

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **THE MYSTERIES OF MATERIAL. KIRCHNER, HECKEL AND SCHMIDT-ROTTLUFF**

**26 June to 13 October 2019**

**#geheimnisdermaterie #staedel**

**Frankfurt am Main, 16 May 2019.** From 26 June to 13 October, in the exhibition “The Mysteries of Material: Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff”, the Städel Museum will explore the reciprocal relationships between woodcut and wooden sculpture in the oeuvres of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Erich Heckel (1883–1970) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976). What the two very different artistic mediums have in common is wood, the material intimately linked with the art of German Expressionism. The three co-founders of the “Brücke” artists’ group became involved with this material by way of the woodcut – a printmaking method in which a relief is cut into a wooden board or block. What appealed to Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff was the great experimental potential of this printing technique, as well as the work with the material. Engagement with the characteristics of various wood types as well as with technique was a recurring concern in the three artists’ oeuvres. What is more, they were the only representatives of the “Brücke” to engage in the art of wood sculpture intensively and over a lengthy period. At around the same time they produced their early woodcuts, they also carved their first sculptures, which influenced the woodcuts with regard to both form and content – and vice versa.

In the exhibition “The Mysteries of Material: Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff”, the Städel is uniting 98 woodcuts, 12 sculptures and 5 printing blocks. A large proportion of the works are from the Carl Hagemann collection in the museum’s own holdings, supplemented in places by loans from the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Brücke-Museum Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna as well as examples from private collections and the Erich Heckel estate in Hemmenhofen.

“The onetime private collection of Carl Hagemann forms the core of the Städel Museum’s exceptionally rich Expressionist art holdings. That collection was generously dedicated to the Städtisches Kunstinstitut in 1948 as a gift and has been expanded consistently to this day. The Städel Museum is one of the most important museum centres worldwide for experiencing Expressionist works on paper in the

**Städtisches Kunstinstitut  
und Städtische Galerie**

Dürerstraße 2  
60596 Frankfurt am Main  
Phone +49(0)69-605098-268  
Fax +49(0)69-605098-111  
presse@staedelmuseum.de  
www.staedelmuseum.de

PRESS DOWNLOADS AT  
newsroom.staedelmuseum.en

PRESS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS  
Pamela Rohde  
Phone +49(0)69-605098-170  
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188  
rohde@staedelmuseum.de

Franziska von Plocki  
Phone +49(0)69-605098-268  
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188  
plocki@staedelmuseum.de

Theresa Franke  
Phone +49(0)69-605098-212  
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188  
franke@staedelmuseum.de

highest quality and concentration. It is among our most urgent priorities not only to investigate these precious holdings comprehensively with regard to provenance, but also to study them from different perspectives and make them accessible to the public again and again”, Städel Director Philipp Demandt comments.

“Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff strove for artistic renewal, for more authenticity and immediacy. Within this process, the natural material wood played a catalytic role. The three artists created their woodcuts quite deliberately in dialogue with the material and ‘peeled’ their sculptures ‘out’ of tree trunks, in some cases ones they had found themselves in nature. The great ‘Brücke’ patroness Rosa Schapire aptly remarked that the ‘Brücke’ artists were never concerned only with the visible world, but also with the mysteries of material. In their woodcuts and sculptures, these mysteries make themselves felt especially in those cases where the structures and special qualities of the wood become part of the artistic composition”, explains Regina Freyberger, the exhibition curator and Head of the Städel Department of Prints and Drawings from 1750.

### **Introduction to the exhibition**

Woodcut takes a central position within the printmaking work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. The oldest technique for the production of graphic images, the woodcut is a relief printing process in which the composition is cut out of a wooden board, literally in the manner of a relief. This depiction is then coloured and printed on a sheet of paper by hand or with the aid of a press. After the paper is removed from the printing block, the elevated areas of the depiction – to which the colour has been applied – appear on the paper in mirror image. With the help of several printing blocks, which can also be sawn in pieces, it is possible to print different colours next to and on top of one another.

The earliest Kirchner woodcuts that have come down to us date from the year 1904. Heckel had already cut various small landscape motifs in wood back in his school days around 1903, and at approximately the same time Schmidt-Rottluff made individual woodcut bookplates for friends and fellow students. After the three young architecture students founded the artists’ group “Brücke” in Dresden in 1905 along with Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966), the woodcut became their preferred artistic medium – from 1906 onwards once a year they sent out a selection of woodcuts in a portfolio to the passive members of the “Brücke”, as a token of thanks and for maintaining contacts. The exhibition shows an example with *Cover of the IVth annual portfolio of the “Brücke”* by Kirchner (1910). They were drawn to it not as a means of reproduction, but as a specific printing technique with possibilities and limitations.

They therefore usually produced their prints themselves, making only a few copies of each. In the years 1905 and 1906 alone, Kirchner executed over 80 woodcuts and Heckel more than 60. Schmidt-Rottluff, for his part, did not begin working in woodcut on a broader scale until 1909. It was also around 1906 that small carved figures also began to emerge from the artists' intense engagement with the material: here Erich Heckel led the way, and Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff followed suit just a few years later.

With their curved contours and smoothed surfaces, the early woodcuts – for example *Male Figure on a Mountain (Longing)* from the series *Two People* (1905) – still exhibits the influence of Art Nouveau. By 1908/09 at the latest, the wood had begun to 'speak' ever more distinctly in the prints. In the process of cutting the wood, the artists now made increasingly conscious use of the resistance it offered to sharpen their personal modes of expression. They usually took the knife to the wood without a detailed preliminary drawing, and they experimented with various wood types. The paper itself also played a key role, especially for Kirchner and Heckel. The sculptures reveal a similar approach to the material. The asymmetrical shape of the trunk, the surface irregularities, grain, changing hues and varying degrees of hardness all made their mark on the creative process. The exhibition begins by illuminating this dialogue with the material that distinguishes particularly the early "Brücke" phase in Dresden and ultimately formed the point of departure for the three artists' entire further artistic production. In the following rooms, it concentrates on each of the three individually so as to retrace their respective handling of the material and the woodcut from the "Brücke" period to the 1920s/'30s.

### **Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff**

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938)** constantly confronted himself with new challenges as an artist. In woodcut, for example, his formal language ranges from radical simplification to the utmost differentiation. He tested the limits and possibilities of the technique particularly in his colour woodcuts. There he worked with several printing blocks – some sawn in several pieces –, varied the printing sequence and thus arrived at ever-new colour combinations. What is more, he often applied the printing ink not with a roller but with a brush, whose singular strokes make every print a unicum.

Like Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner found his motifs in his immediate surroundings. One recurring theme was the human being, usually in movement. In the act of carving wooden sculptures, he explored the body in its volumes, in woodcut the simplification of form. Works such as Kirchner's *Bathing Women (Moritzburg)*

(1909) and Heckel's *Reclining Woman* (1909), for instance, show how the artists depicted their models in rather incidental poses – out of doors, lying on blankets in the studio, sitting on stools, dancing or chatting. Another key work in the show is Kirchner's *Schlemihl* woodcut cycle. During World War I, the artist came to regard the fairy-tale-like story *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* ("Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story"; 1813) by Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838) as a parable of his own loss of identity. He had been released from the military in 1915 and executed this autobiographical interpretation of the story the same year. Owing to its intensity as well as the technical and compositional interlocking of form and colour, Kirchner's *Peter Schlemihl* is a masterpiece of Expressionism.

A similarly masterful mastery of form and color can also be seen in his sheet *Fights (Torments of Love)* (1915).

**Erich Heckel (1883–1970)** is considered the poet and introvert among the "Brücke" artists. He taught himself the techniques of woodcut and wooden sculpture and engaged in searching dialogue with that natural material for nearly fifteen years. He tested the properties of different wood types and the means of working with them. Making use of the resistance offered by the wood, he developed a bold two-dimensionality in his prints; this he combined with vivid colour contrasts. His move to Berlin 1911 brought about a transformation from this life-affirming style to a sensitive brand of Expressionism. To a greater degree than in his woodcuts, for example *White Horses* (1912), the natural shape of the wood governed his expression in the sculpture medium. In the exhibition, the figure *Woman Standing While Resting Her Chin* (1912) impressively illustrates this phenomenon.

In his artistic work, **Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976)** was in constant pursuit of the elementary and existential. He sought to give shape to the feelings sparked in him by what he saw or experienced, and to translate it into universal expression. In woodcut the artist worked almost exclusively in black and white. His chief concern in this medium was a strongly simplified formal language. To that end, he deliberately integrated the grain of the wood as a compositional device in its own right, as seen in the print *Heads I* (1911). In some cases, he reworked his printing blocks as reliefs or, later, sawed them down to the shape of the printing motif, virtually in the manner of a stamp. With regard to both content and form, the wooden block, the woodcut and wooden sculpture were thus closely interrelated and interdependent in his work. This is nowhere more evident than in the distorted faces and heads he produced in the years during and after World War I, such as his *Self-Portrait* of 1919.

**The Mysteries of Material. Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff**

**Exhibition dates:** 26 June – 13 October 2019, Exhibition Annex

**Curator:** Dr Regina Freyberger, Head of the Department of Prints and Drawings from 1750, Städel Museum

**Location:** Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

**Information:** [www.staedelmuseum.de](http://www.staedelmuseum.de)

**Visitor services and guided tours:** +49(0)69-605098-200, [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

**Opening hours:** Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun + holidays 10.00 am – 6.00 pm, Thu + Fri 10.00 am – 9.00 pm, closed Mondays

**Special opening hours:** Sun, 9 June 2019 10.00 am–6.00 pm, Mon, 10 June 2019 10.00 am–6.00 pm, Thu, 20 June 2019 10.00 am–6.00 pm, Thu, 3 October 10.00 am–6.00 pm, Fri, 23 August 2019, 10.00 am–9.00 pm, Sat 24 August 2019, 10.00 am–10.00 pm, Sun 25 August 2019, 10.00 am–8.00pm

**Admission:** Sat, Sun + holidays 16 EUR, reduced 14 EUR; Tue – Fri 14 EUR, reduced 12 EUR; families 24 EUR; admission free for children under 12; groups of at least 10 persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

**Advance ticket sales online at:** [shop.staedelmuseum.de](http://shop.staedelmuseum.de)

**General guided tours of the exhibition:** Tue 3.00 pm, Thu 6.45 pm (except Thu, 3 October, on which day the tour will take place at 4.00 pm) and Sun 2.00 pm. The tour is included in the admission fee.

**Catalogue:** A catalogue edited by Regina Freyberger and published by the Sandstein Verlag will accompany the exhibition. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and contributions by Alexander Eiling, Regina Freyberger, Theresa Nisters, Sabine Protze, Iris Schmeisser and Ruth Schmutzler. In German, 296 pages, 34.90 EUR (museum edition)

**Social Media:** The Städel Museum is communicating the exhibition on social media with the hashtags [#geheimnisdermaterie](#) and [#staedel](#)