ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

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JILL LLOYD

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: "Colors that shine, even in the darkest corner."

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner is the leading figurative artist of German Expressionism. He is also an unusually multi-faceted, multi-talented figure, whose breadth encompasses painting and sculpture, drawing in various media, printmaking, photography, book illustration, theater design, mural painting, tapestry, and metalwork. In each of these fields Kirchner made powerfully innovative work. Far from accepting the traditional hierarchy that placed fine art at the pinnacle of an artist's achievement, Kirchner compared his activity in these various fields to "a tightly woven, organic fabric, in which process and completion go hand in hand and one aspect drives the other on."[1] Kirchner's career spans the period 1905 to 1938, when the artist committed suicide in the Swiss Alps in the wake of a personal crisis exacerbated by the National Socialist's defamation of modern art. His *oeuvre* encompasses several distinct phases. Beginning with his Dresden years, when Kirchner was a founding member of the Expressionist group the Brücke, and moving on to the periods he spent in the Berlin metropolis and finally in the Swiss mountainside resort of Davos—the setting for Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*—the exhibition at the Neue Galerie provides a representative overview of Kirchner's three main phases and charts the transformations in his life's output.

1
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *The Drinker (Self-Portrait)*, 1915, oil on canvas. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

The starting point is nevertheless a thread that runs through Kirchner's work in all media and is present in every location and period—namely his highly individual, utterly characteristic use of color. The present exhibition includes selected paintings, colored drawings and colored prints, showcasing the latter in a separate room. Kirchner's exceptional printmaking skills gave rise to some of the most spectacular experimental prints of the twentieth century. Color is used to celebrate Kirchner's work. But it is also used as a prism to view the artist from various angles, attempting to provide a greater understanding of his techniques, of what color meant to him, and, above all, how he used technique and style to construct meaning.

Kirchner described himself as a "*Farbenmensch*" (color man)[2] and regarded color as the "*Erkennungszeichen*" (distinguishing mark) of his art.[3] In a letter of 1923 the artist explained that color was the fundamental building block of his paintings. Rather than begin by drawing the contours of his subjects on canvas, Kirchner would brush in "*farbigen Flächen*" (color planes) from which his subject would subsequently "emerge."[4] In reality there is a more complex dialogue between line and color in Kirchner's work, as the two are welded together in a highly distinctive way. But Kirchner overstates his case in order to emphasize that color in no way plays a secondary,

additive role, as it traditionally did in nineteenth-century academic art. For example, Kirchner never simply colors his black and white drawings. On the contrary, drawing and color advance hand in hand: when sketching from nature he holds his pencil in one hand and his brush and open box of watercolors in the other. Color is integral to Kirchner's practice in all media—he is an artist who literally thinks in color. He remained, moreover, exceptionally proud of his achievements as a colorist: after viewing a group exhibition including his paintings in Frankfurt in 1931, he wrote to his partner Erna Schilling, "My pictures . . . look wonderful. No one else has these colors."[5]

Three main themes emerged in the present investigations of Kirchner's color. First, and most important, is the artist's modernity, which is the key to understanding his work. Kirchner is a painter of modern life in the Baudelairean sense, a seismograph of his times who nevertheless attempts to distil eternal truths out of his experience of the transitory and momentary.[6] Much attention has been paid to Kirchner's modern subjects—such as his compelling Berlin street scenes—but the present exhibition attempts to show how modernity infiltrates every aspect of his work, including his style, his choice of materials, his techniques and his colors. The second overarching theme is Kirchner's profound interest in decoration, which provided him with an alternative route to modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century, and continued to play a central role in subsequent decades: The Davos room includes two of Kirchner's striking tapestry designs made by Erna Schilling and the Swiss textile artist and weaver Lise Gujer. The latter work, *Cattle Drive into the Alps* (1926), [Plate 55], which depicts idyllic scenes of Swiss village life, demonstrates the intricate combinations of flattened color that recur in Kirchner's paintings, giving rise to his late "tapestry style." This leads to the third and final thread that can be found through all the transformations in Kirchner's art: namely the dynamic interaction of his various media. The exciting dialogue between painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture and photography—not to mention works of decorative art—is the essence of Kirchner's brilliant, experimental style.

The following essays each pursue one of these themes. Janis Staggs provides new insights into Kirchner's decorative projects, paying particular attention to his little-known metalwork. Sherwin Simmons confronts Kirchner's modernity by relating the color compositions in his Berlin street scenes and city views to the brand-new electric light installations in the metropolis. Sharon Jordan analyzes Kirchner's colored woodcut series *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story*—an acknowledged masterpiece of twentieth-century printmaking—in relation to his deep and sustained interest in the writings of the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nelson Blitz, Jr., provides a timely and original interpretation of Kirchner's crisis and suicide by situating the artist's personal story in its historical and political context. The role of this introduction is to pull together the three themes—modernity, decoration, and multi-media—which are truly intertwined in Kirchner's work. By drawing examples from each phase of Kirchner's journey from Dresden to Berlin and finally to Davos, I will attempt to show how color and technique are essential factors in the construction and transmission of meaning.

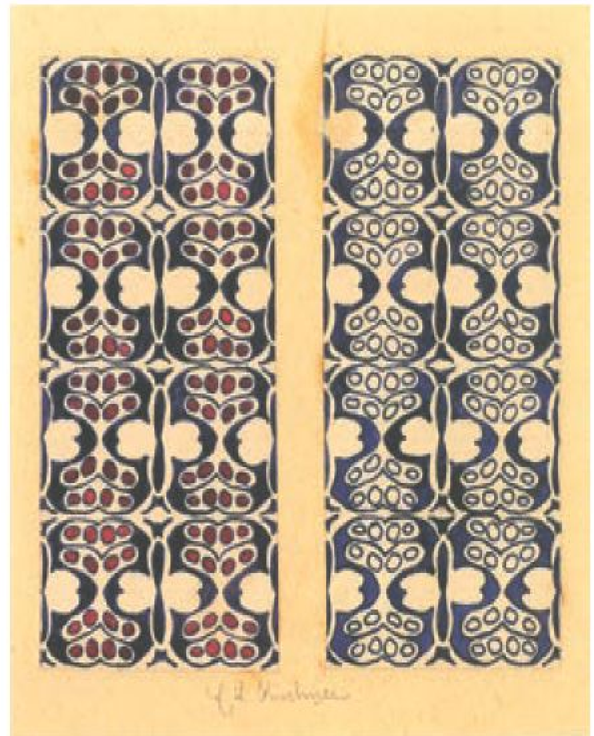
Kirchner's Artistic Apprenticeship

Kirchner began his artistic training not in Dresden's fine art academy but rather at the Technical College, where he studied architecture from 1901 to 1904. Kirchner's contact with teachers such as Fritz Schumacher, whose course on interior design (*Innerer Ausbau*) Kirchner attended, brought him into contact with the most advanced ideas in decorative arts reform, for which Dresden was becoming an important center. Kirchner also spent the winter semester of 1903 to 1904 in Munich, where he took classes at the private Lehr- und Versuchsatelier für angewandte und freie Kunst (Teaching and Experimental Ateliers for Applied and Fine Art) run by the painter decorator Wilhelm von Debschitz and the *Jugendstil* designer Hermann Obrist, who were equally committed to artistic rebirth. Not only did these reformers question the boundaries between fine and decorative art, they also advocated a renewal of painting by drawing on styles and techniques traditionally associated with decoration. They challenged the technical precision, unified varnished surfaces, and muted realistic colors advocated by nineteenth-century art academies, encouraging their students instead to use bright color and adopt a diverse, experimental approach to materials and techniques. The desire for vivid color, for example, prompted experimentation with techniques such as distemper and tempera, which were traditionally associated with decorative painting.[7]

Colorful *Jugendstil*-inspired designs made by Kirchner in his student years [Figs. 2a–b] demonstrate his immediate response to this wave of artistic renewal. More important, however, was the long-term impact that new ideas in decorative art and architecture had on his approach to painting. One of the central principles of the reform movement was the concept of truth to

2a–b

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, ornamental sketches, 1901–02, brush and ink on paper. Nachlass Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Günther Ketterer and Ingeborg Henze-Ketterer, Wichtrach/ Bern



In 1933, Kirchner contributed an essay under his pseudonym Louis de Marsalle to the catalogue for his largest retrospective exhibition yet at the Kunstmuseum Bern. He explained the originality of Kirchner's recent art: "His work of today is the logical consequence of his entire work over thirty years and true of him are the words of Nietzsche: 'You should propagate yourself not only forward but upward.'"[57]

As the National Socialists gained power in Germany, Kirchner was a target of their assaults on modern art. In 1933, he was dismissed as a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts. Over 600 of his artworks were confiscated from German collections, with thirty-two of them, including *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, included in the infamous "Degenerate Art" exhibition, beginning in Munich in 1937.[58] The wall label for the painting *Farewell: Botho and Hugo*, made to mark the younger man's departure for military service in 1915, derided Kirchner by comparing him unfavorably to Dürer.[59] The National Socialists appropriated Dürer's knight and Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as cultural touchstones to serve their mythology of the ideal German, with this association making

23
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *The Rider*, 1931–32, oil on canvas. Kirchner Museum Davos, Donation of the Estate of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1990. Photo: © Kirchner Museum Davos, Jakob Jägli

24
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Herd of Sheep*, 1938, oil on canvas. Brücke-Museum, Berlin. Photo: akg-images

Nietzsche's ideas anathema for many years.[60] As Kirchner became ever more fearful that the German army might enter Swiss territory, he destroyed many of his woodblocks and sculptures.[61]

In Nietzsche's essay "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, the philosopher gives advice to his readers about how to productively use one's knowledge of history.[62] Nietzsche makes a comparison between a herd of happy, grazing animals and the individual, who is always conscious of the past: "The man says 'I remember' and he envies the animal who at once forgets . . . Thus the animal lives ahistorically: for it is contained in the present . . . Man, on the other hand, braces himself against the great and ever-greater pressure of what is past."[63]

The eternal recurrence required of Kirchner an impossible choice. To be alive meant he must have the will to return to his lowest moments as a demonstration of his continued striving. With another war now tragically poised to recur, Kirchner could not accept the answer he was bound to give to the question Nietzsche asks of the reader: "What could ten more years teach that the past ten were unable to teach!"[64] With *Herd of Sheep*, his last painting of animals grazing contentedly in an expansive alpine meadow left unfinished on his easel, Kirchner ended his life on June 15, 1938 [Fig. 24].

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NELSON BLITZ, JR.

Politics and German Identity as Factors in Kirchner's Suicide

On June 15, 1938, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner committed suicide in Davos, Switzerland, by firing a pistol into his chest. Although Kirchner had suffered from physical and mental ailments since before World War I, his maladies do not suffice to explain the motivations behind this act of self-negation. By placing the artist's suicide in the context of the spread of fascism, it becomes clear that the political situation in Europe was a factor in Kirchner's demise. While the artist never suffered bodily harm at the hands of the Nazis, the party's hostility to modernism made him a target. The conservative German identity promoted by the Third Reich erased Kirchner's dynamic vision of German culture. The seizure and destruction of Kirchner's art represented the ultimate repudiation of his ambition to create a progressive German style of art.

1
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Artillerymen in the Shower*, 1915, oil on canvas. Private Collection. Photo: Art Resource, NY

The difficulty in determining the impact of German politics on Kirchner's suicide comes from the dearth of evidence upon which to base our understanding of the artist's beliefs. While his works portrayed automobiles, war widows, fashion, and other elements of modern life, few explicitly engaged with current events. As a result, scholars and critics have largely left Kirchner's politics unexplored.[1] I argue, however, that his experience in World War I and subsequent rejection of militarism demonstrated a radical turn against war. If the changes in Kirchner's thinking in the 1920s do not represent a definite political stance, they help to explain his extreme reaction to Nazi expansion in the 1930s. Further, the artist's comments on race emphasize his preoccupation with German identity. While inconsistencies and contradictions in the artist's statements point toward his ambivalence to politics, Kirchner's drive to forge a new type of art drawn from German tradition and suited to modern German society put him definitively at odds with Nazi cultural policies.

From the early days of his career, Kirchner shed the strictures of conservative bourgeois society in favor of a bohemian lifestyle. He eschewed the conventions of academic painting for the exploration of free expression and artistic autonomy. With the other members of the Brücke—Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff—he began to make art that emphasized the qualities he associated with the German character. These included psychological introspection, expressive use of line, and the incorporation of wood. His goal was to provide German society with the advanced visual culture that rivaled the achievements of his French contemporaries.[2] Critics associated Kirchner's art with contemporary efforts to innovate in the fields of literature, theater, and the new medium of film. He focused on the city and its vibrancy when he moved from Dresden to Berlin.

The trauma of World War I strained Kirchner's fragile psyche to the point that he recoiled even from the prospect of combat. Caught in the nationalistic euphoria that swept German society in the early 1910s, the artist initially condoned the war and volunteered to serve in the 75th Field Artillery Regiment in the spring of 1915.[3] The strictly regimented and communal life he encountered as a trainee in Halle prompted feelings of alienation and a loss of individuality. Kirchner had begun to exhibit signs of mental instability and substance abuse as early as 1913.[4] His anxieties intensified as the prospect of deployment approached and precipitated a severe breakdown in November 1915.[5] That month, Kirchner received a provisional discharge and left the army, ostensibly to regain his strength.[6]

Kirchner's mental and physical difficulties persisted throughout the three years he spent in sanatoriums in Königstein, Berlin, and Davos.[7] The threat of being recalled to service loomed over him and repeated the trauma of his time in Halle.[8] To prolong his medical exemption, Kirchner

2
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Nervous People Eating (Sanatorium Kohnstamm)*, 1916, woodcut on paper. Collection of Catherine Woodard and Nelson Blitz, Jr. Photo: Hulya Kolabas

3
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Artillerymen in the Shower—Bathing Soldiers*, 1915, lithograph on yellow paper. Collection of Catherine Woodard and Nelson Blitz, Jr. Photo: Hulya Kolabas

deliberately starved himself, fashioning a secret pocket in his coat to hide uneaten food from his nurses.[9] In 1916, his doctor diagnosed him with a heavy dependency on Veronal (a barbiturate sleep aid), alcoholism, and a mild morphine addiction.[10] In addition to his medical conditions, the artist was struck by a car in Berlin in early 1917.[11]

Although he complained to friends that ailments kept him from working, Kirchner produced a range of paintings, prints, and sculptures during his convalescence, some of which reflected upon his life during the war. During his stay at the Kohnstamm sanatorium in Königstein, he created the woodcut, *Nervous People Eating (Sanatorium Kohnstamm)* [Fig. 2, Plate 67], that suggested the tension felt within the clinic. The diners, dressed in formal clothes, sit sphinx-like before the table with their thin hands poised upon their plates. Kirchner's angular shading gives a skeletal appearance to the faces and hands of the figures.

In a painting and a lithograph on yellow paper from 1915, both titled *Artillerymen in the Shower*, Kirchner represented the claustrophobia and humiliation of life in the barracks through the cramped composition of soldiers and the surveilling presence of an officer.[12] In the painting [Fig. 1] the ochre tones of the soldiers contrast with the blue and green of the bath house and set the servicemen apart from the officer in white, who watches the men from the right edge of the composition. Under the showerheads, the soldiers in the lithograph [Fig. 3, Plate 90] coalesce into a unified mass interrupted only by a stove tended by a crouching bather. Although placed in

1 SELF-PORTRAIT, 1905–06, woodcut on paper, 18.7 x 8 cm (7 ⅜ x 3 ⅛ in.)
Kirchner Museum Davos, Donation of the Estate of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1992.
Photo: © Kirchner Museum Davos, Stephan Bösch

DRESDEN

2 PORTRAIT OF HANS FRISCH, ca. 1907, oil on canvas, 113.7 x 113.7 cm (44 ¾ x 44 ¾ in.)
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio. Photo: © McNay Art Museum / Art Resource, NY

3 DORIS STANDING, 1906, oil on board, 96.5 x 52.5 cm (38 x 20 ⅝ in.)
Latner Family Art Collection. Photo: akg-images

20 SELF-PORTRAIT WITH CIGARETTE, 1915, lithograph on yellow paper,
58.4 x 39.4 cm (23 x 15 ½ in.). Collection of Catherine Woodard and Nelson Blitz, Jr.
Photo: Hulya Kolabas

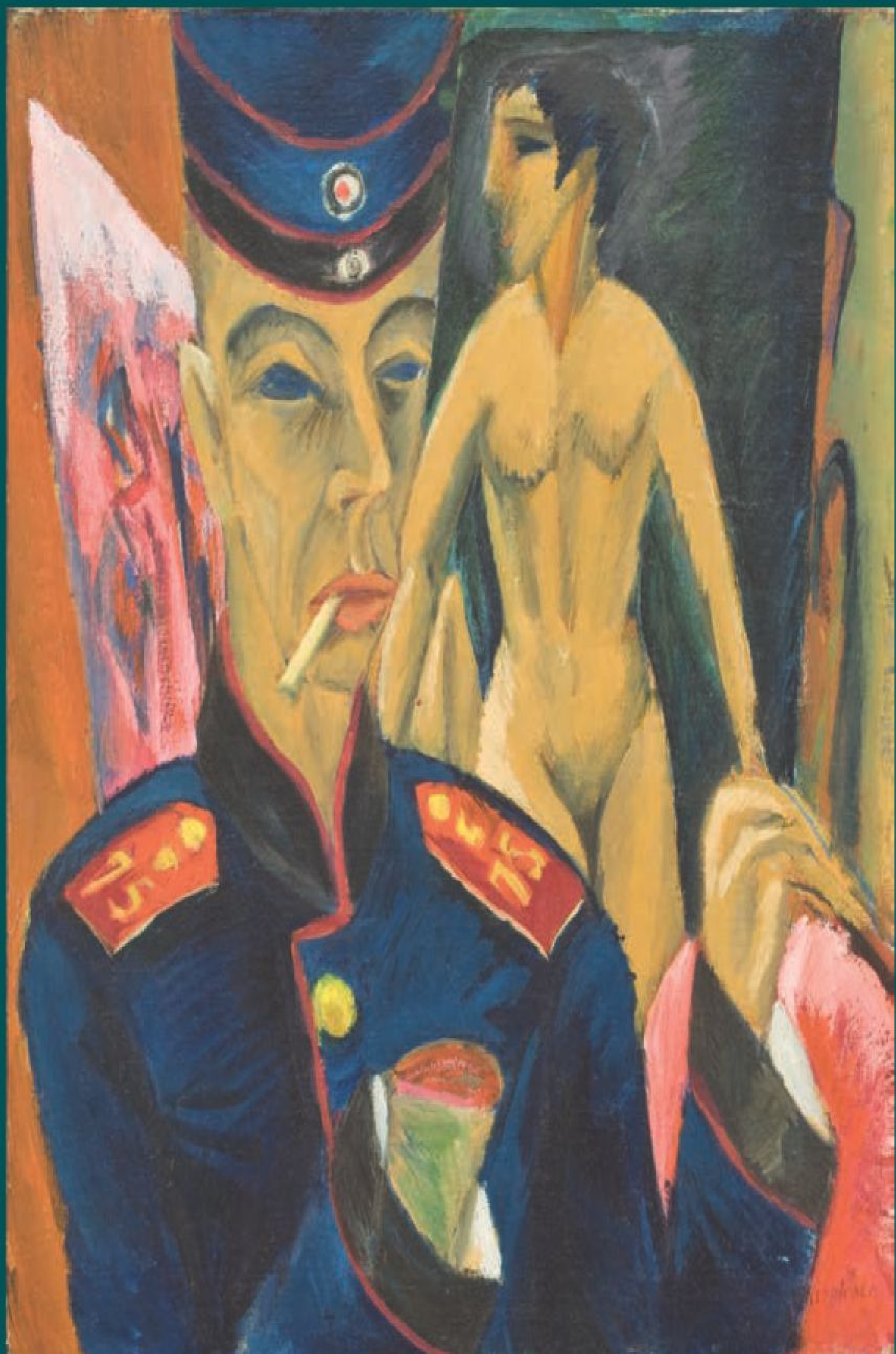
BERLIN

21 THE RUSSIAN DANCER MELA, 1911, oil on canvas, 100 x 79.4 cm (39 ⅜ x 29 ½ in.)
Private Collection

22 THE TOILETTE (WOMAN BEFORE THE MIRROR), 1913–20, oil on canvas, 100.5 x 75.5 cm (39 ½ x 29 ¾ in.)
Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne/Centre de création industrielle. Photo: © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

WAR YEARS

39 SELF-PORTRAIT AS A SOLDIER, 1915, oil on canvas, 69 x 63.3 cm (27 1/8 x 24 7/8 in.)
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH. Charles F. Olney Fund, 1950.29



40 PETER SCHLEMIHL'S WONDROUS STORY (Title Page), 1915, colored woodcut on medium thick wove paper, 29.2 x 26.2 cm (11 ½ x 10 ¼ in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., New Century Fund and Gift of Ruth and Jacob Kainen, 1999

41 PETER SCHLEMIHL'S WONDROUS STORY: THE SALE OF HIS SHADOW (Plate 1), 1915, colored woodcut on medium thick wove paper, 41 x 34.8 cm (16 ⅛ x 13 ⅝ in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., New Century Fund and Gift of Ruth and Jacob Kainen, 1999

SKETCHBOOKS

57 SKETCHBOOK 007, fol. 3, 1909–10, bound paper booklet, 21 x 17.2 cm (8 ¼ x 67 ⅝ in.). Kirchner Museum Davos, Donation of the Estate of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1990. Photo: © Kirchner Museum Davos