**Space, and Sexual Relationships and War in *View of Basel and the Rhine***

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a German expressionist and founding member of The Bridge. His service in the army during World War I deeply affected him, causing physical and psychological trauma, and he was addicted to various substances until his death. He painted *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* (Figure 2)soon after his service in 1915; when Kirchner painted *View of Basel and the Rhine* (Figure 1) in 1927, he had been out of the war for more than ten years. The latter painting explores a more unified relationship between the sexes than it does in the former, where his anxieties about the war and women are clear in his depiction of self and placement of the woman.

The entire composition of *View of Basel and the Rhine* is filled with objects in detailed description that give a confusing sense of hierarchy, given their detail: buildings in the background feature arches, windows, turrets and roof tiles; the middle ground features a complex and varied color system of wavy lines depicting waves; and the foreground shows a man in a hat and a man and woman couple (closely entwined arm-in-arm) walking to the left, while a dog trots in the other direction. The people and dog walk alongside a river, the part of the Rhine in Basel, a large city in Switzerland. The cityscape is colorful, the Rhine murky green, and the male figures dark. The female figure is outstandingly pink.

The use of color (particularly the pink) and shading highlights or establishes the issue of competing spatial hierarchies. The middle ground and background display depth and shadow. The waves of the river closer to the foreground are larger, and shaded with dark green; the buildings of Basel allude to their three-dimensionality: this is most clear in the leftmost pink building, which shows the planar relationship between the lighter wall and a darker pink around the corner; however, similar wall/corner detail can be seen in the whole cityscape. By contrast, the figures in the foreground are mostly made of flat brush strokes with little shading indicating their form. The couple is in the center-bottom of the composition. The mauve of the woman’s outfit leaks onto the ground in front of and behind her, and the color is repeated in the cityscape.

The setting is specific: the viewer knows, from the title, where the figures are located due to the city, river, and even the recognizable white bridge on the left of the composition. However, the figures are not specific. This is fitting, as they are given less dimensional detail and attention than the background aspects of the city of Basel and the Rhine River.

Although the figures are not individualized, Kirchner pays attention to the message he communicates in his compositions. In works demonstrating the relationship between man and woman, he represents them as “complementary halves of a single whole.” In *Melancholy; Self-Portrait with Erna,* Scholar so and so argues thatKirchner “places the woman at the center of the composition, at the same time proudly presenting her to the world as his property.” In addition, the man is a complement to the woman as a “partner, companion, admirer, or suitor.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The central placement of the woman and her role as companion is a repeated theme in *View of Basel and the Rhine.* The nearly-intertwined position of the couple enforces the “halves of a whole” concept: it is difficult to distinguish the man’s arm, and the color of her outfit extends past her leg and in between his; they are so physically close that they fuse.

In *View of Basel and the Rhine,* Kirchner shows the influence women have on him by giving the female figure a central placement and extended aura of color. The “leaking” mauve color of the woman’s outfit, seen both in the foreground on the path on which the figures walk and also on the city steps, a wall of some buildings, and numerous windows suggests the strong influence of woman on Kirchner. The artist imagined this woman, already important because of her placement in the composition, as someone whose power reached across the city. Her mauve extends to the man in the hat that walks in front of her and her partner and reaches behind her partner in an unrealistic way. Although the walking partner is not Kirchner, he used the man as a representative for all men, and imagined himself in the man’s place.

*Self-Portrait as a Soldier* serves as a predecessor for his later works in which the opposite sexes fuse physically—for example, *View of Basel and the Rhine.* As an artillery driver and not in military action, he felt that he was not of use, missed the studio greatly and was driven “insane” by a desire to work[[2]](#footnote-2). He painted *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in 1915, the same year he had a nervous breakdown and left the army[[3]](#footnote-3). The painting features Kirchner as an amputee in uniform, holding up both arms into the composition, with one hand a greenish stump. The color palette is unsettling, made up of jaundiced greens, eerie yellows, haunting blues and red reminiscent of blood. The figure behind him is actually a painting of a woman on an easel. She is so close to him in the composition of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* that it suggests his closeness to painting and his work. Kirchner’s bloody stump is fictional. While his hand was not actually cut off in the war, serving in the army caused him such psychological anguish that he expressed it with a physical fiction.In his disturbing 1915 self-portrait, Kirchner flattens foreground and background into one. The only divide between the flesh tones of his face and the background figure’s arm is a thin contour line or shadow; similarly, his hand and the figure’s wrist blend due to the low contrast and similarity in hue. In this way, Kirchner is physically and mentally connected with painting and women.

Although Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s experiences in the war affected him deeply, he was already mentally unstable before entering the war. The stress and anxiety caused by the war hurt him to the point that the worse his psychological state became, the more his art improved. In addition to fearing war, Kirchner both feared and respected women. Mainly through the depiction of space, his paintings were often informed by his relationship with the opposite sex in addition to his experiences in the war, as seen in *View of Basel and the Rhine* and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier.* A stressful service in the war impacted Kirchner’s representations of women and men together.

1. Kirchner, Krämer, and Städtische Galerie im Städelschen Kunstinstitut Frankfurt am Main, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schneede and Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, *1914*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Benson et al., *Expressionism in Germany and France*. Chronology, 1915. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)