

**SEVEN MAJOR PAINTINGS IN ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER'S STREET SCENE SERIES SHOWN TOGETHER FOR FIRST TIME IN NEW MoMA EXHIBITION**

**The Glamour, Decadence, and Loneliness of Modern City Life Evoked in the Series, A High Point of 20<sup>th</sup>-century German Expressionism**

***Kirchner and the Berlin Street***

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

August 3–November 10, 2008

Press Preview: July 29, 2008, 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

**New York, July 29, 2008—*Kirchner and the Berlin Street*** is a focused investigation of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's (German, 1880-1938) renowned Berlin Street Scenes of 1913-1915, bringing together seven major paintings of the series, the first time these paintings have ever been shown together. With the unusual motif of the prostitute, and a visual language of jagged forms, agitated brushwork, acute perspectives, and strident color, the Street Scene paintings evoke the striking contradictions of modern city life, from nighttime glamour and excitement to loneliness, decadence, and danger. In addition, 60 works on paper examine the artist's subject matter in the Street Scene series, as well as his working process as it evolved. The exhibition draws from public and private collections in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States, providing the most comprehensive examination of the series to date. On view in the Special Exhibitions Gallery on the third floor from August 3 to November 10, 2008, the exhibition is organized by Deborah Wye, The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Chief Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books, The Museum of Modern Art. MoMA is the only venue for the exhibition.

The Street Scene series is considered not only the high point of Kirchner's career, but also a milestone in German Expressionism. Earlier, as a member of the *Brücke* (Bridge) artists' group, Kirchner rejected traditional art as it was taught in the academy, seeking instead a more natural and spontaneous freedom of expression. By late 1911, the principal artists of *Brücke* had moved from the relatively genteel city of Dresden to the teeming metropolis of Berlin, by then the third largest city in Europe, following London and Paris. In May 1913, after finding only moderate success there, and with the individual artists developing along their own paths, the *Brücke* group disbanded, after eight years of working closely together. In the fall of that same year, at a time of relative loneliness and discouragement, Kirchner began the Street Scene series with unusual resolve and ambition, moving away from the bright colors and curving lines captured in earlier works, and toward a strident palette with angular forms that conjure up the high-pitched energy and lurid atmosphere of Berlin in those years. The fact that this mood was captured on the eve of World War I contributes to the tensions embodied in these paintings.

Later, when speaking of the Street Scenes, Kirchner said: "They originated...in one of the loneliest times of my life, during which an agonizing restlessness drove me out onto the streets day and night, which were filled with people and cars."

Ms. Wye states: "Through a range of effects, these paintings present a complex view of the modern city. Created in a period of rapid change and development, they mark a distinct time not only in Kirchner's life, but also in the history of Berlin and of Germany as a whole."

To contextualize the Street Scene series, the exhibition is divided into two sections, with the seven paintings forming the centerpiece. In one area, Kirchner's working process is revealed through drawings, pastels, and prints that demonstrate Kirchner's commitment to this theme and also reveal the investigatory method he used to refine his subject and establish his artistic means. Another section focuses on Kirchner's unusual choice of the prostitute motif as his symbol for the city, through contrasting examples of his more typical cityscapes and studies of the eroticized female figure.

The seven paintings in the Berlin Street Scene Series are *Five Women on the Street* (1913), *Berlin Street Scene* (1913), *Street, Berlin* (1913), *Street Scene (Friedrichstraße in Berlin)* (1914), *Two Women on the Street* (1914), *Potsdamer Platz* (1914), and *Women on the Street* (1915). *Street, Berlin* has long been part of MoMA's collection. At first glance, it appears to simply depict elegantly dressed figures on the way to a fancy event. But the strident color and knowing glances of the female figures, with their swaying hips and syncopated steps, suggest a more illicit role. The crowds of men also add a menacing note.

In *Berlin Street Scene* (1913), two prostitutes make up the painting's center, while two men before them are viewed from behind, seemingly about to be preyed upon. The bright red lips of the male figure on the right forge a direct link to the heavily made-up women. If the male face is indeed a self-portrait of the artist—as some have argued—the figure's identification with the prostitutes is especially provocative.

With *Five Women on the Street* (1913), Kirchner has placed the prostitutes in a space that resembles a stage, relating them to dancers in a revue. Lined up rhythmically, these figures, in their proliferation, also reference the abundance of streetwalkers in Berlin at that time.

Unlike the other Street Scene paintings, where usual signs of city life are kept at the periphery, the monumental *Potsdamer Platz* (1914) is set in a recognizable spot in early-twentieth-century Berlin—specifically Potsdamer Platz, as identified by the red train station and rounded building housing a café seen in the background. The primary figures of *Potsdamer Platz*, standing on a traffic island, call to mind mannequins in store windows set on revolving platforms.

Considering the large number of works on paper related to the Street Scene paintings, it is clear that Kirchner held high ambitions for this series. In the section of the exhibition devoted to these works, one finds drawings in ink, pastel, and charcoal, along with prints and sketchbook studies that demonstrate Kirchner's probing creative process. However, none of

these works are strictly preparatory; some exhibit specific references to the paintings, while others share generalized movements or moods.

Included in the exhibition are three of Kirchner's sketchbooks (seen also in electronic versions that allow for pages to be viewed), revealing how Kirchner observed the world around him, always striving to capture his reactions with an immediacy and authenticity of feeling before returning to the studio. As he later said: "It seems as though the goal of my work has always been to dissolve myself completely into the sensations of the surroundings in order to then integrate this into a coherent painterly form." As part of his working process, Kirchner experimented with patterns of light and dark, combinations of colors, and various surface rhythms achieved through hatching pen strokes, gouges in woodblock, and scratches on etching plates.

In *Five Cocottes* (1914) and *Women on Potsdamer Platz* (1914), two woodcuts in the exhibition, Kirchner seems to closely follow the compositions of the related paintings. But in fact there are significant differences, indicating that printmaking, like drawing, could play an experimental role in Kirchner's evolving imagery.

Kirchner also explored thematic concerns in these works on paper. In one pastel and charcoal, *Berlin Street Scene* (1914), the central female figure is accompanied by a male, while in the painting of the same scene, the male figure is almost fully obscured behind what looks like a lamppost. Instead, the woman has been joined by companions, all striding forward and implying a kind of solidarity among those who prowled the streets of nighttime Berlin.

Throughout Kirchner's career, female figures with erotic overtones were among his primary motifs, and vistas of cities also appear frequently. One section of the exhibition explores these subjects, in works from the years leading up to and including the period of the Street Scenes, in an effort to highlight the contrasting approach he used in the paintings.

Kirchner's representations of the city usually depicted buildings, bridges, and monuments, with people barely noted. Many hint at his prior architectural training. One exception is the painting in MoMA's collection entitled, *Street, Dresden* (1908/19), created during Kirchner's early years as part of the *Brücke* artists' group. Its bright colors and spontaneous strokes capture the spirit of shoppers at midday, in contrast to the lurid atmosphere of nighttime Berlin found in the street scenes.

For Kirchner, and the artists of the *Brücke* group, the female nude was considered a fundamental building block of art. However, they rebelled against the traditional, idealized conception of the body, fostering instead a more open and intimate relationship to nudity. In *Bather with Hat* (1913), for example, the way in which Kirchner pictures the torque of the body and sway of the hips in the central figure expresses an unrestrained sexuality. When the artists turned their attention to cabaret dancers in the nightspots of the city, it was also in search of an authentic vitality. Kirchner captured a raw and energized emotion through the movements of the dancers' bodies and their exotic costumes. The vivid eroticism revealed in such work differs

from Kirchner's interpretation of the prostitute in his Berlin Street Scenes, where allure is coupled with alienation, and the "women of the night" come to symbolize life in the modern city.

**SPONSORSHIP:**

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The symposium is supported by The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

**PUBLICATION:**

*Kirchner and the Berlin Street* is the most extensive consideration of Kirchner's Street Scene paintings in English, a richly illustrated volume with an essay by Ms. Wye that examines the series through contrasting motifs in the artist's oeuvre, as well as his creative process. The book is distributed to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada and through Thames + Hudson outside North America. It will be available in August 2008 at MoMA Stores and online at [www.momastore.org](http://www.momastore.org). Clothbound. 9 x 10 ¾ in.; 138 pages; 135 color illustrations. Price: \$35.00.

**PUBLIC PROGRAMS:**

**Kirchner Symposium**

October 17, 2008

A symposium including international scholars will offer new insights on Kirchner's defining Street Scene series. The symposium will include brief, illustrated papers, as well as a discussion moderated by **Deborah Wye**. Participants include **Charles W. Haxthausen**, Robert Sterling Clark Professor of Art History, Williams College; **Katharina Henkel**, Curator, Kunsthalle Emden; **Jill Lloyd**, independent writer and curator; **Sherwin Simmons**, Professor of Twentieth Century Art and Design, Department of Art History, University of Oregon; **Katharina Sykora**, Professor, Department of Art History and Media Studies, Braunschweig University of Arts, Germany; among others.

Tickets (\$10; members \$8; students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5) can be purchased at the lobby information desk, the film desk, or online at [www.moma.org/thinkmodern](http://www.moma.org/thinkmodern).

**MoMA AUDIO:**

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum will offer a MoMA Audio program including commentary by Ms. Wye and quotations from the artist. MoMA Audio is also available for download on [www.moma.org/audio](http://www.moma.org/audio) and as a podcast on iTunes. MoMA audio is available free of charge courtesy of Bloomberg.

**MoMA WEBSITE:**

An online exhibition will provide an interactive presentation of the seven Street Scene paintings and related works. The site sets the series in historical and visual context and navigational tools allow for enhanced viewing beyond the gallery setting. Three of Kirchner's sketchbooks will be animated, illuminating the artist's working process. The site will launch August 3, 2008. [www.moma.org/kirchner](http://www.moma.org/kirchner)

**MoMA THURSDAY NIGHTS:**

During July and August, the Museum is open to the public until 8:45 p.m. giving visitors an extended opportunity to see MoMA's renowned collection and to visit special exhibitions such as *Kirchner and the Berlin Street*. Regular museum admission applies.

**PRESS PREVIEW:**

Tuesday, July 29, 2008, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Remarks at 11:00 a.m.

RSVP: 212-708-9401 or [pressoffice@moma.org](mailto:pressoffice@moma.org)

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For high resolution images, please register on our press office Web site: [www.moma.org/press](http://www.moma.org/press).

**Public Information:**

**The Museum of Modern Art**, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

**Hours:** Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m.  
Closed Tuesday.

**During July and August, the Museum is open to the public until 8:45 p.m. on Thursdays.**

The public may call 212/708-9400 for detailed Museum information. Visit us on the Web at [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).