



*Self-Portrait as a Soldier (Selbstbildnis als Soldat)*, 1915

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, 1880-1938)

Oil on canvas | 27 ¼ x 24 in. (69 x 61 cm)

- What is the subject or theme of this work?
- Is there a relationship between the two figures?

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

The painting features two figures: in the foreground, a soldier, and in the background, a woman. The soldier has a deflated posture while he smokes a cigarette and displays a possible war wound; he has lost a hand. The nude woman is displayed prominently, though with ambiguous sexual features. The soldier is dressed in rich colors—a blue uniform with red shoulder decorations and trim. The red is echoed in the

color of his lips and the red stump of his hand, as well in the background. The woman appears to be gazing to her right, possibly at herself in a mirror. A black panel silhouettes her figure and highlights her upright posture. Neither figure is drawn to scale: the soldier has an elongated face and other blurred features, while the woman's shoulders are disproportionate to that of a true human form. The painting also implies distance between the foreground and the background, due to the difference in the size of each figure.

The sharp, angular lines created within the composition evoke a sense of violence or angst, which is underscored by the red tones of the background. The canvas is sharply divided between left and right by the figure of the soldier that runs vertically across the entire work. A powerful diagonal movement from the lower right to the upper left runs across the work, culminating in the jagged or blade-like “mirror.”

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

Kirchner was one of the founding members of “Die Brücke,” German for “The Bridge.” This group was formed in 1905 in Dresden and then was carried over to England. It called for “an uprising by the youth [against] the older traditions and the older generation in order to gain greater artistic freedom.” It also aimed to “spontaneously if not exaggeratedly express emotionality and the sentiment of unmediated experience.” The symbolism expressed in *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* adheres to this school of thought. The absence of the soldier's hand, which would have been the same hand Kirchner used to paint, expresses Kirchner's fear of being “artistically castrated or amputated by the war,” if his hand were to be lost in some way. The nude in the background might also imply some fear of or realized sexual impotence.

- What about this painting is overly expressive and emotional?
- What parallels do you see between this painting and works of African art?
- How could this painting undermine the ideals that were being promoted in Nazi Germany?
- What effect did its confiscation by the Nazis have on the meaning and importance of the work?

The depiction of the nude in particular shows the influence of **Primitivism**, and Kirchner’s appropriation of African stylistic **tropes**. In a way, the painting responds to **Fauvism**: the colors used are rich and deep, a stark contrast to the bright colors used by the Fauvists. Ultimately, Kirchner was part of a larger movement, known as the **Expressionists**, and this painting is considered to be a prime example of their style.

### CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The painting holds a level of significance for both the WWI and WWII eras. It is a product of Kirchner’s experience during the First World War, and it serves to shed light on the atmosphere of Nazi Germany during the 1930s. After the National Socialist German Worker’s Party (NSDAP) came to power, Kirchner was dismissed from the Prüssische Akademie der Künste, and his works were confiscated and dubbed “degenerate.” *Self-Portrait of a Soldier* was one of these censored works. In 1937, the Nazis put it on display as part of an exhibition called “Degenerate Art” under the

name *Soldier with Whore*. The AMAM acquired the painting in 1950 under the guidance of Wolfgang Stechow, who had been dismissed from his own professorship in Germany by the Nazis in 1936.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was born in Aschaffenburg, Germany in 1880 to a family with artistic inclinations, yet they had no support for Kirchner’s own artistic aspirations. To appease them, he attended a university in Dresden and studied architecture. After he graduated, he dropped all pretense of becoming an architect and pursued a career as an artist. He became known for depicting the street life in Berlin, which at the time, was the cultural capital of Europe. During World War I, he became an “involuntary volunteer” in the German Army: this phrase does not imply his forced participation, but rather his enlistment in the field artillery unit, which was a prestigious position that also had the least amount of danger. He enlisted for sixth months as a driver, but was released because of his bad nerves and lungs, which were both hastened by poor eating habits,

### VOCABULARY

**Expressionists:** A manner of painting, drawing, sculpting, etc. in which forms derived from nature are distorted or exaggerated and colors are intensified for emotive or expressive purposes.

**Fauvism:** A movement by any of a group of French artists of the early 20th century whose works are characterized chiefly by the use of vivid colors in immediate juxtaposition and contours usually in marked contrast to the color of the area defined.

**Primitivism:** Term used with reference to art that celebrates certain values or forms regarded as primal, ancestral, fertile, and regenerative.

**Tropes:** Common or overused themes or devices.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Government; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

as well as alcohol and drug abuse. He eventually returned to the service, but was found physically and mentally unfit for the military. He therefore never actually participated in combat, but

he did focus many of his works around representations of war-time symbolism.

He committed suicide in 1938, at the age of 58.

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** One of the most compelling poems written during WWI is “In Flanders Field” by Canadian physician, Lt. Col. John McCrae. It was written after the death of a close friend during the Second Battle of Ypres (April - May 1915). Study this poem, and other poems written during the period, along with excerpts from the novel “All Quiet on the Western Front” by Erich Maria Remarque (a German novelist), and discuss how they convey the experiences of the soldiers that fought in the war. (*Middle and High School*)

**SCIENCE:** The First World War introduced the extensive use of automated weapons and machinery, and launched the age of modern warfare. What were some of the critical innovations in science and industry that made products such as automatic guns, heavy tanks, and air combat possible? (*Middle and High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES/VISUAL ART:** How did the tremendous social and political upheaval of the WWI period effect artists, their output, and their artistic philosophies (study some works by the German Expressionists and Dada artists for ideas)? (*Middle and High School*)