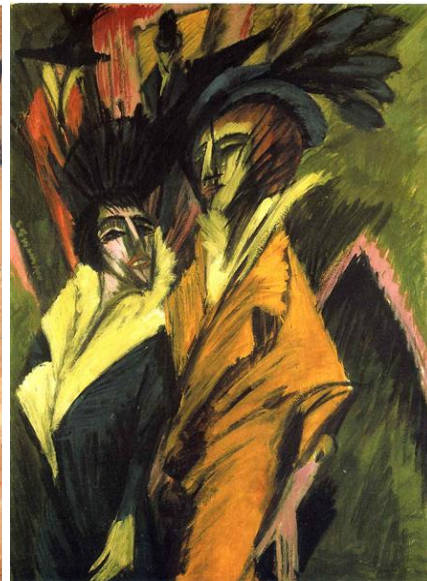


Ernst Ludwig Kirchner & African Masks

In addition to wooden sculptures, many of the paintings made by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner have similar formal qualities to African artwork. Kirchner's paintings consisted of vibrant colors as well as bold lines and shapes. The facial features of many of his figures are very geometrical and mask-like. The facial composition of the people in his pieces features an elongated face, exaggerated features, and contoured faces. The faces are angular and come to a point at the bottom, in a similar fashion to many traditional African masks.



*Figure 7-
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,
Berlin Street Scene,
1913, Oil on Canvas.*



*Figure 8-
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,
Two Women in the Street,
1914, Oil on Canvas.*

In *Two Women in the Street* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the women featured in the painting have this same facial construction. Their faces are elongated, and become sharper towards the bottom. In addition, their eyes, noses, and eyebrows are all extremely contoured and exaggerated. This is a similar case for all of the other people featured throughout the entire

painting, each having exaggerated noses and other distinct features. This same form of facial exaggeration can be seen in Kirchner's piece *Berlin Street Scene*. In this painting, Kirchner used the same technique that he did for nearly all of his figural works. The faces of the people in the street are angular and have mask-like features. The eyes, noses, and chins of these people are extremely dark and contoured as well. These painted figures can be best compared to the Fang African Masks shown in *Figure 9*. Both faces in these pieces have elongated chins and features, as well as highly contoured pieces such as eyes and jawlines. However a difference they hold is that Kirchner's faces are more realistically proportioned than African Fang Masks, while still holding some exaggeration within them.

The Fang African Mask has a very similar structure to the faces of the figures that Kirchner paints. These masks are made of wood, fiber, and paint, and are not painted like the figures in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork.¹ These masks are also elongated with pointed chins at the bottom and made up of a variety of geometric shapes. On the mask shown in *Figure 9* specifically, the nose, chin, and upper eyes of the mask are contoured and exaggerate the facial expression of the mask. This facial structure is similar to the facial structure of the people that Kirchner painted. They share similar exaggerated features and elongated faces.

¹ "Ngil Mask." *Ngil Mask* | *Denver Art Museum*, Accessed 18 Aug. 2023. www.denverartmuseum.org/en/object/1942.443.



Figure 9- Fang African Mask, Gabon, late 1800s, Wood, Fiber, and Paint

The artwork of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the African artwork that he was inspired by share a wide variety of similar formal qualities. Kirchner's inspirations can be very visibly seen in his paintings and his wood carvings. Not only did Kirchner use a similar technique while creating his wood carvings, but he also tried to achieve a similar aesthetic to the African wood carvings he was so interested in. In addition, the physical appearance of the figures within his oil paintings can be heavily linked to the facial structure of African masks. The most compelling evidence of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's inspiration lying with African tribal artwork can be seen within the formal qualities of his own work compared to tribal pieces.

Conclusion

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner rose to popularity during the rise of German Expressionism with the assistance of African artists and artwork who inspired his process of creation.

To reach the answer to the question of *to what extent Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork was inspired by African art*, I analyzed primary and secondary sources including texts, observations, and the artworks themselves made by Kirchner and the African tribal artists. Through this extensive research I was able to find that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner drew inspiration from African tribal art through their aesthetics and overall formal qualities. These inspirations can be physically seen in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's artwork through the aesthetic of his wood carvings and the physical appearance of the faces included in his oil paintings. The faces in his paintings strike an obvious resemblance to African masks which were a common inspiration for many artists at the time, including Pablo Picasso, who Kirchner also drew inspiration from.

As a German-Expressionist, Kirchner's goal was to make social commentary on what was happening around him in Germany at the time of his piece's creation. This is a complete contrast to the cultural significance of the tribal artwork he was inspired by, whose main goal was to be used in cultural ceremonies and decoration. In addition, the function and purpose of Kirchner's work and the work he was inspired by is very different. As mentioned before, Kirchner's pieces were meant to show his perspective on social and political issues whereas African tribal artwork was used for decoration, cultural events, and to show high status.

In particular the aesthetic and overall appearance of his wood carvings draw striking similarities to Cameroon sculpture and the faces in his paintings can be directly connected to African tribal masks such as the Fang African Mask. These specific inspirations come from the time he spent studying African art at the Ethnology Museum in Dresden, wanting to replicate the

aesthetic and “exotic-ness” of these pieces into his own artwork. It’s also important to note the inspiration that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner found in other western artists who also used Oceanic and African art as an inspiration for their work. The German-Expressionist group, Die Brücke, that Kirchner was a part of drew inspiration from western artists who are known to have taken inspiration from “primitive” work in their own artwork. This leads to the idea that not only was Ernst Ludwig Kirchner inspired by African art he found in Ethnology museums, but he was further inspired by this artwork through other western artists as African relics became mainstream in western art movements.

The supporting evidence throughout this paper ultimately supports the claim that Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was inspired by African tribal art to a high extent. Some other avenues of research that can be pursued through my research include in depth analysis on how other artists have been inspired by different “primitive” artworks, and whether or not those artists acknowledge their inspirations. Many artists, specifically western artists during the early 1900’s, did not credit the “primitive” artwork that they found inspiration in because they wanted people to believe that they had discovered these ideas themselves. It’s important for artists, especially nowadays, to credit where their inspiration is coming from in order to give credit where credit is due and help the art community build off of each other. In addition, my research can be used to further look into how the colonization of countries such as Africa have caused change to art in general, and specifically impacted the stylistic choices of art movements. As countries become colonized, their cultural practices and art become colonized along with it, slowly causing the authenticity and credit of this artwork to disappear. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was inspired by African art to a high extent which can be visually seen through analysis of the formal qualities of his work compared to African tribal art.

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