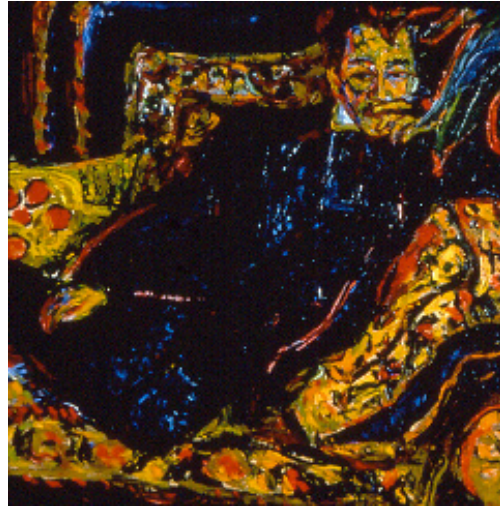


Information on

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (KEERSH-ner)
German, 1880–1938
Portrait of Hans Frisch, ca. 1907
Oil on canvas, 44 3/4 x 44 3/4 in.
Museum Purchase
1963.2



Subject Matter

Kirchner's portrait of his good friend Hans Frisch shows the Dresden poet seated on a sofa. His legs are tucked up under him, with his right hand resting on his calf, while his left hand holds a cigar or cigarette to his mouth. His suit is painted in blues and blacks, with bright pink outlines and underpainting. The cushions and forms of the sofa are painted in yellow, as are his hand and face, with splashes of red, blue and green. The area behind the sofa on the left is painted in dark blue with two muddy colored stripes with red dots. On the right above his head and in the center are the green leaves of a plant; the leaves on the right are outlined in red and highlighted with blue.

The paint surface indicates he used not only a brush, but also thick oil colors squeezed from the tube or spread on with a palette knife. It is, perhaps, the most thickly painted of Kirchner's canvases. Kirchner did several graphic works, including a woodcut in 1907, depicting Frisch. (He also painted two oils of Frisch's sister, Emmy.)

About the Artist

Born in Germany, Kirchner attended art school in Munich 1903–04. Acceding to his father's wishes, he returned to Dresden and completed his architectural degree in 1905 before devoting full time to art. In 1905, Kirchner was the dominant artist in forming Die Brücke (The Bridge), a group of artists who viewed their art as a bridge between self and the world. Their views gave the initial spark to German Expressionism by proclaiming the only acceptable aim in art was to represent emotions. Independent of, but coinciding with, the Fauves (1905–07) in France, the German Expressionists used bold distortions and unnatural color. Die Brücke's intensive study of medieval woodcuts helped formulate their graphic styles.

The year after painting Hans Frisch, Kirchner made an abrupt change in both style and theme, painting street scenes and the bohemian world on more thinly painted surfaces. In 1911, Die Brücke moved to Berlin where Kirchner captured the feel of modern city life in a series of intense psychological portraits and scenes that are considered some of his finest work.

With the onset of World War I, Kirchner joined the military in 1914, and soon after his mobilization, he suffered a physical and mental breakdown. Sent to Switzerland to recover, he eventually settled and continued his work in isolation from outside influences, painting the simple life of the Swiss mountains. His late styles remained boldly innovative.

In 1937, 639 of his works were declared "degenerate" and confiscated from German museums by the Nazis. In ill health and despondent, Kirchner committed suicide the following year. Kirchner's woodcuts share equal significance with his paintings, and had great influence on both his contemporaries and the generation that followed.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (KEERSH-ner)
Portrait of Hans Frisch, ca. 1907

Quote from the Artist

My goal was always to express emotion and experience with large simple forms and clear colors...

Through speed of work... abbreviations took place in the sketches—abbreviations which still render the intended image most accurately and clearly for others, often better than the precise execution...

They are hieroglyphs in the sense of reducing natural forms to simplified flat shapes that suggest their meaning to the beholder, as the word 'horse' evokes the image of a horse.

Strategies for Tours

Primary Grades (ages 6–8): Is this a portrait, landscape, or still life? Explore the way color is used [see above].

Upper Elementary (ages 9–11): [Discuss the poet's face.] What else can they learn about this person from looking at this portrait? What kind of furniture is in the room? Is his dress contemporary or old-fashioned? What tools did the artist use to paint this?

Middle School/High School (ages 12–18): [Explore color and explain terms. Discuss the Fauves and the German Expressionists, and explain that these artists were rebelling against traditional ways of painting. Ask what ways other than color might artists rebel. Prepare them for looking at Cubist works.]

Sources Worth Consulting

Lloyd, Jill, and Moeller, Magdalena, eds. *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.

Gordon, Donald E. *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968.