

PHYSICAL EXERCISE AND SPORT IN THE WORKS OF ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER

Expressionist Painter and Graphic Artist

by KURT GRASSHOFF

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), the "Brücke" painter, the Berlin National Gallery (State museums, Prussian Cultural Heritage Institute, FRG) organised a major commemorative exhibition in the form of a retrospective review. After Berlin, the exhibition travelled to Cologne, Munich and Zurich. The extremely comprehensive catalogue prepared for the exhibition indicated that the artist had shown an active interest in bathing as an element of free bodily development, in expressionist dancing and in gymnastics, as well as in various forms of physical exercise, games and sports. During the first third of the twentieth century these subjects took on increasing importance in the social life of the circles in which he moved in Germany and in Switzerland and inspired him to draw on them to find subjects for his pictures. Examples given in the catalogue lead one to explore the question of to what extent and in what way Kirchner came to grips with these subjects and to consider what links there were between his own life style and his works devoted to physical exercise, sport and related forms of movement.

On the basis of recent art writings on the subject of Kirchner, a specific catalogue of works entitled "Movements drawn from sport and related fields in the works of the expressionist painter and graphic artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner" has been compiled. It lists the works of the artist containing movement motifs drawn from the circus and the music-hall, from expressionist (or artistic) dancing, from free bodily development and bathing and from recreational and competitive sport which can be identified from the writings mentioned. Over 200 of his works derive their motifs from these fields; some 100 of them relate to sports. Gabler has estimated that the complete list of Kirchner's works would include some 20,000 items. Since a complete catalogue has not yet been established, it may well be that there are still many works buried in the archives of the Kirchner foundation which illustrate the views of the artist about sport.

Of the works by Kirchner which represent subjects drawn from recreational or competitive sport, some 30 are large paintings; all the others are drawings or prints (especially woodcuts). This article is primarily concerned with those works representing sports subjects.

One element of the Expressionist programme was the representation of individuals in

movement. In an article written in 1930 entitled "On Life and Work" Kirchner stated : "Observation of movement has been for me a particularly fruitful source of creative inspiration. From that observation comes the increased awareness of life which is the source of all artistic works. A moving (human) body has for me many individual facets..." Thus throughout his life the painter was fascinated by the movement of the human body - and thus by movement in games and sports. This is particularly apparent in the drawings which survived him and the prints made from them.

Kirchner began to portray moving figures in 1909 ; his source of inspiration was the many visits he paid to music-halls and circuses in Dresden and Berlin. He recorded many cabaret dancing scenes on sheets of paper and on canvas with the pencil, the pen and the brush. From the world of the circus he moved on to the representation of the forms of movement of acrobats and artistic riders, which were similar to those observed in sport. Professional wrestling matches used to take place in circuses ; this explains the origin of the painting " *Wrestlers in the circus* " which was finished in 1909.

BATHING SCENES

At the same time, he was giving concrete expression to the theme of "man in movement" in over 30 bathing scenes and in pictures of naked people playing games against a natural background. These pictures were based on actual experiences on the shores of the Moritzburg Lakes, to the North of Dresden, and on the Baltic island of Fehmarn. In his excursions to the Moritzburg Lakes he was accompanied by the painters Otto Mueller, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff and other artists belonging to the "Brücke" group together with their models. All of them portrayed a number of bathing scenes at that time ; they bear witness to a sensuous apprehension of a life closely related to nature. If one disregards the wish of the artist to portray naked human beings in movement in natural surroundings, these pictures may be classified as life-paintings. They may also - but this is only conjecture - be evidence of an emerging culture of "free bodily development" (1909-16). Two of these bathing scenes may be considered as typical : the painting entitled " *Nudes playing under a tree* " (1910) and that entitled " *People walking into the sea* " (1912). He portrayed one





open-air bathing pool in Dresden, where he certainly swam, in a woodcut in 1909. The picture has been lost. He returned to the subject of bathing several times after the war. While he was living in Hochtal, near Frauenkirch and not far from Davos, he produced scenes of bathing in the mountain streams.

Kirchner received further impulse to study movement from expressionist dancing as demonstrated to him by Gret Palucca and Mary Wigman during the 1920's. Both dancers had a decisive influence on the gymnastics movement in Germany. The artist knew both of them from his Dresden period, since it was the home town of all three. Later, he met them several times when their show visited Davos. He made his first attempts to apprehend gymnastic dancing forms of movement in 1912, and he continued to take an active interest in dynamic individual and group presentations by women until 1936. The most significant paintings inspired by this train of thought were: *"The dancer G. Palucca leaping"* (1931-32), *"Colour dance II"* (1932-33) and *"Sun dancer"* (1933-35).

In 1911 Kirchner moved to Berlin. There the *"securely even tenor of a life spent in freedom with a sensuously satisfying art"* was disrupted. He fell ill; at the beginning on the First World War he was called to the colours and transferred to Halle, where in 1915 he had a nervous breakdown and was released from military service.

During his Berlin period, he produced some 20 works on subjects drawn from pleasure sail-

ing. This is due to the fact that his brother lived in Grünau, where Kirchner visited him and had the opportunity of observing sailors in different types of boats. It is not known whether the 1928-29 painting entitled *"Oarsman"* recalls a pre-war experience in Grünau. Nothing is known of any participation by Kirchner in water sports; but he might have had an opportunity of entering a sailboat during one of his stays in Burg, on the Baltic coastal island of Fehmarn, where he often went from Berlin and where he bathed.

BICYCLE RACES AND WINTER SPORTS

Before his physical and mental breakdown, he had come into contact with bicycle racing, in the



form of stayer racing in pursuit of motor-cycles, which was practised frequently on the cement track of the old Olympia stadium in Berlin as late as 1930. Two paintings dating from that period bear witness that he drew inspiration from these races. Around 1927, he made a number of journeys within Germany to escape from the loneliness of Frauenkirch; during those journeys he took up the theme of bicycle racing several times. Typical of the two subject groups are the paintings *"Sailing boats in Grünau"* (1913-14) and



"Bicycle racing" (1927). Between 1908 and 1915 he also produced pictures of billiards and tennis games and of riding.

From 1915 onwards, Kirchner went from one sanatorium to another. He spent a considerable time - with some interruptions during 1916 - in Dr. Kohnstamm's convalescent home in Königsstein/Ts. There he decorated the pump-room, using motifs he had collected in the bathing establishment in Fehmarn. The five wall-paintings he made there were destroyed after 1933 ; we only have photographs of them.

After his release from the sanatorium, he went back - on the advice of his doctors, but only on a temporary basis at first - to Frauenkirch, in the mountains of Switzerland, not far from Davos. He finally settled there in 1923. He was in poor physical condition ; since his breakdown he had been a drug addict, and his friends and patrons helped him in the difficult struggle against that scourge. It is surprising that, in spite of the deterioration of his physical state, he became so intensely interested in sports he could never practice as a field for subjects. But the reason might have been an unquenchable desire for physical and mental health. In Davos he became *"the interpreter of a magnificent natural setting and of a race of strong men enclosed within the rhythm of that setting"*. He was able to make contacts, not only with sportsmen, but also with the local peasants. This is illustrated in particular by the painting *"Wrestlers in the mountains (Sertigdörfli)"* (1926). During the years following 1926 he frequently left the silence of his Hochtal home to visit the cities of Basle, Zurich, Frankfurt, Berlin, Dresden, Chemnitz and Jena. Unquestionably, these journeys have something to do with Kirchner's intense interest in sports during the next ten years. This period saw the production of most of his works on sports subjects. Naturally, in this creative process preference was given to sub-

jects which he had been able to observe and experience while in contact with the people staying in the winter sports centre at Davos - skiing, ski-jumping, skating, figure skating, ice hockey and horse-racing on the frozen lake nearby. Kirchner thought that these races were trotting races, as his 1930 painting entitled *"Sulky"* shows. The best-known paintings on the theme group of winter sports, besides the one just mentioned, are : *"Skaters"* (1924-25), *"Ski-jumpers"* (1927) and *"Ice-hockey players"* (1934).

The picture *"Sulky"* marks the beginning of an ever-increasing tendency - caused by the influence of Picasso - towards abstraction in Kirchner's paintings. It is also visible in his last major picture devoted to sports themes - the drawing entitled *"Archers"* (1935-37). Abstract elements are interwoven with the realistic forms in the picture. Kirchner was in correspondence with friends for two years over it. What is particularly interesting about this picture is that it is the only one by Kirchner on a sports subject which we know from correspondence is based on his own participation. In October 1933 he wrote : *"Yesterday and today we practised a marvellous*



sport - archery - until it started to snow. Often on Sundays crowds of people come to the game park for target practice. My wife is quite a good shot too. It is an educational sport which makes people take up beautiful attitudes..."

EXPRESSIONISM

Other themes selected by him included running as a form of light athletics, a scene in a stadium, ball and bowling games, pole-jumping as a form of gymnastic exercise, riding and cycling. There is a picture of a "Procession of gymnasts" (1923) and one of an open-air "Skittle alley" (1920). Most of the pictures on these themes are drawings or graphic works. Frequently there are several versions of the same subject. One critic, speaking of Kirchner's earliest creative period in Dresden, has stated that he developed his abilities by the study of acts of movement (he was referring to the bathing pictures) : "everything that he saw or experienced he tried to write down in the hieroglyphics of drawing". Kirchner later elaborated on this remark as follows : "They are hieroglyphs in the sense that they present a natural form in a simpler, two-dimensional form and suggest their significance to the beholder in the same way as the word "horse" evokes the form of a horse for everyone". Thus a natural form is transformed into an artistic one. Kirchner was an adherent of the basic teachings of Paul Klee, who published them in 1920. They contain the following : 'Art is not a representation of the visible ; art makes things visible...' The representation of sports in Kirchner's art must be considered from that standpoint. The sportsman, who has been spoilt by the realistic presentation of his sport in newsreels and conditioned to see things as they really are, will find this very hard to accept. The expressive style of painting exaggerates in form, proportion, gesture and colour; thus in modern expressionism there is a loss of reality content. The "Brücke" painters endeavoured "by a deformation of outward appearances to expose the spiritual content of the subject". However, they remained within the bounds of nature (Kindler). Expressionism has also been defined, in opposition to Impressionism, as "the art of spiritual expression"; its works of art "should not serve to give aesthetic pleasure, but to express... the elementary experience". Expressionist art was a reaction against bourgeois taste. (Brockhaus).

After 1933, the Expressionist pictures were removed from German museums by the National Socialists and stigmatised as "degenerate" art. Kirchner's pictures also fell victims to the Nazi mobs. Deeply hurt by these events, and fatally ill, he took his life in 1938.

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With a few exceptions, only paintings have been included. The sources used are : Berlin National Gallery (State museums, etc., ed.), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1880-1938, Berlin, 1979-80 (catalogue) ; Ketterer, N., (publ.) Das Werk Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Graphik, Plastik. Campione d'Italia (Lugano), 1980 ; Aschaffenburg City Museum (publ.) : E.L. Kirchner, Zeichnungen (catalogue) ; K. Gabler (Aschaffenburg, 1980) ; Kindlers Malerei Lexikon ; Brockhaus encyclopedia.

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