

## KIRCHNER AS A FOLLOWER OF DÜRER

Even if Kirchner knew the two Dürer portraits only from reproductions—"the precious compilation of Dürer's drawings, the *Lippmann*, was always within easy reach throughout his life"—he nevertheless made a point of coming to terms with Dürer early on by studying originals of the great artist's works.<sup>1</sup> As early as 1903 in the Graphic Arts Collection of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum he saw, alongside other drawings and graphics by the Nuremberg master, original printing plates for the woodcuts and incunabula. Some time later in Munich he intensified his study of Dürer's original works. The impression they made exerted an influence throughout Kirchner's life. We can therefore say with assurance that Kirchner was strongly influenced by Albrecht Dürer.<sup>2</sup>

A good twenty years later, in March 1926, Kirchner wrote to Carl Hagemann that he had found "confirmation and encouragement" from a subsequent viewing of "Dürer's . . . old pictures."<sup>3</sup> On September 16, 1926, Kirchner made a retrospective note in his travel diary:

as I was going through the museums again and looking at my old favorites by Rembrandt, Cranach, Dürer, the Dutch masters, and the Indians [sixth-century Indian wall paintings], [I realized that] it was the same elements [in their works] that still move me today, and that only today do I perceive much more deeply and more truly the influence they had on my own development. No modern artist could ever have given me what these old masters have given me; I have never had the sense of sharing a common natural world with any of them the way I have with these masters. . . . I have yet to find any modern artist whose style is so directly formed by experience and constant work as is so clearly the case with Rembrandt, [and] also with Dürer, etc.<sup>4</sup>

It is surely no accident that, when trying to decide on the appropriate composition for his programmatic and retrospective group portrait of the Brücke artists of 1926–1927, Kirchner chose an arrangement very reminiscent of



**Figure 86**  
Albrecht Dürer,  
*Self-Portrait with  
Bandage*, 1455



**Figure 87**  
Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait,  
Study of Hand and Pillow*, 1493.  
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Dürer's religious portrayal of the *Four Apostles* (1526). The final work certainly deserves to be described as a "testimonial to the authority of Albrecht Dürer."<sup>5</sup>

Kirchner's relationship to Dürer was far from derivative. For Kirchner, Dürer was *the* great authority figure, the artist he identified with and whom he revered: "Albrecht Dürer is the greatest German master, . . . the new German art will find its father in him."<sup>6</sup> Kirchner was soon to apply the latter generalization quite specifically to himself. In 1924, for instance, he wrote to Schiefler: "Yesterday I got the great Lippmann work on Dürer's drawings. It's a joy to look at these drawings, which, despite the distance, touch me so deeply. How much closer one stands to the whole artistic sensitivity of a Dürer than to that of the best French artists or Munch or anybody else. Dürer is inexhaustible; he is frequently so 'modern' in his stroke that one is simply bowled over."<sup>7</sup>

Kirchner's borrowings from Cranach and "the Indians" are common knowledge; as we have seen, he even mentions them himself—an admission that made the search for traces of Rembrandt and the Dutch masters in Kirchner's work an obvious task for scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Kirchner's artistic relationship to Dürer, which has yet to be examined, is far more profound, however. He repeatedly referred to Dürer as a theoretician—more often, in fact, than was called for. And in practice, the deliberate composition of *Self-Portrait as Soldier* clearly demonstrates the model of Dürer's "moderation." As Karlheinz Gabler remarks, "There is a close connection between Dürer and Kirchner with respect to proportion and arrangement, as well as freehand drawing and the deliberate composition of a picture."<sup>9</sup>

The intensity of this relationship does not rest solely on the deep esteem Kirchner had felt for the Nuremberg master ever since his early years as an artist or even on his thorough study of Dürer's works. The fact that he compared his own paintings with those of the master,<sup>10</sup> copied several of Dürer's works shortly before his own death,<sup>11</sup> and referred to Dürer again and again when formulating his own theory of art is but part of the story. Most telling, rather, is the fact that Kirchner repeatedly compared *himself* to Dürer. Not only that, but others did so as well.

In the lengthy section of his diary from 1925 he called *Das Werk* (The work), Kirchner made explicit his attitude toward Dürer when he wrote, "There are only a very few German artists who can be called pioneers in the field of composition, and almost none since *Dürer*." Then, after a paragraph, he continues where he left off: "While working on his fantasy pictures, *Kirchner* real-

ized that his most pressing need was to find a form that would adequately express his dreams. . . . Kirchner was able to develop a new form that . . . was recognized as new and original and which, for the first time, once again elevated a German painter to the ranks of the technical pioneers of art."<sup>12</sup> In other words, Dürer and I, Kirchner, as trailblazers!

Even the *Degenerate Art* exhibition of 1937 equated Dürer and Kirchner, albeit ironically. A notation placed next to Kirchner's *Self-Portrait as Soldier* (dubbed *Soldier with Whore*) stated: "The democratic *Reichskunstwart* [Reich Curator], Dr. Redslob, on Kirchner: 'We are in the presence of the first German artist to achieve a penetrating quality that can be likened to that of Dürer: E. L. Kirchner.'" This notation was quoted on several other occasions, with regard to the same painting.<sup>13</sup>

Redslob is clearly paraphrasing Kirchner's own—and not exactly modest—assessment of his historical significance as an artist. The fact that Kirchner later denied any outside influence, going so far as to deny Dürer's influence in particular, seems, if anything, only to confirm these connections.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Kirchner never denied basing his theoretical orientation on Dürer, probably because that aspect was simply too obvious.

Our study is concerned with another matter, however. In the programmatic and autobiographical reflections that Kirchner composed around 1925, *The Work of E. L. Kirchner*, he differentiates between the ability to form inner images from visual experience or imagination and the ability—actually, more of a skill honed through constant practice—to transform these inner images into external pictures. He repeatedly uses the word *Handschrift* (handwriting) in this context, and he also refers to Dürer: "There are two things, then, that lie at the base [of my theory of art]: (1) the picture that the painter has engendered in himself based upon experience or fantasy; (2) the technical means [including the hand itself] and the pictures produced by them consisting of lines and surfaces and colors on the surface."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to paraphrase one of Dürer's famous formulations from the *Aesthetic Excursus* of 1512 for "Die Unterweisung der Messung" (The instruction of measurement):

If the artist carries within himself many such inner pictures resulting from visual experience, that is, if he is inwardly full of figures, as Dürer says, then he can produce pictures out of himself without any further ado. The power that enables him to do so is called fantasy. This is a kind of picture that always was and still is valued most highly as a pure artistic product of the human mind. As a rule, through their

form these pictures convey a profound truth and immortalize it for all time. [One example of this is] Dürer's *Melancholie*.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, for Dürer the ultimate execution of art lay in "painting from the head, without any other assistance."<sup>17</sup> Kirchner repeatedly described his own wrestling with pure form to convey emotional expression in similar terms. Looking back in 1937, he thought about comparing one of his prostitute pictures with a picture of Dürer's and added: "Part of painting, in addition to fantasy, in addition to artistic inspiration, is the head, the brain, the mind. . . . Inspiration is very important, absolutely necessary for creativity, it is the source, the beginning, it accompanies the work and perfects it, but next to it stands the brain as the constructive power that directs the brush and mixes the paint, that gives form."<sup>18</sup> Differing from Kirchner's self-comparison with Dürer, critics and art historians have long overlooked the calculated side of Kirchner's creativity, guided by reason: "Whenever Kirchner talks about his art, whether in essays, letters, or diary entries, he always speaks about his goal of 'working from imagination,' 'from the mind alone,' 'completely freely from his head.'"<sup>19</sup>

For an artist like Kirchner, then, who, like his great model Dürer, defined himself equally in terms of his head ("the picture . . . based upon experience or fantasy") and his hand ("the technical means and the pictures produced by them"), the loss of his painting hand had to mean a loss of identity. Kirchner explicitly considered the relationship of head and hand when he wrote in his Davos diary in 1919 that "the danger for German [artists] lies in their head and not in their hands."<sup>20</sup> Clearly the relationship between hand and head was a problem that concerned Kirchner, above and beyond the role it may have played as a major cause of his nervous ailments. For through that relationship the individual and general problematic of being an artist, as well as the connections both with the present and with tradition, fuse.

Seen against this background, the severing of Kirchner's painting hand signals the violent interruption of an old tradition, one to which Kirchner felt bound even as he asserted the absolute newness of his art. Indicative of this allegiance are not only the many connections between Kirchner and Dürer, but also the dialectic of hand and head—a dialectic that in turn merges a motif from contemporary propaganda with an important concept in the theory of Renaissance art.