

ART IN BERLIN

1815-1989

High Museum of Art

Distributed by
University of Washington Press
Seattle and London

Images of Berlin in the Art of the Secession and Expressionism

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Parts of this essay are adapted from my article "A New Beauty": Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Images of Berlin," to appear in Charles W. Haxthausen, Heidrun Suhr, eds., *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

I. "The capital city of all modern ugliness"

"I don't know why it is," wrote the Berlin novelist Georg Hermann in 1912, "the Berliner is truly ashamed of his city, and the art is especially so." Although Berlin, after the unification of Germany in 1871, had quickly emerged as the cultural and artistic capital of Germany and its only true metropolis, there was at first little reflection of this new urban reality in the art and literature produced there. The contrast with Paris during the same period is striking, for there the 1870s—the years immediately following the Prussian victory over the French—were marked by the ascendancy of impressionism, the first artistic movement of the nineteenth century to embrace contemporary urban reality as subject matter. The works of Manet, Degas, and Monet, to name only the most illustrious, present the recreational life of modern Paris; they offer an affirmative image of this modern urban spectacle, documenting the distinct pleasures offered by the city.²

Of Berlin during this same period we see little in the visual arts. To be sure, German impressionism emerged only in the 1890s, a good quarter-century after the beginnings of the French movement; but even then, its leading painters—Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, and Max Slevogt—almost totally ignored the city in which they lived and worked.³ Although Liebermann's studio was housed in the family residence on Pariser Platz, where Unter den Linden, the city's most celebrated avenue, met the Brandenburg Gate, we see neither this Berlin landmark nor any other in his art. Yet Liebermann was not entirely hostile to urban motifs—only to those of Berlin. When he painted cities, he preferred pleasant scenes of Amsterdam or Hamburg.⁴

Why was this so? Why should Berlin, during this period of dynamic economic and political ascendancy, have been *imago non grata* in the visual arts? For one, although the German capital may have been the political counterpart of Paris, it was hardly its equal in other ways. Charles Huard, the French travel writer and illustrator, offered a Parisian perspective on this question in his book *Berlin comme je l'ai vu*, published in 1907. His first chapter, on the capital's most famous street, set the general tone for his sober view of the city:

What sort of enthusiastic Berliner was it, who, on my departure from Paris, could sing to me the praises of the beauties of the Linden? . . . "You cannot imagine its charm," he said: "It is more discreet, more elegant, more aristocratic than your Parisian boulevards, than Piccadilly, the Corso, than every other vaunted street in the world." I anticipated an admirable avenue decorated with magnificent trees, bounded by the palace and frequented by princely carriages. To be sure, I found a large avenue, but it was planted with ordinary trees, unwelcome chestnuts and lime trees, topped and stunted; unsightly carriages drawn by emaciated, decrepit horses and driven by coarse coachmen rolled along the pavement. Dense, inelegant crowds halted at the intersections, and, docile and superbly trained, stomped along again at the order of the vigilant policemen. My disillusionment was complete.⁵

Such observations abound in Huard's book, and these impressions cannot be dismissed merely as manifestations of French chauvinism or of lingering resentments over the Franco-Prussian War—there were too many similarly negative characterizations of the city by thoughtful Berliners, many of whom considered

1. Georg Hermann, "Um Berlin," *Pan* 2 (22 August 1912): 1101.
2. On the impressionist treatment of Paris, see Théodore Reff, *Manet and Modern Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), and T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
3. To be sure, this is not the only difference between these German "impressionists" and their French counterparts. As Gert Schiff has written: "It was . . . inevitable that certain critics would compare their respective styles to those of the French impressionists, with whom the German painters shared plein-air subjects, bright tonality, suppression of detail, quick brushwork, and eventually even colored shadows. However, those critics overlooked the fact that the Germans adopted none of the most radical French innovations: the division of color into its spectral constituents, the organization of space by means of color alone, and the dissolution of matter in light." Quoted from his essay "An Epoch of Longing: An Introduction to German Painting of the Nineteenth Century," *German Masters of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), p. 34.
4. Liebermann was never interested in modern cityscapes as motifs, although he was drawn to urban recreational scenes of a kind associated with the French impressionists. See, for example, his two Amsterdam scenes *The Parrot Man* and *Parrot Walk*, both of 1902, and his *Summer Evening on the Alster*, painted in 1911, a motif from Hamburg. During the First World War he began painting recreational scenes near his villa in Wannsee, to the southwest of Berlin. For illustrations see the exhibition catalogue *Max Liebermann in seiner Zeit* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1979), pp. 301, 303, 333, 345.
5. Charles Huard, *Berlin comme je l'ai vu* (Paris: Eugène Rey, 1907), pp. 11f. (my translation).

it second-rate as a European capital. Even as ardent a nationalist as Heinrich von Treitschke once remarked that the Germans alone among the peoples of the earth had attained the rank of great power without having a great city, although he meant this as a boast.⁶

Karl Scheffler, one of the most influential art critics of the period and author of a book-length historical critique, *Berlin: ein Stadtschicksal* (1910), claimed for the city the distinction of being not only the ugliest in Germany, but “the capital city of all modern ugliness.”⁷ Like Huard, he measured Berlin against Paris, with depressing conclusions. Architecturally, Scheffler found the city devoid of any properly urban physiognomy. In contrast to the French capital, with its grand design of boulevards, parks, and public monuments, its ordered but dramatic vistas, Berlin was shapeless, confused, and arbitrary. It had grown piece by piece, without any sense of the whole, without any larger urbane vision of what a city should be. Most of its radial arteries, according to Scheffler, tended to “disappear into a tangle of streets on the periphery of the old city, before they have reached its center.” There was but one axis of orientation—Unter den Linden. It alone led to the core of the city, and yet it ended drearily in the New Market like a dead-end street.⁸ And like Huard, Scheffler found Berlin’s population graceless and uncultured: “Nine-tenths of the urban population makes an impression of hopeless inferiority,” he lamented. “Not a trace of the born gentleman does one find in the modern Berliner. At times it seems as if the entire male population consisted of building contractors and their assistants.”⁹ This was a colonial population, “dull and dreary, which . . . had streamed into the city from the eastern plains, lured by the promise of Americanism.”¹⁰

What made Berlin so ugly in the eyes of cultivated observers was above all its flagrant modernity. Even a contemporary Baedeker guide to the city commented that in its visual aspect Berlin suffered from this condition, since “three-quarters of its buildings are quite modern,” resulting in “a certain lack of historical interest.”¹¹ This condition was due to Berlin’s extraordinary growth: it had burgeoned from a relatively sleepy town of 170,000 inhabitants in 1800 to a city of nearly two million only a century later.¹² In the views of most observers, according to Georg Hermann, Berlin was “in a state of becoming, in constant transformation, and for that reason has as yet no physiognomy.”¹³ Huard described it as “new, clean, and devoid of character, completely new, too new, newer than any American city, newer than Chicago, the only city in the world with which one can compare it in terms of the incredible rapidity of its growth.”¹⁴ Scheffler, too, found Berlin distressingly American in yet other ways: in its diverse migrant population, its robust materialism, its lack of culture, and, for better or worse, its pioneer spirit. It had, he declared, “literally become like a colonial city, like . . . the American and Australian cities that arose deep in the bush.”¹⁵ Completing this unappealing urban picture was Berlin’s failure to accommodate its expanding population: the city’s growth had brought with it scandalous housing conditions—the worst in Europe after Budapest—a situation which led the architectural critic Werner Hegemann to dub it the “largest tenement city in the world.”¹⁶

Berlin’s abrupt genesis into a modern metropolis is undoubtedly a central factor in the history of its representation—and, for long periods, its neglect—in the visual arts. The charm of the pre-industrial city had attracted architectural painters such as Eduard Gärtner (1801-77), best known for his gracious views of the official face of Berlin. But as Berlin’s character changed, as it grew into a modern industrial city, it seemingly became, in the eyes of its major artists, a subject unworthy of representation. Adolph Menzel (1815-1905), the greatest

6. Werner Hegemann, *Das steinerne Berlin: Geschichte der grössten Miethasernenstadt der Welt* (Berlin: Verlag Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1930), p. 13.

7. Karl Scheffler, *Berlin: Ein Stadtschicksal*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1910), p. 200. Hereafter cited as Scheffler 1910.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 55ff.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

11. Karl Baedeker, *Berlin and its Environs: Handbook for Travellers* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1903), p. 51.

12. In 1800 Berlin had a population of 172,122, including 25,221 military personnel. By 1849, fifteen years after the beginning of Berlin’s industrialization, the population had reached 412,154. This figure had exactly doubled twenty-two years later when Berlin became the capital city of the new German Reich with 826,000 inhabitants. By 1895 there were nearly 1.7 million people living in Berlin; in 1905 the figure was 2,040,148. Population figures taken from Wolfgang Ribbe, ed., *Geschichte Berlins* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1987), 1:413; 2:661, 697. Hereafter cited as Ribbe.

13. Georg Hermann (see note 1), p. 1101.

14. Huard, p. 33.

15. Scheffler 1910, p. 17.

16. In 1905, for example, over half of Berlin’s two million inhabitants lived in dwellings averaging between three and thirteen occupants per heated room. (Forty-two percent of the population lived in one-room dwellings, seventy-five percent in dwellings with two rooms or less.) Berlin had the worst housing conditions of any city in Europe except for Budapest, but masked this condition with the ornate, eclectic facades of four- and five-story buildings. See the data reproduced in Hegemann (see note 6), plates 4, 5.

Berlin painter of the nineteenth century, produced several strikingly modern images of the city in the 1840s, but he rarely chose it as a motif thereafter, except in depicting events of an official nature.¹⁷ I have already noted the neglect of Berlin by its leading impressionist painters. It was not until expressionism, in the years just prior to the outbreak of World War I, that Berlin was embraced as a major theme in the visual arts.

As Jost Hermand has recently observed, expressionism—in literature and in the visual arts—was “the first real urban art in Germany, and for that reason found its logical center in Berlin.”¹⁸ The two major painters of urban life identified with this movement—Ludwig Meidner and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—spent their most productive years in Berlin. It was Kirchner, however, who was justly recognized very early on as *the* artist who best captured the exhilarating *Hektik* of the city during this period. “No other artist experienced the metropolis Berlin, as it was in the last years before the War, so intensely, with every fiber of his being, as did Kirchner,” wrote Curt Glaser in the 1920s. “Beyond the ephemeral charm . . . of modish elegance he sensed plastic form in the life of the metropolitan street.”¹⁹ But Kirchner and Meidner were by no means the first to discover the city: Liebermann, Corinth, and Slevogt may have ignored the urban landscape of their city, but there were lesser painters, associated like these three with the Berlin Secession, who made it their subject as early as the 1880s.

2. Representations of the city by the artists of the Secession

Among Berlin painters of his generation, Hans Baluschek best captured that considerable segment of the city’s life which most of his contemporaries preferred to ignore, an urban reality which they considered too ugly and too banal to paint. Baluschek’s importance in this regard was grasped early on by the critic

17. *The Berlin-Potsdam Railway* (1847), which shows a distant panorama of the city with a steaming locomotive in the foreground is one example; the best known is Menzel’s unfinished painting inspired by the 1848 Revolution, *The Lying-in-State of the Dead of March 1848* (fig. 42). Although it is in its subject a modern “history painting,” its manner of composition and treatment of the subject anticipate French impressionism. For illustrations, see the exhibition catalogue *Menzel der Beobachter*, ed. by Werner Hofmann (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1982), pp. 38, 83. Significantly, the Menzel paintings which best capture the texture of everyday urban life are scenes of Paris, a city in which modernity presented a more aesthetically pleasing aspect.
18. Jost Hermand, “Das Bild der ‘grossen Stadt’: im Expressionismus,” in Klaus Scherpe, ed., *Die Unwirklichkeit der Städte: Grossstadtdarstellungen zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1988), p. 65.
19. Curt Glaser, *Die Graphik der Neuzeit: Vom Anfang des XIX. Jahrhunderts bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923), p. 540.



Fig. 55: Hans Baluschek, *Noon at Borsig*, ca. 1910/11, oil on canvas, Kunstamt Kreuzberg, Berlin.

Hans Mackowsky, who wrote in 1902: "What he is to us today, that he will remain for all times: the painter of that Berlin which became a metropolis overnight, but which, like a lucky speculator, lacks the breeding and culture to play the new role with decorum, without meanness."²⁰

Like so many of those who swelled Berlin's population in the Wilhelmine era, Hans Baluschek came from the east, from Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland). In the mid-1890s, after five years of training at the Berlin Academy, he quickly established himself as the painter of the quotidian life of the working class and petty bourgeoisie who lived and worked on the edge of the expanding city. *Noon at Borsig* (fig. 55), although dating from ca. 1910, could easily be from the 1890s, for his work changed little. As is common in Baluschek's subjects evoking the hardships of the working class, it is a bleak wintry scene. At three minutes before twelve, wives, mothers, and children, bearing baskets containing simple repasts, await the lunch pause of the workers in the courtyard of the Borsig engine works in Tegel, to the north of the city.²¹ *Weissbier Idyll* (fig. 56), on the other hand, is a typical Baluschek image of the simple pleasures in Berlin's outer districts. Approaching caricature, yet without condescension, Baluschek portrayed a pair of *Kleinbürger*, dressed in their Sunday best, enjoying a distinctive Berlin specialty in a beer garden, as the woman plucks the petals of a forget-me-not.

Baluschek's figure compositions, which often suffer from an excess of well-meaning sentiment toward his subjects and frequently degenerate into the anecdotal, do not have the expressive power of the early Käthe Kollwitz (who was also inspired by the proletariat without, however, sharing Baluschek's interest in capturing the local color of the Berlin milieu). Nor did Baluschek have Kollwitz's technical gifts and formal strength. The young Max Beckmann, who admired certain aspects of Baluschek's work, regretted that he wasn't a better painter. Writing of a typical Baluschek scene of a dance hall on the edge of the city, he mused: "If only it had been painted with a little more temperament the whole thing would have been like an image from van Gogh's sphere of feeling. It's a shame that as a painter the fellow is such a Philistine."²²

It was as a painter of industrial landscape, above all of railroads, that Baluschek revealed his greatest strength. The son of a locomotive engineer, he was again and again drawn to this industrial motif. *The Railroad Station* (fig. 57), unfortunately lost in World War II, is one of his most successful and remarkable images.²³ Eschewing the aestheticizing qualities of Monet's *Gare St.-Lazare* series of a quarter-century earlier, Baluschek rendered an extraordinary industrial landscape of locomotives and freight cars, factories and tenements—a vast panorama choked with steam and smoke, from which every trace of unspoiled nature has been purged. As an image of industry, one observer rightly placed it in the lineage of Menzel's famous *Iron Rolling Mill* of 1875.

The Homeless (cat. no. 115), a work of 1919 documenting the desperate conditions in postwar Berlin, reveals how Baluschek remained true to the spirit of his early work throughout the ascendancy of expressionism. It was a spirit which would at that time, with the rise of the New Objectivity, become a dominant tendency in the art of the Weimar Republic.

Baluschek's proletarian subject matter and his social engagement made him an atypical member of the Berlin Secession, although he was one of its founding members and was elected to its governing body in 1908. As previously noted, the major painters of the Secession—Liebermann, Corinth, and Slevogt—ignored the urban landscape of the city in which they worked. Walter Leistikow, another leading member and one of the strongest painters in the organization, did draw his motifs from Greater Berlin, but preferred to paint suburban lakes such as

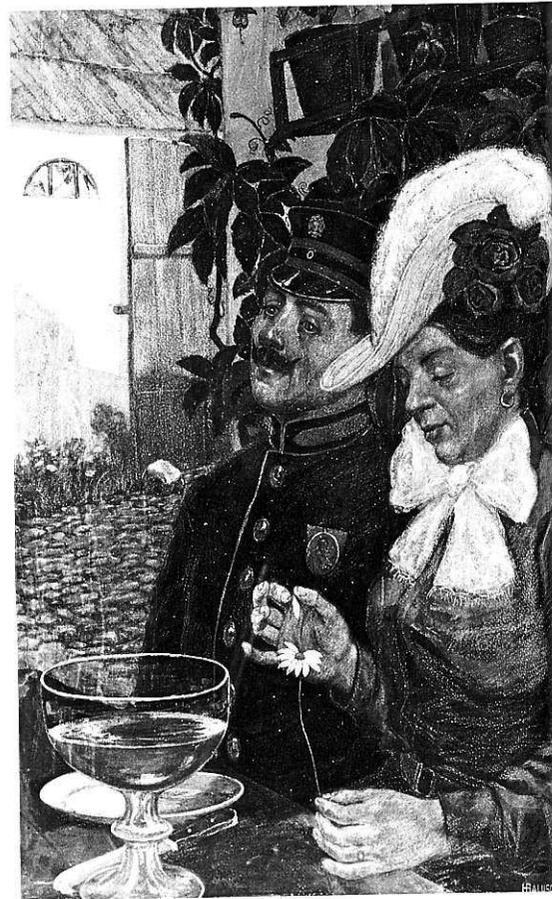


Fig. 56: Hans Baluschek, *Weissbier Idyll*, ca. 1902, pastel, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin.

20. Hans Mackowsky, "Hans Baluschek," *Kunst und Künstler* 1 (1902/03): 338.

21. August Borsig built the first factory in Berlin in the 1830s, and in 1839 produced the first locomotive built in Germany. By the end of the nineteenth century, the concern was producing a variety of machines. In 1898 the Borsig Works moved from Moabit to the outlying village of Tegel (today one of the districts of West Berlin). Cf. Annemarie Lange, *Das Wilhelminische Berlin: Zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Novemberrevolution* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1967), pp. 120ff.

22. Quoted from Margrit Bröhan, *Hans Baluschek: 1870-1935* (Berlin: Bröhan-Museum, 1985), p. 59.

23. It was also very well received in the 1904 Secession. See *ibid.*, pp. 80ff.

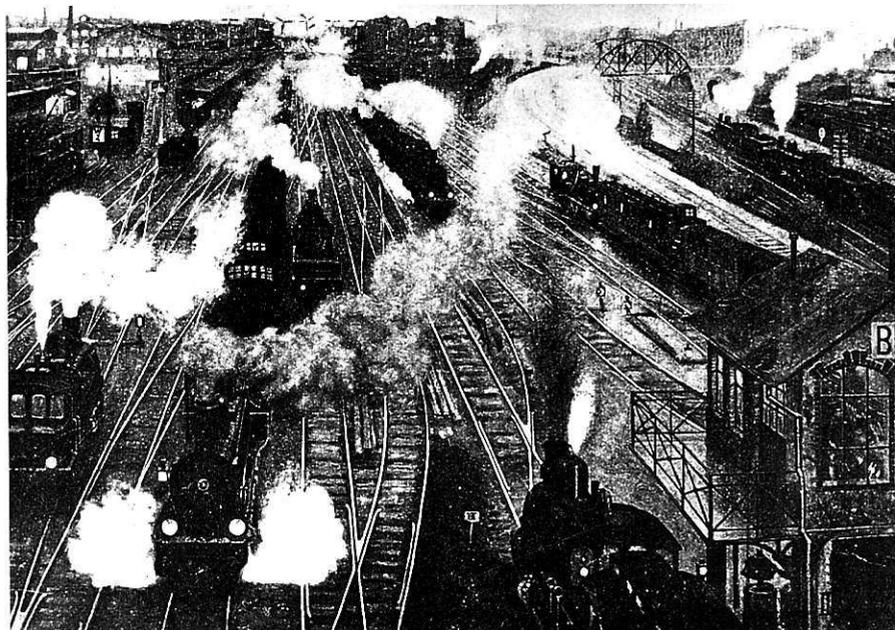


Fig. 57: Hans Baluschek, *The Railroad Station*, 1904, oil on canvas (?), whereabouts unknown.

Grunewaldsee or Schlachtensee (cat. no. 20). He rendered them not as the popular recreational areas which they were, located on the edge of residential neighborhoods and offering restaurants and boats for hire (what Manet or Monet would have done with such motifs!), but as remote natural sanctuaries unspoiled by human presence.²⁴ His style, too, with its cool, melancholy palette and flattened shapes silhouetted by twilight, seems appropriate to this imagery. Unlike so many of his Secessionist colleagues, who practiced a German version of impressionism, Leistikow was closer to the more rarefied decorative values of *Jugendstil*.

Among the Secessionists there were a few other painters who took the city as their subject, but their work generally presents a different Berlin from Baluschek's. They usually chose their motifs either from Berlin-Mitte—Unter den Linden, Leipzigerstrasse, and Friedrichstrasse—or from the fashionable western districts of the city. The most important of these artists was Lesser Ury. Like Baluschek and Corinth, he came to the city from the eastern provinces, from a predominantly Jewish village in what is today Poland (in the vicinity of Poznan). After the death of his father, his mother moved with her children to Berlin in the early 1870s, just as it had become the capital of the newly unified nation. Before the end of the decade, Ury left the city, while still in his teens, and spent brief periods in Düsseldorf, Brussels, and Paris, devoting himself to painting.²⁵ It was in Paris that he was first drawn to urban subjects, and there he painted his first street scene, a foggy avenue by night, illuminated by lanterns.²⁶

When Ury resettled in Berlin in 1887, he rediscovered such motifs, and they remained his specialty until his death. The city had grown dramatically during his absence—its population now numbered nearly 1.5 million—and in *At the Friedrichstrasse Station* (cat. no. 108), painted just after his return in 1888, he depicted one of the more conspicuous products of that growth. It had been opened only six years earlier as part of the municipal rail network (Stadtbahn), which linked the eastern and western halves of the city.²⁷ One can sense the influence of French impressionism in this image of nocturnal urban spectacle, with its seemingly random composition and its avoidance of anecdote. But it is not the motifs of industrial progress that are the focus of this picture, as they are in Baluschek's *Railroad Station* of 1904. The locomotive, in the distance, is

24. Cf. Baedeker (see note 11), p. 185f., who mentions restaurants at both lakes and boats for hire at the Schlachtensee.

25. Joachim Seyppel, *Lesser Ury: Der Maler der alten City—Leben, Kunst, Wirkung* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1987), pp. 30ff. et passim.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 47f. and cat. no. 18 (1882).

27. See Michael Erbe, "Berlin im Kaiserreich (1871-1918)," in Ribbe 2:734 (see note 12).



Fig. 58: Lesser Ury, *Berlin Street Scene (Leipzigerplatz)*, 1898, oil on canvas, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin.

partially obscured by its own steam; the station itself is summarily indicated. Here it is above all the wintry nocturnal *Stimmung*, with luminous street lamps, clouds of steam, snowflakes flickering in the dark, that interests Ury—it is the magical transforming effect of the night and of weather on the city. More frequently, Ury combined these nocturnal effects with glistening rain-soaked pavement, as in his *Berlin Street Scene (Leipzigerplatz)* of 1898 (fig. 58), adding a further air of enchantment. A Ury from 1925, *Nollendorf Platz by Night*, shows how faithfully—and agreeably—he pursued this impressionist formula right into the Weimar era.

This “impressionist” aesthetic found verbal expression in the writings of August Endell, best known today as a Jugendstil designer. Like Scheffler and so many others of refined aesthetic sensibility, Endell found the modern architecture of Berlin, including the Friedrichstrasse Station, “*abscheulich*” (abominable). But in the evening, he wrote, when the buildings became darkened masses and the street lamps were lit, the ugliness of the city was redeemed: Berlin was transfigured into the setting for “a fairy tale more colorful and charming than any we were told as children.”²⁸ Weather had the same transfiguring effect: amid the graceless new urban landscape, “in these dreadful heaps of stone, beauty is alive. Here, too, there is nature, there is landscape. The changing weather, the sun, the rain, the fog form out of what is hopelessly ugly an exquisite beauty.”²⁹

Scheffler, too, found consolation in such impressionistic transfigurations. Berlin’s very ugliness intensified those rare aesthetic pleasures to be found in it, he declared. “The less pleasure one derives from the architectural aspect, the

28. August Endell, “Abendfarben,” *Die neue Gesellschaft*, 1905, p. 82. I am grateful to John Czaplicka for calling this article to my attention and making a photocopy of it available to me. These observations were further developed three years later in Endell’s book, *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt* (Stuttgart, 1908; reprint, Berlin: Archibook Verlag, 1984). In that book he specifically described the poetic effects of twilight from the platform of the Friedrichstrasse Station, when one could see little of the architecture, and could concentrate on the shimmering color reflections on the glass panels (p. 41 in the 1984 edition).

29. Endell, *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt*, p. 34. In this discussion of the impressionist vision of Berlin I am indebted to John Czaplicka’s unpublished dissertation, “Prolegomena to a Typology of Grossstadt Imageries: The Pictorial Imagery of Berlin, 1870-1930” (Universität Hamburg, 1984), pp. 217ff.

more one feels repulsed by the pervasive artificiality, all the more passionately does one grasp toward the cosmic beauty of light and air."³⁰ Correspondingly, we actually see relatively little of Berlin in Ury's work; it was precisely these transfigurations of the city which provided the impulse to his art.

In his striking *Railroad Tracks in North Berlin* (cat. no. 19), of ca. 1895, Franz Skarbina carried out such an impressionist transfiguration on a motif closer to Baluschek—a weary proletarian couple making their way by night on a bridge traversing a vast rail yard. Unlike Baluschek's uncompromising *The Railway Station*, this sober industrial landscape is barely intelligible in the darkness; and the motif is transformed by the nocturnal spectacle of the city in the distance—a relatively new visual experience made possible by dramatic progress in the technology of electricity, which at just this time was transforming Berlin into a "city of light."³¹

Such impressionistic images of Berlin, with their suppression of factual detail, form a striking contrast to Julius Jacob's earlier, painstakingly naturalistic images of the city in neutral daylight, of which his *Wilhelmplatz* of 1886 (cat. no. 11) is a fine example. Here the buildings, including the newly opened Hotel Kaiserhof to the right, are rendered with a scrupulous detail reminiscent of Bernardo Bellotto. Jacob's unashamed delight in the physiognomy of the capital city—so atypical among the Berlin artists of his time—seems to reflect the brash self-confidence of the "New Reich."

During the mid-1890s there was a foreign artist working in Berlin who deserves mention in this discussion of urban iconography—Edvard Munch.³² He lived in the capital intermittently between 1892 and 1895, and again in 1901-02 and 1907-08. During the 1890s, he was part of a circle which included Ibsen, Strindberg, and Richard Dehmel, and produced some of his best work in Berlin, although he did not take up the city as a motif. His subject matter during these extraordinarily fertile years was to a large extent a reworking of past experience in the form of concentrated, simplified memory images (cat. nos. 13-18, 110-112). One of these, inspired by a painful experience of 1890, was a painting of the main thoroughfare in Kristiania (as Oslo was then called), *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1893), here shown in a unique lithographic impression (cat. no. 13).³³ In this icon of collective anxiety in a city street, Munch left the psychologically detached urban iconography of the French impressionists far behind. Obviously, the work is equally far removed from the aestheticizing veils of the Berlin Secessionists.

Although welcomed by some of the city's progressive painters, Munch had no visible impact on their work. This odd circumstance may be explained by a time warp: he had been in Paris, where he had assimilated certain tendencies of post-impressionism, while the most progressive Berlin painters, on the other hand, were just coming to grips with impressionism. In their gingerly approach to modern life, the Berlin impressionists were just discovering subjects which had been dealt with in France in the 1860s, while in France, on the other hand, impressionism belonged to the past. There was by now a strong Symbolist tendency characterized by anti-naturalist formal practices and a development beyond the iconography of everyday life toward giving visual form to inner experience.

But Munch's work did not remain without resonance in Germany; it became an important stimulus to the next generation—the expressionists. His art was a major formative influence on the early art of Die Brücke, particularly that of Kirchner.³⁴ The first of Kirchner's urban street scenes, painted in Dresden,³⁵ was heavily indebted to Munch, and it served as the prototype for the great series of Berlin street scenes of 1913-14, which will be discussed later in this essay.

30. Scheffler 1910, pp. 201f.

31. Berlin was one of the world's leading centers of the electrical industry, and in the 1880s became a leader in the generation of electric power. The electrification of street lighting began in that decade, and in 1894, just before Skarbina painted this nocturnal scene, a decisive reduction in the cost of electric current stimulated a greater use of electricity. See Erbe, in Ribbe 2:713 (see note 27). See also Lange, p. 126.

32. In September 1892 the then little known Norwegian painter had been invited by the Verein Berliner Künstler to mount a solo exhibition in the rotunda of the association's headquarters. Munch was but a name to the members, but when the show opened, conservative members of the group were outraged by Munch's paintings, and pressed for a vote to have the exhibition closed, which carried by a majority of 120 to 105 or 104. This action stimulated the first rumblings of secession amidst a faction of the membership which included Liebermann, Skarbina, and Leistikow. The *succès de scandale* was widely covered in the German press, and made Munch, in Lovis Corinth's words, "the most famous man in Germany." For a detailed account of the incident and its aftermath, see Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 50ff.

33. Cf. Reinhold Heller, *Munch: His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 132f. As was so often the case with Munch, the print was a reworking of an earlier painting, dating from 1893 and bearing the same title.

34. See Donald Gordon, "Kirchner in Dresden," *Art Bulletin* 48 (1966): 335ff.

35. *Street*, painted in 1908, and today in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

3. Expressionism: Ludwig Meidner's images of the urban "Heimat"

In 1917, in a newspaper article on the "artistic discovery of the big city," Emil Waldmann proposed that what distinguished the expressionist approach to the urban landscape from that of the impressionists was that the former did not seek "to obscure its ugliness with light and color; rather, they have elevated precisely this ugliness to its characteristic feature."³⁶ This essentially negative view of the expressionist representation of the city, above all of Berlin, has become the dominant one in the art-historical literature since World War II. Art historians, like their colleagues in German literary studies of this period, have tended to see in the artistic treatment of Berlin symptoms of "ein Leiden an der Stadt," a chronic state of suffering and alienation brought on by urban experience.³⁷

In art and literature there was indeed an intensified responsiveness to the city: that "blasé outlook," which, according to the sociologist Georg Simmel, the metropolitan type adopted as a defense against "the profound disruptions with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it," was shed as a stultifying bourgeois characteristic.³⁸ Now the extremes of Berlin were-celebrated in a liberation of feeling and instinct. It is true that one product of this intensity was an overtly apocalyptic imagery in the verbal and visual representations of the city—verses such as Georg Heym's "Umbra vitae" and Jakob van Hoddis's "Weltende" (End of the World) are classic literary examples.³⁹ This foreboding aspect, however, has perhaps been overemphasized, leading many commentators to caricature the relationship of the pre-war expressionist generation to Berlin as a wholly negative one.

This has generally been true of the literature on Ludwig Meidner.⁴⁰ He has been viewed almost uniformly as a painter in whom urban alienation was heightened to a form of hysteria. Yet, even as he was producing the drawings and paintings which have inspired such commentary, he published a rhapsodic text—"Anleitung zum Malen von Grossstadtbildern" (Directions for Painting the Big City)—which reads throughout like a paean to the metropolis. Karl Scheffler had declared that "one can establish every kind of relationship to Berlin, it is only loving the city that is impossible";⁴¹ now, in Scheffler's magazine, *Kunst und Künstler*, Meidner proclaimed that that, too, was possible, and he exhorted his fellow artists to embrace their beloved: "We must finally begin to paint our homeland [*Heimat*], the metropolis, for which we have an infinite love."⁴² To call the city "Heimat" was to suggest that it had become humanized, that its inhabitants had put down roots and were establishing an urban culture, that Berlin was moving beyond the status of Scheffler's culture-less "Kolonialstadt" of the uprooted.

More significantly, in contrast to the impressionist vision of Scheffler or Endell, the beauty of the metropolis for Meidner was to be found not in the transfiguring effects of natural light and atmosphere, but precisely in what was not natural: in the fabricated environment of the city—the "tumultuous streets, the elegance of iron suspension bridges, the gasometers . . . the howling colors of the autobusses and express locomotives, the rolling telephone wires, the harlequinade of the advertisement pillars."⁴³ Meidner condemned the impressionistic Paris scenes of Monet and Pissarro; they had painted urban architecture as they painted brooks, and boulevards as if they were flower beds. "A street," Meidner insisted, "is composed not of tonal values, but is a bombardment of whizzing rows of windows, of rushing beams of light between vehicles of many kinds, of a thousand leaping spheres, tatters of people, advertisements and droning, formless masses of color."⁴⁴ This urban environment was a product of mathematics, the creation of the engineer. Light remained a major concern

36. Emil Waldmann, "Die künstlerische Entdeckung der Grossstadt," *Vossische Zeitung*, December 2, 1917, Morgenblatt, no. 615. I use the term "expressionism" here for the sake of convenience; it should be understood as synonymous with "German avant-garde" for the period from roughly 1910 to 1920.

37. I have taken the phrase from Andreas Freisfeld's study of the response to urbanization in German literature, *Das Leiden an der Stadt: Spuren der Verstädterung in deutschen Romanen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne/Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1982).

38. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. by Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 325f., 329. Simmel's essay, which at the time was identified with the "impressionist" experience of the city, was first published in 1903.

39. The German texts and English translations can be found in *Twentieth Century German Verse*, ed. by Patrick Bridgwater (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), pp. 84, 112ff.

40. The major studies are: Thomas Grochowiak, *Ludwig Meidner* (Recklinghausen: Verlag Aurel Bongers, 1966); J. P. Hodin, *Ludwig Meidner: Seine Kunst, seine Persönlichkeit, seine Zeit* (Darmstadt: Justus von Liebig Verlag, 1975); Victor Miesel, "Ludwig Meidner," in *Ludwig Meidner: An Expressionist Master*, exhibition catalogue (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1978); G. Leistner, *Idee und Wirklichkeit: Gehalt und Bedeutung des urbanen Expressionismus in Deutschland, dargestellt am Werk Ludwig Meidners* (Frankfurt am Main/Bern/New York: Peter Lang, 1986).

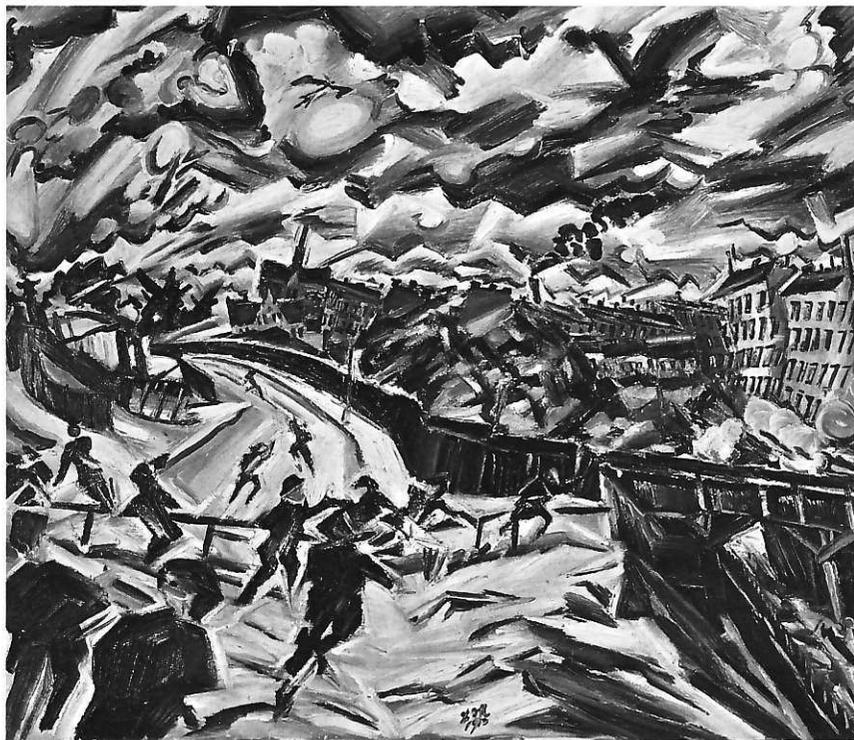
41. Scheffler 1910, p. 265.

42. Ludwig Meidner, "Anleitung zum Malen von Grossstadtbildern," originally published in *Kunst und Künstler* 12 (1914), 299ff., here and elsewhere quoted from Grochowiak, pp. 78ff. August Endell had already called Berlin "Heimat" in 1908. See August Endell, *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt* (see note 28), pp. 18f.

43. Meidner, in Grochowiak, p. 80.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Fig. 59: Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913, oil on canvas, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Clifford Odets.



(above all electric light); however, it did not soften objects, but was itself transformed by the movement of the city. Meidner's rhetoric is clearly indebted to the texts of the Italian Futurists, which had been published in German translation by 1912, but he looked not to *their* paintings but to Robert Delaunay's cubistic images of the Eiffel Tower as a model of a truly urban art grounded in a new perceptual experience of the modern city.⁴⁵

The relationship between this euphoric text and Meidner's art is problematic. Like the manifestoes of the Futurists, the tone of the article is thoroughly celebratory, without evidence of the *Angst* or of the "apocalyptic" vision which most commentators have found in Meidner's paintings and drawings during the years 1912-14. But it is these images, not Meidner's declaration of an "infinite love" for the urban *Heimat*, which most commentators have taken as expressions of the artist's true attitude toward Berlin, and little attempt has been made to reconcile these two visions. It is symptomatic of this apparent conflict that Thomas Grochowiak, in his pioneering monograph on Meidner, reproduced this text as a chapter in itself, and made no effort even to relate it to his art, which, like most commentators, he consistently read in apocalyptic terms.⁴⁶

Recent scholarship has shown the way toward a resolution of this apparent contradiction. One important discovery concerns the titles of Meidner's urban compositions from the period 1912-14, most of which today have expressly apocalyptic references. An inventory compiled by Meidner in 1915 and published in 1973 contained no such titles, and it is now evident that he retitled many works: sometime prior to his traveling retrospective of 1963-64, he thus converted them into "apocalyptic landscapes," seeking to capitalize retroactively, it seems, on a prophetic gift which was confirmed by two World Wars.⁴⁷ Many paintings which had titles referring to specific motifs in Berlin, such as *At Halensee Station* (fig. 59), became "*Apocalyptic Landscapes*," blurring the distinctions between them and paintings of a more fantastic, visionary, and—admittedly—often apocalyptic nature, some of which occur in generic urban settings.

45. For illustrations, see Gustav Vriesen and Max Imdahl, *Robert Delaunay: Light and Color* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), pp. 23, 27, 31. On Delaunay's importance for Meidner and the Berlin avant-garde generally, see Thomas Gaehtgens, "Delaunay in Berlin," *Delaunay und Deutschland*, ed. by Peter-Klaus Schuster (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1985), pp. 264-84.

46. Grochowiak, pp. 78ff. Leistner (pp. 144ff.) finds a relationship between the visual effects described in the text and certain works of Meidner, but declares that the text is not a programmatic key to Meidner's work. J. P. Hodin does not even mention Meidner's essay.

47. The diary entry was published in L. Kunz, ed., *Ludwig Meidner: Dichter, Maler und Cafés* (Zurich: Verlag die Arche, 1973), pp. 48f. Cf. also Miesel, pp. 6f., and Leistner, pp. 118f.

A work like *At Halensee Station*, Victor Miesel contends, “may not seem at all terrifying” if one “ignores for a moment the catastrophic history of modern Germany.” Such a painting is “no more apocalyptic than Boccioni’s *Laugh* or Balla’s *Swifts*”; its “disintegrating forms have less to do with disaster than with futurism’s ‘whirling life of fever and speed.’”⁴⁸ Moreover, this remarkable work relates very closely to the visual effects which Meidner described in his 1914 text:

Light seems to flow. It hacks things to pieces. . . . Whole complexes heave in light and appear transparent. . . . The sky presses in on us like a waterfall. Its fullness of light explodes what is below. Sharp contours stagger in the harsh glare. . . . The light brings all things into movement. The towers, houses, street lamps seem to hang or to swim.⁴⁹

Here, too, as the abundant but apt metaphors make clear, we are dealing with no less a transfiguration of the city than was the case with impressionism. It is, in reality, the same sun which shone on the impressionist city, but now it does not “naturalize” this constructed world; rather, light itself seems mechanized: it takes on the hectic, agitated qualities of the metropolis. Clearly, the sensations are intense, but they are not for that reason apocalyptic. As Miesel writes of this picture, it “can be experienced rather as a form of report on big city life, though it is life lived at fever pitch.”⁵⁰

Two works in the present exhibition belong in this same category of Berlin imagery: *The Church of the Good Shepherd* (cat. no. 34), a site near Meidner’s studio in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, and *Street with Pedestrian at Night* (cat. no. 116). The seemingly collapsing buildings on the periphery of the latter work should not necessarily be seen as inspired by a longing for cataclysmic destruction, but as an example of an optical effect which Meidner described in his text. Although houses in the distance may conform to traditional perspective, Meidner wrote, those

beside us—we sense them with only half an eye—seem to totter and collapse. Here lines which in reality are parallel shoot up steeply and intersect. Gables, chimneys, windows, are dark, chaotic masses, fantastically foreshortened, ambiguous.⁵¹

What is striking is the degree to which Meidner’s “apocalyptic” style is grounded in perception, in *optical* experience, not merely in psychological reactions to the urban environment. In short, there is a strongly mimetic impulse behind the cubistic distortion and emotional intensity of such images.

Although a drawing, the *Street with Pedestrian at Night* can be fruitfully compared with another nocturnal motif, Lesser Ury’s *Berlin Street Scene (Leipzigerplatz)* (fig. 58). In both, artificial light transfigures the street into a fantastic realm, but in Meidner’s drawing the light has an aggressive, angular quality. But this, too, should not necessarily be read as an attempt to render the city as a hostile, menacing force, but as an expression of a new aesthetic. “We today, contemporaries of the engineer, feel the beauty of straight lines, of geometric forms,” declared Meidner. “In the street, what triangles, polygons, and circles rush in upon us. . . . Even people and animals seem to be geometric constructions.”⁵²

Nevertheless, some works of Meidner are unquestionably apocalyptic. One such painting is *Apocalyptic City* (fig. 60), which shows burning buildings, ominous, exploding “signs in the sky,” and panicked crowds in the streets below. Yet such works—many of which present scenes in relatively open landscapes—form a different category from those based on Berlin motifs. Gerhard Leistner has persuasively argued that as a group these compositions are inspired by literary sources. Their inspiration was the early expressionist poetry of

48. Miesel, p. 8.

49. Meidner, in Grochowiak, p. 79.

50. Miesel, p. 9.

51. Meidner, in Grochowiak, p. 79.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Fig. 60: Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic City*, 1913, oil on canvas, Westfälisches Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster.



Meidner's contemporaries—Jakob van Hoddis, who was his close friend, Gottfried Benn, Georg Heym, Ernst Stadler—and older poets whom he admired such as Alfred Mombert and Walt Whitman, “poet of the foaming urban seas,” as Meidner called him.⁵³ Indeed, in Berlin Meidner was more closely associated with poets than with painters and made numerous portraits of them; he moved in expressionist literary circles at the Café des Westens. And in the nature of his imagery Meidner is nearer to these poets than to other Berlin painters of urban motifs such as Kirchner, Heckel, or the early Beckmann (cat. no. 30).⁵⁴

Leistner has sought to connect a number of Meidner's apocalyptic images with specific texts, but probably Meidner did not approach these sources as an illustrator. Rather, they served him as models of a hallucinatory urban imagery for which he sought a pictorial equivalent. One richly evocative verse by Mombert, for example, describes the distorting shadows of the night in a phantasmagorical imagery very much akin to Meidner's nocturnal cityscapes:

Nights. Deep chasms sundered the city. On the edges hung narrow labyrinthine streets of ominous, dangerous houses. Across decaying wooden footpaths rattling lanterns flickered.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, some of Meidner's images do seem so close to certain poems as to have been directly inspired by particular passages in them. *Apocalyptic City* presents an image which is strikingly similar to the scene conjured up in the opening verse of Heym's “*Umbra vitae*”:

People draw up in the streets and look upon the great portents in the sky, where comets with fiery noses steal threateningly round the serrated towers.⁵⁶

Meidner seems to have envied the relative ease with which poets—even mediocre poets—could conjure up strange worlds by the mere combination of words, seemingly at will, compared with the arduous material labors of the painter. He told Thomas Grochowiak that he would like to have been a poet, “but I could not rhyme.”⁵⁷ In one particularly revealing text, “*Salute of the Painter to the Poets*,” he seemed to admit his frustration with his more resistant, more physical medium:

Put away your brush, dauber. Enough of these paint-dripping hours, of leathery, ponderous canvases. Soar at last out of the cave of your garret into

53. Leistner, p. 124. Meidner's reference to Whitman occurs in his “Gruss des Malers an die Dichter,” *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1918), p. 76, hereafter cited as Meidner 1918. In the same passage he writes of Mombert: “Meteor above the mountains, so much loved by me and celebrated in a picture or two and many resonant drawings!” In 1912 Meidner made a painting of the poet seated in a landscape, *To Alfred Mombert* (Grochowiak, fig. 88), now lost. On Meidner and Mombert, cf. Leistner, p. 122.

54. Meidner had contact with Beckmann and the *Brücke* artists during these years. Beckmann was still working in an impressionist manner, and, according to Grochowiak (p. 37), Meidner found *Die Brücke* wanting because “das seelische Erleben” (a soulful experience of life) played no role in their art.

55. “Abende,” quoted from Dietrich Bode, ed., *Gedichte des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1974), p. 20 (my prose translation).

56. Quoted from Bridgwater (see note 39), p. 112.

57. Grochowiak, p. 47.

the clouded sky and salute the poets! . . . You poets . . . the painter salutes you. He is ashamed of his glutinous paints, of his mute, plodding craft. The painter does not find words adequate to pour out his admiration for you.⁵⁸

For Meidner, this admiration gave birth to literary ambitions, which he began to pursue during the War years when he was unable to draw and paint.⁵⁹ His writings took the form of an effusive, bombastic poetic prose, in which he clearly delighted in an extravagant proliferation of images which could not be equaled in painting; he also obviously relished evoking sensations of sound, smell, and touch which also lay beyond the capacities of the painter. Some of these traits are evident in the title essay of his collection *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* (A Sea of Stars in the Back of My Neck), published in 1918, in which Meidner described a walk through the city:

The city approaches. Already it crackles on my body. Its tittering sears my skin. I hear its explosions echoing into the back of my head.

The houses approach. Their catastrophes explode from the windows. Stairways silently crash. People laugh among the ruins. . . . The streets gradually become more slippery. Lanterns simply throw away their light rays and every one takes his share. . . . Gradually the streets become filled. The asphalt roars. Frightful turmoil. The noise of machines. . . . The guffaws of derailed streetcars, the sneezes of elderly ladies, and philosophical discussions of cobblers fill the space. . . .⁶⁰

If his "Directions for Painting the Big City" relates closely to Meidner's images of Berlin, this text on the other hand has much in common with—may indeed be seen as a verbal equivalent of—his visionary landscapes of the pre-War years. The structure of the text, with its jarring juxtapositions of bizarre images, also adopts the style, the so-called *Reihungsstil*, of the early expressionist poets whom Meidner so much admired.⁶¹ At the same time, the whimsical, sometimes even humorous imagery—also a feature of Hoddiss's "End of the World"—seems in places closer in spirit to the poetry of Arp than to that of Heym or Benn. Should Meidner's text perhaps be regarded above all as an exuberant play with language, as a mischievous dismantling of the rationalized urban milieu through the elastic power of words, rather than as an expression of any particular sentiment toward the city, such as a longing for destruction? In any case, the whimsy in such texts may prompt us to ask whether we have approached some of Meidner's "apocalyptic" images too earnestly.

There are several paintings, such as an *Apocalyptic Landscape* (*sic*) from 1913 (fig. 61), which seem clearly to contain a note of humor, deflating the bombastic rhetoric of the rest of the image. Here, along the bottom edge, the artist has painted an amusingly homely image of himself, bald and abundantly mustachioed, in an attitude which can only be described as a caricature of *Angst*, as he desperately flees from the cataclysm he has created with his brush.

It would be rash—and foolish—to claim that Meidner's fantastic pictorial imagery, with its often undeniably dark, disquieting content, was consistently the product of an ironic posture. Similarly, it would be extreme to argue that he produced such works only in emulation of the effects of expressionist poetry, without a deeper identification with its ominous imagery—even if there is an element of humor in some of them. But it is equally unwise to ignore the celebration of urban spectacle in Meidner's "Directions for Painting the Big City," or to explain it away as an imitation of futurist jargon or a mere list of formal recipes with no relation to his underlying attitude toward Berlin.⁶² Together, his texts and his art suggest that his relationship to this city was too complex to be reduced to the tiresome monomania of urban anxiety and alienation. Undoubtedly, alienation and anxiety were part of Meidner's experi-

58. "Gruss des Malers an die Dichter," in Meidner 1918, pp. 74f.

59. The first of these efforts was *Im Nacken das Sternemeer* (see note 53), followed by *Septemberschrei* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1920).

60. Meidner 1918, p. 27 (my translation).

61. On the "Reihungsstil," see Silvio Vietta, "Grossstadt-wahrnehmung und ihre literarische Darstellung: Expressionistischer Reihungsstil und Collage," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 48 (1974): 359ff.

62. Cf. Leistner, pp. 141f.

63. Quoted in Miesel, p. 33.
64. Quoted from Roy F. Allen, *Literary Life in German Expressionism and the Berlin Circles* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), pp. 206f.
65. Wolf-Dieter Dube, "The Artists Group *Die Brücke*," in *Expressionism: A German Intuition, 1905-1920* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1980), p. 101. Hereafter cited as Dube 1980.
66. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Alienation in Berlin: Kirchner's Street Scenes," *Art in America*, January 1983, p. 69.
67. Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 139. Hereafter cited as Gordon 1987. Kirchner commentators such as Ewald Rathke, Karlheinz Gabler, and Lucius Grisebach, who have refrained from this type of reading, have generally confined themselves to stressing the formal issues in Kirchner's street scenes. See Ewald Rathke, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Strassenbilder* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam Jun., 1969); Karlheinz Gabler, "Die Gemälde Ernst Ludwig Kirchners," in the exhibition catalogue *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1960); and E. L. Kirchner: *Zeichnungen* (Aschaffenburg: Museum der Stadt Aschaffenburg, 1980), pp. 21ff. See Grisebach's catalogue commentaries in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1880-1938* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1979), cat. no. 150, pp. 173ff. et passim, hereafter cited as Berlin 1979; and in particular his *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Grosstadtbilder* (Munich/Zurich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1979). Anton Henze's brief Kirchner monograph also belongs in this company: *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart/Zurich: Belser Verlag, 1980), pp. 37ff.



Fig. 61: Ludwig Meidner, *Apocalyptic Landscape*, 1913, oil on canvas, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Marvin L. Fishman, Milwaukee.

ence of the capital: in 1918, writing in the calmer surroundings of Aschaffenburg, he denounced Berlin as the "guillotine of all my hopes for joy," as a "painful net" in which he had been "trapped,"⁶³ and he vowed to live henceforth in the county. But a year later he was back in Berlin, where he stayed for sixteen years.

The dominant spirit behind Meidner's images of Berlin is perhaps captured in a later reminiscence of his nocturnal wanderings through the city with Jakob van Hoddis:

I have fond memories of the hours-long treks which we often took across Berlin at night. This great metropolis was the major experience of those days, and not only for me, born and raised in a small city, but also for Hoddis who was from Berlin. We left the Café des Westens after midnight and marched right off, smartly and somewhat briskly, through the streets, always following our noses. . . . We were 28 years old then and had a lot of endurance, which had not even run out by the time the sun came up. . . . We were so much in love with this city.⁶⁴

4. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's images of Berlin: "A new beauty"

Kirchner's images of Berlin have been widely interpreted in the same spirit as Meidner's. For Wolf-Dieter Dube the underlying theme of Kirchner's Berlin scenes is "the hectic and unnatural condition of the modern metropolis," revealing "the helpless compulsion, the desolation of the alienated man, which he was himself."⁶⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, in an article on Kirchner's street scenes entitled "Alienation in Berlin," declares these works "immediately recognizable as pictures of an unnatural, thoroughly dehumanized world."⁶⁶ And the late Donald Gordon, in his posthumously published study of expressionism, reaffirmed his earlier dark reading of Kirchner's city pictures, calling them images of "a lonely wasteland."⁶⁷

This dark view contrasts strikingly with the predominantly positive reading of these works before 1933. Paul Westheim characterized Kirchner's city images as



Fig. 62: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Circus Rider*, 1914, oil on canvas, The Saint Louis Art Museum, bequest of Morton D. May.

a “Symphonie der Grossstadt,” a symphony of the metropolis.⁶⁸ In 1920 Karl Scheffler, like others before him, stressed Kirchner’s affinity with the French impressionists, comparing him to Manet.⁶⁹ To be sure, this view can still be found occasionally in the Kirchner literature after 1945;⁷⁰ yet, on the whole, following the Second World War a very different Kirchner began to emerge in the critical and scholarly literature: a deeply alienated artist who viewed the city with anxiety and foreboding.⁷¹ Consequently, today his vision of Berlin appears to many viewers as akin to Meidner’s apocalyptic nightmares, Beckmann’s *Hell* (cat. no. 134), or the frenzied insanity of Grosz’s urban pandemonium.⁷²

Central to these dark interpretations of Kirchner’s urban imagery has been the distinctive style of his Berlin period. Compared to the fluid, curvilinear, fauve-inspired manner that dominated the Dresden period, Kirchner’s Berlin painting style is decidedly angular and more tautly schematic in composition. Forms and spaces are subject to often extreme distortions; pulled and stretched by compositional forces, bodies are drastically attenuated, horizontal planes are tilted up at steep angles (see *Nude Woman Combing her Hair*, cat. no. 36, and *Circus Rider*, fig. 62). Yet, for all the carefully calculated, often geometric rigor

68. Paul Westheim, *Helden und Abenteurer: Welt und Leben der Künstler* (Berlin: Verlag Hermann Reckendorf, 1931), p. 212. The characterization is, of course, inspired by Walter Ruttmann’s classic film of 1927, *Berlin, Die Symphonie einer Grossstadt*.

69. Karl Scheffler, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” *Kunst und Künstler* 18, no. 5 (1920): 217ff. Evidently, one of the first to make the connection was Wilhelm Hausenstein, in *Die bildende Kunst der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1914), p. 304. See also G. F. Hartlaub’s remarks on Kirchner, note 91, below.

70. One finds it in Will Grohmann’s monograph of 1958, *E. L. Kirchner* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958). It is significant in this regard that Grohmann had been a leading proponent of Kirchner’s art in the 1920s, publishing the first general monograph on the artist, *Das Werk Ernst Ludwig Kirchners* (Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1926). Annemarie Dube-Heynig, in her 1961 study of Kirchner’s graphic art, echoed Glaser in portraying the artist as the “chronicler of Berlin and its people” in the years before the Great War; Kirchner, she declared, was “the first to give form to lived experience of the large modern city.” See *E. L. Kirchner: Graphik* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1961), p. 49. Hereafter cited as Dube-Heynig 1961.

71. See Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1957), p. 139; Bernard S. Myers, *The German Expressionists: A Generation in Revolt* (New York: Praeger, 1957), pp. 131f.

72. There have been exceptions to this. Jost Hermand (see note 18), p. 64, has recently offered a fresh look at this issue. He writes, for example, that although Kirchner’s street scenes with prostitutes may have been shocking to bourgeois sensibilities, they are not “ripe for collapse (untergangreif) or apocalyptic.” Indeed, he suggests that, contrary to the conventional view, only Ludwig Meidner’s urban scenes truly fit into this category. Reinhold Heller has also taken a more nuanced look at Kirchner’s urban subjects. Although he does not focus on Kirchner’s Berlin imagery, he does write about his first major

Fig. 63: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Two Women on the Street*, 1914, oil on canvas, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf.



street scene, *The Street* (see note 35), executed in Dresden in 1908, and suggests that there are positive as well as negative elements, notably, “a fascination [with] . . . the city’s dynamism and intensified life.” “‘The City is Dark’: Conceptions of Urban Landscape and Life in Expressionist Painting and Architecture,” in Gertrud Bauer Pickar and Karl Eugen Webb, *Expressionism Reconsidered*, Houston German Studies, vol. 1 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979), pp. 50f.

73. See, for example, *Deutsche*, p. 65, and Gordon 1968, pp. 92ff.

74. Diary entry of 18 February 1926, *E. L. Kirchners Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften*, ed. by Lothar Grisebach (Cologne: DuMont, 1968), p. 128. Hereafter cited as *Davoser Tagebuch*.

75. E. L. Kirchner, “Über die Malerei,” text of 1913, in Berlin 1979 (see note 67), p. 67.

of their compositions, these pictures convey an effect of excited spontaneity through their rapidly brushed liquid pigment, set down with a nervous, energized graphic *facture* evocative of pastel. In the best of Kirchner’s Berlin compositions, such as *Two Women on the Street* (fig. 63) or *Belle-Alliance Platz* (Gordon 371, Nationalgalerie Berlin), this contrast, this sense of raw, animal energy harnessed by uncompromising pressures of pictorial design, produces a tension that is explosive. It is precisely this style which has been widely interpreted as the sign of an aggressively negative attitude toward the city.⁷³

Yet, Kirchner himself described his Berlin style not as an expression of his emotional estrangement from his motifs, but as an attempt to capture, in a carefully worked out composition, “the ecstasy of the initial perception.”⁷⁴ For Kirchner the city was, to be sure, a place of intense sensations, but, in marked contrast to his typical commentators, he consistently described those sensations in positive aesthetic terms. “The sensuous delight in what is seen (die sinnliche Lust am Gesehenen) is the origin of all plastic art from the beginning,” he wrote in 1913, near the peak of his Berlin period.⁷⁵ Indeed, his accounts of the artistic process are often overtly Dionysian; the “so-called distortions,” he wrote, “are

generated instinctively by the ecstasy of what is seen."⁷⁶ And there are paeans to the beauty of the modern city, as in a text of 1930:

The modern light of cities, in combination with the movement of the streets, continually gives me new stimuli. It spreads a new beauty out across the world, one which does not lie in details of the object.⁷⁷

He developed his style of the years 1913-14 out of "the perception of movement," he wrote.⁷⁸ And, in one of his most lucid statements on the novel character of urban perception, there is a vivid description of the complex, ever fluctuant tissue of visual reality in the modern city:

If we see a modern metropolitan street at night with its thousands of light sources, some of them colored, then we must realize that any objective [pictorial] construction is futile, since a passing taxi, a bright or dark evening dress transforms the entire laboriously achieved construction. If we consider the stimulating impact which is produced in us through the sight of unfamiliar effects and which is really the origin of the artist's impression, something quite different comes into being than an exact reconstruction.⁷⁹

At the same time this statement makes an important point that is crucial, I believe, for understanding Kirchner's style: *that the altered nature of modern perception renders traditional modes of representation inadequate*. Accordingly, Kirchner—like Meidner—had to find new means if he wished to render his experience in its fullness. The abstract nature of this pictorial sign is evident from the following Kirchner text, in which he referred to himself in the third person:

He discovered that the feeling that pervades a city presented itself in the qualities of lines of force (Kraftlinien). In the way in which groups of persons configured themselves in the rush, in the trams, how they moved, this is how he found the means to capture what he had experienced. There are pictures and prints in which a purely linear scaffolding with almost schematic figures nevertheless represents the life of the streets in the most vital way.⁸⁰

In his stress on the qualitative difference of modern urban perception and on the impossibility of rendering that experience by traditional naturalistic means, Kirchner recalls the Italian futurists. As already noted, their manifestoes were published in German (in *Der Sturm*), and their first exhibition, after opening in Paris, was shown in Berlin in March and April 1912, half a year after Kirchner had settled there.⁸¹ Fundamental to this sensation for both the futurists and Kirchner is the experience of movement. Kirchner's formulation is a retrospective one, but it nevertheless is strikingly close to the futurist language of that time. They wrote of translating the fluctuant object according to "the force lines (Linienkräften) which distinguish them," creating a picture that was "a synthesis of the various abstract rhythms of every object, from which there springs a font of pictorial lyricism hitherto unknown."⁸² Kirchner declared:

From [movement] comes the intensified feeling for life which is the origin of the work of art. A body in movement shows me many different aspects, these fuse within me to a *unified form*, to an inner image.⁸³

This artistic image is for Kirchner conditioned only partly by mimetic aims. Its "distortions" of natural form are determined by two factors. The first is a non-mimetic compositional logic through which the configurations of individual forms are radically simplified and altered to conform to an overall compositional schema: "The forms emerge and are transformed through working on the surface as a whole," Kirchner wrote in a text of 1920. "It is this that also explains the so-called distortions of the individual forms; the small must subordinate itself to

76. E. L. Kirchner to Eberhard Grisebach, 31 January 1918, as quoted by Hans Bolliger and Georg Reinhardt, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1880-1938: Eine biografische Text-Bild-Dokumentation," in Berlin 1979, p. 77.

77. Berlin 1979, p. 98. Unfortunately, the bulk of Kirchner's published statements on the art of his Dresden and Berlin periods dates from his later residence in Switzerland. Yet, with regard to urban experience, Berlin was clearly the reference, and Kirchner sometimes mentioned his Berlin cityscapes and street scenes in this context. While the later dates of these statements may place their reliability in question, it is striking that despite a wealth of letters and diary entries documenting periods of past and present anguish, such as the difficult war years, there is not a single negative statement about Berlin or urban experience, and there are on the other hand a number, spread over many years, which are positive.

78. Kirchner, "Die Arbeit E. L. Kirchners," published for the first time in E. W. Kornfeld, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Nachzeichnung seines Lebens* (Bern: Verlag Kornfeld & Co., 1979), pp. 332-44. The cited passage can be found on p. 339. The text dates from the mid-1920s. Hereafter cited as "Arbeit ELK."

79. *Ibid.*, p. 341.

80. "Das Werk," text of 1925, *Davoser Tagebuch*, p. 86.

81. In the catalogue of that exhibition, they declared that "there can be no modern painting without the starting point of an absolutely modern sensation." See "The Exhibitors to the Public," quoted from Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 294f.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 298. The shared concept of "lines of force" ("Kraftlinien" in Kirchner's text and "Linienkräften" in the original German translation of the futurist text) is especially striking.

83. Kirchner (1930), in Berlin 1979, p. 97. Emphasis added.

the large.⁸⁴ The second factor in these distortions is affective purpose, directed toward what Umberto Eco has called “programmed stimulation” of the viewer.⁸⁵ According to Kirchner, the goal of the artistic image (Kunstbild) is to produce in the viewer the interior image (Innenbild) of the artist, that psychological construct of sensual and emotional ecstasy which was the origin of the picture.⁸⁶ This result, Kirchner argued, cannot be achieved by a mimetic reconstruction of the original stimulus, but only by the production of “unfamiliar effects” which are truly “the origin of the artistic impression.”⁸⁷ “The lines of force,” intended to convey “the feeling that pervades a city,” would be an example of this. It is clear, then, that for all of their carefully calculated effects of spontaneity, the so-called distortions of Kirchner’s pictures should not be naively read as merely reactive—as symptoms of alienation, acts of aggression against a hostile milieu, or nightmarish visions of a collapsing world. Like the distortions of his contemporary, Matisse, these are aspects of a sophisticated aesthetic strategy.

But it is not Kirchner’s Berlin style alone that has inspired the negative readings of his urban imagery; his street scenes with prostitutes, widely regarded as personifications of urban decadence, have been seen as consummate expressions of the alienation Kirchner experienced in the city. This group of ten paintings, executed in 1913-14, rightly enjoys a privileged place in Kirchner’s oeuvre, but it has tended to be the dominant, occasionally even the exclusive focus in discussions of his images of Berlin. Yet these works were created within a period spanning less than a year, while there are other urban subjects which Kirchner drew and painted repeatedly between 1908 and 1915: parks and gardens, rows of houses and railroad bridges (cat. no. 39), dance halls and cafés (cat. nos. 37, 119), *variété* dancers and circus performers (fig. 62). These motifs tend to get perfunctory notice in the discourse on Kirchner’s urban anxiety, probably because such subject matter is difficult to reconcile with the currently prevalent “anxious” reading of his art.

Just as these subjects have been neglected, so have the texts which help to illuminate Kirchner’s attraction to them. Kirchner was as articulate about his subject matter as he was about his style, and while no text has come to light which supports the moralistic reading of his depictions of prostitutes, there are a number of sources which suggest that he saw his mission as an artist, at least during the decade he spent in Dresden and Berlin, as a commitment to an art based on direct experience, and this of necessity involved urban life. In an autobiographical text from the 1930s, Kirchner recalled how as a student in Munich, in 1904, he had found the Secessionists—the progressive German artists of that era—uninspiring because of their neglect “of the colorful, sunny life outside. And that was what I as a young student would so like to have seen in pictures, our life, movement, color. . . . And I attempted it, drew in the streets and squares, in restaurants and cafés.”⁸⁸ This same commitment to the vibrancy of contemporary life found expression in two Kirchner texts from the Berlin period. In the “Chronik der Brücke,” drafted in early 1913, Kirchner wrote that the goal of the Brücke artists was “to draw their stimulus for creation from life, and to subordinate themselves to lived experience [Erlebnis].”⁸⁹ And the brochure for the MUIM Institut (Institute for Modern Instruction in Painting), which Kirchner operated briefly with Pechstein in Berlin in 1911-12, declared: “The life of our new age [das neuzeitliche Leben] is the starting point of artistic creation.” The students were to be taught to draw and paint with new means in the new manner, “sketching from life.”⁹⁰

If one surveys Kirchner’s production in paintings, drawings, prints, and pastels from 1908 to 1914, the life of the “new age”—a certain segment of it, at any rate—is what one finds. Alongside the numerous motifs of nudes, in the

84. Kirchner, writing under the pseudonym “L. de Marsalle,” “Zeichnungen von E. L. Kirchner,” originally published in *Genius*, 1920, quoted in *Davoser Tagebuch*, p. 185.

85. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 203f.

86. See “Arbeit ELK,” p. 342.

87. *Ibid.*

88. This is taken from a “Lebensgeschichte” that Kirchner included in a letter to Carl Hagemann, 30 June 1937, quoted from Berlin 1979, p. 48.

89. “Chronik der Brücke,” quoted from Berlin 1979, p. 65. An English translation can be found in Chipp (see note 81), pp. 175-78.

90. The text of the brochure is reproduced in Karlheinz Gabler, ed., *E. L. Kirchner-Dokumente: Fotos, Schriften, Briefe* (Aschaffenburg: Museum der Stadt Aschaffenburg, 1980), p. 90. “Sketching from life” (Skizzieren nach dem Leben) should not be confused with what in English is called “life drawing,” or drawing from the nude, since there can be no semantic confusion in German, where the latter is “Aktzeichnen.” This, too, was central to Kirchner and Die Brücke, but that is not what he meant by “Skizzieren nach dem Leben.”

studio or bathing outdoors, which were important to his and the group's ideology of sexual liberation, the dominant subject matter is drawn from the life of the city. Moreover, the majority of Kirchner's urban motifs are the same ones of urban spectacle favored by some of the major French impressionists and post-impressionists.⁹¹ Curt Glaser wrote of him in 1923: "He loved the public places where people gathered, the street itself as well as places of nocturnal amusement, the café or the *Tingeltangel*. . . . Kirchner gave artistic form to this world."⁹² Kirchner, like his French precursors, chose "vulgar" entertainments which were genuinely popular; unlike opera or ballet with their courtly origins, they were both products and expressions of modern urban culture. As Peter Jelavich demonstrates in a forthcoming study, the content of these entertainments was explicitly affirmative of that modern Berlin that was ignored by artists and lamented by writers with more traditional aesthetic values.⁹³ In contrast to the cultivated visual arts, in which, as Georg Hermann lamented, the Berlin artist seemed ashamed of his city, these popular entertainments were at once a manifestation of the new urban culture and an explicit celebration of it. Moreover, the topics of the songs and skits described by Jelavich strikingly coincide with many of Kirchner's motifs, and it is arguable that he conceived of his art in the same spirit. It is precisely the harshly colorful aspects of the city in which Kirchner discovered a new beauty. He did not seek aesthetically to "redeem" such phenomena from their innate "ugliness" by transfiguring them according to impressionist criteria of beauty; his abstraction of the object aimed rather at capturing its raw vitalism. As Dube writes, Kirchner was drawn to "the music hall and circus . . . as expressions of intensified life."⁹⁴

But what of the prostitutes? How can one reconcile a positive reading of Kirchner's Berlin pictures with the subject matter of his most ambitious series of paintings from these years? Clearly they must be central to any reading of Kirchner's Berlin imagery and what it reflects of his attitude toward the city; for that reason I shall need to examine them in some detail. And, as already noted, these are the images that have been the focus of the discourse on urban alienation.⁹⁵ But can we be sure that Kirchner regarded his street scenes in this way? If we do accept this reading, we are faced with a contradiction between Kirchner's art during the Berlin period and what he and those closest to him wrote about it, then and later.⁹⁶ One cannot, to be sure, accept such sources uncritically, but where they appear to contradict one's own analysis neither should they be ignored.

There is also the problem of documentation concerning Kirchner's attitudes towards prostitutes: Kirchner's known writings and correspondence contain few comments on them. In none of them, however, is there any clear evidence of moral condemnation or of other attitudes attributed to him by the writers I have quoted. On the contrary, his remarks suggest not a revulsion toward the prostitute but a sympathy and perhaps even an identification with her.⁹⁷ But however one may interpret these documents, neither they nor any other known statement by Kirchner attest to a clear antipathy toward prostitutes.

If there is scant textual documentation of Kirchner's feelings towards prostitutes, he did write often in later life about the street scenes in which they appear, yet he never did so in the moralistic terms which have become the norm in the recent literature. On the contrary, he wrote about the sensory excitement of the street, about the problems of rendering such dynamism of movement in a static medium, about his geometrical compositional schemas.⁹⁸ This discrepancy between Kirchner's words and the ostensible content of these images was noted by Gordon, who seemed mildly puzzled that Kirchner wrote about these Berlin street scenes "more in esthetic than in ethical terms," while remaining

91. This iconographic parallel was noted by G. F. Hartlaub in 1920: "In their subject matter Kirchner, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, and Pechstein have long remained 'impressionists.'" Specifically referring to Kirchner, Hartlaub wrote: "Like his companion Pechstein, the autodidact [Kirchner] also comes out of an admiration for impressionism, above all in that movement's boldest and most daring expressions, in the drawings and prints of a Degas, Lautrec, . . . among others. He in particular has shown a fondness for impressionist subjects. . . ." G. F. Hartlaub, *Die neue deutsche Graphik*, *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit: Eine Schriftensammlung*, vol. 14 (Berlin: Erich Reiss Verlag, 1920), pp. 49f., 52f. This relationship was affirmed by other writers of the time, and has been reaffirmed in the Kirchner literature of our own era by Dube-Heynig, p. 54.

92. Glaser (see note 19), p. 540.

93. See Jelavich's forthcoming essay, "Modernity, Civic Identity and Metropolitan Entertainment: Vaudeville, Cabaret and Revue in Berlin, 1900-1933," in Haxthausen, Suhr and Weiss (see note at the beginning of this essay). He writes for example, that in one such revue, "Das muss man seh'n," presented in the Metropol Theater in 1907, "The majority of the numbers praised Berlin for its modernity. The Weltstadt was welcomed with open arms: its vitality, its hectic tempo, its commercialism and consumerism were hailed. In songs and skits, praise was lavished on new urban phenomena ranging from the rapid-transit *Hochbahn* to new forms of mass-cultural entertainment like the Lunapark, cinema and sports events."

94. Dube 1980 (see note 65), p. 98.

95. Wolf-Dieter Dube, borrowing a phrase from the novelist Otto Flake, calls these scenes expressions of the "lovelessness of all toward all" ("Kirchners Bildmotive in Beziehung zur Umwelt," in Berlin 1979, p. 13). For Gordon, Kirchner's prostitutes are "the unconscious agents of urban anxiety"; the street scenes reveal "an active distaste for the image of urban sin. . . . The Dresden champion of instinct in nature has become the Berlin critic of sex in the streets" (Gordon 1968, p. 92; Gordon, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: By Instinct Possessed," *Art in America*, November 1980, p. 89). Deutsche (pp. 69, 71), linking the street scenes with the spirit of Simmel's essay on prostitution (1907), attributes a more specific moral critique to Kirchner. In these works, she wrote, the artist "went beyond a mere depiction of alienation to observe its actual cause—the dominance of a money economy. . . . By choosing as his subjects prostitutes and their clients, Kirchner focused on the objectification of human relations inherent in economic exchange."

Fig. 64: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Street, Berlin*, 1913, oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

96. The artist's closest friend from these years, the art historian Botho Graef, described Kirchner's art of this period as inspired by a spirit of friendship toward the world. See Graef, "Über die Arbeit von E. L. Kirchner," originally published in 1919 as the foreword to the catalogue of a Kirchner exhibition held at the Galerie Ludwig Schames in Frankfurt, reprinted in Berlin 1979, p. 78. Since Graef died in 1917, the reference is clearly to the works of the artist's Berlin period.
97. Two of these sources date from the winter of 1915-16. Kirchner—ill, tormented by a pathological fear of being recalled to the military, and consequently unable to work—compared the precariousness of his own existence to that of the streetwalkers he painted. See Gordon 1968, p. 27. Kirchner's identification with the vulnerability of the whore to civil authority could have been nurtured by a traumatic incident of August 1914. En route back to Berlin from Fehmarn after war had broken out, Kirchner and his companion, Erna Schilling, were twice briefly detained by police under suspicion of being Russian spies. After this incident, Erna reported, Kirchner suffered from deep anxieties of being arrested again: he developed a phobia toward uniforms, and was afraid to go out of his studio, except at night. This marked the beginning of the psychological deterioration of his last years in Germany. See Kornfeld, pp. 54f., and Kirchner's own mention of the incident in "Arbeit ELK," *ibid.*, p. 337.
98. See above, notes 76, 77, 79, 80.
99. Gordon 1980 (see note 95), p. 95.
100. For an account of the development of prostitution in Berlin see Hans Ostwald, *Kultur- und Sittengeschichte Berlins* (Berlin-Grunewald: Verlagsanstalt Hermann Klemm A. G., n.d. [1924?]), pp. 613-52. For another informative contemporary source, see Robert Hessen, *Die Prostitution in Deutschland* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1910), particularly pp. 107-22.
101. Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe*, Publications of the Bureau of Social Hygiene (New York: The Century Company, 1920), p. 157. Flexner's book was first published in January 1914, and his account is based on the practice of prostitution in Berlin during the pre-War years, i.e., the years in which Kirchner painted his street scenes. Flexner (pp. 415-19) also publishes the Berlin regulations governing prostitution at that time, which went into effect in February 1912.



silent about "the ambivalent feelings for prostitutes that these pictures revealed."⁹⁹ But again, can we be sure that those feelings were Kirchner's own?

One element that has been ignored in discussions of these images is the practice of prostitution itself in Berlin at the time Kirchner painted these works. Berlin differed from Hamburg, Paris, and Vienna in that it was not a brothel city—brothels had been outlawed in the mid-nineteenth century. And since this law was strictly enforced, prostitutes were forced to solicit in the streets, the cafés, taverns, and dance halls.¹⁰⁰ In Kirchner's time prostitution was officially illegal in Berlin, but it was tolerated, and the police sought to regulate it by inscription, or registration. Only a few prostitutes actually followed this procedure, however.¹⁰¹ An inscribed prostitute was permitted to function under certain conditions set by the police. She had to practice her trade discreetly so as not to give scandal; accordingly, she was forbidden to solicit on major thoroughfares, or in the immediate vicinity of cultural institutions, public parks, railroad stations, or army barracks. A registered prostitute who violated these laws, or an unregistered woman who practiced prostitution under any circumstances—and such prostitutes were many times more numerous—was

liable to arrest and imprisonment. And arrest was a real risk, since the morals police (Sittenpolizei)—two hundred strong—patrolled the Berlin streets undercover, in pairs. Consequently, the typical prostitute had to be extremely circumspect in seeking clients. According to one observer, the American Abraham Flexner, the streetwalker was “noticeable by reason of slow gait, furtive expression, and more or less striking garb. Her demeanor is usually restrained. If no response is made to the invitation conveyed in a glance, she passes on; doubtful or encouraged, she stops at a show-window or turns off into a café or street.”¹⁰² The undercover agents of the morals police had to be almost equally cautious: since solicitation took discreet and often ambiguous forms, they were, Flexner reports, “bound to proceed with great circumspection. They are indeed instructed that a hundred omissions are preferable to a single error, or apparent error.” They dared not touch “the most sophisticated forms of prostitution,” because proof was so difficult; consequently, they arrested only “the most obvious and flagrant offenders.”¹⁰³ As a result, the laws were ineffectual, not only with regard to inscription, but also in interdicting prostitution on the proscribed public thoroughfares.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, some of those places which were interdicted became the most notorious sites of prostitution. As Flexner reported, the street-walker sought “by preference the main channels of retail trade.”¹⁰⁵

The restraint necessitated on both sides obviously produced a considerable ambiguity. One could not always be sure: was a glance perhaps innocent? Was a woman perhaps *really* only window-shopping or en route from work or to meet a friend? Dress and demeanor were not always conclusive: some dressed flamboyantly, others simply; many looked the part, but some looked like respectable girls from bourgeois families.¹⁰⁶

This ambiguity is a feature of most of Kirchner's street scenes. With one exception, their titles seem innocent enough—*Berlin Street Scene*, *Two Women on the Street* (fig. 63), *The Street* (fig. 64).¹⁰⁷ Can we be sure that the women in each of the street scenes are in fact prostitutes? Many Kirchner commentators have not written about them as such.¹⁰⁸ However, their showy plumed hats—a feature of each of the ten Berlin street scenes—were associated with prostitutes.¹⁰⁹ And interestingly, the only paintings in the series which bear specific topographical titles—*Friedrichstrasse*, *Potsdamer Platz*, and *Leipzigerstrasse with Electric Tram*—refer to places notorious for prostitution. The Friedrichstrasse had the reputation of being a “public love market,” yet, since both it and Potsdamer Platz were officially off limits for prostitution, circumspection was especially in order.¹¹⁰

Significantly, none of Kirchner's street scenes show women in the act of overt solicitation¹¹¹—they exchange glances, walk singly or in groups, look in shop windows, or gaze directly at the viewer. Where men figure in the picture, as they do in all but *Five Women on the Street* (see the woodcut version of this motif, cat. no. 118),¹¹² they are usually relegated to the background. In none of them do we see direct eye contact between a man and a woman, but *The Street* and *Berlin Street Scene* seem to show the prelude to such an encounter. In the former, the woman on the left may be attempting to catch the male window-shopper's eye by means of her reflection in the glass. In several other cases, Kirchner seems to have been specifically interested in the disguises employed by streetwalkers. *Potsdamer Platz* and *Two Women on the Street* (fig. 63) show them in widow's veils, which, after the War began, were adopted by some Berlin prostitutes.¹¹³ These were a novel, opportunistic means of signification which nevertheless retained a particularly delicate ambiguity. They were surely an excellent deterrent to the already cautious morals police, since a false arrest of a genuine war widow would be particularly embarrassing.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

103. *Ibid.*, pp. 146f.

104. *Ibid.*, pp. 160f.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

106. Ostwald, pp. 640f.

107. According to Gordon's catalogue of the paintings (Gordon 1968), it seems that Kirchner gave only one of these works a title with an explicit reference to prostitution (*Street with Red Cocotte*, 1914/25, Gordon 366).

108. For example, in the 1920s, Scheffler (1920), Gustav Schiefler, and Curt Glaser discussed Kirchner's street scenes without any reference to prostitutes. In a long commentary on *The Street* (fig. 10), just acquired by the Berlin Nationalgalerie in 1920, Ludwig Justi (the institution's director), characterized it as a “poem in planes and colors”; there is not a word about “Cocottes.” L. Justi, *Neue Kunst: Ein Führer zu den Gemälden der sogenannten Expressionisten in der Nationalgalerie* (Berlin: Julius Bard, 1921), p. 31. Discussing the same work in 1957, Peter Selz (p. 139f.) also omitted any mention of prostitutes, describing the motif as a “perfectly ordinary scene” of a Berlin street.

109. See George Grosz, *Ein kleines Ja und ein grosses Nein* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1974), p. 98; Ostwald, p. 644; also Hanne Bergius, “Berlin als Hure Babylon,” in *Die Metropole: Industriekultur in Berlin im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Jochen Boberg, Tilman Fichter, and Eckhart Gillen (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1986), p. 125.

110. The description of Friedrichstrasse is by Edmund Edel, as cited by Dieter Glatzer and Ruth Glatzer, *Berliner Leben, 1900-1914: Eine historische Reportage aus Erinnerungen und Berichten* (Berlin: Verlag das Europäische Buch, 1986), 2:359. Cf. also Grosz, p. 98; Ostwald, pp. 638, 644; and the police regulations in Flexner, p. 416, wherein Potsdamerplatz and Friedrichstrasse are listed among the streets and places forbidden to prostitutes.

111. In his prints, Kirchner does show such episodes. For example, among a series of twelve etchings of the street scene motif from 1914, several show eye contact and verbal exchanges. See Dube R 177 (*Ansprachen auf der Strasse*), R 179 (*Ansprachen II*), and R 182 (*Sich anbietende Kokotte*). Cf. also the woodcut of the same year, Dube H 238 (*Am Schaufenster*).

112. Just as Kirchner's prints are sometimes more explicit than his paintings about the nature of these street encounters (see note 111), so, too, are their titles. In its later

The ambiguities in Kirchner's street scenes, then—ambiguities which led many early critics to overlook the actual subject matter of these works—approximate very closely the contemporary descriptions of the *modus operandi* of prostitution in the capital, and in this sense these pictures seem to be very much a part of Kirchner's program of giving pictorial form to modern urban life. Indeed, for Will Grohmann, who *did* recognize the subjects of these pictures, such images of Berlin were neither celebratory nor critical in spirit; the artist stood outside of his subject matter, merely registering what he saw and giving it artistic form.¹¹⁴

But this does not explain why Kirchner would give such images a privileged place in his art of the Berlin period. A recent article by Hanne Bergius may provide a clue. She has written of how precisely Berlin's notorious reputation as "the Whore Babylon" constituted a major part of the city's appeal to artists and writers of Kirchner's generation:

For many of them this myth, stirred up by the provinces, meant liberation from the narrowness of provincial morality, succumbing to the magic of the urban "femme fatale," instead of dozing eternally at the breast of provincial Mother Nature. Sexual desires and the first experience of the metropolis become interwoven. For at first it was not a moralizing Christian interpretation of the Whore Babylon that characterized the avant-garde artists and literati, but rather a Dionysian avowal of the real, sensual world.¹¹⁵

This attitude seems much more consistent with the generally Dionysian tone of Kirchner's descriptions of the city, free of any trace of moralizing, and with his fascination with all manifestations of sexuality. The prostitute, simultaneously threatening and fascinating to fin de siècle artists who treated her as a subversive force within the bourgeois social order, may have appealed to Kirchner for precisely that reason. Robert Hessen wrote that "nowhere does prostitution have as many traits in common with free love as in Berlin."¹¹⁶ If this reading is correct, Kirchner would not have seen the prostitutes, as did so many males of that era, as "tempting sirens and vampires of the streets."¹¹⁷ nor would he have viewed them, as Simmel did, as victims of a degrading, dehumanizing financial transaction which reduced them to sexual commodities. Instead, Kirchner would have seen them as allies in his campaign for the liberation of instinct. What would have attracted him to these subjects, then, was not that sex was being sold like hats and furs and jewels—which, in any case, it was not, for there was no need for circumspection in those trades—but that, through discreet glances and coded words and gestures, the bourgeois city—this world of labor, industry, and commerce, of crowded sidewalks, omnibusses, and automobiles—had been *eroticized*. The prostitutes who promenaded the streets of this clean, orderly, industrious metropolis would thus constitute a kind of erotic epiphany, an irrepressible, triumphant manifestation of the primordial id in an artificial world built by the superego. Kirchner's street scenes would then function not as the negative antithesis of his erotic Baltic idylls but as a glorification of those same primordial energies within the modern metropolis.

To be sure, to present Berlin as Kirchner did during these years was to present it selectively. Clearly Kirchner was not truly interested in being the chronicler of urban life in all of its variety. One need only look at the posthumously discovered photographs of Berlin life by Heinrich Zille from roughly these same years—a far more diverse visual chronicle of ~~the life of~~ "das neuzeitliche Leben"—to realize how narrow was Kirchner's choice of urban motifs.¹¹⁸ He avoided the horrible poverty, the dreadful housing conditions, the class tensions; he ignored the city at work. His goal was not to document a social reality but an aesthetic one. Berlin for Kirchner was above all a domain of intense sensuous excitement, a

woodcut version, *Five Women on the Street* [*Fünf Frauen auf der Strasse*] became *Five Tarts* [*Fünf Kokotten*]. The titles, first published in Gustav Schiefler's catalog (*Die Graphik Ernst Ludwig Kirchners bis 1916* [Berlin-Charlottenburg: Euphorion-Verlag, 1926]), are assumed to be Kirchner's own or at least to have been approved by him.

113. Gordon 1968, p. 94.

114. Will Grohmann, *E. L. Kirchner* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958), p. 54.

115. Bergius (see note 109), p. 102.

116. Hessen (see note 100), p. 111.

117. I borrow the phrase from Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 357.

118. Winfried Ranke, *Heinrich Zille: Photographien, Berlin 1890-1910* (Munich: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1975). Zille's photographs were, however, not published or even known at the time that he made them; they are a posthumous discovery.

stimulus to aesthetic ecstasy. He represented Berlin as a place of vibrant pleasures, a city which up to then—to quote Scheffler once more—had seemed “a place in which there was much work and little enjoyment, good order and discipline, but not the poetry of exuberance.”¹⁹ This should in no way diminish Kirchner’s achievement. On the contrary, the aestheticization of this “capital of modern ugliness” should be seen as an essential contribution to the historical process of urban socialization, a process furthering the willing acceptance, the embrace, even, of the metropolis as the “Heimat” of modern men and women.

119. Scheffler 1910, p. 100.

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