

Intervention: “Rethinking and Re-envisioning the Collection”

Chapter II

In the Course of Time

Dealing with Colonial Thought and Tradition

February 8, 2022–Summer 2022

In a more globalized world, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is endeavoring to expand the presentation of its collection and to rethink the role of the museum. In a newly designed gallery at K20, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is reviewing modernist artworks within the historical context and in the light of recent debates to open up the canon to new perspectives. In this regard, the intersections between art and politics, liberation and appropriation, fascination and racism, Expressionism and colonialism are becoming the subject of thematic scrutiny.

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The first intervention was devoted to the history of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen and its founding director Werner Schmalenbach.

By way of example, the second chapter in the series deals with two paintings in the collection—Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde, respectively. What do we know about the paintings? How do we engage with artworks, in which quondam colonial modes are perpetuated? The presentation examines how the museum has dealt with discriminatory subjects and titles since its foundation in 1961. At the same time, it strives to illuminate how the artistic innovations of Expressionism are linked to the actual experiences of these two artists and to their social, cultural, and political surroundings at the beginning of the 20th century.

Expressionism in the Context of Colonialism

The German colonial activities highly influenced the Expressionist movement and style. During the reign of Wilhelm II (from the end of the 19th century until 1918), raw materials and artefacts arrived in the then German empire from the colonies in Africa and Asia. In search of a new “authentic” approach, avant-garde artists appropriated indigenous forms of expression and embraced the visual and representational aesthetics encountered through colonization. The notion of “primitivism” is key to the discussion and has been critically debated among scholars of art history.

From 1913 to 1914, Emil Nolde was employed as a draughtsman and accompanied the so-called “Medical Demographic Expedition to German New Guinea” instigated by the Imperial

Colonial Office in Berlin. It was his “free and special task” to research “the racial peculiarities of the population,” as Nolde described it. The expedition—led by the “tropical physicians” professor Alfred Leber (leader) and Ludwig Külz (deputy)—sought to investigate the high mortality rate of the indigenous population in what is now Papua New Guinea. The trip ended with the outbreak of the First World War.

“When it was difficult to portray the natives, we would show a picture of the German Kaiser and say, ‘This big fellow Kaiser wants to see what you look like, and that is why you’re being portrayed,’” Nolde wrote retrospectively in 1936. Embedded in the colonial system, Nolde’s drawings and colourful paintings bear witness to his indubitably *white* gaze and thus reproduce the imperial and colonial ideology.

Emil Nolde, Women and a Pierrot, 1917

The painting “Women and a Pierrot” was made during the First World War. At that time, Nolde was living in poverty and seclusion with his wife Adamine Frederike Vilstrup in a small farmstead in Utenwarf, a border region between Denmark and Germany. Despite the war, Nolde realized numerous paintings. Many of them are based on the watercolours and sketches he made during his journey to what is now Papua New Guinea (1913/14).

“Women and a Pierrot” is not a portrait. The work—bursting with tonal contrasts—liberates itself from the traditions of figurative painting and arises from the artist’s imagination. At the same time, the sexualised depiction of the women’s bodies is inextricably linked to the colonial production of knowledge and images. Thus, it provides an insight into Nolde’s quintessentially oneiric grasp of the world and wholly reflects his *white* patriarchal gaze. Like the women depicted, the Pierrot is a fictional stage character, known for his pantomime performances. The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen acquired the painting in 1964.

In later years, Nolde published nationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic ideas in his autobiographical writings. From 1934 onwards, he was a party member of a North German Nazi association. Despite his political views, his works were subsequently defamed by the Nazis as so-called “Degenerate Art” and removed from museum collections in 1937, then forcibly sold or destroyed. In spite of this treatment, Nolde remained true to his political convictions even after the Second World War.

Entertainment Industry, Fascination, and Colonialism

Unlike Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner never journeyed to the German colonies. Instead, he visited the so-called “human zoos” and ethnographic expositions in Dresden between 1909 and 1911. He also attended theatrical performances by artists of color at the Schumann Circus and the variety shows in Berlin and Hamburg. Kirchner was fascinated by indigenous cultures and equally enthusiastic about the idea that the avant-garde could liberate itself from the traditions of European painting via a “purely naïve study of nature,” as Kirchner put it. Allured by his colonially-engendered imagination, Kirchner encountered migrants in the urban entertainment industry and fashioned them as subjects to reinvent his notion of painting.

“I have never had any actual models in the academic sense [...],” Kirchner said in 1916. As far as Kirchner’s Expressionist style is concerned, couples and dance scenes can be considered as key motifs. In a painting, acquired by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in 1964 from a donation by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk, the dancers are represented as anonymous subjects—Kirchner does not provide any details about their identity. Instead, the painting’s x-shaped composition foregrounds the excessive movement and intoxication of dance.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Various Titles (N* Dance, Circus Scene, Varsity Show, Traveling Circus, Dancing Couple), c. 1911

The original title of the work cannot be reconstructed; instead, various titles have been attributed to the painting in the course of its history. The note “N*tanz” was written on a previous stretcher of the painting. According to the latest findings, the handwriting can be attributed neither to the artist nor to his wife Erna Schilling. Today, the note with the addition “Friedenau / Körnerstr. 45” (Kirchner’s Berlin studio address from October 1913) is archived in the museum as a fragment. The frame was removed for conservation reasons in 1967 and subsequently renewed.

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In catalogues of early exhibitions, the painting was listed under the title “N* Dance,” e.g. in “Vierte Gesamtausstellung” at the Galerie Hans Goltz in Munich (1916), “Grosse Kunstausstellung” at the Städtischer Kunstpalast Düsseldorf (1920) and “Brücke” at the Kunsthalle Bern (1948). For the solo exhibition “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner” at the Kunsthaus Zurich (1952), a sticky note that read “Circus Scene” was stuck on the previous painting’s stretcher, while it was listed in the exhibition catalogue as “Varsity Show” and dated 1907.

In 1964, the Wilhelm Grosshennig Gallery in Düsseldorf exhibited the painting under the title “Traveling Circus.” Having been acquired by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen from that gallery exhibition, the invoice referred to the artwork as “Dancing Couple” and dated it 1907/08. In an exchange of letters between the museum and Donald E. Gordon, author of the catalogue raisonné “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner” (1968) published in Munich, the painting was called “Traveling Circus” and dated by the museum “to the time around 1911.”

In 1968, the painting was called “N* Dance” in Gordon’s catalogue raisonné and in the first collection catalogue of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. There, founding director Werner Schmalenbach wrote about the painting: “Around 1911—still in Dresden or already in Berlin—Kirchner’s large-scale variety scene was created, which the artist titled “N* Dance,” presumably thinking—since no N* appear—of jazz music and its African origins.” In the 1986 collection catalogue, Schmalenbach reformulated his thoughts and wrote: ““N* Dance” was possibly still created in Dresden, perhaps already in Berlin. Presumably because of the Afro-American origin of jazz music, Kirchner chose a title which might not have been immediately understandable otherwise.”

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Given the work's complex biography, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen decides to list the painting with its various titles. By means of the asterisk [*], the museum seeks to identify the racist history of the painting's previous title. Simultaneously, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is at pains not to replicate the structural hegemony of language, and strives for a more sensitive approach to forms of racism and discrimination in the collection holdings.

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