

Gerd Presler "Dances with Peasants": Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Convalescence in the Shadow of Mount Tinzenhorn

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's first sojourn in Davos in January/February of 1917 was something of a headlong flight: out of the meatgrinder of the Great War, out of the maws of ever-looming Death. How did he feel? "Wiped flat; next time, I'll be gone." And his self-image? He painted himself with a severed right hand, mutilated, robbed of his vocation as a painter (Fig.). The message couldn't have been clearer: Never again will my hand wield a paintbrush or an etching needle unless I manage to get out of this uniform of the 75th Field Artillery Regiment! But that he would eventually make a new life for himself in this resort town high in the Swiss mountains? That he would spend the rest of his life in this nook sheltered by the sky and mountain walls, in the shadow of the Tinzenhorn, the "guardian at the end of the valley"? That this would be where he would live and create and actually find a modicum of fulfilment? No one could have anticipated it at the time. He himself least of all.

And when he was confronted with this drastic change in his life, little – indeed, nothing – was the same anymore. Here was a painter who had created outstanding works of immense significance in art history, first in the big-city din of Dresden where one sensation followed on another, and then, especially, in the hectic, noisy, exciting hurly-burly of Berlin. What sort of backwater was this Davos where he had arrived, which he had imagined as lying far down in the south where palm trees grew? Would he find any sources of inspiration at all here, surrounded by these precipitous walls of stone – mute, forbidding, adamant, and timeless as time itself? Was there anything here that could lift him up into that "ecstasy of first seeing" to which he credited the genesis of his ground-breaking, inimitable creations?

There was! *Mondaufgang auf der Stafelalp* (fig. right), one of Kirchner's few oil paintings from 1917, shows him in a peaceful, almost idyllic state of coddled security – and, at the same time, definitely in full possession of his creative powers. So what was behind this surprising "recovery"? To quote Lucius Grisebach: "He then began to take in his environment. [...] Before long, the local 'peasant life' became one of the key motifs in Kirchner's art, even attaining the same level of importance as the key themes of his Dresden and Berlin periods [...]. In this context, Kirchner immediately understood that the life of the farmers around him constituted a harmonious order that had grown organically out of the special conditions of the Alpine region and the course of its seasons." As Kirchner wrote in a letter to a friend, the architect Henry van de Velde: "So I am living here very quietly and well-cared for." Shortly thereafter, he confided to Gustav Schiefeler, the director of the Hamburg Regional Court who



E. L. Kirchner. *Selbstbildnis als Soldat*. 1915. Oil on canvas (Gordon 435)



E. L. Kirchner. *Mondaufgang auf der Stafelalp*. 1917. Oil on canvas (Gordon 561)

would also edit the catalogue raisonné of his graphic works, "I am so glad to be able to be here."

In a photo taken around 1920, we see Kirchner – perpetually lit cigarette dangling languidly from the left corner of his mouth – surrounded by dancing peasants on the upper floor of the *Haus in den Lärchen*, a somewhat secluded farmstead in the Landwassertal Valley near Frauenkirch/Davos (fig.). He had rented the house and was soon inviting his neighbors to visit. They came gladly, since he owned the only gramophone near or far, bringing variety into their hardscrabble existence. Kirchner, a city-slicker whom they found hard to fathom, with a job none of them could really define, was livening things up in their day-to-day routines and kept in touch as a neighbour. He was not one of them, but still someone who had earned their respect. And that alone was a lot from these taciturn Alpine people, who often eked out their living on extremely isolated farmsteads. They invited him into their celebrations and their personal lives. At any rate, these were certainly more than encounters between strangers.

The year 1923 then brought a number of changes: Kirchner moved to the other side of the Landwassertal, into the *Haus auf dem Wildboden*, which stood at the mouth of another valley, the Sertigtal. His long-time companion Erna Schilling came to live with him permanently, having unwound the couple's Berlin flat and the business matters she had



Dancing peasants at *Haus in den Lärchen*, E. L. Kirchner standing to the left. 1919/20

been managing up until then. Everyone in the area was soon calling her "Frau Kirchner." The painter used the new house's upper level as his sleeping quarters, studio, printing-press workshop, and paper storeroom. He now had lots of space to (finally) create larger paintings. A photo (fig. right) shows canvases he had set aside for this purpose, stacked along an exterior wall of the house.

He had arrived in the true sense of the word. Kirchner described what this meant for him (writing under the pseudonym Louis de Marsalle): "Amongst the farmers of *Fraunkirchen*, he soon found a new sort of landscape and people he [...] proceeded to record in large, monumental pictures." He, the restless artist, had stepped into a new world encircled by a panorama of Alpine mountain walls – and had gotten to know a new way of life: that of the famers and their livestock, ruled by the great cycles of nature and the seasons.

It was this state of cozy contentment that gave rise to the painting *Heuern-te*.

A few details strike the viewer at once: A slew of elongated, yellow and grey-blue lines of grass that has dried into hay, which run through the entire composition, giving shape to the overwhelming nature of the Landwassertal Valley: Alpine meadows in all their autumnal beauty. The time has come to harvest the winter hay for the livestock and drive it home in a four-wheeled wagon. The scene is similar to a silhouette backdrop, against which the strenuous life of the mountain folk and their animals unfolds. The peasants "toil away" along the steep cliffside – three women and four men, stooping over their sickles and rakes. A scene that repeats itself year after year; a rhythmic cycle, almost a ritual: handed-down, meaningful, accepted.

But then, on the upper right-hand side, indistinctly at first, we discern another scene the artist has disassociated from any reference to time and space, making it almost surreal. It is certainly an altogether different situation we see here – perhaps a brighter, alternate universe inflamed with light? Looking closer, we see adumbrated the sort of locale Thomas Mann described in his novel "The Magic Mountain": A green meadow where the rich and beautiful mingle and indulge in therapeutic sunbathing, later to engage in all sorts of leisure pursuits "in the big sanatoriums to be found in a spa resort that had pretensions of international allure and urbanity." A cosmopolitan clientele, in other words, "who regarded themselves [...] as a closed social circle" (Lucius Grisebach).

Kirchner, true to his nature: Right between himself and this particular social clique, he interposes – upright – an eight-toothed rake! A signal. A boundary. He is turning his back on the fancy spa-goers of Davos. He leaves hardly any room



Lot 8



Erna Schilling and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in front of the patio at *Wildbodenhaus*. 1925/26

in his painting for those who always claim everything for themselves wherever they go. He relegates them to the margins instead, leaving them to fade out in all their expensive and colourful finery. Kirchner is using the painterly means and language at his disposal to manifest what he had already expressed years earlier in a letter to Henry van de Velde: "My days in the circus, of consorting with the cocottes and high society, are over [...]. I have other tasks before me today, and they are here."

Heuern-te: The time is late afternoon; the sun is already hanging low. In its lengthening shadows, Kirchner showcases the unaffected, down-to-the-basics way of life of the Alpine farmers who inhabit the highland meadows looming over the window of his studio. They work, gathering the hay they will need to feed their animals – cows, goats, sheep – during the long winter months. What is going on in the artist's mind as he paints this? To paint this world, which he has only just gotten to know, he discovers new colours, new symbols, and entirely unprecedented compositional elements. The hectic, almost breathless slices of life he had captured in Berlin are a thing of the past. Immersed in the timeless natural architecture of his "New World," he now delves into longer rhythms that can only be measured in years, decades, or even longer spans. And his neighbours, for whom this view of the world is inborn, are helping him to learn in the process: "It is a proud cast of human being who makes this his home. The hard work, performed with great love, the interaction with animals [...] – they are what entitle him to his pride." Kirchner is giving thanks. He did not do that very often in his life. The words he writes to the collector Georg Reinhart sound like a reckoning, a confession: "It is wonderful up here. The mountains and the people are having a cleansing effect on me."



View of *Wildbodenhaus*. After 1924

8 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Aschaffenburg 1880 – 1938 Davos

“Heuernte”. 1924–26

Oil on canvas. 90 × 120 cm (35 3/8 × 47 1/4 in.). Signed upper left: E.L. Kirchner. Signed, dated, titled and inscribed with brush in black on the reverse: ELKirchner Davos 24 Heuernte Ölgemälde. There too the estate stamp (not in Lugt) inscribed with the registry number with brush in black: Da/Be 26. On the stretcher a label of the exhibition Munich 2013 (see below) as well as a label of the Museum Biberach. Catalogue raisonné: Gordon 787 (there dated: 1924–1926). The painting is registered in the Ernst Ludwig Kirchner archive, Wichtrach/Bern. [3041] Framed.

Provenance

Family of the artist / Private Collection, Germany (by descent 2023; since 1967 on loan to Museum Biberach)

EUR 700,000–900,000

USD 753,000–968,000

Exhibition

Ausstellung Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Bern, Kunstmuseum, 1933, cat. no. 52 / Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Munich, Galerie Thomas, 2013, p. 93 and 94, w. ill. / Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Retrospective. Frankfurt a.M., Städel Museum, 2010, cat. no. 123, ill. p. 197

Literature and illustration

Frank Brunecker/Uwe Degreif (ed.): Ernst Ludwig Kirchner im Braith-Mali-Museum Biberach. Biberach, Biberacher Verlagsdruckerei, 2004, p. 68–69, w. ill.



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