Velde, accompanied by her mother, made a lengthy visit to Frauenkirch. Nele and Kirchner worked together. In December, an exhibition was mounted in the Hotel Belvedere. During the preparations, Kirchner submitted a detailed "Proposal for the design of an exhibition of the Davos Society of Art in the great hall of the Belvedere Hotel".

1921

An exhibition of 50 works was mounted in the Kronprinzpalais in Berlin. The reviews were favourable and Kirchner was acknowledged as the leading German expressionist. On 14 February, Kirchner's father died.

At the beginning of May, Kirchner spent three days in Zurich, where he met the dancer Nina Hard.

Letter from Helen Spengler to Eberhard Grisebach, 14 May:

"Kirchner was in Zurich for three days. He came back today, radiant, because he had found a dancer who gave him a thousand ideas for paintings. Mrs Kirchner happened to be here when he came and was less enthusiastic about his discovery. He wants to go back there next week because her engagement will soon be finished. He would like to have her as a guest but his Zuleika still seems to be quite disinclined."

Nina Hard came to Frauenkirch as Kirchner's guest in June, staying with Kirchner in the small Sprecher house, where the Dutch painter Jan Wiegers and his family had lived when he had come to the Landwassertal for health reasons in the summer of 1920. Wiegers often returned to Frauenkirch and was on friendly terms with Kirchner up to his death. With Nina Hard, Kirchner returned to life-drawing for the first time since 1916, and she figured in much of the work he produced in the summer of 1921. After giving a public performance of dance in the vestibule of the Zurich sanatorium in Clavadel, for which Kirchner designed the curtain, Nina Hard left Frauenkirch at the end of September. The summer of 1921 was the first in which Kirchner did not go up to Stafelalp for a stay. He began work on three large (1.7x4 m) painting of peasants. In January 1922, he started preliminary sketches for the exhibition of "Swiss Works by E. L. Kirchner", which was scheduled to be held at the Schames Gallery in Frankfurt in January 1922. In this year, he met A. H. Pellegrini, the first of the Basle painters he was to know, and the poet Jakob Bosshard and the weaver Lise Gujer in Clavadel.

1922

Under his pseudonym Louis de Marsalle, Kirchner wrote the following preface (among other things) for the catalogue of his Frankfurt exhibition:

"The bleak and yet so intimate nature of the mountains has had an enormous impact on the painter. It has deepened his love for his subjects and at the same time purged his vision of everything that is secondary. Nothing inessential appears in the paintings, but how delicately every detail is worked out! The creative thought emerges strongly and nakedly from the finished work. Kirchner is now so taken up with entirely new problems that one cannot apply the old criteria to him if one is to do justice to his work. Those who wish to classify him on the strength of his German paintings will be both disappointed and surprised. Far from destroying him, his serious illness has matured him. Besides his work on visible life, creativity stemming solely from the imagination has opened up its vast potential to him – for this the brief span of his life will probably be far from sufficient."

Dr Frédéric Bauer, chief physician of the Park Sanatorium in Davos and successor to Dr Turban, bought his first painting by Kirchner in February. By 1938, Dr Bauer had assembled the largest-ever collection of works by the artist; it was dispersed after 1952.

Using an old Graubünden farmer's loom, Lise Gujer began weaving rugs based on a large number of designs provided by Kirchner. Kirchner finally disposed of his apartment in Berlin, and the pictures, graphic works and remaining furniture were sent to Frauenkirch. Following the death of Ludwig Schames, the Frankfurt gallery was taken over by his nephew. Gustav Schiefler visited Kirchner in Frauenkirch and revised the first volume of his catalogue of Kirchner's graphic works.

1923

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On the 12 February, Dr Lucius Spengler, Kirchner's doctor, died unexpectedly at the age of 64. Because of Kirchner's medical history, there had been serious disagreements with the Spengler family and relations were broken off. From then on, Dr Bauer was to be responsible for Kirchner's health.

In April, the Müller family informed Kirchner that they wished to occupy the "In den Lärchen" house themselves again in the autumn. This was a blow for Kirchner and, still reeling from it, he painted the picture *Schwarzer Frühling* (Black Spring) (Gordon 749) that was later to be re-worked by Lise Gujer in rug form.

In June, a major exhibition was mounted in the Kunsthalle in Basle which left a strong impression on young Basle artists. The exhibition led to the formation of an artists' group called the *Rot-Blau* (Red-Blue) in 1925. Its Members included Hermann Scherer, Albert Müller, Paul Camenisch and Hans Schiess, who all subsequently visited Kirchner in Davos and worked under Kirchner's guidance. The first to visit him was Hermann Scherer in August 1923.

According to Georg Schmidt in his book *Rot-Blau: Ein Kapitel Basler Kunst* (Red-Blue: a Chapter in Basle's Art History):

"The large Munch exhibition in 1922 had deeply moved the minds and spirits of the young artists. Munch, who in terms of development was very close to the Brücke group, had paved the way in Basle for a readiness to fully accept modern German art. The fact that Kirchner, for the first time since he had moved to Switzerland, came to Basle the following year with a large exhibition is one of those coincidences that have a special significance. It was actually Pellegrini who had persuaded Kirchner to exhibit his works in Basle. The exhibition made a strong impression and, what is perhaps even more important for the young, developing artist, it was soon followed by personal contacts with this important representative of an entirely contemporary kind of art. For these young Basle artists, Kirchner increasingly came to embody modern German art. The first to be drawn to this new art was the sculptor Scherer. He was soon followed by Albert Müller, the painter..."

Probably through the intermediary of his Clavadel friends, Kirchner found a new home at Wildboden.

Entry in Kirchner's diary, 7. September 1923:

"Our new little house is a real joy to us. We shall live here comfortably and in great new order. This will really come to be a turning point of my life. Everything must be put in clear order and the little house furnished as simply and modestly as possible, while still being beautiful and intimate."

At the End of the year, Jakob Bosshard's cycle of novellas *Neben der Heerstrasse* (By the Military Road), which was illustrated with 23 of Kirchner's woodcuts, was published by Grethlein (Leipzig and Zurich).

In the summer, the Schiefler family spent almost six weeks at the "In den Lärchen" house working on an inventory of the graphic works Kirchner had produced in Switzerland since 1917. The works produced from 1923 to 1927 were included five years later. The second volume of this catalogue was designed in a pioneering graphic style by Kirchner himself and published in 1931. The first volume had already been published in 1926.

1924

The views from the Wildboden house were magnificent; on the one side, it looked out over Davos and, on the other, to Frauenkirch and Stafelalp. The view down the Sertigtal was no less impressive. In the winter of 1923-1924, Kirchner, under the influence of these new landscapes, started a series of important paintings, including *Wildboden im Schnee* (Wildboden in the Snow) (Gordon 791).

From 22 June to 13 July, the Winterthur Kunstmuseum, through the intermediary of Georg Reinhart, a member of the board of the Winterthur *Kunstverein*, organized a large-scale Kirchner exhibition. It met with rejection in the town, which was more sympathetic to French art. Georg Schmidt from Basle conducted lecture tours of the exhibition.

In this year, the Basle artist Albert Müller worked with Kirchner in Davos for the first time. In the autumn, the painter Rolf Nesch from Germany spent six weeks with Kirchner.

July 1924 saw the publication of the volume of posthumous poems of Georg Heym entitled "Umbra Vitae", for which Kirchner, with great dedication and sensitivity, had provided woodcut illustrations.

Will Grohmann from Dresden visited Kirchner and, together with the artist, prepared the book *Kirchner-Zeichnungen* (Kirchner Drawings), which was published in March 1925. As a reminder of Grohmann's visit, Kirchner painted *Moderner Bohème* (A Modern Bohemian) (Gordon 767), which

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was reproduced as a woodcut in the same year. In the summer, together with Hermann Scherer, Kirchner redecorated the outside of his house. For the hall of the Restaurant Sand, Kirchner completed two large-scale oil paintings *Alpsonntag* (Alpine Sunday) (Gordon 734) and *Sonntag der Bergbauern* (Mountain Farmer's Sunday) (Gordon 735).

1925

Kirchner continued to take an active interest in his Basle pupils' development, but the exhibition *Jüngere Basler* (Young Basle Artists) in the Basle Kunsthalle in April and May 1925 caused him serious problem. He began to take a more detached attitude towards Scherer.

In the June issue of *Werk*, the first article dealing with the woven rugs which Lise Gujer had created to designs by Kirchner was published.

The months of June and July were periods of intensive and satisfying work for the two friends Kirchner and Müller. The two wives also got on very well, and the group was ideally rounded off by the two Müller children, the twins Judith and Kaspar. The Bernese painter Fritz Pauli also worked at Wildboden from time to time.

In August, Kirchner had a visit from Dr Karl Hagemann and Manfred Schames, who was running his late uncle's art gallery in Frankfurt and now received 60 oil paintings by Kirchner to sell on a commission basis. In the same year, Kirchner made the acquaintance of Julius Hembus from Kronberg, who had been living in Spina since 1923. The years from 1930 to 1933 were to be the period of the closest friendship with Hembus. Hembus had married a lively German woman, and the "Hembusses" were immortalized in various drawings and photographs and, in the case of Mrs Hembus, in an oil painting (Gordon 964). In the autumn, Frédéric Bauer bought a number of important early pictures.

Kirchner's long-felt wish to travel to Germany was realized towards the end of the year. He left Davos on 18 December, travelling to Zurich where he met Dr Wartmann to discuss a large-scale exhibition in the Zurich Kunsthhaus (this exhibition never took place).

The journey continued by way of Frankfurt, where Kirchner visited Dr Hagemann and Schames, and then to Chemnitz, where his mother was living.

1926

In 1926, Kirchner stayed in Dresden from January to mid-February, visiting Will Grohmann and the dancers Mary Wigmann and Gret Palucca. He was re-united with Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, who tried to persuade Kirchner to found a new artists' group. Kirchner declined politely but firmly. From 17 February to 5 March, he was in Berlin, where he saw his bother Walter again. He returned to Davos by way of Frankfurt.

Letter from Kirchner to Dr C. Hagemann, 26 March:

"Now I'm sitting quietly at home again and I'm happy to be able to work undisturbed. I made a lot of sketches of life in Germany and it was very intriguing to see life there. I was also glad to see the old pictures of Rembrandt, Dürer, etc. again and to have the confirmation and encouragement they gave me. As for the moderns, I saw damned little that gripped me. ... Modern German painting has moved so far away from me and become unintelligible in areas in which my work had, and still has, an influence, but people like Klee, Kandinsky, etc. have moved much closer to me again, in fact I value the Bauhaus more and more. These people are working and developing. You can see that there is development. And they love their work, which is the main thing."

In the summer, Kirchner travelled with Albert Müller to Dresden to attend the big "International Exhibition of Art". In July, August and September, Paul Camenisch worked with Kirchner in Davos. In the autumn, Will Grohmann's substantial book, *Das Werk Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (The Work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner) was published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag in Munich. In December and January, the family of Albert Müller, Kirchner's closest painter friend, was struck by tragedy. On 14 December, Albert Müller died of typhus in the Ticino, followed on 7 January by his wife Anni. Albert Müller was 29, his wife 27. The children were saved.

From the end of 1926 through January 1927, Kirchner mounted a large exhibition entitled *Kirchner – 10 Jahre in Davos* in the schoolhouse, through the intermediary of the president of Davos commune, Dr Erhard Branger, and a prominent Davos architect, Rudolf Gaberel. The reviews stressed that, next to Hodler and Segantini, Kirchner was now the greatest portrayer of the world of the mountains.

1927

On 13 May, Kirchner experienced a further blow when Hermann Scherer died at the age of 35.

Three large-scale exhibitions were held in the first six months of the year: at the *Kunstverein* in Wiesbaden, the Kunstsalon Fides on Dresden and Galerie Aktuaryus in Zurich. The Dresden exhibition included the painting *Vor Sonnenaufgang* from 1925-1926 (Gordon 783). This painting shows Kirchner and Erna in front of the Wildboden house, with, on the left, the two large wooden figures of Adam and Eve, although these had never stood in front of the house in this form. The Zurich exhibition was confined to water-colours and graphic works. In the autumn, Kirchner organized a memorial exhibition for Albert Müller at the Kunsthalle in Basle.

In the autumn, Kirchner and Lise Gujer completed the "Hagemann carpet", which is now in the possession of the Städelsche Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt.

Kirchner started sketching murals for the great hall of the Folkswang Museum in Essen. This project, which had been initiated by Ernst Gosebruch, was never realized.

1928

Kirchner's style now showed an increasing tendency towards the analytical abstraction that had been perceptible in individual paintings since 1925 but which was not fully expressed until 1928.

Kirchner organized a memorial exhibition in Basle for Hermann Scherer which was combined with an exhibition of works by Paul Camenisch. In the spring and summer, Kirchner spent much time on preliminary work for the Essen museum project, including the execution of detailed sketches on a 1:1 and 2:3 scale.

At the Biennale in Venice, Kirchner exhibited the painting *Schlittenfahrt* (Sleigh-ride) (Gordon 713) in the German pavilion. Erna Kirchner spent May and June in Germany. On 23 December, Kirchner's mother died in Chemnitz.

1929

Erna travelled to Altglashütten to visit the Knoblauch family, who had been friends of the Kirchners since 1927. In Basle, the *Rot-Blau* artists' group was re-formed. Its declared allegiance to Kirchner – despite the fact that several of the new members had never met him – upset the artist and prompted him to publish "An open letter to the Basle Red-Blue group" in No. 5 of the *Das Kunstblatt*, in which he drew attention to his isolation and requested that they should view him only as a colleague and not as a patron or agent.

On 10 June 1929, Kirchner amended his last will and testament of 10 September 1923.

On 15 June, Kirchner went to Zurich, where he stayed in the Hotel Habis. On 22 June, he travelled to Berlin and then to Essen to view the great hall of the museum in its original state, before returning to Berlin. At the end of June, he was back at Wildboden. The painter Fritz Winter (born 1905) spent some time with Kirchner.

1930

Kirchner was on friendly terms with Walter Kern, the Davos director of tourism. Walter Kern was a talented writer and artist and was to play a very important role in Kirchner's later years. Kirchner attended a performance of dance by Gret Palucca in Davos and the dancer stayed several times at Wildboden. Kirchner had health problems due to excessive smoking.

Towards the end of August, the artist spent some time in Zurich and Basle. In comparison with early years, Kirchner painted little in 1929 and 1930, being entirely absorbed by his Essen project. But the change in style that became obvious in these years also appears to have inhibited him.

1931

No major one Kirchner exhibition were held in this year, but the artist was represented in a number of important group exhibitions, for example "German paintings and sculpture" in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and "L'Art vivant en Europe" in Brussels. Kirchner designed the backdrops and stage curtain for the play "The Daughter of Arvenhof", which was performed by the Frauenkirch mixed-voice choir in the Restaurant Sand.

In mid-June, Kirchner returned to Germany after spending some time in Zurich and Basle. He stayed in Frankfurt and Berlin, and was struck by the poverty in Germany.

In this year he had his first contact with Dr Max Huggler, the director of the Kunsthalle in Berne. At the request of the German Minister of Culture, Kirchner was made a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin. Towards the end of the year, Erna was suspected of suffering from a growth and underwent surgery in Berlin.

1932

On 1 January, Kirchner travelled direct to Berlin via Zurich in order to bring his wife back to Wildboden on 8 January. Letter from Kirchner to the Knoblauch, 12 January:

"All in all, it was quite nice to see how things are [in Germany], but it didn't make us want to stay there for good. Se we've crept back to our nest at Wildboden and are quite happy."

The still unresolved situation in Essen and the general economic crisis in this year preyed on Kirchner's mind. In despair, he wrote to the Knoblauch on 26 May:

"We are also struggling through the crisis as best we can. It's now almost impossible for me to sell anything in Germany, and that of course makes things very difficult for us, but we live very simply and we can manage for the time being. Davos is quite dead. The foreigners are missing. Nobody knows what's going to happen. But life goes on, and it is up to us to shape the times we live in."

The Davos architect Gaberel, the president of the local Society of Art, purchased an oil painting for the commune. Gret Gujer bought the picture *Junkerboden* (Gordon 569). Frédéric Bauer also supported Kirchner by purchasing further pictures.

In the summer, Erna Kirchner returned to Germany for four weeks, stopping over in Berlin before travelling on to the Schiefelers at Mellingstedt near Hamburg and then to the sea.

At the end of October, Kirchner visited Berne for the first time, becoming friends with Dr Max Huggler, the director of the Kunsthalle, and agreeing to a large exhibition being held in the Berne Kunsthalle in March, 1933.

Letter from Kirchner to Kurt Hentzen in Berlin, 19 November:

"I was recently in Berne. It's a very interesting town with its many bridges and curious buildings, fountains and arcades. Kind, honest people. I saw the Kunstmuseum with its early Hodler paintings. Unfortunately the moderns are poorly represented so far."

1933

In January, Kirchner was enthusiastically set about preparing the exhibition in Berne, selecting the works and designing the catalogue. He was helped by Max Huggler, who showed enthusiasm and a great deal of sensitivity with respect to Kirchner as an artist and a man. Kirchner was concerned by the political upheavals in Germany and the coming to power of the National Socialists at the end of January, particularly with regard to the future of his art. By the end of February, he had completed the arrangements for his Berne exhibition, but travelled back to Davos before the opening on 5 March, at which he was represented by his wife. Kirchner was completely satisfied with the success of the exhibition.

Kirchner to Dr Hagemann, 7 March:

"The exhibition is the best that I have mounted myself up to now, and both Dr Huggler and I are very pleased with it. He has been extremely obliging. The result is a coherent artistic whole that provides a survey of my entire oeuvre. ... The exhibition was very well received in Berne. And a painting will be hung permanently in the museum."

Meanwhile, a storm was brewing on the political horizon: in May, Kirchner received a letter from Berlin, calling him to resign his membership of the Prussian Academy of Art. Kirchner to Hagemann: *"Here we have been hearing terrible rumours about torture of the Jews, but it's all surely untrue. I'm a little tired and sad about the situation up there. There is a war in the air. In the museums, the hard-won cultural achievements of the last 20 years are being destroyed, and yet the reason why founded the Brücke was to encourage truly German art, made in Germany. And now it is supposed to be un-German. Dear God. It does upset me."*

In summer, Kirchner discovered a new sport, archery, which was also to figure in his art. Through Dr Bauer, he established close contacts with the French surrealist, René Crevel, who was in Davos for treatment.

Though Kirchner painted almost nothing in 1933, that year saw a magnificent succession of coloured woodcuts, including *Porträt Dr Bauer* (Portrait of Dr Bauer), *Farbentanz* (Colour Dance),

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Akte im Wald (Nude Figures in Wood), *Kühe im Frühling* (Cows in Springtime) and *Waldfriedhof* (The Cemetery by the Wood).

These works are among the most important of the artist's entire graphic oeuvre.

1934

In March, Kirchner received a visit from Oskar Schlemmer, who had been dismissed from his post in Germany. Kirchner spent the end of May and the beginning of June in Berne, where he saw the Meyer-Amden exhibition. He also met Paul Klee. In September, he had visits from Dr Karl Hagemann and a new collector called Budczies from Berlin, who had already purchased a substantial number of graphic works from the Commeter Gallery in Hamburg. 1934 was not a very productive year either. Kirchner finished only two oil paintings – portrayals of ice-hockey, a very popular sport in Davos.

1935

A large exhibition of works by Paul Klee was held in the Kunsthalle in Berne from the end of February to the end of March. Will Grohmann spoke at the opening. Kirchner travelled to Berne by way of Basle and took a benevolent but critical view of the exhibition. He was delighted by the warmth of his welcome and the lively contact he maintained with Huggler: *"I am always welcomed here like an old friend, which does me a lot of good."* He also spent several days in Zurich on the way home. After his warm reception in Basle and Berne, he wrote less appreciatively about Zurich in a letter to Erna:

"I don't care for Zurich at all, a city of racketeers, the inhabitants are conceited and only interested in appearances. Every penny is spent on food and clothing, there's not much left over for art. The people are so unfriendly and suspicious, quite unlike Basle or Berne, and therefore I shall raise my anchor and travel home at the earliest possible opportunity."

The prints Department of the Basle Kunstmuseum exhibited a very fine selection of water-colours and drawings by Kirchner from 12 May to 23 June. I. B. Neumann, a German art dealer resident in New York, expressed the wish to exhibit works by Kirchner in New York, but was unable to agree to the cash payment on which Kirchner insisted.

In 1934, Kirchner finally abandoned the Essen project which had been occupying him for so many years. He now concentrated increasingly on sketches for paintings with Swiss subjects – views of Berne and Zurich, Davos sanatorium views and views of Wildboden. In the early winter, he executed the first sketches of murals for the choir of the small church in Frauenkirch. Kirchner planned to illustrate the apocalypse. This project was never realized.

1936

In the winter of 1935-1936, it was decided that a new school should be built in Frauenkirch. Kirchner's friend, Rudolf Gabarel, was entrusted with the task.

Letter from Kirchner to Gabarel, 1 February:

"I heard today that you are going to build our new school in Frauenkirch. ... Frauenkirch is my adopted home, I shall soon have lived here in peace and friendship with its citizens for twenty years, and it would of course be a great pleasure for me if I could paint a mural for the inside of this building."

After discussing the matter once, nothing more was said about the mural, but Kirchner agreed to create a sculpture to be placed above the entrance door. The schoolhouse in Frauenkirch was inaugurated on 18 October 1936.

At the end of March, Kirchner was surprised to receive an inquiry from the Kunsthaus in Zurich about holding a large exhibition there in July. However, Kirchner's conditions for selecting and hanging the works were not accepted. Kirchner's great hope of holding a properly representative show of his work in Zurich had to come to nothing.

Letter from Kirchner to Dr Karl Hagemann, 19 October:

"The new school was inaugurated yesterday. It was a celebration with songs, dancing and speeches, followed by drinking such as I have not seen or experienced in decades. Everyone ... sat in the "Post", the village council, the president of the council, the farmers, every one of one accord and friendly. They made a point of including me and so there I was, sitting once again amongst these people who had received me with such kindness and friendliness on the alp twenty years ago. The relief has found favour and was mentioned often in the speeches."

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Meanwhile, the news from Germany was becoming increasingly bad, and the campaign against “degenerate art” was getting into full swing. Kirchner’s health had been poor for months. He repeatedly complained of intestinal problems and “steady loss of weight”. On his doctor’s instructions, he started drinking large amount of Ovaltine, but also regularly took Eukodal, a morphine derivative.

Contacts with the USA were resumed in autumn. The art dealer Curt Valentin visited Kirchner at Wildboden, while Wilhelm R. Valentiner from Detroit, who was interested in mounting an exhibition at the Institute of Art there, also contacted Kirchner. In December, agreement was reached with the Basle Kunsthalle to hold a large exhibition in the summer of 1937. Kirchner also had contacts with the English author Llewellyn Powys, who was living in Clavadel.

1937

This year got off to a good start. In January, the Riehen collector Dr Bosshart bought three oil paintings. The exhibition in Detroit was well received, and Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art in New York contacted Kirchner.

In Germany, the campaign to “cleanse” modern art reached its climax in 1937. All objectionable works were withdrawn from German museums and deposited in Berlin. A total of 639 works by Kirchner were confiscated. The notorious “Exhibition of Degenerate Art” was shown first in Munich and then in many other cities from July 1937 onwards. Kirchner was represented with 25 oil paintings. The academy of Arts in Berlin expelled Kirchner as a member.

The artist became increasingly isolated, but threw himself into his work. In the summer, he completed a large number of fine paintings on mountain and farming themes, and two interior views of his Wildboden house.

An exhibition for which Kirchner had personally selected and hung the pictures opened in Basle on 30 October. His high hopes were not fulfilled, despite the good reviews, and the exhibition was not a breakthrough.

Kirchner approached Gabarel about his wish to become a Swiss citizen: *“In the twenty years I have been here, I have always been treated with kindness and it is therefore only natural that I should do everything in my power on behalf of our homeland here.”*

1938

The year began with Kirchner in a mood of grief and despondency. His old intestinal disease and Erna’s broken arm poisoned the domestic atmosphere, and Kirchner was in despair about political and intellectual development in Germany, a country with which, even in his adopted homeland, he still felt strong ties.

Not all the news were bad. Detroit had acquired his painting *Hockeyspieler* (Hockey Players) (Gordon 976) for its collection. Near the Wildboden house, a new orphanage was being built to an attractive flat-roofed design. Kirchner followed the construction of this modern building with interest, and again expressed the hope that he might on day be able to build a studio to a similar design.

He was increasingly afflicted by depression, sleepless nights and inner restlessness. After the shock of Austria’s annexation on 13 March, he became increasingly obsessed by the idea that German soldiers could one day stand in front of his house at Wildboden. The sculptures that decorated the outside of the house were removed and destroyed. On Kirchner’s 58th birthday on 6 May, he did not receive a single letter of congratulation from friends, and only Erna was there to help him overcome this disappointment. Kirchner now decided to marry Erna after all. On 10 May, he informed the town hall of Davos of his intention to get married. It took a long time to assemble the necessary papers, and the marriage never did take place. On the night of 14-15 June, Kirchner’s crisis came to a head. After a sleepless night, he tried to persuade Erna to commit suicide with him. But Erna, determined to help him overcome his severe depression, tried to get hold of a doctor. While she was on the telephone, Kirchner took his own life in front of farmer Ruesch’s house. On 18 June, after the obsequies at Davos crematorium, Kirchner was laid to rest in the Waldfriedhof cemetery.

Letter from Erna Kirchner to Hagemann, 24 June:

„A tragedy had been quietly enacted here over the last few months. Because of the defamation in Germany and the failure of the November exhibition in Basle ... he chose a radiantly beautiful day, 15 June, to put an end to his life. I shall spare you the details. He had been suffering grievously until he was able to make this decision.”

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A Davos lawyer, Dr Stiefler, was appointed executor of the estate. His task was a difficult one, for Erna had no legal rights and the brothers disclaimed any closer contacts because of the Nazi regime. The Davos authorities were not petty-minded, however, and Erna was allowed to continue using the name Mrs Erna Kirchner although there was no posthumous acknowledgement of the marriage and no legal change of name either. Davos granted Erna control of the entire estate. She stayed on at Wildboden, cared for by several friends and acquaintances, particularly Lise Gujer and Walter Kern.

Erna lived to see the end of the war. On 15 September 1945, she was admitted to Davos Hospital. She passed away on 4 October. Kirchner's works were deposited in the Basle Kunstmuseum and handed over to his brother in 1954. The Wildboden house was vacated for good in 1947 and restored to the Oberrauch family. In 1962, it was purchased by a group of individuals interested in Kirchner and, up to 1982, when the Kirchner Museum was opened in Davos Platz, it housed a private collection of Kirchner works which was occasionally opened to the public.

Dr. E. W. Kornfeld and Christine E. Stauffer, 1992
BMP Translations Services, Basle
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