

MASI Lugano
Museo d'arte
della Svizzera italiana,
Lugano

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Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the Artists of the Rot-Blau Group

17 November 2024 – 23 March 2025

Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano
LAC venue

Curated by Cristina Sonderegger

PRESS RELEASE

Lugano, 30 October 2024

MASI presents "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the artists of the Rot-Blau group". The exhibition explores the work of one of the leading exponents of twentieth-century expressionism, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (Aschaffenburg, Germany, 1880- Davos, Switzerland, 1938).

Painter, sculptor and engraver, Kirchner was a prominent figure in the German avant-garde at the turn of the century. Together with Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, he founded the group Die Brücke (The Bridge) which sought to radically renew visual art in an anti-academic key, seeing painting as an immediate expression of the artist's inner world, conveyed in defined lines and vibrant, unnatural colours. Kirchner was one of the most important European artists to take residence in the Grisons, and his works played a key role in making the Swiss Alps known internationally.

The show in MASI, which presents ten medium and large format paintings, some of which are rarities, from prestigious public and private collections, highlights the German master's connection to Ticino and Davos. It also sets out to show the profound influence that Kirchner had on an entire generation of young Basel artists, such as Hermann Scherer, Albert Müller and Paul Camenisch, co-founders of the Rot-Blau artistic group. Created as an in-depth investigation of a theme related to the permanent exhibition of the MASI collection entitled "Sentiment and Observation", the Kirchner exhibition thus forges a dialogue with a key element of the Museum's collections, in particular the room dedicated to the works of the Rot-Blau group in the Mendrisio area.

Kirchner spent the last part of his life near Davos, having moved there from Berlin in 1917 with serious physical and mental health problems following the traumatic experience of the First World War. The period he spent in the famed tourist resort, which ended in his suicide in 1938, was to strongly influence his artistic practice: the locals and the alpine landscape proved a source of new inspiration for him. There, his painterly aesthetic opened up to brighter shades, and the gloomy scenes of city life in Berlin, its circus and cabaret shows, that characterized the previous years, made way for slices of life in the mountains - from cattle drives and peasant farmers, to trees, larch forests and the unmistakable silhouette of the Tinzenhorn. The MASI show reveals the marked

difference between the works Kirchner created during the first few years of his stay in the Swiss Alps, between 1918 and 1923, and a number of pieces from 1925-1926, when the members of the Rot-Blau group regularly gathered around their mentor. The works on display include *Bauernmittag* (Lunch of the Farmers) which was confiscated from the Kunsthalle in Hamburg by the Nazis and indicated as an example of bad art in the exhibition "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) in Munich.

As well as tracing the stylistic development of Kirchner's work, the exhibition also offers key insights into the historical and cultural milieu evoked by the individual works on display, which can be accessed through the QR codes and information sheets provided.

The exhibition

The show in MASI features ten paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner that were exhibited in two key exhibitions - the group show at the Kunsthalle in Basel in 1923 and the solo show at the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur in 1924; two exhibitions met by varying reactions from the public which nonetheless played a key role in making his work known in Switzerland. Indeed, despite his self-imposed exile and decision to live on the periphery of the local community, from Davos Kirchner continued to manage his affairs and promote his work in Switzerland and Germany. The artist himself described the change that took place in his work after he moved to Switzerland: "In the new works of the last six years, the colours have become pure and bright. It is the clear air of the mountains that has triggered this new approach to colour... The changes in form and proportions are not arbitrary, but serve to render the mental expression with breadth and depth and ensure the colours are perceived in the proportions appropriate to the expression sought", he wrote in 1921, under the pseudonym Louis de Marsalle, the art critic persona he had invented.

These elements can be seen in the work *Alpküche* (Alpine Kitchen) of 1918. Exceptionally on loan from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, the painting represents the interior of the house Kirchner rented on the Stafelalp in Frauenkirch, near Davos, from the summer of 1917. "The distorted perspective, the bright colours and the way the setting is stripped back to the bare essentials evoke certain interiors painted by Vincent van Gogh, whose expressive power and use of colour in a psychological key had made a big impression on Kirchner from a young age", the catalogue explains. In the painting, a door stands open revealing a sunlit landscape in which the outline of the Tinzenhorn can be glimpsed. This element, which recurs in Kirchner's works devoted to the Alpine landscape, is also featured in the powerful piece *Tinzenhorn – Zügenschlucht bei Monstein* (Tinzenhorn – Zügenschlucht near Monstein). Here too the depiction of an inner vision takes precedence over the naturalistic representation of the landscape: the expressive use of colour, shapes and proportions are a painterly rendering of the essence and spirituality of life in the mountains.

The pace of rural life on the Stafelalp is the subject of *Alpaufzug* (Ascent to the Alpine Pasture), one of his first large-format paintings of an alpine scene. In other works, the mountain landscape becomes a metaphor for the artist's violent inner struggles; the frequent periods of angst that plagued him throughout his life.

"...because after Hodler, Kirchner was the first painter to represent the mountains in a new way". This is how Kirchner himself sums up the last decade of his career, also celebrating his role as a mentor to a young generation of artists. Between 1924 and 1926, Hermann Scherer, Albert Müller and Paul Camenisch were fairly regular visitors to the artist's home, and the close-up view of a

tree-covered landscape, as can be seen in *Waldlandschaft mit Bach* (Landscape in a Forest with Stream), is a trope that they reworked in their own paintings.

Other works testify to Kirchner's growing interest in life in the Canton of the Grisons, and the advent of technological progress in this unspoilt natural area, as in the painting *Italienische Bahnarbeiter* (Italian Railway Workers), which portrays a group of Italian railway workers, probably employed by the Rhaetian Railway, taking a break.

As mentioned above, *Bauernmittag* (Lunch of the Farmers) is linked to a lamentable episode: it was exhibited, with a derogatory caption, along with another 32 of Kirchner's works, in the exhibition devoted to "Degenerate Art" organized by the Nazi regime in Munich in 1937. What the regime objected to was the painting's depiction of the figures, held to be caricature-like and offensive, in opposition to the idealized view of the peasant farmer – as conveying the values of a simple life in harmony with nature – that was pushed by the party's propaganda. Kirchner, who had a total of 639 works confiscated, was one of the artists most targeted by the Nazis. Greatly distressed by this turn of events, his precarious mental health deteriorated drastically, and even led to him destroying numerous works. He took his own life in his home on the Wildboden in June 1938.

"Sentiment and Observation. Art in Ticino 1850 – 1950": the MASI collection and art in Ticino.

The exhibition on Ernst Ludwig Kirchner is an in-depth exploration of a theme related to the permanent exhibition of the MASI collection entitled "Sentiment and Observation". Featuring a number of prestigious loans, it aims to show how art in Ticino – from the foundation of the federal state in 1848 up to the end of the Second World War – evolved dynamically in this specific cultural setting, and illustrate the influences from the North and the South that became established in the area. The history of the visual arts in Ticino has been shaped not only by local artists, but also by international names, collectors, art dealers and academics who have taken up residence in Ticino. The exhibition looks back over some of the key currents of the period, from Expressionism, New Objectivity and Magical Realism, casting back to Realism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and the first stirrings of Surrealism.

MASILugano

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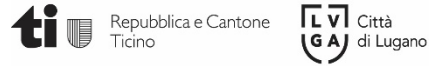
Exhibition venues

LAC
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Press images

01.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Alpküche (Alpine Kitchen)

1918

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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Madrid



02.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Das Tobel (The Ravine)

1920 ca.

Düren, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum

Fotografia: Peter Hinschläger



03.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Bauernmittag (Lunch of the Farmers)

1920

Collezione privata, Svizzera



04.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Vor Sonnenaufgang (Before Sunrise)

1925/1926

Collezione Glarner Kunstverein. Fotografia:

Urs Bachofen



05.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Waldlandschaft mit Bach

(*Landscape in a Forest with Stream*)

1925/1926

Kunsthhaus Zürich, 1950

