

## ART AND CRISIS: KIRCHNER PAINTS KIRCHNER

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In his self-portraits, the artist confronts us with himself. When Rembrandt or Vincent van Gogh recorded themselves, over the years, in diverse moods, these self-portraits bore witness to the course of their lives, to the alternation of joy and sorrow, of triumph and defeat. Yet artists' self-portraits are not only biographical documents; they are also works of art, which we find compelling on account of their formal inventiveness. They testify not only to the life of the artist, but also to his work. This, too, is the sense of self-portraits.<sup>1</sup>

### I GUILT AND ATONEMENT

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner painted himself quite often, but not as often as Rembrandt or Van Gogh. His self-portraits bear witness to a personal crisis during the years 1915 to 1918; they anticipate this crisis, and accompany it, and ultimately testify to the discovery of a new sense of self. Scholars such as Eberhard W. Kornfeld, Roland Scotti, Peter Springer, and Joachim Kaak, who have studied Kirchner's self-portraits individually or in their entirety, have of course looked into the artist's biography; but only *en route* to seeking the significance of any given portrait in the formal aspect of what Kirchner himself termed his "hieroglyphics."<sup>2</sup> The biographical background to Kirchner's achievement is as unavoidable as it is, taken alone, insufficient. The problem here is not only a general one: it is not only a question of the circular reasoning of explaining the life of the artist through his work, and *vice versa*; and it is also not only a question of the opposition of biographical content to artistic form.

In the case of Kirchner, the matter is further complicated by the variety of levels on which his biography appears to reflect history, especially the trauma of World War I. The evolution of the artist's personal crisis runs exactly parallel with the course of the war. Behind Kirchner's mood of resignation, the illness that, in 1917, brought him close to death, lies the war. The parallels between the personal and universal crises raise the question as to whether it was only himself that Kirchner was examining in his self-portraits. Was he also, or even primarily, calling into question the cultural and moral values of the West?

If we extend these questions from the biographical sphere to that of art, it is apparent that from 1915 to 1919—that is to say, starting with the *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (fig. 12) with its severed hand—Kirchner uses the image of himself to address the issue of his own capacity for creation and the threat of losing it. Was he thereby giving extreme expression to a sense of the crisis, indeed the silencing, of the culture of which he felt himself a part? And does Kirchner's subsequent discovery of a new sense of self through an ascetic way of life point the way for a new beginning for Europe through a retreat into itself? Explicitly or otherwise, the critics and art historians who sought to interpret these pictures have somehow alluded to all of these metaphorical significations of Kirchner's

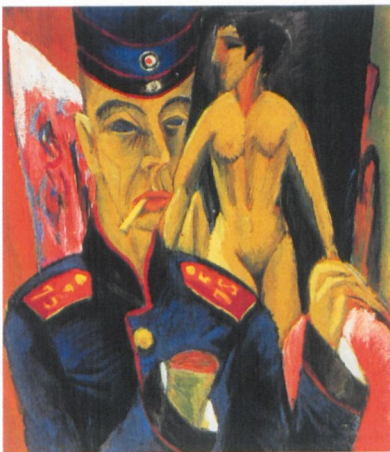


Fig. 12 Self-Portrait as a Soldier, 1915

life. Biographical and historical content complement each other on three levels: firstly, that of the biography of the *individual*; secondly, on that of the *historical and political* crisis; and thirdly, on that of the loss of the sense of *cultural* self that had characterized the West in the era of imperialism preceding the war. On each of these distinct levels, all the other levels also come into play. Inevitably, Kirchner's sickness is also that of the West.

But we need to go further. However tempting it is to read Kirchner's career as richly metaphorical, the narrative of the artist's biography is by no means a neutral starting point. Kirchner himself transformed his life into a legend. It is well known that his quarrel of 1913 with the other members of the group Die Brücke (The Bridge)—a quarrel that put an end to the cooperation—was sparked by Kirchner's written account of its history, in which he had, in their opinion, ascribed to himself a far too prominent role.<sup>3</sup> The critic Louis de Marsalle, who from 1920 commented positively on Kirchner's work, proved to be an invention of the artist's.<sup>4</sup> Kirchner also circulated false diagnoses of the illness that ultimately brought about his move to Davos—among these the rumor that he was suffering from tuberculosis. Such instances of artists creating legends about themselves to their own advantage make it necessary for the art historian to become a sort of detective, using one source to call into question another and thereby arriving at a plausible account of the life of the subject. The art historian, thus, must seek to uncover the "truth."

However, even this biographical "truth" is not yet the heart of the matter. It is itself a narrative that follows certain structures. It runs like a recurrent theme through Kirchner's work; and it is not without reason that so few exhibition catalogues devoted to his work fail to include a chronological outline of his life.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Kirchner's biography, the "true" story of the artist, exposed through the art historian's detective work, is no less mythical than his own account. In Dresden and in Berlin, Kirchner lived out the truthfulness of his art and of his passions. This artist, life-affirming and challenging the bigoted norms of bourgeois society, volunteered for active military service in 1915. Yet he was far from suited to the rigors of military life and even less so to the "heroism" to which young soldiers were then being urged. His fear of a senseless death was sufficient to make him genuinely ill. During a short period of leave in Berlin he took a series of photographs of himself, still proudly posing in his uniform (fig. 17, p. 65); but he also produced the famous *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (fig. 12, p. 59). It was through this work of art that he first became fully aware of his inability to stand by his own resolve in volunteering to serve. The biographical episodes of his flight from the war are familiar and have repeatedly been summarized.<sup>6</sup> Out of fear of serving in the German army, Kirchner succumbed to the lure of alcohol and other drugs—among them the mildly poisonous absinthe (fig. p. 13).

In 1916 an addiction to Veronal, a soporific, brought Kirchner three times to the sanitarium of Dr. Oskar Kohnstamm at Königstein in the Taunus,<sup>7</sup> in December to Dr. Edel's clinic for nervous disorders in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin, and at the start of 1917 to the Schatzalp Sanitarium in Davos, where in May he





Fig. 13 The Drinker. Self-Portrait, 1915

Cat. 56 Self-Portrait with Death Dancing, 1918

was diagnosed as being addicted to morphine as well.<sup>8</sup> In the summer he moved to the Rüeschhütte on the Stafelalp, where he suffered from loss of sensation in his hands and feet. On the advice of the architect Henry van de Velde, Kirchner spent the period from September 1917 to July 1918 at the Bellevue Sanitarium in Kreuzlingen. The medical director, Ludwig Binswanger Jr., had studied in Zurich with Eugen Bleuler and Carl Gustav Jung, had moved in 1907, along with Jung, to Vienna in order to meet with Sigmund Freud, and had then returned to Zurich to serve his professional apprenticeship at the Burghölzli Clinic. Other prominent figures following Kirchner as patients of Ludwig Binswanger at his psychoanalytically organized clinic in Kreuzlingen included the art historian Aby Warburg.<sup>9</sup>

Kirchner's illness eventually gave way to recuperation and self-discovery in the mountains around Davos. Not unlike Giovanni Segantini, who increasingly felt himself driven out of the Moloch of late-nineteenth-century Milan and ever further into the mountains (where, in September 1899, he died on the Schafberg above St. Moritz while painting what was, in effect, the image of his own death), Kirchner was now content to pursue his work as an artist alongside simple peasants. Like Kirchner, Segantini was simultaneously an invalid, a decadent, and a primitive, whose attempts at healing the ills of modern civilization through an immersion in the natural world eventually proved impossible. In 1912, Karl Abraham brought the principles of Freudian analysis to bear on the case of Segantini, concluding that his oeuvre had been the fulfillment of an overpowering death wish.<sup>10</sup>

In the manner of the parable of the Prodigal Son or a moralizing tale of adventure incorporating guilt, punishment, and atonement, Kirchner's biography embraces clichéd episodes: life in the metropolis, the depravity of which Kirchner had captured, shortly before the advent of war, in his forceful pictures of street life on Potsdamer Platz, of prostitutes and their clients; the horror of the war, which Kirchner expressed for his entire generation in the vision of his own mutilation; then the asceticism and simplicity of life in the mountains, in which he would eventually commit suicide in a spirit of resignation to the approach of yet another world war. Each of these clichés has attracted the scrutiny of art historians. Charles Haxthausen and Katharina Sykora, for example, have explored the exciting relationship between Kirchner's Berlin pictures of prostitutes and the erotic nudes he painted on the island of Fehmarn in the Baltic Sea: while Haxthausen reads the images of Berlin prostitutes as socially critical in intent, albeit ultimately as "allies in [Kirchner's] campaign for the liberation of instinct," Sykora sees these paintings as evidence of Kirchner morally distancing himself from his subject, in contrast to his earlier primitivist visions of an ideal erotic partnership. Peter Springer was recently able to demonstrate that Kirchner for a long time could not decide what attitude to adopt towards his own initial enthusiasm for the war. Lucius Grisebach has shown how closely in touch with Europe as a whole Kirchner remained—even after the "caesura" in his biography—the move to rural Frauenkirch. Even with works based on motifs of life

in the mountains, he asserted his presence in both German and international art life.<sup>11</sup> Not only was Kirchner pleased whenever his work was perceived “German” in character; he also continued to hope for serious recognition in Germany, even after the advent of National Socialism, until the impossibility of this became painfully evident with his inclusion in the exhibition of “degenerate art” mounted at the Hofgartenarkaden in Munich in 1937.

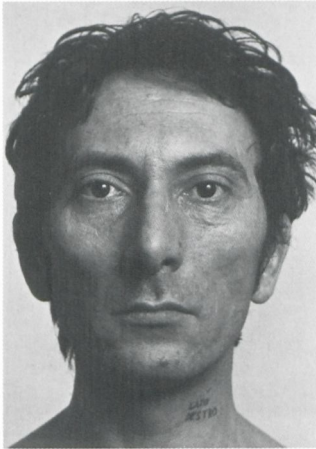
However convincingly called into question, the cliché nonetheless persists as part of the myth of Kirchner. And in the biographical narrative of guilt and atonement the self-portraits play a crucial part. Roland Scotti has summarized their evolution<sup>12</sup> in a way that is as precise as it is ironic: “We believe [. . .] that it is possible to distinguish the individual stages of Kirchner’s life: in 1913 he saw himself as a metropolitan dandy; in 1915 he was a recruit; in 1915 he was an alcoholic; in 1917 he went through a bout of morphine addiction, and in 1918 he painted a picture of himself as a sick man; in 1920, after treatment in various sanatoria and a period of convalescence in Davos, he was at last once again able to depict himself as a painter, in 1926 as a traveller.”<sup>13</sup> The *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* heralds the period of crisis (fig. 12, p. 59); the *Self-Portrait as a Sick Man* (fig. p. 49), recently acquired by the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, marks the end of this phase and the start of a new period of self-discovery.

As we confront Kirchner’s self-portraits, there is no escape from the myth of the biographical—precisely because commentators even by devaluating that myth through their questioning have, paradoxically, brought it once more into play. The moment at which the artist is engaged in painting his own portrait is thereby constantly promoted to a higher level of narrative, be it biographical, historical or related to the history of form, and art. When we consider these portraits as *paintings*, as instances of the *work* that goes into the engagement with the self, we will find that, while it is impossible to get away from myths, we can, however, try to apprehend them at their point of origin. Let us, then, try to see this point of origin, in which Kirchner, through moving his brush across his canvas, brought into being his self-portrait while simultaneously observing his own reflection in a mirror.

## II IN THE PICTURE

The artist necessarily observes and records himself at the same time. But for whom? For himself, for the public—or for both? Since the advent of modernism—that is to say, since a self-portrait has been perceived as something entirely different from a portrait—artists have asked themselves this question. Is it as himself that the painter observes himself? Or does he look at himself through the eyes of another, the public? In order to make clear just how distinct these alternative positions are, let us consider the painter as a “narrator.” Is the artist who paints his own self-portrait, and thereby, as it were, narrates himself, a part of his own narrative? Or does he speak of himself from outside, as if he were an authoritative narrator, an objective observer, standing outside the story—or the picture?<sup>14</sup> There is one criterion that allows us to assess such a situation: when

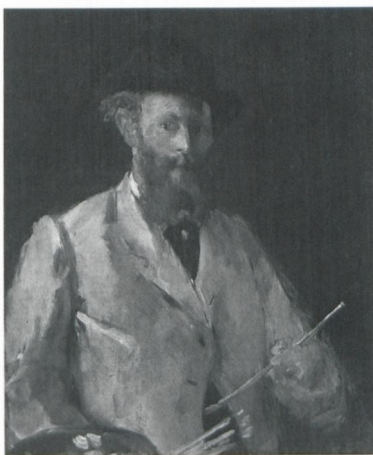




we look in the mirror we see ourselves reversed. When an artist records such a mirror image of himself he shows himself as he appears in the mirror: that is to say, reversed. Giovanni Anselmo, an exponent of *arte povera*, made this problem comprehensible in a photographic self-portrait. On the skin of his throat he had written the words *lato destro* (right side) (fig. 14). In the photograph the writing is not reversed. The inscription marks the right side not of Anselmo's throat, but of his portrait, as the observer sees it. For the spectator, then, the inscription means exactly what is indicated by the place where it is encountered: here, indexical and symbolic meanings coincide.<sup>15</sup>

Anselmo looked in the mirror while he was writing. In order to write words that would be legible to him as he wrote, he had to write them reversed. For the viewer of Anselmo's portrait, who is not looking into a mirror, but at Anselmo himself, the reversal would have been apparent, and the writing would mark the left—and thus, for the spectator, the “wrong” side. Only when the photographer Paolo Mussat Sartor reversed the negative of the photograph of Anselmo did there emerge a portrait that was both “correctly” labeled and legible—to the viewer. But we may well ask: is the result still a self-portrait or, rather, a portrait of Anselmo by Mussat Sartor?<sup>16</sup> A right-handed artist who intends to show himself in the act of painting is bound to come up against this problem—and not as a philosophical issue but, simply, from a practical point of view. He has to decide whether to show “himself” holding the brush in his right hand, as the viewer would see him, or in his left, as he sees himself reflected in the mirror. The first solution to this dilemma was the traditional one. Édouard Manet, who produced very few self-portraits, eschewed this convention in a sketchily painted work (fig. 15), in which his hand—his left hand—appears as a curiously blurred segment of the canvas, as if the act of painting precisely this passage with the brush held in the hand had replaced the very representation of that hand. The hand or, rather, the passage of loose brushstrokes that we find in its place, becomes the interface where the action of the artist and his own image meet. It is with an almost skeptical air and with shadows seeming to divide his face that the artist looks at his own reflection, or even at the portrait. This is, in short, a self-portrait that offers a commentary on the process of painting self-portraits.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of Kirchner the position of the artist painting his own self-portrait was itself to become a dominant theme. The artist enters into a dialogue both with his mirror—or ideal—image and with his canvas. This silent dialogue is carried on not by two interlocutors, but exclusively by the artist's brush. And yet, the person standing in front of the painting in progress splits into two: the one that is visible in the painting, and the one that is creating it. The area where the brush touches the canvas is the crucial point of the separation between the (mirror) image of the artist and his portrait—or between life and work. The artist's right hand, as it appears in the painting, is metaphorically the site of this divergence. For this passage can only be painted by the artist if he makes an abstraction of the fact that he is in this very moment painting with precisely this hand.



Cat. 70 Self-Portrait Holding a Flower, 1920

Fig. 14 Giovanni Anselmo, *Lato destro* (Right Side), color photograph from reversed negative, 1970

Fig. 15 Édouard Manet, *Self-Portrait with Palette*, 1878/79

Let us pursue Kirchner's self-portraits as if they were part of a story about hands—just as Gogol, in 1836, wrote the story of a nose, which had become separated from its body and was to be found wandering about on its own through the streets of Saint Petersburg.<sup>18</sup> As in the case of Gogol's tale, the story of Kirchner's hand emerges as a truly surreal grotesque. During his period of military service, Kirchner posed in his spiked helmet in front of one of his paintings—the remote control release of his camera in his hand. He looked directly into the lens and then pressed the button (fig. 17, p. 65).<sup>19</sup> The painting in the background of the resulting photograph can be identified as an earlier version, later re-worked, of the canvas *Artillerymen in the Shower* (fig. 16): around a bathstove, which is being re-fuelled with coal by a figure shown squatting in the foreground, there stand naked men, kept under surveillance by a man in uniform. The boy-like soldiers, crushed closely together, are washing themselves under the several showerheads, the jets of water striking them like the bundled rays of searchlights. The lone Kirchner here presents himself as a soldier-painter in front of this image of collective corporeality. Nothing can be seen of his own hands; they are busy with the remote control release of the camera, into which he is looking so intently that he is unable to achieve a sharp photographic record of his face.

In his painting *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* the attention caught by the spiked helmet is captured by the hands, this headgear being replaced by a prosaic cap. Kirchner is shown painting, with an expression on his face suggestive of indifference, even coolness towards this activity. In the background we can see canvases bewilderingly foreshortened and reduced to sloping silhouettes, like prongs rearing up behind the artist. Level with his face, which we see in a three-quarter view, a dark canvas shows a superb standing female nude, with her head turned towards him. But what is this painting soldier, fitted out so correctly in his uniform, doing with his hands? He holds his right hand out in front of him, but it is not engaged in painting—for it has been hacked off! In front of his breast—precisely in the position occupied, in religious tradition, by the wound in Christ's side—there looms up out of the white lining of his sleeve the bloody stump of an arm. Was this the painter's working hand, the hand of creation, whose prehistory in the work of sculptors from Canova to Rodin has been so eloquently traced by Peter Springer? Or is not the left hand—perhaps here the right hand, reversed in its reflection in a mirror—Kirchner's painting hand? Resembling a small bent claw, it appears to hold a brush and, at this very moment, to be painting the edge of the canvas. Or is it simply held aloft? We can be sure about none of this.<sup>20</sup>

In his detailed study, Springer recapitulates the different ways in which this most frequently interpreted of Kirchner's paintings has been understood: as the image of himself as both soldier and victim; as a martyr to art, with his severed hand as his saint's attribute; as a testament to his traumatic fear of death, impotence and castration. Sexual, artistic and military identities here engage in metaphorical interaction. Springer rightly insists on the fact that this is not a convulsive, but a reflective self-representation of an artist. It is also clear that Kirchner did not in-



sist on his sickness as exemplary; on the contrary, he stressed his ambivalence towards the war—his initial euphoria, and his growing terror. But, in our view, Springer returns rather too often to the hand as a metaphor of creative power, and he pays rather too little attention to the process of painting. We do not even know whether the severed hand is Kirchner's right or, rather, his left simply reversed in the mirror reflection!<sup>21</sup> In Gogol's story, the clerk Kovalyov loses his nose on a visit to his barber. The recruit Kirchner must have lost his hand while painting, while he was considering whether he should paint himself holding the brush in his right or in his left hand—and was then struck by the possibility of a third solution. At this moment terror drove him to project himself into the future: in his imagination he had already lost the hand during the war.

It was in Kirchner's Berlin studio, "while, day and night, trains filled with soldiers passed below my window," as Kirchner was to write to Hannes Meyer on July 11, 1923, that he painted the self-portrait first exhibited, in Frankfurt am Main in 1916, as *The Drinker* (fig. 13, p. 60). Here we find Kirchner sitting hunched at a round table, on which the goblet with the yellow narcotic drink stands like a chalice. His face, shown in three-quarter view, resembles an African mask; and he stares ahead, unseeing. He has lain one hand on the table, while the other (his left) points down, as if in argument, as it emerges from the wide sleeve of a splendidly embroidered smock.<sup>22</sup> But what is Kirchner's argument here—except that things are exactly as we can see they are? Or should we, rather, complete this hand gesture through the imaginative addition of a brush—which in this case would be held by the right hand, which hangs down like that of a drunkard, fully powerless in this nonetheless resolutely painted picture? We can find no answer to such a question, for this is the self-portrait of an artist disguised as a genre portrait. Kirchner here poses as someone-or-other, as a typical absinthe drinker sitting at a table, in evident allusion to the famous absinthe drinkers in the work of Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso.



Fig. 16 Artillerymen in the Shower, 1915

Fig. 17 Self-Portrait as a Soldier in the Studio at 45 Körnerstrasse, Berlin-Friedenau, 1915

### III THE HAND

The situation is quite different in the *Self-Portrait as a Sick Man*, recently acquired for the collection of the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, which assumes a key role as an image of Kirchner directly after his period of crisis. In his memoirs, van de Velde recalls visiting Kirchner in 1917. Commentators have repeatedly been moved to explain the idiosyncratic positioning of Kirchner's arms and hands in this self-portrait through the recollections of van de Velde: "In Davos I found an emaciated man with a piercing, feverish gaze who seemed to observe the approach of death. He appeared outraged to see me at his bedside. He pressed his arms convulsively to his breast. And beneath his shirt he hid his passport as if it were a talisman that, together with his Swiss visitor's permit, would protect him from the clutches of imaginary enemies, who wanted to deliver him up to the German authorities."<sup>23</sup>

It was also long assumed that Kirchner had painted this self-portrait while staying on the Stafelalp during his treatment for alcoholism. In 1986 Eberhard W.

Kornfeld published evidence to show that it had in fact been painted in the house called In den Lärchen (Among the Larches), to which Kirchner had moved only at the end of September 1918, after his stay at the clinic in Kreuzlingen.<sup>24</sup> When the painting was acquired by the Pinakotek der Moderne, Joachim Kaak published a thorough study of it, which also incorporated the results of research carried out during restoration. Having been reproduced in 1925 in an article contributed by Kirchner, writing as Louis de Marsalle, to the *Europa-Almanach* edited by Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim, the painting was extensively re-worked, probably in the same year, and the canvas cropped and affixed to a plywood board. The reworking had the effect of consolidating the surface of the painting. Something of the original appearance of this work is, however, known through x-ray photographs and through the evidence of a related watercolor now in a private collection in Hamburg: it is evident that, in the process of his re-working, Kirchner placed the headboard of the bed somewhat higher in order to simplify the background against which the image of his own head would appear.<sup>25</sup>

We find Kirchner sitting, twisted around, on the bed in an interior rendered in the emphatic diagonals of perspective foreshortening. While he may have been looking at the curiously latticed view of the mountain scenery visible through the window, he now looks up—perhaps in the direction of someone just entering the room? Here we see no hand in the act of painting. Kirchner's right hand holds his chin in a gesture indicative of despairing contemplation; and his left, seemingly attached to his back, points upwards. Both the right hand and the three-quarter view of the face are reiterated, in a ghostly fashion, in the cloudlike phantom formed by the salmon-pink bedding visible directly to the right.

The watercolor, with its spontaneous preliminary pencil drawing (fig. p. 67), shows the same gesture, although it is here less ambiguous. The artist's left hand appears to lie on the bed in a horizontal position. Kirchner is here clearly looking at someone who is entering the room, thereby identifying himself, as someone engaged with the fearfully awaited other. It is in the Munich picture that the action of looking round first becomes that of staring into emptiness—of infinity. The idiosyncratic gesture of the hand is, therefore, made for quite a different reason than that of the arms pressed to the body, observed by van de Velde, albeit still recalling that action. The hands now convey not only fear, not only terror, but a moment of pausing, and—together with the sightless black pupils in the wide-open, visionary eyes—the cautiously resolute gesture of a man at prayer. The left hand, in addition, appears to touch the canvas as if Kirchner were sleepwalking, like a blind painter, here in his art, while the right hand holds the chin—as if it were a brush. At the same time, one might see the hands as those of a sculpture—the facial type also more resembling the roughly hewn wood sculpture of that period than a recollection of African masks. Rarely has an artist captured himself so variously within a single work—as a convalescent, as alien to himself as to the person entering the sickroom. Everything is new to him, even the ostensibly long-familiar formal language of his own pictures.





Over the course of the following years Kirchner painted other self-portraits set in his own room. In the *Self-Portrait with Cat* (fig. p. 53), Kirchner stands before the viewer with the same visionary gaze in his mysterious eyes, their upper lids forming broad arcs above the emphatically underlined horizontal of the lower lids.<sup>26</sup> In spite of its captivating gaze, the face is effectively a mask. In the artist's salmon-pink coat there appears, quite surreally, the silhouette of a vessel-like entity, made up of the dark coat lining and perhaps also a shirt: we may interpret this as the artist's hieroglyphic body sheathed in orange. All too evident is the significance of the black cat, a symbol of fate, death, and the devil, and that of the peak known as the Tinzenhorn that is visible, yellow and steeply projecting, through the window. The artist has put his right hand in his pocket or hides it behind his back. His left—or is it the mirror reflection of his right?—is concealed by the mouth of a vase, out of which a sprig of blue flowers protrudes. These are blue wolfsbane (Latin: *aconitum*), a highly toxic plant, from which can be extracted the substance aconite. It can function as an anodyne if taken in the correct dosage, but may kill if this dosage is exceeded. A tangle of black and turquoise brushstrokes conceals the spot where the hand would have appeared—much as in the case of Manet's self-portrait (p. 63, fig. 15). It is the left hand—it appears that Kirchner was first painting himself for himself, and had not troubled to present himself as a right-handed painter for the sake of the viewer, before then deciding to place the vase at the spot where his hand would have been. The tangle of lines at the mouth of the vase is rendered by the painting hand at the spot where it should have painted itself. The blue flower, intoxication, and death, are thus entwined at the interface between the artist and his

Cat. 54 Man Lying in Bed (Self-Portrait), 1918

projection on to the canvas. Here, the wolfsbane flower is not only a metaphor of sickness, but also of self-contemplation through painting—and of its dangers. At around the same time, Kirchner painted a portrait of himself in profile, seated in a room with a large round iron stove (fig. p. 55). Here, his left hand holds the brush vertically in relation to his canvas, which marks the left boundary of this all too cubically intimate box of a room. Yet, even in this forceful and nonetheless calm pictorial formula, the painter in his own workspace, there appears a floral motif—on this occasion mountain rose emerging diagonally from a bottle and masking a part of the artist's elbow—as if Kirchner still felt it necessary to ensure some “protection” for his painting arm.

A series of self-portraits shows Kirchner in his room, bent over a sheet of paper or a wood block, on which he is working with both hands to make a drawing or a woodcut. Here, the hard work of cutting the block itself becomes Kirchner's principal motif. On the Stafelalp in the summer of 1918, even before he had produced the *Self-Portrait as a Sick Man*, Kirchner made a painting that shows the kitchen of the house in dizzying perspective foreshortening that leads the eye to the door opening on to the terrace (fig. p. 54). Through the open door, we again see the Tinzenhorn. The wooden floor and the furniture exude an oppressive orange glow, and to the left we find the silhouetted form of the stove, two saucepans, and a bent stovepipe. Beside the stove, and positioned behind a table, which resembles a curious grimace as we view it end on, we then notice the grotesquely twisted silhouette of the artist sitting on a chair but eagerly bent over his work. He resembles a black beast that claws with its lame hands at the object of its momentary attention, with little strength but great effort. It is as if we had not at first noticed that black bundle in this setting: its small, grotesque, but fiercely busy occupant. Everything here seems as if made of wood and orange in tone, even the wood block with which Kirchner is so busy; and red streaks, suggestive of blood, appear on his fingers. The over-emphatic rendering of the perspective foreshortening is now suggestive of rays emanating from the head of the busy artist. The painting is itself a trace of his gestures and a hint of the radiance around the deformed figure of the convalescent, who works with a strength born of despair.

In a woodcut made in 1921 Kirchner elucidates and alters his central motif (fig. p. 69).<sup>27</sup> His face, presented frontally and placed high on the canvas, is seen alongside the paintings and sculptures that occupy the background: a beautiful nude (the inspiring muse), two lovers, and a mother and child—all images of fulfillment. The artist's left hand holds the wood block, his right hand—here shown as his right, with the viewer in mind—the graver. Kirchner is once again “in the picture.” Placed precisely beneath his figure, like an icon gazing out at us, the motif reappears, in reverse, on the block, coinciding with the picture plane. The artist observes his transformation into art as a perfectly symmetrical reversal.

In the same year the motif of the lone artist at work is explicitly located in the house *In den Lärchen Living Room* (fig. 18, p. 69).<sup>28</sup> Here, too, Kirchner is viewed



frontally; here, too, he appears dressed in a simple, but bourgeois style, and his face is a calm likeness, no longer a mask. His muse is no longer an anonymous nude, but Erna Schilling, who had been his partner since shortly after his move to Berlin in 1911 and who was to remain with him until his death. She sits on a chair, its large back decorated by Kirchner with a relief of Adam and Eve turning towards each other. Erna bends over her sewing—absorbed in this task but otherwise calmly oblivious, like the cat lying on the colorful bed.<sup>29</sup> This bed had, in fact, been carved by Kirchner for Erna, and decorated with primitivist figures of loving couples. In the background of the artist contacting his medium—and his public—there is the idyll of natural, biological love, which shelters the artist, enclosing him in calm self-assurance. In a more abstract, planar, and decorative version of this composition (Gordon 627), Kirchner stands before us, in front of his primitivistically re-fashioned ideal of partnership. Holding a brush, or perhaps a cigarette, in his left hand, he looks sideways, as if in proud self-reassurance, at this interior, which he has created, which he uses, and which is his—even including the patient woman and the observant cat, with its gaze suggestive of a sphinx-like wisdom.

Here ends the story of the autonomous hand—this mediator between the artist's mirror reflection and his effigy, between the portrait and the public. The late self-portraits repeatedly place the artist in the mythical relationship of a pair of lovers or of friends, absorbing the individual into a natural state of twosomeness. Only two of these self-portraits are present in this exhibition. In both of them Kirchner is idealizing the relationship of the couple—on one occasion in the guise of Adam and Eve, on the other in that of a meditative man and woman in the mountains (although the latter are shown in the company of Kirchner's own sculptural figures of Adam and Eve). In *Black Springtime* (fig. p. 110), the squatting female nude, placed so as to face the viewer, head resting on hand though without thereby twisting out of a frontal position, and the naked man standing to her side and bending over her, resemble two painted wooden sculptures. In

Fig. 18 The Living Room.  
Interior with Painter, 1923

Cat. 74 Self-Portrait,  
Working on a Woodcut, 1921

relation to the painting *Living Room*, the direction in which both figures look and move is reversed. There, Kirchner himself was shown looking at the viewer while the seated, bent figure of the woman served as a compositional foil; here, the man is curved around the frontality of the woman's pose. Behind the emphatic verticality of the meeting of her calves, we find the symmetrical curve of her hips. The figure of the woman, with her dark gaze, is set off against the crystalline peaks of the violet-pink mountain range rather more than is the figure of the man. The woman, allegory of nature, hardly seems to require the attention he so lovingly devotes to her. Kirchner and Erna stand like two idols in a field covered with white spring flowers. It is not the artist's gaze that strikes us as psychic and archaic but, rather, the figure of the woman. The cat and the woman represent nature. The man is but its visionary observer.

In his picture *Before Sunrise* (fig. p. 111), painted on the Wildboden between 1925 and 1926, Kirchner again shows himself together with Erna. We find him in the foreground, standing beside his partner in silent contemplation of the natural world, though with his hands now nonchalantly placed in his trouser pockets. Both look sideways down into the valley. Behind them there appear two life-size figures in *asp*, which Kirchner had carved as male and female caryatids to flank the entrance to the house *In den Lärchen*.<sup>30</sup> After moving to the Wildboden he removed the "cushions" on top of the heads on which they had initially appeared to support the rafters of the house. Now the male and the female figures, their eyes and anatomy geometrically accentuated, stood as silent gods of sexual twosomeness in front of Kirchner's new home. In the painting they accompany Kirchner and Erna as their primal images.<sup>31</sup> Everything here is twofold: the windows in the bright blue wall, the two mountain peaks. Only the cat sleeps in proverbial self-sufficiency beside the couple lost in contemplation of nature. Kirchner has finally succeeded in quelling the oppressive sense of conflict, subscribing to the myth of idealized twosomeness. To do so, he needed Erna, his one true (unloved) love.

In contradiction to what might be expected of an art historical text, I do not wish to conclude with an appreciation of the self-portraits as formal achievements, as a form of "hieroglyphics," as Kirchner himself would have put it. Instead of being tantalized by the final pictorial formulas, I tried to stage the interpretation as a movement in tune with the process of the work: the process of transforming the self into an image, and the action of the hand at the interface between the artist and his effigy. The validity of this approach lies, perhaps, in the very fact that, instead of masking the making of a portrait, Kirchner often startles us, in the works we have considered, by revealing what this activity may involve. The urge for completion replaces completion. The circles remain open, even *Before Sunrise*.