

WALL TEXTS

THE MYSTERIES OF MATERIAL. KIRCHNER, HECKEL AND SCHMIDT-ROTLUFF

26 June to 13 October 2019

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No material bears as close a connection to the art of German Expressionism as wood. Nor is there anything more “Brücke” than woodcut. In this printing technique, the artist cuts the depiction into wood in the manner of a relief. The pictorial idea is conveyed as an impression of a virtually sculptural act.

The three co-founders of the *Brücke* – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Erich Heckel (1883–1970) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976) were particularly drawn to the woodcut technique because of its experimental potential. In search of new art forms and primal experiences of life, they turned their attention to pre-industrial cultures in and outside of Europe – and to the natural material wood. They appreciated its irregular growth as well as the resistance and hardness that demand great simplification of form. It was in this context that the *Brücke*’s early woodcuts came about, as well as the group’s first sculptures. In their work, the two mediums are closely related both formally and with regard to content.

Taking the Städel Museum’s rich collection of Carl Hagemann (1867–1940) as its point of departure, the exhibition examines the special characteristics of woodcut as well as the interplay between printmaking, sculpture and the material wood.

WOODCUT

Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff had all already produced woodcuts early on. Yet it was not until they had founded the *Brücke* artists’ group in Dresden in the summer of 1905 that, in the process of working with the material, they began to develop a formal language of their own. Often without a precise preliminary drawing, they cut into the wood with a knife or other tool and deliberately left the traces of the working process – as well as the grain of the wood – visible as part of the artwork.

This approach corresponded to the demand for “immediate and genuine” creativity with which the *Brücke* artists not only rebelled against the official art world and established art currents, but also hoped to bring about a change of disposition throughout society. Against this background, woodcut became the most important medium of their

advertising efforts and their exhibitions. Yet even long after the group had disbanded in 1913, woodcut remained one of the key printmaking mediums in the *œuvres* of Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff.

WOODEN SCULPTURE

At around the time they began working with woodcut – and in close connection to that medium –, Heckel, Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff also took an interest in sculpture. Neither stone, plaster nor bronze became their preferred material, but wood. Again and again, they made use of the natural forms that had come about by chance in the growth process, and “peeled [the figure] out” of the trunk (Kirchner). They abstained from polishing the surfaces, and even when they painted their sculptures, the traces of their work remained clearly recognizable as a ‘creative fingerprint’.

Owing to the confiscations carried out in 1937 within the context of the “Degenerate Art” campaign, but also as a consequence of World War II, only few examples of the three artists’ once rich sculptural *œuvres* have come down to us.

KIRCHNER, HECKEL, SCHMIDT-ROTTLUFF, BRÜCKE AND THE STÄDEL MUSEUM

- 1905 On 7 June, the architecture students Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Karl Schmidt from Rottluff found the artists’ group Die Brücke (“The Bridge”) in Dresden with their fellow student Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966).
- 1906 Further artists are admitted to Brücke. The group publishes its first annual portfolio containing woodcuts for the ‘passive’ members.
The first Brücke exhibition featuring only woodcuts opens in Dresden.
Heckel carves his first wooden sculptures.
- 1908 In September Die Brücke exhibit their works at the Kunstsalon Richter in Dresden and, for the first time, advertise the event with a poster in the woodcut medium.
- 1909 Kirchner makes his first sculptures and carvings.
- ca. 1910 Carl Hagemann (1867–1940) begins collecting Expressionist art.
- 1911 Schmidt-Rottluff carves his first wooden relief.
Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel move to Berlin. Kirchner destroys most of his woodcut printing blocks before the move.
- 1913 The artist friends quarrel over the Brücke Chronik written by Kirchner.
27 May: The artist group disbands. From this time forward, Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff go separate ways.
The first woodcut by Heckel is purchased for the Städtische Galerie which, founded only a few years earlier, is affiliated with the Städel

- Museum. In the years that follow, works by Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff likewise enter the holdings.
- 1914 Outbreak of World War I
 - 1915 Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff and Kirchner report for military service. Kirchner suffers a mental and physical breakdown.
Carl Hagemann begins lively correspondence with Heckel and Kirchner.
 - 1917 Kirchner moves to Switzerland.
 - 1918 Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff return to Berlin after the war.
Carl Hagemann decides to collect Schmidt-Rottluff's printmaking oeuvre in its entirety. They correspond by letter from this time onward.
 - 1933 The National Socialists come to power.
The first defamatory exhibitions of "degenerate art" take place in various cities of Germany. The Brücke artists are among those targeted.
 - 1937 Within the framework of the "degenerate art" confiscation campaign, the Städtische Galerie – and with it the Städel Museum – loses nearly its entire collection of Expressionist printmaking.
 - 1938 Kirchner commits suicide in Frauenkirch, Switzerland.
 - 1939 Outbreak of World War II
 - 1940 Carl Hagemann dies in an accident. His collection survives the war thanks to the efforts of Ernst Holzinger (1901–1972), the director of the Städtisches Kunstinstitut.
 - 1941 Schmidt-Rottluff is prohibited from practising his profession.
 - 1943 Schmidt-Rottluff's Berlin studio is destroyed, and with it numerous sculptures. The woodcut blocks in the cellar remain unharmed.
 - 1944 Heckel's Berlin studio is destroyed along with nearly all his printing blocks and several wooden sculptures.
 - 1948 Hagemann's heirs donate nearly all of the works on paper in his collection to the Städtisches Kunstinstitut. Since then the holdings have been expanded by means of targeted purchases.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner constantly presented himself new challenges as an artist. No sooner had he found a mode of expression than he also questioned it. He saw printmaking as a means of "attaining new forms". In woodcut, for example, his formal language ranges from radical simplification to the utmost differentiation. With great mastery, 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 lively

strokes make every print a unicum. In general, he printed his woodcuts by hand or on his own press, producing only a few copies from a given block.

Like Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff, Kirchner found his motifs in his immediate surroundings. One recurring theme was the human being, usually in movement. He approached it from different mediums, as he also did his other artistic concerns. In carved wooden sculpture, he explored the body in its volumes, in woodcut the simplification of its form. The mediums were thus in constant interplay in his working process.

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER'S *PETER SCHLEMIHL*

During World War I, Kirchner 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 executed the *Schlemihl* cycle – his boldly autobiographical interpretation of the tale – the same year he was released from the military. The deeply self-reflective nature of the series may account for the fact that he printed only five complete copies of it and distributed them exclusively to close friends.

Kirchner's *Peter Schlemihl* cycle is one of the masterworks of Expressionism. As was the case with *Cocotte on the Street*, the artist printed the six sheets from two wooden blocks each, in part sawn in pieces and usually coloured with a brush in the manner of a monotype. Closely mirroring the contents of the story, the colour zones depart more and more from the outlines of the drawing block until the composition is composed entirely of colour. In the last print, the shadow has a shape more solid than that of Schlemihl, who has begun to dissolve.

In Chamisso's tale, Schlemihl exchanges his shadow for inexhaustible wealth, but as a result becomes an outsider to society. Kirchner read the tale as that of a "persecution paranoiac" who sells his "innermost attribute", his shadow (print 1). He falls in love (2), but his love remains unfulfilled (3) and he is moreover ostracized from society (4). On a country road, Schlemihl encounters the little grey man to whom he has once sold his shadow, but the transaction can no longer be undone (5). Downcast, Schlemihl wanders the countryside and unexpectedly meets his shadow, but does not succeed in fixing it to his soles again (6). In the end, Chamisso has his protagonist roaming the world in seven-league boots – a conciliatory motif Kirchner was incapable of visualizing.

ERICH HECKEL

Erich Heckel is considered the poet and introvert among the *Brücke* artists. He taught himself the techniques of woodcut and wooden sculpture and engaged in intense 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, which usually also feature strong colour contrasts. His move to Berlin brought about a transformation from this vehement, life-affirming style to a rich, angular, but nevertheless sensitive Expressionism. A certain scepticism, internalization, even sorrow characterize his woodcuts and wooden sculptures alike. On the other hand, the natural shape of the wood governed his sculptural expression far more than it did his printmaking works. In 1914, Heckel wrote in a questionnaire: "The unknown and the unwanted are the source of artistic energy."

KARL SCHMIDT-ROTTLUFF

In his artistic work, Schmidt-Rottluff 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. From 1911 onward, he carried out this endeavour primarily in woodcut, which was to dominate his printmaking oeuvre for nearly twenty years. In this medium, the artist worked almost exclusively in black and white. His chief concern was a strongly simplified formal language and he hardly experimented with colour or coloured paper. Instead, he deliberately integrated the grain of the wood as a compositional device in its own right, especially in 1911/12. In some cases, he later reworked his printing blocks as reliefs, sawing them down to the shape of the printing motif. With regard to both content and formal expression, the wooden block, the woodcut and wooden sculpture were closely interrelated and interdependent in his work. This is nowhere more evident than in the mask-like faces and heads he produced during World War I.