

# Extended Essay

## *Visual Arts*

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and his desire to change artistic expression.

# **To what extent did African art influence Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork?**

The ways in which African Art made an impact on this German-Expressionist's work, and  
influenced artists around the world.

Word Count: 3,853

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## Changing Western Art

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a German Expressionist who rose to prominence in Europe in the 1920's, drawing inspiration from an array of other artists and art movements in order to create his own unique style that was meant to break away from the norms of modern artwork.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a well known artist of the group Die Brücke, a collective group of German-expressionist artists which consisted of some of the most popular artists during this time period. They drew inspiration from other European artists such as Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse and reinvented how artwork is viewed. In addition to these European artists, they also drew heavy inspiration from traditional tribal artworks from Africa and other countries. These modern artists were drawn to African sculpture due to the way in which it displayed the abstraction of the human figure.<sup>1</sup> African sculptures included more exaggerated forms such as elongated facial features, and disproportionate representations of the human form. African tribal artworks had seemed to be the ideal influence for the Expressionists due to their urge to move from realistic artwork and change to exaggeration and the distortion of line and color. German Expressionist artists were inspired by African artists bold and volumetric shapes, their use of geometric ornamentation, as well as their way of using decorative patterning and flat planned artwork.

A specific member of the Die Brücke group, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, drew inspiration from Africa, being inspired by traditional African wood carvings, masks, and other various forms of sculpture. The influences can be seen in his figural artworks with many of his portraits showing “mask-like” figures, as well as his own wood carvings drawing heavy inspirations from Cameroon and other traditional African carvings. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner wanted to integrate

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<sup>1</sup> Metmuseum.org. Accessed September 6, 2022.  
[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd\\_aima.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm).

“primitive” aspects into his own lifestyle, keeping African sculptures and masks around his own apartment.<sup>2</sup> Primitive being defined as “the art of various historical European periods and of non-Western societies”.<sup>3</sup> In this extended essay I will explore the question, “*to what extent did African art influence Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s artwork?*”

To answer the question of “to what extent Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s artwork was inspired by African art”, I will be analyzing primary and secondary sources including texts, observations, and the artworks themselves. I will examine the cultural influences of African art on Kirchner’s artwork as well as the function and purpose and formal qualities of the pieces I have chosen. I will be considering the figural influences of African masks on his portraits as well as the influence of African wood carvings on his own sculptural work. By analyzing primary sources such as artwork, I will be able to visually see the connections between the African sculptures and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s artwork. I will be able to gather my own interpretations on to what extent Kirchner was truly influenced by African art in his own artwork. However, by also analyzing secondary sources such as texts on Kirchner’s artwork, I will be able to gather other evidence that supports my argument.

It is relevant to discuss where the inspirations of modern art originated because “primitive” artwork is typically never credited as inspirations for modern artists. Artists take influence from other artists in their own movement, as well as artists in other movements and time periods. Many of these more traditional influences, such as African tribal art, come from so far back that it’s hard to trace the true origins of these pieces. It can be argued that modern artists giving recognition to their inspirations is the ethical thing to do, and that it’s important to give

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<sup>2</sup> Ettliger, L. D. “German Expressionism and Primitive Art.” *The Burlington Magazine* 110, no. 781 (1968): 191–201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/875584>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/primitive-art>



credit to those who have helped shape a style of art or an entire art movement. The conclusion I will draw for this essay is the extent that artists' influences can be visually seen in their artworks, and how artists can influence each other's style and process. My research has led me to the thesis statement “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was influenced artistically by the aesthetic and figural style of African tribal art to a high extent”.

## **Cultural Influence**

### **Transforming Western Art with New, Bold Aesthetics**

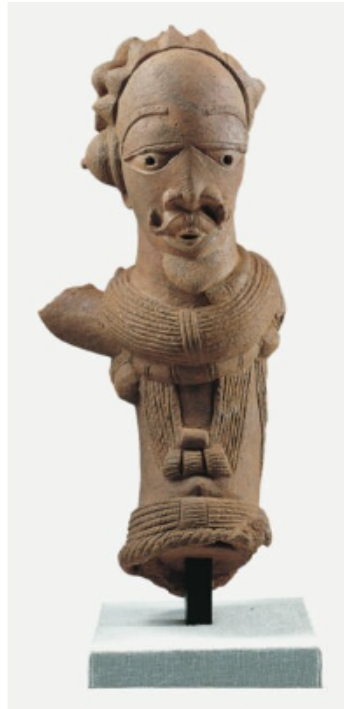
African artwork was a common influence for many western artists. As this “primitive” artwork was brought into European museums, it was subsequently brought to the public eye and began to be recognized by Western artists as artwork of value.<sup>4</sup> Kirchner studied African and Indonesian wood carvings for years at the Ethnology Museum in Dresden. These wood carvings had come to the museum through German colonists, who were bringing home artifacts from newly conquered territories, many of which were African. Kirchner was specifically intrigued by Cameroon wood carvings, this inspiration can be seen in some of his pieces such as *Dancer with Necklace* and *Bust of a Woman*. In his studio, Kirchner carved “African-like” figures out of wood and painted materials to create an “exotic” refuge for himself. He was very intrigued by the process in which African tribal art was created, studying the creation of wood carvings and masks.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a German-Expressionist. The artists in this movement were known for their bold use of lines, colors, and contours. They use these techniques to create bold statements about the world around them. German-Expressionists took older art styles from

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<sup>4</sup> Alfert, Max. “Relationships between African Tribal Art and Modern Western Art.” *Art Journal* 31, no. 4 (1972): 387–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/775542>.

Expressionism and made them more modernized in order to reflect their current state in Germany. They often made political statements in their pieces, and made bold choices in order to draw attention to their work. German-Expressionists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner specifically used their art in order to express their feelings about the bourgeois culture in Germany during the 1920's.



*Figure 1 - Nok Male Figure, Nigeria, 195 B.C.–A.D. 205, Terracotta*

Many African art pieces that inspired western artists such as wooden and clay sculpture are ancient and hold a lot of cultural value. Many of the pieces were created with the intention of being a symbol of power for whoever owned the figures. Nigerian Nok statues, as is shown in *Figure 1* were a sign of sophistication and high wealth and power. They were meant to be a status symbol. Nigerian Nok figures display large headed people with parted lips and eyes curved to be almond-shaped. They also have large headdresses and hairstyles, another way to show high

status.<sup>5</sup> As each Nok figure was uniquely made, it is believed that these terracotta figures may have also been commissioned by people of high power to use as decorations in their homes. Since they hold so much power, each person wanted a sculpture unique to them that was one of a kind.

### **Differing Cultural Influences of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner & African Art**

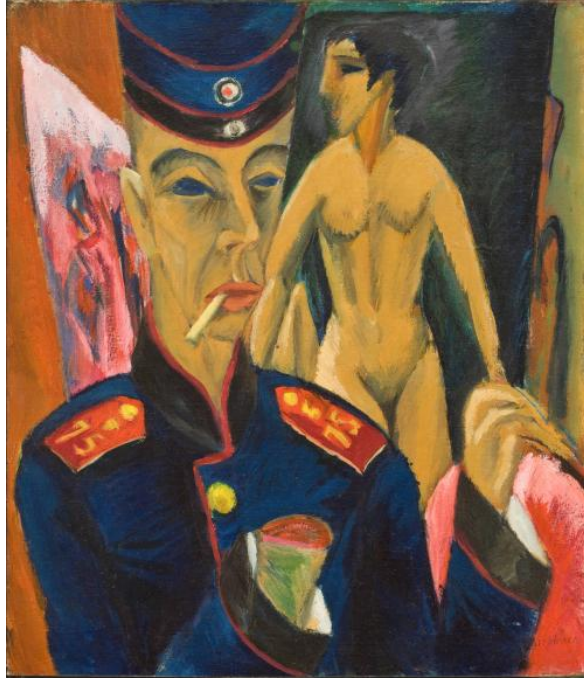
Differing from the work of African artists, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork was created with the intention of making statements about the world around him rather than being used as a status symbol. Through his work he often displayed the themes of war, anxiety, and overall fear about the world he was living through. None of these themes were shown through African sculptures, such as Nok figures, due to their sole purpose: decoration and status symbolization.

One of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's most well recognized political works is his piece, "*Self-Portrait as a Soldier*". Through this painting Kirchner expresses the horrors that he viewed while being involved in World War 1, and the violence he witnessed first hand. Kirchner chose to comment on the treatment of veterans through this piece as well, and how after the war, veterans are left to fend for themselves despite the severe conditions they're left in mentally and physically.<sup>6</sup> He chose to use his artwork to express his mental state.

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<sup>5</sup> Atwood, Roger. "The NOK of Nigeria." *Archaeology* 64, no. 4 (2011): 34–38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41780708>.

<sup>6</sup> Roggenkamp, Shawn, and Shawn Roggenkamp. "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Self-Portrait as a Soldier." Smarthistory Ernst Ludwig Kirchner SelfPortrait As a Soldier Comments. Accessed August 22, 2023. <https://smarthistory.org/kirchner-self-portrait-as-a-soldier/>.



*Figure 2 - Self-Portrait as a Soldier , 1913, Oil Painting*

In addition to using different themes, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and African tribal artists used different mediums and techniques based on their cultural influences. Kirchner typically used oil paint because that was one of the most popular mediums during the German Expressionist art movement. Contrastingly, the African tribal artwork that Kirchner drew inspirations from were typically made of wood or clay and consisted of masks and sculptures. This is due to the fact that these sculpting mediums were the most popular forms of art-making in each piece's respective areas and time periods.

Though Ernst Ludwig Kirchner may have drawn a lot of influence from African artwork as it was brought to Europe in museums, it is important to note that the cultural significance of both Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's work and his inspirations are very different. Each artist was inspired by different social situations, art movements, and overall cultural differences.

## Function and Purpose

### Investigating the Differing Function & Purposes of Kirchner Alongside his Influences

The purpose of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork was self expression. Kirchner created his artwork in order to create commentary on the world around him, and express his feelings towards events in Germany in the 1920's.<sup>7</sup> He created his works with the intention of expressing his own thoughts, feelings, and commentary. Since these pieces were made with the intention of being self-expressive, they function as a lens into Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's mind at the time of him creating the artwork. Through how he expresses himself via painting and sculpture, we are able to see exactly how the anxieties of his world affected him and his mental state.

The function and purposes of both Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork and the African tribal artwork that he was inspired by were very different, showing inspiration in that regard to a low extent. Kirchner's pieces did not simply exist as decorative pieces, as he made political and social commentary on the state of Germany at the time when he created the artwork, whereas African tribal artwork served as mainly decorative pieces, or pieces associated with the culture that the sculptures originated from. This means that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's pieces function as an insight into his political and social beliefs on the time that he was living in, whereas the African tribal artwork may not have that same effect.

African art, especially sculptures, are created with the intention of holding value within a culture. These sculptures are made, and owned in order to show power, beauty, and wealth. The purpose of African artwork is to be a symbol of class and power. Hence, African sculptures function as a decorative piece of art. African sculptures and masks are commonly seen as decorative pieces, especially once they were brought into European museums by colonizers and people began to study the structure of the pieces. Many of the African art pieces that Ernst

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<sup>7</sup> Sadowsky, Thorsten. *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2017.

Ludwig Kirchner was inspired by don't have any political or self-expressive messaging attached to them.

While Kirchner uses his work to express himself, African tribal artwork shows cultural practices in a way that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting does not. For example, the artwork of the Dogon tribe in central Mali is a look into how this culture celebrates cultural events such as religious ceremonies and funerals. Their artwork is intertwined with their spiritual beliefs of ancestor worship and it shows a connection to their culture. Many of these artworks are specifically created with the intention of being used for cultural practices, and are made to specifically reflect a culture's beliefs.



*Figure 3 - Dogon Sculpture, 18th - 19th century, Wood and Metal*

Masks also have significance in many African cultures and function as not only a decorative piece, but also an important part of traditions. Many of these masks created by tribes

are created with the intention of functioning as a ceremonial piece, and are later taken from these tribes and used as decorative pieces. In African culture, masks are commonly believed to connect with the afterlife and are worn by dancers during traditional African rituals.

Unlike African tribal artwork, Kirchner's artwork does not have any function as a ceremonial relic or is of use in any sort of cultural ceremony, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork was never created with the intention of using it for ceremonial purposes. Kirchner was not inspired by African tribal artwork to make ceremonial or cultural artwork of his own. The function and purpose of his work and the African tribal work that he was inspired by were vastly different, Kirchner wanting to create political and social commentary, and the African tribal artwork was to be used as cultural relics and decorative pieces.

### **Formal Qualities**

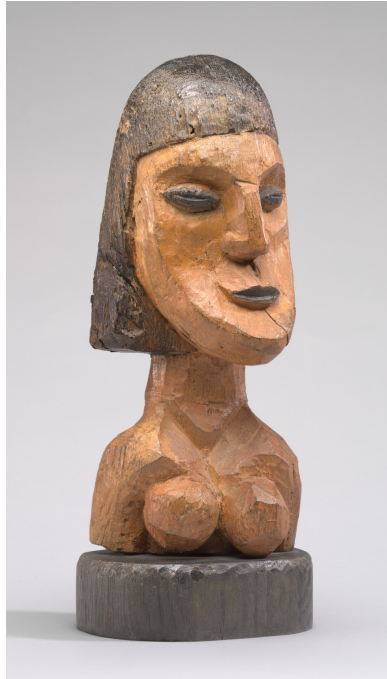
#### **Kirchner Embraces a "Primitive" Style**

There are many similar formal qualities between Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork and African tribal artwork within the physical structure of their pieces. The forms of African wood carvings consisted of smooth edges yet they all had very defined facial features. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was artistically influenced by the aesthetic and figural style of African tribal art. He was fascinated by the spontaneous nature of the sculptures, and how they didn't require too much planning.<sup>8</sup> Kirchner combined African aesthetics with the clashing color tones and figural distortion of German Expressionist artworks. The facial structure and figural distortion of many of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artworks can be traced down to the facial structures of many

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<sup>8</sup> Ettlinger, L. D. "German Expressionism and Primitive Art." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 110, no. 781, 1968, pp. 191–201. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/875584>. Accessed 18 Aug. 2023.

traditional African tribal masks. He combined the aesthetics of African artwork with his own German expressionist style to create figural distortion.



*Figure 4 - Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Bust of a Woman, 1913, wood.*

When creating his own wooden carved sculptures, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's technique was much less smooth, as he was trying to practice the carefree attitude of his inspirations. A major part of the German-Expressionist art movement was the ability to create carefree art that showcased a different style than previous art movements. This is shown in many of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's paintings through the sharp lines and contours he uses to create dramatic figures. However, this technique can also be seen in his sculptural pieces as well. In Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's piece, *Bust of a Woman*, the jawline of the woman is very contoured and sharp. Kirchner took inspiration from Pablo Picasso and African masks when creating the shapes of the faces he used in his pieces. The angular and geometric shape is similar to the figural shape



of many African masks, with the face getting smaller down the piece and the chin pointing at the end. In addition, the carving of the wood in this piece seems to be rough and jaggy in some points throughout the piece. The chest of this piece in particular seems to be coarse and the carving seems to be careless.

A similar technique is shown again in his piece, *Standing Girl, Caryatid*, another wood carving that he created in 1909-1910. This piece was one of the first wood carvings that he experimented with, which is why the form is much more simplified than other wood carvings that he created. The figural form of this piece is straightforward and features a woman standing and holding her arm. The facial features of this piece are also a lot more simple than his later wood carvings. Rather than sculpting out the individual features of the face, he chose to paint on the features for this piece. While the inspiration for this piece is less figurally shown, the techniques used to carve the wood is similar to the techniques used by African artists to make their wooden sculptures. By using a less refined technique, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner also emphasizes that the purpose of this piece is not to hold high power unlike many African wood sculptures. Kirchner simply created his sculptures in order to express himself.



*Figure 5 - Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Standing Girl, Caryatid, 1909-1910, wood*

Nigerian Chamba wooden figures held very similar formal qualities to many of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's wood carvings. These carvings were much rougher than other traditional African wood carvings, as can be seen through the more jagged hand-carved facial features and overall figural shapes of the statues. This statue features two figures connected in the waist by a circular disk. Their eyes, noses, and mouths seem to be carved very simply, with very little specific details. There isn't that same exaggerated expression and heavy contour as commonly seen in other African masks and sculptures.



*Figure 6- Hand Carved Chamba Statue, Nigeria, 7th or 8th century AD, Wood and Pigment*

These hand carved statues share many similar formal qualities to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's sculptures than many other variations of African tribal sculpture. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was heavily influenced by the aesthetic of these wooden carvings viewing them as "primitive" and natural. These Chamba statues can be best compared to Kirchner's pieces featured in *Figure 4* and *Figure 6* in the ways in which the carved wood is more irregular and

simplistic. They also share some differences though, with Kirchner choosing to use paint on certain parts of the sculpture, whereas African tribal members simply left the wood as it was.