

## Kirchner in America: Building a Legacy Through the 1968 Retrospective Exhibition

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Donald E. Gordon (1931-1984) was a German Expressionist art historian and professor at the University of Pittsburgh. During his career, he published several books and essays pertaining to modern art and expressionism, especially the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Along with Thomas Maythem of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and James Demetrian of the Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum), Gordon was the main advocate and planner for an exhibition of Kirchner's art in 1968 and 1969. This was the first touring exhibit of his work in the United States. With the financial support of the German government, the exhibition included over 100 artworks and made a significant impact on art critics, cultural connoisseurs, and the general public. But how did this exhibit build Kirchner's, and more broadly German Expressionism's, reputation in America? How did Gordon's expertise help build Kirchner's reputation, and vice versa? The selection of Kirchner over other German artists was, in at least one way, a safe choice, especially for the German government. Kirchner's imagery was decidedly anti-war in its content, but his death before the start of World War II also allowed accounts of his work to avoid associations with the rise of the Nazi regime. .

The 1968-1969 retrospective exhibition was then the single largest display of Kirchner's work in the United States, and remains one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of his work ever held. With 148 oil paintings, watercolors, sketches, lithographs, prints, sculptures, and more, the exhibit was a grand commemoration of Kirchner's legacy.<sup>1</sup> Especially since the show was strategically planned to take place on the 30th anniversary of his death, this wide array of

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Gordon. "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: A retrospective exhibition." (1968)

artworks by the German Expressionist served as a powerful tribute to his career. These works came from a variety of sources including private lenders and museum collections, the organizers amassed a truly representative variety of Kirchner's life work. The Kirchner retrospective was also significant because it was the first traveling exhibit of the artist's work in the United States. Three museums hosted the traveling show: the Pasadena Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Seattle Art Museum.

James Demetrian, director of the Pasadena Art Museum, seems to have been the initiator of this exhibition. On July 27, 1964, Demetrian sent a letter to Dr. Donald Gordon asking if he would be interested in working on an Expressionist exhibit. Gordon's "interest in Kirchner recently came into our attention... and since thoughts about a major Kirchner exhibition recently come into the back of our collective mind, I would like to know if you are planning such an exhibition or know of one."<sup>2</sup> Gordon was eager to collaborate with Demetrian on this project and began reaching out to other museums to garner interest. After receiving firm but supportive "no's" from the Guggenheim and MoMA, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston joined the project in April 1965. Thomas Maytham, the assistant at the Museum of Fine Arts, later relocated to the Seattle Art Museum and agreed to program the exhibit there as well. While the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and Seattle Art Museum were important and established local museums, although without the profiles of New York institutions, the only-recently opened Pasadena Art Museum was founded with four hundred German Expressionist paintings in its collection, before Demetrian's tenure as director. This unique combination of personalities and museums created the perfect environment for an exhibit of an experimental, anti-war German artist.

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<sup>2</sup> James Demetrian. Letter to Donald Gordon starting exhibit. July 27, 1964. Donald Gordon Archives.

It is worth noting that 1969 was only two decades after the end of WWII; many Americans still associated the German government with a ruthless Nazi regime responsible for the death of millions of people. But a solo exhibit on an artist who was deemed a “degenerate” by the fascist government represented an attractive outlet for the German government to redeem itself in the United States. The perception of a doom-and-gloom Germany could be flipped to one of experimentation, fluidity, and creativity - much like the United States in the 1960s. Given this context, Donald Gordon, along with Charles Millard at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, sought to involve the German government in the exhibit planning process. This unsurprisingly turned out to be a logistical nightmare. Millard, who had served as the point of contact between Gordon and the German embassy, dropped out of the exhibit in April 1967. He then admitted that “the recent trend of my talks with the German embassy” would have to be passed on to the next museum which agrees to take on the project, which turned out to be the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.<sup>3</sup> After receiving a “no” from the Embassy after Millard’s last correspondence, Thomas Maytham received some good news in November 1967. He happily reported that “the German Foreign Officials [were] apparently reconsidering some kind of financial and hopefully administrative subsidisation [sic] of the KIRCHNER show.”<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, special thanks were given to the German government for “its sponsorship of the exhibition and financial support of its cost” in the exhibition catalog.

Why would the German government take such an interest in the Kirchner exhibit? Even though it is the largest exhibition of his work done in the United States, Kirchner was just one of the many artists to have their work shown across the pond. There were a couple of reasons that would

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Millard. Letter to Donald Gordon about withdrawing. April 19, 1967. Donald Gordon Archives.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Maythem. Letter to Donald Gordon about the German Embassy. November 20, 1967. Donald Gordon Archives.

place Kirchner as a new face for the German cultural scene. The first reason was that Kirchner was firmly anti-war. After training as an artillery driver in 1915, Kirchner suffered a “physical and nervous collapse,” landing him back in his studio by October.<sup>5</sup> While his health recovered in the 1920s, the threat of another looming war led him to contract “several severe illnesses” around 1935.<sup>6</sup> With the rise of the Nazi party, his art was branded “degenerate,” being portrayed in exhibitions throughout 1938 to represent the ills of German society. Living in Switzerland at the time, Kirchner feared imminent invasion by the Nazi government and took his own life on June 15th, 1938.<sup>7</sup> Not only did Kirchner die before the “start” of WWII in 1939, but he was also considered to be, in his life, the antithesis of the Nazi government. This idea of “degenerate” art was attractive to Americans during and after WWII.<sup>8</sup> Seeing the previous trend with German Expressionist art and having the opportunity to sponsor an exhibit from an artist who was “innocent” of the horrors of the war, it is no surprise that the German government was eager to support the retrospective exhibit on Kirchner. Financially supporting the work of an anti-war artist once branded a “degenerate” by the country’s previous government allowed Germany, I would suggest, an opportunity to rebrand itself as a new, anti-Nazi state, starting with putting its name alongside Kirchner in support instead of in dismay. And so, the largest exhibit of Kirchner’s work in America now had the German stamp of approval. This ethos of experimentation and anti-war sentiment blended well with the politics of the American 1960s, providing an effective context for cultural diplomacy to advance.

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<sup>5</sup> Donald Gordon. “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: A retrospective exhibition.” (1968) p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 32

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 32

<sup>8</sup> For further reading on this subject, refer to Pamela Kort’s essay “The Myths of German Expressionism in America” in *New Worlds: German and Austrian Art, 1890-1940*. (2001) p. 260-293.

The fact that the largest exhibit on Kirchner's work indelibly connected his work with the politics of the 1960s ensured that his work was associated with that decade's progressive legacies. It is also notable that this exhibition occurred in the shadow of widespread anti-Vietnam protest, with Gordon himself being anti-war.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition also left an important mark on the careers of its organizers, especially Thomas Maythem and Dr. Donald Gordon. Even at James Demetrian's own Pasadena Art Museum, curatorial credits are given to "Thomas Maythem, associate director at the Seattle Art Museum, and... Prof. Donald E. Gordon of Dickinson College."<sup>10</sup> What led these two individuals to be recognized as the drivers of this show was the exhibit catalogue. This all-powerful document, with its preface written by Maythem and the chronology by Gordon, immediately cements these two figures as central to the exhibition organization process. A 1968 listing in *Art Journal* lists John Maythem as the main organizer of "what will be the most important survey of the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner ever to be seen in America."<sup>11</sup> Surely, this is a hefty role to fill, especially when mentioned in a publication as prestigious in art critical circles as *Art Journal*.

While most reviews of the exhibit and its respective catalogues were overwhelmingly positive, there was also some controversy - sometimes from the very same critics. Hilton Kramer's December 1969 book review section praised Gordon for writing "with an attention to visual detail rare among writers in Expressionist painting," but only a few months before had written an editorial criticized Gordon for this same "refreshing formal analysis." Per Kramer, the quality that validates German expressionism as a legitimate field of study is not the formal qualities of the work, but the social context in which it was made. The popularity of German expressionism

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<sup>9</sup> "Silent no more." *The Pittsburgh Press*, May 14, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> "Art News." *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome A. Donson. "College Art News." *Art Journal* 28. no. 1. (1968) p. 114.

in the United States did, after all, start with the interest in seeing what the Nazi regime deemed “degenerate.” Kramer states that the “Expressionist impulse, with its romantic yearnings, its highly critical outlook on art and society, and its contradictory attitude towards modern life” are the facets that merit academic study in regards to German expressionism, not the actual artwork.<sup>12</sup> He even goes as far as to say that “Kirchner is not, I think, a great artist.”<sup>13</sup> Donald Gordon built the exhibit catalog with a nuanced perspective. He wove the social context of the time with the formal evolution of Kirchner’s work, but Kramer was not impressed. In response to reading the exhibit catalogue, Kramer states “Professor Gordon is so anxious to legitimize Kirchner in formal pictorial terms that he manages to overlook the real strengths of this interesting artist - strengths that have little to do with disquisitions on ‘the absolute primacy of the picture plane.’”<sup>14</sup> But what perspective is Kramer coming from in this argument? He even states himself that “the art of the German Expressionists nowadays receives little serious attention.” The minimal scholarly work that has analyzed German Expressionist art has, in fact, taken Kramer’s approach. These early works were largely focused on the sociopolitical context of Germany in the early 20th century, not exactly the formal qualities of the art. Gordon’s introduction of composition was not only unfamiliar to Kramer, but contradicted the few works he had come into contact with. While he is quick to criticize Gordon in “E. L. Kirchner: Art vs. Life,” he must have taken Gordon’s novel approach to heart by the time his recommendation came out in December. Donald E. Gordon’s work and the perspective of the retrospective exhibit not only made headlines in the New York Times, but were persuasive enough to make their critics change their minds.

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<sup>12</sup> Hilton Kramer. “E. L. Kirchner: Art Vs. Life.” New York Times, April 6, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

Bearing all this in mind, how did the 1968 retrospective exhibit impact Kirchner's legacy as an artist? Let's begin by looking at digitized newspapers published before and after the exhibit. From 1965 to 1967, during the planning phase of the exhibit, only German language publications in the United States mentioned Kirchner by name.<sup>15</sup> Of the nine publications that mention Kirchner over these years, seven were published in Omaha, Nebraska. At this point, Kirchner was only reaching a limited, German-speaking (likely Nebraskan!) segment of the American general public. But what about after 1969? From 1970 to 1973, Kirchner coverage is seen in Missouri, Wisconsin, New York, Michigan, Maine, Ohio, New Hampshire, Iowa, and Maryland - in English! And in the arts section of newspapers across the country, including the *New York Times*. The immediate aftermath of the exhibit placed Kirchner in the circles of the American public, rather than just in a few foreign-language publications. The result of this press attention, I would argue, is that Kirchner received a place among the canon of esteemed Expressionist artists in art historical sources too. With Gordon at the forefront of this effort to establish his reputation, Kirchner's life and work became the subject of many an essay in esteemed art journals. While the retrospective exhibition was certainly not the first display of Kirchner's work in America, its political backing, skilled planning, wide array of art objects, and diversity of museums involved all contributed to bringing Kirchner into the canon.

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<sup>15</sup>With the Baltimore Sun being the only exception, in Carolyn Taylor's article "A Curator's Method of Art Display," August 18, 1966.

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