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Icon of Heroic “Degeneracy”

The Journey of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*

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Oberlin College

Thesis Advisor: Professor Leonard Smith

Spring, 2016

To Dad, who sparked my interest in art and the stories it can tell...

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Professor Leonard Smith, who has guided me through this process from the start and taught me to think about my research in new and profound ways. Thank you for your endless support, encouragement, and confidence in me. I am truly grateful.

My deepest gratitude to Professor Shelley Lee, who not only encouraged me to apply for Honors late in the game but helped me through this process every step of the way. Thank you for holding the Honors students together when we needed the most guidance and support. You were our rock.

To Professor Renee Romano and the Oberlin History Department: Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to conduct this Honors research. It has been greatly educational and character building. Thank you, Professor Romano, for guiding me as my advisor through my years as a history major and encouraging me to undertake this wonderful project.

I cannot begin to express the thanks I owe to Professor Erik Inglis who, purely out of the goodness of his heart, assisted me immensely with my research in the art history aspects of this project. Your endless resources, willingness to help, and most importantly your enthusiasm for my project inspired me and gave me structure and meaning to my ideas throughout the entire process. Thanks for the inspiration.

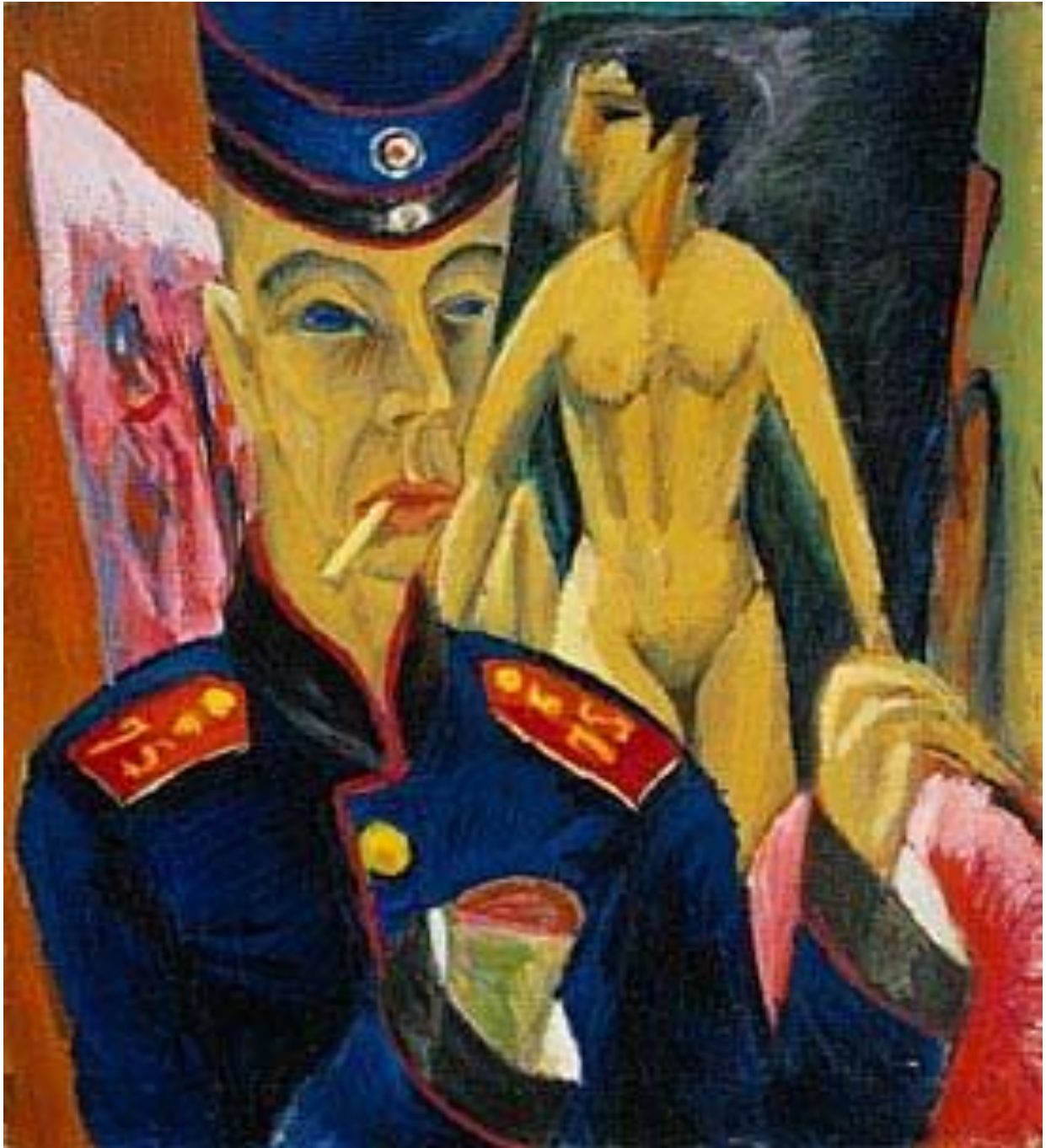
To Liliana Milkova and the Allen Memorial Art Museum staff who assisted me tirelessly as I came in to conduct my provenance research, week after week: I could not have done this project without your patience and help. Your time and efforts were invaluable to me and I owe you the deepest gratitude.

Thank you to Jennifer Starkey and Ken Grossi for all of your patience and assistance with research and library resource use. I am so grateful for your contributions.

A special thanks to Victoria Goldman from the Cleveland Museum of Art, as well as Denise Birkhofer and Lucille Stiger from the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Thank you for all of your guidance in provenance research, navigation in museum policies, and information on museum history. Thank you for your patience with my endless emails.

To my fellow Honors students, Daniel, Jesse, Gabe, and Gavin: Thank you for all of your editing, your input, your support, your laughs, and at times, your commiseration. This process would have been lonely without all of you beside me. Thank you for everything- it's been fun.

Last, but certainly not least, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to my friends and family, particularly my parents, who provided me with endless encouragement and support along the way. You are all wonderful.



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (German, Aschaffenburg 1880- 1938 Davos)

Self-Portrait as a Soldier, 1915

Signed lower right: E.L. Kirchner

Oil on canvas

27 ¼ x 24 in. (69 x 61 cm)

Charles F. Olney Fund, 1950

Allen Memorial Art Museum 1950.29

Preface

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, a globally renowned German Expressionist, painted one of his most famous works, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, in 1915. Today it hangs in Oberlin College's Allen Memorial Art Museum and is greatly sought after around the world for loan exhibitions. Yet the painting did not always have such a great demand; painted during Kirchner's experience as a World War I Soldier and publicly denounced by the Nazis, the painting realized a complicated journey to the United States and its eventual global fame. So how did it arrive at where it is today and why? This paper will examine in-depth the path of this painting and along the way its failures and successes, its popularity and its defamation; it will attempt to unlock the mystery of German Expressionism's relationship to politics and ultimately project a key understanding as to why reception of contemporary German culture in the United States was much better received after World War II than before. It will demonstrate how *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*'s political identity changed with the context of its varying environments. Most importantly it will demonstrate the ability of art to tell history in a way that politics never could.

Introduction

On March 15th, 1938 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner sat down at his desk in his candle-lit studio, an old run-down barn in Davos, Switzerland, to write a letter to German immigrant art historian, Wilhelm R. Valentiner in America. He had been in contact with Valentiner after the art historian had first expressed interest in his work in 1937. Valentiner, a German immigrant to the United States, was a curator at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art in the earlier part of the 20th century, and, after temporarily returning to Germany for soldier duty in World War I, became director at the Detroit Institute of Arts.¹ With his career in Germany destroyed by Nazi denunciation, Kirchner found refuge hiding away in the Swiss Alps, and he saw the only salvation of his work in Valentiner's help, hoping for promotion of his artistic work in America. The problem was, Kirchner feared, America would have no interest in supporting German culture at a time when Hitler was preparing Germany once again to upset the dynamic of the world.

“As a German painter,” Kirchner wrote, “one is looked at now as something not very pleasant. Thus, my position after the “defamation” has become very difficult;”² he was referring to the Nazi denunciation of his work. Yet Kirchner saw opportunity in Valentiner and America as the threat to German artistic reputation increased. “You are doing so much for us German artists,” he wrote to the influential art historian.

You were certainly right in saying that a delicate flower which is trampled upon can never revive. Today the youth on the other side of the frontier get acquainted

¹ “Valentiner W[ilhelm] R[heinhold Otto],” Dictionary of Art Historians, accessed April 19, 2016, <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/valentinerw.htm>

² Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to W.R. Valentiner, March 15, 1938*. Letter. From W. R. Valentiner, *E.L. Kirchner, German Expressionist (North Carolina, Museum of Art, Raleigh, A Loan Exhibition)*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1958, 48.

with art, which is not permitted, and hold on to it like an old friend; and what a situation that is. We will be the laughing stock of the other countries.³

As Valentiner struggled to gain traction with Kirchner's pieces in the United States, the artist developed a dangerous dependency on the future of art in America. "America has a direct relation to art and therefore a clearer vision of the modern development," he wrote. "It is our land of hope."⁴

Yet Valentiner had little success in his initial attempts to equate Americans with Kirchner's work and inspire enthusiasm, even in the developing New York art world; it did not seem as though Americans held much interest in a German Expressionist who was hiding away in Switzerland. His reputation and success in Europe was also in critical condition. His recent switch to landscape works compared weakly with his early Expressionist pieces, and this earlier, more exciting work, was at the time publicly ostracized in Germany. It is not surprising then, that three months later to the day, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner took his own life in his hollowed out barn, once candle-lit and cluttered with paintings that he believed would be forgotten to the world. The sound of the pistol was loud but only Kirchner's wife heard it as it echoed through the mountains.

* * *

Self-Portrait as a Soldier, one of Kirchner's most famous and disturbing paintings, tells a slightly different story, with a legacy that greatly outlived its creator. Expressionism, particularly German Expression, was an art movement that was meant to express internal emotion rather than external impressions. As a piece of Expressionism, this piece did just that. Painted in 1915, the work of art was meant to symbolize the horror of World War I and the artist's own internal

³ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to W.R. Valentiner, January 24, 1938*. Letter. From W.R. Valentiner, *E.L. Kirchner, German Expressionist (North Carolina, Museum of Art, Raleigh, A Loan Exhibition)*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1958, 47.

⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

struggle with being a soldier. Though Kirchner, who had previously developed psychological issues, fell ill to severe neurosis at the time of the painting's conception, putting his career on hiatus, the piece was displayed in the Stadtische Galerie in Dresden by 1916. The exact process by which the painting appeared in the gallery and the reasons for which it was purchased is unknown, but by 1919 the painting was adopted, along with many of Kirchner's other works, by a highly regarded art dealer, Ludwig Schames, and taken to Frankfurt where it would remain on display in the Stadtische Galerie, Frankfurt until 1937. While the painting spent a notable duration of time in Frankfurt, the artwork's fate took a drastic turn when, in 1937, the Nazis confiscated it under the pretense that it was, as a piece of modern art, "degenerate." After hiding away in a Berlin warehouse, the piece would be displayed in Munich at the Great Anti-Bolshevik Exhibition, a propaganda tool and site of numerous Nazi rallies, as well as at the Degenerate Art exhibition in 1937.

The Degenerate Art exhibition was a turning point in popularity both for this specific work of art and for Kirchner himself. Denounced as a symbol of "national sabotage" and a piece that depicts a whore and communist values, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* became famous to the international community under an ideology quite different from the artist's original intent. Kirchner, who had over 600 works of art confiscated and thirty-two displayed in the Degenerate Art exhibition, became a mockery at the hands of the Nazis, who overturned his career in Germany for the rest of his life.⁵ Yet it seems an interest in Kirchner's work emerged in an underground art trade in Germany. Through one of the few Nazi-approved dealers of degenerate

⁵ Stephanie Barron, "Degenerate Art": *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Exhibition Pamphlet, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991, 7.

art, a secret modern art enthusiast, Kurt Feldhäusser, obtained *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in 1943.⁶ His hidden yet committed passion for modern art, even amidst the fear of Nazi reprimand, was instrumental in creating global fame not only for the painting but for Kirchner himself.

After Feldhäusser was killed by an air raid in 1945, his mother, Marie Feldhäusser, traveled to New York, bringing the works Kurt had collected with her, including *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*.⁷ After briefly passing through the hands of the Weyhe Gallery in Brooklyn, the piece was met with enthusiasm from an institution that would become its home indefinitely: Oberlin College. Charles Parkhurst, the director of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at the time, saw a vision in Kirchner's deeply disturbing Expressionist work. He saw a future in German Expressionism, a future in which the American public as well as international community not only accepted this work but desired it. The painting would find popularity in its new establishment, but this was only the beginning.

Almost immediately, loan requests for *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* came flooding in. A 1952 request from the Curt Valentin Gallery in New York was accepted for his show, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner." The amount of success was less than inordinate, but the interest it inspired was genuine. It was not long before enthusiasm for the painting was snowballing. The Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University took out the piece on loan in 1957 as it sought to rebuild acceptance of institutions in America that promoted German culture. After this exhibition, loan applications became too abundant for the Allen Memorial Art Museum staff to grant every request. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* traveled the country, and then the globe. In 1958 it

⁶ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29, General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed October 26, 2015, 2.

⁷ Marie L. Feldhäusser, *Marie Feldhäusser to Herrn Charles P. Parkhurst, June 13, 1951*. Letter. From *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29 General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed October 26, 2015.

was displayed at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, by Wilhelm Valentiner, the same man who received Kirchner's letters of despair that his work might not be received well in the United States. From there it traveled to Toledo Museum of Art in 1960, London County Council, Kenwood in 1962, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1966, the Seattle Art Museum (with twin shows at Pasadena Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1968-1969), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago in 1978, the Nationalgalerie, Berlin in 1979-1980, and the Royal Academy of the Arts, London in 1985. As reports circulated widely throughout the decades succeeding World War II that Kirchner was one of the many estranged artists to suffer through Nazi denunciation, he became a hero in a sense, and this allowed for the popularity of his artwork to blossom.

In 1991, Stephanie Barron at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art projected a groundbreaking idea for an exhibition: a reproduction of the Degenerate Art exhibition that had ruined the careers of so many artists and yet created an explosion of interest in their work. The production fed Americans the solidified information they needed to popularize the denounced work. The work of Kirchner and other German Expressionists had never been so desired in America as it was at this point. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* flashed the front pages of art magazines and exhibition pamphlets, becoming an icon of the reproduction. The painting would go on to enjoy an exalted existence in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, content to deny the loan requests of the art institutions around the world that continue to this day to inundate the museum. The slow rise in American approval of German culture over the last five decades had culminated at this point in the form of Expressionist art. But what kind of approval was this and what does it indicate?

It is important to understand that, ironically, Kirchner was vying for a German nationalistic art in his youth, an ideology that was not so far aligned from that of the National Socialists. At this point in his career, his name was unknown to the United States, let alone celebrated. Even as Expressionism captured a small following in the United States in the late 1930s, E.L. Kirchner was not a name that art consumers would search for in the exhibition advertisements or art magazines. Yet his name gained traction through what he thought of as his demise; Degenerate Art. The pattern of his popularity can be traced through *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, and through this path a new outlook can be discovered concerning the acceptance of contemporary German culture in America following World War II. By examining the demand in the art world along with the exhibitions in which the piece was displayed, one can detect an intriguing trend in American acceptance of German culture.

Studying public reaction to the painting both before the Second World War in Germany and afterwards in America produces a conclusion with grand effects; this examination indicates a pattern in which politics greatly shape artistic taste, and often in astonishing ways. In the case of German Expressionism, it seems, when the government was denouncing this type of art, the interest and market for this art grew. This could indicate that popularity surrounding art is quite separate from artistic, aesthetic, and technical value as it becomes politicized. This can be seen on an even grander scale; *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*'s popularity as well as Kirchner's fame in America was in many ways correlated to Nazi denunciation of the work. Had it not been for this restriction on art, it is very possible that German Expressionism in general never would have gained the type of traction in the United States that it did. In other words, the painting was given a new political meaning under the context of Nazi oppression. It seems that Americans, following the war, were in a large way attempting to create an element of German culture that

they could accept; they wanted to establish the notion of a “good-German, bad-German” dichotomy, in which they could pit one against the other and find acceptability in incorporating German culture into American society while simultaneously denouncing fascism and moving forward from the war. Their acceptance was somewhat limited, therefore, to only a microcosm of German culture, that which was oppressed by the Nazis. This truly underscores the fact that the *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, as a symbol for all of Kirchner’s Expressionist works and German Expressionism in general, became as famous in America and around the globe as it is today partly, and ironically, *because* of Nazi persecution.

This paper is namely an insight into cultural history in the context of political history, built from a research methodology that consists of mostly cultural documents. It displays a different outlook on cultural trends as well as relations between countries following the destruction and aggression of World War II. It attempts to balance out the one-dimensional view that political history portrays and illuminate how studying cultural elements can demonstrate true and sometimes hidden societal sentiment. The methodology for this research includes sources in the form of art journals, magazines, and reviews, news papers, personal letters, official documents from art institutions, exhibition pamphlets, and video footage, as well as numerous secondary sources written by prominent authors and historians. Much of the research was conducted through institutions such as the Library of Congress, the National Gallery, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives, the Archives of American Art, Oberlin College Archives, the Allen Memorial Art Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, as well as online databases such as the German History in Documents and Images, and the Getty Research Institute.

This paper will commence with a discussion in Chapter I about art politics under Wilhelm II and, by examining exhibition function and reviews, will cover the first public reception that Kirchner and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* ever received. Chapter II will discuss Nazi rise to power in relation to art and the complexities of the Degenerate Art exhibition and public perception. Chapter III will expand upon Degenerate Art's reverse impact on American perception of German modern art by studying closely the transition of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* to the United States and the figures that initially helped the piece gain ground. Chapter IV will further demonstrate that essential idea, while also delineating the proof of American enthusiasm for German Expressionism in the decades following the Second World War. It will examine a few crucial exhibits to which the work was loaned out, looking specifically at exhibition function and art reviews as a tool to understand these main ideas. This paper will demonstrate how the painting's popularity fluctuated according to politics in pre-war Germany and how its Nazi denunciation was a significant basis for its popularity in America. This popularity however, was limited to contemporary German culture, merely because this contemporary culture was viewed as the victim of Nazi oppression. It is a general notion that art can tell history better than text books; as this paper will illustrate, a painting can quite literally tell the tale of a revolutionary change in cultural reception and the underlying reasons behind it.

Chapter 1: *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany

Even from the beginning of Kirchner's career, public and government reaction to Expressionism demonstrated a direct correlation between politics and art, and the initial path of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* exemplifies this well; it also seems clear that Kirchner and his fellow Expressionists had autonomy in Germany before their work was re-contextualized under the National Socialists. While this type of modern art was denounced and censored under Wilhelm II for reasons of public decency, popularity of Expressionism seemed to grow. Kirchner painted *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* just as World War I broke out, and while Kirchner was actually quite nationalistic, the government viewed it as anti-patriotic.⁸ Yet this disapproval seemed to give the painting its popularity, as it was immediately put on display in German art institutions. Although not all works of art require political conflict to contextualize them, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* apparently did. Had Germany won the war, it is quite possible that without political controversy, the painting would not have become as popular as it did. As an indication of this, when Wilhelm II was no longer in power and the German state fell into a few years of stability, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* received little if any attention. This underscores again how strongly politics can influence art. On an international scale, while Kirchner had autonomy in Germany, his fame in America was non-existent; this would all change under Hitler's art policies in the years succeeding the Weimar Republic, when Germany would once again denounce modern art, only this time in much more severe way, in which the creators of this art were actively persecuted.

From early on in his career, Kirchner had radical ideas about creating a new autonomous German art through Expressionism. He formed the Expressionist artist group, *Die Brücke*, in

⁸ Thomas W. Gaehtgens, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: An Inner War," in *Nothing But the Clouds Unchanged: Artists in World War I*, ed. Gordon Hughes and Philipp Blom (The Getty Research Institute, 2014,) 119.

1905⁹; this group of artists sought to bring together the past traditional elements of artistic study and technique and create a “bridge” (as their name illustrates) into the future to a new German nationalistic art of youth. Kirchner, along with co-founders Erich Heckel, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Fritz Bleyl, defied the natural artist track and did not enroll in official art education; this was because they believed that the traditional teachings in contemporary art school led to nothing innovative or groundbreaking.¹⁰ Their goal was to take inspiration from classic works of German master artists such as Albrecht Dürer and apply that to new and innovative artistic values. The result was “sharp and sometimes violently clashing colors often used” that were meant to “jolt the viewer into the experience of a particular emotion.”¹¹ These artists also desired to “escape the structures of modern middle-class life” and explore all aspects of humanity, including “free sexuality.”¹² The group disbanded in 1913, when each of the artists went their separate ways.¹³ One of the key qualities of the group that is essential to examine, however, was the emphasis the artists put on rejecting the foreign art that had infiltrated the artistic reputation of imperial Germany. Kirchner was especially direct in his enthusiasm for creating a new nationalist German art in the form of German Expressionism.¹⁴ It is clear that these artists had established autonomy for Expressionism in Germany long before the Nazis would reorient this type of art politically.

Yet Kirchner’s early career began when Germany was in a state of artistic flux, when the country was publicly rejecting modern art. Under Emperor Wilhelm II, art had begun to play a more refined role. In the 1890s Wilhelm’s view on art became “rigidly conservative,” although

⁹ Matthew Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany, 1871-1918* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 234.

¹⁰ “Die Brücke,” The Art Story: Modern Art Insight, accessed April 20, 2016,

<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-die-brucke.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sigfried Gohr, [Excerpt], *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1985). *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed September 10, 2015, 1.

not all of the government agreed on his art politics.¹⁵ As the 20th century commenced, the emperor developed what he termed a *Kunstpolitik*, or an “art policy.” In the early 20th century, it was clear that Wilhelm, in an attempt to refine a nationalistic art, promoted only what he thought of as quality art, that is, the art of ““1900 years ago.””¹⁶ Wilhelm did not believe in any art that criticized society. The emperor famously stated that,

When art, as often happens today, shows us only misery... then art commits a sin against the German people. The supreme task of our cultural effort is to foster our ideals. If we are and want to remain a model for other nations, our entire people must share in this effort, and if culture is to fulfill its task completely it must reach down to the lowest levels of the population. That can be done only if art holds out its hand to raise the people up, instead of descending into the gutter.¹⁷

Wilhelm’s *Kunstpolitik* to uphold a German nationalist art did not fit with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s patriotic vision of Expressionism, that is, his dream to create a new nationalistic German art, which excluded the foreign art that had been penetrating the art culture of Germany in preceding years. To Wilhelm, Expressionism, which often depicted suffering and troubling messages about society, was not fit to be a national art.

While Kirchner deemed himself quite patriotic, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was interpreted differently. When World War I broke out, the artist volunteered for the army almost immediately.¹⁸ While he did so in order to acquire a more desirable and less dangerous position in the military, Kirchner also expressed the wish to “experience the feeling of commitment to a patriotic cause” in order to help him understand humanity in his art.¹⁹ He was placed in the Field Artillery Regiment No. 75 in Halle an der Saale, working as a driver for artillery, and was

¹⁵ Francoise Forster-Hahn, Claude Keisch, Peter-Klaus Schuster, and Angelika Wesenberg, *Spirit of an Age* (London: National Gallery Company, 2001), 37.

¹⁶ Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany*, 185.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gaegtens, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: An Inner War,” in *Nothing But the Clouds Unchanged*, 119.

¹⁹ Ibid.

actually treated quite leniently by the German military.²⁰ Yet here he eventually fell victim to severe neurosis and only desired to finish his art work instead of dying heroically in battle, which he now felt to be pointless.²¹ Due to this neurosis, he was forced to recover in several different sanatoria in Germany and Switzerland.²² It was during this psychiatric chaos that he painted *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, which ultimately led the painting to be interpreted as a piece of anti-war propaganda. In reality, Kirchner wanted to depict his struggle of existing simultaneously as a soldier and an artist.²³ As historian Peter Springer discusses, “an antiwar activist he was not.”²⁴ Kirchner had come to the conclusion that his role as a creator was more important than his role as a soldier, and that his art could contribute to the German cause as much as a sword or gun. Kirchner expressed, “I want to publish a small book to show the German people that I would gladly contribute something human and artistic, just not with weapons.”²⁵ His fervor for nationalism had not waned.

Despite Kirchner’s slightly unconventional commitment to his country, the German government would continually denounce *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* as unpatriotic; yet this controversy proved to be the impetus for its popularity. It is easy to see how the painting could be interpreted as an anti-war message, with the image of a grotesque soldier, a severed hand, and a blank-faced nude in the background. This type of image was especially controversial at a time when the world was beginning to criticize the structure of imperialism and the absolute authority of the German emperor. Yet this time of unrest during and immediately after the war proved to be ironically lucrative in the art market. In some sense, Germany’s art became the new beacon of

²⁰ Peter Springer, *Head and Hand: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Self-Portrait as Soldier* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 25.

²¹ Gaehtgens, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: An Inner War,” in *Nothing But the Clouds Unchanged*, 118.

²² Ibid., 121.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Springer, *Head and Hand*, 58.

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

German culture during the clash of European countries; it seemed to be a “culture war,” as it was clear that culture was still essential to Germany as a nation. It was modern art in particular that took the lead as the war waged on and citizens wanted to defy the official ideology of the government by accepting the art it denounced; this helps to demonstrate this strong relationship between politics and artistic taste.

It therefore did not take long for *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* to attract attention. Already in 1916, a year after it was painted, it was brought to Dresden and displayed there at the Stadtische Galerie until 1919.²⁶ Although there is not an exorbitant amount of information on this first transaction or on how the painting was displayed, the fact that it was so quickly adopted is telling. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was Kirchner's first painting to go to one of the main German art museums and be exhibited, most likely due to its controversial nature.²⁷ The painting's first real fame, however, came about in 1919, when it caught the eye of Ludwig Schames, a well renowned art dealer. In 1914, Kirchner had met an archeologist named Botho Graef at Jena University, who would go on to become somewhat of a caretaker for Kirchner.²⁸ Gräf seems to have seen quality in Kirchner's work and connected him with the famous Schames. As Kirchner wrote in a letter to Curt Valentin on April 17th, 1937, “B. Gräf in Jena worked for the disclosure of my work; he brought me to Schames, whom I owed so much.”²⁹ Schames acquired many of Kirchner's works for the Stadtische Galerie Frankfurt, which loaned several of these paintings, including *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* for 10,000 Marks out to the Stadelsche Kunstinstitut, from

²⁶ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed September, 10, 2015, 1.

²⁷ Springer, *Hand and Head*, 8.

²⁸ Dr. E. W. Kornfeld and Christine E. Stauffer, “Biography Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” Kirchner Museum Davos (1992), accessed April 19, 2016, http://www.kirchnermuseum.ch/fileadmin/Inhalte_Redaktoren/Bilder_Inhalt/E.L.Kirchner/Biography_E.L.Kirchner_english.pdf, 2-3.

²⁹ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Curt Valentin, April 17, 1937*. Letter. From the American Archives of Art, Roll. No. 4049, 2.

1919 to 1937.³⁰ Kirchner's works in general were well received at this time and the artist was clearly gaining a temporary artistic autonomy in Germany.

Kirchner's work in general received encouraging reviews and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in particular became an object of idolization. The early 20th century art journal titled *Kunst und Künstler*, or "Art and Artist" raved about the Kirchner works in Schames' painting exhibit. It printed in 1925 that the "the painting collection of Schames' should be given large credit" and "appraisal for the glory of E.L. Kirchner."³¹ Other articles from this journal praised more specifically the qualities of Expressionism. "The bright colors and limits of form," one report by Wilhelm von Bode printed in 1920 stated, "helped instead of hindered" these works of art.³² While this might seem less than a controversial statement, endorsing unconventional art such as this, even in 1920, greatly reflected a divergence from the path of art politics that the Kaiser had set forth under his rule. People projected an excitement around this vilified art, and museums began adhering to popular demand, bringing in more Expressionist work for display. In 1923, *Jahrbuch der jungen Kunst*, or "the Yearbook of Young Art," published an article titled "Moderne Bilder im Städel Neubau" by Sascha Schwabacher, in which Schwabacher praised new visions of Expressionism in Germany's galleries, and emphasized *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* specifically as a monumental piece of art. It stated that the städelschen Kunstinstituts of German art were expanding and bringing in attractions of strong, vibrating colors which "magnetize" the visitors and work to create a "feeling of great power."³³ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, "which the

³⁰ Springer, *Hand and Head*, 8-9.

³¹ Ernst Grosse, "Ostasiatisches Gerät," in *Kunst und Künstler: illustrierte Monatsschrift für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe, Jahrgang XXIII 1924-1925*, ed. Karl Scheffler (Berlin: Verlag von Bruno Cassirer Berlin, 1925), Oberlin College Archives, 193. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

³² Wilhelm von Bode, "Die 'Not der Geistigen Arbeiter' im Gebiet der Kunstforschung: E.L. Kirchner Berichtet," in *Kunst und Künstler; illustrierte Monatsschrift für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe, Jahrgang XVIII 1919-1920*, ed. Karl Scheffler (Berlin: Verlag von Bruno Cassirer, 1920), Oberlin College Archives, 340.

³³ Sascha Schwabacher, "Moderne Bilder im Städel-Neubau," in *Jahrbuch der jungen Kunst (1923)* (Leipzig: Verlag Klinkhardt and Biermann), 363.

Städel had the fortune of acquiring,” she wrote, “is one of Kirchner’s best works” and “perhaps will remain a document of our time.”³⁴ The early recognition of this piece as an essential work speaks more to the time than to the piece. In the early 1920s when the age of Wilhelm’s Kunstpolitik still lingered in German culture, this piece was radical and most certainly monumental.

As the country fell into a period of relative stability under the Weimar Republic, however, and this type of art was no longer actively frowned upon, artistic trends changed and public enthusiasm for Expressionism waned. New cultural advancements in art and science developed and innovative popular forms of art and entertainment, such as in “cinema, jazz, and sport” flourished.³⁵ The artistic movements in the period of Weimar Germany has also been described as “sober, functional, technologically conscious,” and “socially oriented.”³⁶ The new post-Expressionist art trend that ensued, “Neue Sachlichkeit,” or “New Sobriety,” centered around objectivity, “functionalism, utility, absence of decorative frills” and motion away from individuality and towards the ideas of the masses.³⁷ Artists and other innovative figures such as playwright Bertolt Brecht moved toward social movements, often with socialist undertones, for the greater public, and away from the decadence of Expressionism. While *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* may have remained in Frankfurt Am Main until 1937, there is no mention of it, no popular reviews and no indication that the painting was even on display throughout these later years. One could argue that, as the government was no longer denouncing modern art, there was less excitement around works such as *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. This societal sentiment helps to

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 102.

³⁶ Ibid., 98.

³⁷ Ibid., 111-112.

project the notion that politics can shape artistic taste immensely, and certainly did for this painting.

Up until the National Socialists came to power, Kirchner and his fellow Expressionists had autonomy in Germany, and whether or not their work was popular, it is clear that Kirchner was vying for a nationalistic German art; however, these strong German nationalistic ideals certainly did not give him fame internationally, and he was not recognized outside of Germany until his Nazi persecution. In America, Kirchner's name was unbeknown to the general art world let alone sought after. Yet all of this changed drastically when the National Socialists came to power and persecuted this art. With this grand denunciation of his work, Kirchner's popularity would develop on an equally large scale in America. Although restrictive, his denunciation under Wilhelm was closer to benign censorship, but once the international community viewed him as a persecuted artist, a symbol of anti-Nazism under this much more severe repression, his popularity skyrocketed. This clearly indicates a strong correlation between politics and art and suggests that politics can and has shaped artistic taste drastically. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* exemplified this as it was taken out of its World War I context and given a new association under Nazi persecution, allowing it to become desirable in America under a certain Nazi victimology. As noted previously, Sascha Schwabacher had labeled the artwork as, a "document of our time," but certainly that would change with a new era and an extreme swing in politics, as the painting was wrenched out of its original historical context.

Chapter 2: *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* under Nazi Denunciation

The journey of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* took a drastic turn in the middle of the 1930s, when the Nazis came to power and developed a new form of *Kunstpolitik*. German Expressionism, which had largely stopped receiving attention during the Weimar period, suddenly became the target of Nazi opposition. Hitler believed in using the denunciation of modern art as a platform for his ideology, which proposed that people would have to understand some deeper “pretentious” meaning in order to appreciate the art; this style of art, especially those pieces which were more abstract, appeared chaotic, insane and seemingly communistic during a time when Germany needed stability.³⁸ Instead, Hitler wanted to direct the German citizens towards his idea of the true German art, an objectively less sophisticated art which depicted classic Aryan heroes. He instigated three art exhibitions in order to develop rhetoric against his proposed Jewish-Communist threat to Germany: The Great Anti-Bolshevik Exhibition in 1936, and both the Degenerate Art Exhibition and the Great German Art Exhibition in 1937. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was displayed in each of these shows except the last, which only displayed “true” German art. Despite the efforts of the National Socialists, however, the Degenerate Art Exhibition attracted critical international attention and was the impetus for the upshot in American popularity for *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and Kirchner’s work in general.

In the 1920s, during the relatively “stable” years of the Weimar Republic, Expressionism ironically aligned closely with early Nazi ideology, and received very little attention from the public in Germany and abroad. Author Matthew Jefferies delineates further how Expressionism and National Socialism had important connections. Expressionist values and Nazi ideology, he discusses, had similar aspects, such as “dislike of rationality, materialism, and liberalism, the cult

³⁸ Lucy Burns, “Degenerate art: Why Hitler hated modernism,” *BBC News*, November 6, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24819441>.

of youth, and a desire to renew society.”³⁹ Even some of the early leading figures in the Nazi party delved into Expressionist culture. Dr. Goebbels, who would become Hitler’s propaganda minister, had a history with Expressionist art forms. He was the author of an Expressionist novel and during the Weimar period, he advocated that “Expressionism should be the official art of the Third Reich.”⁴⁰ Author Willibald Sauerländer even comments that “Expressionists associated with the *Brücke* movement,” “were regarded by the young right-wing idealists and radicals as artists who should be part of Germany’s future.”⁴¹ At this time, both the American public and the rest of the international community had no interest in an art movement that perhaps aligned with right-wing governmental politics. This would change once that very government turned and denounced this artwork.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Kirchner was shocked at the confiscation of his work for display both at the Great Anti-Bolshevik exhibition and at the Degenerate Art exhibition.⁴² It is unclear whether or not Kirchner viewed his work to be in alignment with Nazi ideology, but the artist was originally in support of some of the Nazi politics.⁴³ While he did not explicitly create art under the umbrella of Nazi dogma, he did try to defend his work against Nazi accusations and distance himself from the idea of “degenerate” culture. He wrote in a letter,

For thirty years I have fought for a strong new real German art and will continue to do so until I die. I am not a Jew, a Social Democrat, or otherwise politically active and have a clear conscience. I therefore will patiently await what the new government decides to do with the academy.⁴⁴

³⁹ Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany*, 233.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Willibald Sauerländer, “Un German Activities,” *New York Review of Books*, April 7th, 1994, 10.

⁴² Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1992), 65.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Ironically, he was fighting for this German art from the safety of Switzerland. Needless to say, he believed it to be a mistake when the Nazis denounced his artwork in 1935.⁴⁵ This information is especially ironic considering that Kirchner's popularity in the United States after the war drew largely from his reputation as an artist that supposedly defied Nazism and oppression. If Americans had known the complication of his political loyalties, it is quite possible that the reception of his artwork after the war would have been quite different.

While he was hiding away in Switzerland, Kirchner's "defamation," as he called it, began in 1936, when the Nazis confiscated *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and hung it in the Deutsches Museum in Munich as part of the exhibition, The Great Anti-Bolshevist Show.⁴⁶ This show was held in Munich as well as in Nuremberg alongside Nazi rallies, which included elaborate speeches from Nazi officers. According to a *New York Times* article from August 28th, 1937, the Propaganda Ministry of the National Socialists was in charge of orchestrating the show, which would be the biggest show yet against the Moscow scare of Bolshevism.⁴⁷ "The center of attraction," the article reads, "will be a terrestrial globe thirty feet in diameter with crimson splashes over those parts of the world where 'the Communist spider had spun its web from Moscow,'" and there would also be a display of "'Jewry as the germ cell of bolshevism.'"⁴⁸ The speeches given by Nazi officials at this event underscored the main themes of the exhibition and included comments that it was meant to create a great influence and commend "Hitler for his work in freeing Germany from Bolshevism."⁴⁹ While there is no record of what role *Self-Portrait*

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Springer, *Head and Head*, 10.

⁴⁷ "Nazis Plan Exhibits Against Bolshevism: Frightfulness of Moscow and Methods will be Pictured at Nuremberg Party Congress," *New York Times*, August 28, 1937, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://oberlin.idm.oclc.org/docview/102236939?accountid=1293>, 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Eroeffnung der antibolschewistischen Ausstellung in Nuremberg, 1937*. Film. From Holocaust Museum Collections Search, Story: 4559, Film ID:2827. (Berlin: Bundesarchiv, June 2006), time 01:16:56:13 and 01:19:10:11.

as a Soldier played in this exhibition, these known attributes of the show and events give a comprehensive idea of what purpose the piece might have held here, given that the piece was originally perceived as anti-imperialist and against the German state. The show also set the stage for the Degenerate Art exhibition, which would change international perception of German Expressionism forever.

Within a year, the National Socialists had erected the Degenerate Art Exhibition, or “Entartete Kunst,” and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was featured prominently among the many other works of art that Hitler and the Nazis had denounced. The show opened in Munich in July of 1937.⁵⁰ Hitler employed Adolf Ziegler to round up approximately 6,000 pieces of what he considered to be “degenerate” art in ten days and open the exhibit to the public, so that visitors might become involved in the message the Nazis were trying to put forth.⁵¹ Interestingly, only six artists were Jewish out of the 112 artists whose works were displayed, but since the Nazis believed that Jewish culture could permeate through society uncontrollably, they denounced any artists that seemed to have “Jewish” influence.⁵² The exhibit opened three days late and the works of art were subsequently, but perhaps advantageously, messily “tacked” up or shoved into display.⁵³ The idea was to give visitors the impression that these works of art were unworthy and shabby. The exhibition had seven galleries and over six hundred and fifty works that were displayed in strategic ways; author Bruce Altshuler notes that the “paintings were hung without frames, on the temporary panels covered with political invective and derogatory remarks.”⁵⁴ In general, the exhibit was intended to display and mock any works of art that were “depicting

⁵⁰ Peter-Klaus Schuster, *Nationalsozialismus und ‘Entartete Kunst’* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987), 97.

⁵¹ Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1994), 140.

⁵² Ibid., 141.

⁵³ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

social misery and class exploitation” or that were at all abstract.⁵⁵ While this effect was meant to turn the public away from this type of art, it would end up ironically creating much intrigue, at least throughout the international community.

The National Socialists also used economic propaganda as a crucial tool. In the Degenerate Art exhibition, much of the art was accompanied by their prices, in an attempt to show how much money had been spent on “degeneracy.”⁵⁶ Alongside many of the pieces and their prices, the exhibit displayed statements such as “paid for by the taxes of the German working people.”⁵⁷ Due to current inflation and many German citizens losing their jobs in the depression between 1930 and 1932, upwards of six million people became unemployed; it was easy to equate degenerate art with decline of German values, especially when the Nazis painted it in this light.⁵⁸ This propaganda appealed to many German citizens in their search for understanding the blame for the current state of German society.

The Nazis displayed many false interpretations of these works of art, especially in the case of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Under the generalization of “judisch-bolschewistisch” or assumed anti-Christian values, Kirchner’s works were moved to this new exhibit to be part of what the Nazis deemed “Kulturbolschewismus,” or cultural Bolshevism.⁵⁹ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was displayed in the third room of the exhibit, where the pieces were categorized as art that was considered a “mockery of the ideal German woman.”⁶⁰ The piece fit under this category due to the nude in the background, and was given the title, “*Soldat mit Dirne*,” or “Soldier with

⁵⁵ Ibid., 143, 146.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 143-144.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁸ Sauerländer, “Un German Activities,” 16.

⁵⁹ Christoph Zuschlag, “*Entartete Kunst*”: *Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland* (Worms am Rhein, Germany: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1995), 303.

⁶⁰ Schuster, *Nationalsozialismus und “Entartete Kunst,”* 105.

Whore.”⁶¹ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* also fit into the themes of the third room as this space additionally displayed works that depicted war. Despite Kirchner’s patriotism and commitment to Germany, the Nazis wrote the following words next to the painting: ““a deliberate sabotage of National Defense”” and ““an insult to the German heroes of the Great War.””⁶² Lastly, a plaque hung next to the painting that mocked Kirchner’s claim of artistic descent and influence from the great German master artist, Albrecht Dürer. The plaque was supposed to read sarcastically:

The democratic Reichskunstwart [Reich Curator], Dr. Redslob, on Kirchner: We are in the presence of the first German artist to achieve a penetrating quality that can be likened to that of Dürer: E.L. Kirchner.⁶³

This mockery and misinterpretation lead to what Kirchner considered to be his defamation.

Kirchner did not understand why the Nazis were falsely construing his work, but their gross misrepresentations would eventually work to his advantage. After Kirchner was forced to leave his membership at the Prussian Academy of Art, he wrote to Hagemann that, “the reason why I founded the Brücke was to encourage truly German art, made in Germany. And now it is supposed to be un-German. Dear God. It does upset me.””⁶⁴ Little did Kirchner know, however, the blatant misrepresentation of his works’ values would earn him respect in the United States in the following years. While the Nazi’s denunciation created a different political context for *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* that would stay with the work forever, that is, a work that would always be associated with Nazi oppression, it would have a surprisingly shocking effect on the popularity of Kirchner’s work in America. His supposed defamation would paint him as a “good German” in the eyes of Americans, who would construct the notion of the “good German- bad German” dichotomy, and view him as a victim who tried to defy Nazi ideology.

⁶¹ Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 145.

⁶² Sauerländer, “Un German Activities,” 12.

⁶³ Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 113.

⁶⁴ Dr. E. W. Kornfeld and Christine E. Stauffer, “Biography Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” 12.

It is also very important to note the attributes and strategies of the contrasting Great German Art exhibition. This show, which was supposed to depict “true” German art, opened right across from the Degenerate Art exhibition.⁶⁵ Hitler gave an hour and a half speech at the House of German Art on how important art is to a nation and what its “function” should be.⁶⁶ The exhibit opened on July 18th, 1937, with 900 pieces of art that depicted “nudes, genre scenes, still lifes, idealized landscapes, mythological scenes, images of workers and heroes, and above all portraits of ‘pure’ and ‘Aryan’ people.”⁶⁷ The purpose of the exhibit was to offer a prototype of the “museums for the people” demonstrating a place ““of national and racial consciousness,” and not ““places for the virus of decadence.””⁶⁸ This art was supposed to expand through all social classes, celebrating heroic German history, and demonstrating a new future for Germany.⁶⁹ Hitler wanted this art to seem accessible and reachable for the German people.”⁷⁰ Here the prices of the art were marked down in comparison to the Degenerate Art exhibition, so that people would understand the corruption of “advanced art.”⁷¹ All of the works in this exhibition also had price tags on them that helped to show how much had been spent on them, which was often very little.⁷² The Nazis provided incredibly cheap or even free tours of the show so that everyone, including the lower class, could be exposed to the ideological message.⁷³ The exhibition clearly served as a juxtaposing message to Degenerate art and was used as a propaganda tool.

⁶⁵ Richard Nilsen, “Horror Show: Exhibit Depicts Arts’ ‘Holocaust,’” *Life & Leisure (The Arizona Republic)*, March 25, 1991.

⁶⁶ Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 136.

⁶⁷ “Hitler’s Speech at the Opening of the House of German Art in Munich (July 18, 1937),” German History in Documents and Images, accessed April 20, 2016, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1577.

⁶⁸ Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1992), 67.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷¹ Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, 143.

⁷² Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 123.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 73.

The response of these double exhibitions did not develop exactly as the Nazis had hoped, however. During Dr. Goebbels' speech on the Great German Art exhibition, he stated that

...tens of thousands walked through the "Degenerate Art" exhibition and then entered the wide rooms of the House of German Art with an elevated heart and a true feeling of happiness, knowing that after years of terrible defeat German art has found itself again.⁷⁴

Yet the comparative success rates of the two exhibitions provided speculation about the reception of modern art and prompted intrigue for it abroad. Indeed, while in Munich for the duration of only four months, the Degenerate Art exhibition attracted more than two million visitors, and then subsequently traveled for three years; reports stated that "the popularity of *Entartete Kunst* has never been matched by any other exhibition of modern art" and that this exhibition drew in five times the amount of visitors than the Great German Art exhibition had attracted.⁷⁵ Yet if people had truly agreed with the denunciation of modern art, and found new contemporary German art to be the future of German culture, would not the two exhibits have had close to an equal number of visitors? The international community certainly picked up on this and used it as a selling point for promoting this denounced art.

It is evident that this Nazi defamation caused condemnation from the international community, and even made this modern art more popular outside of the country. The Degenerate Art exhibition certainly received ridicule and mockery from abroad. A Canadian humor magazine, *Wit and Wisdom*, mentioned that "thirty thousand persons visited the 'degenerate' art exhibition sponsored by the Nazi regime at Munich. The Big Idea was to show what art should not be. But only 10,000 visited the legitimate art show provided for contrast."⁷⁶ The British political and cultural magazine, *New Statesman and Nation*, published a satirical article titled,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁵ Stephanie Barron, *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1991), 9.

⁷⁶ "Popular Art," *Wit and Wisdom*, October 15, 1937, 59.

“Year Nine”, in which the author, Cyril Connolly, mocked Nazi propaganda and art politics by telling an ironic story of a man who is imprisoned for enjoying “degenerate” art. He was charged on the fact that he on his “own impulse visited the basement of the degenerate art and were aesthetically stimulated thereby.”⁷⁷ These articles give insight into growing popularity of this “degenerate” art abroad. Some of the works that the Nazis confiscated suddenly had so much “international value” that they decided to sell them abroad instead of displaying them in the exhibition.⁷⁸

In particular, it is evident that Nazi denunciation of modern art began to spark an interest in the United States. An American popular magazine, *New Republic*, published an article, “Readers Guide Retro,” by Paul Rosenfield that stated:

a deal of the stigmatized work is healthy, intrinsically good, capable of serving as criteria of healthiness and goodness, and in the best tradition of the art of the German past; while the officially sanctioned art, although it may be German, non-Mongolian and un-Bolshevistic, is- to lapse still further into the lovely terminology of our good friends the National Socialists- rankly “degenerate.”⁷⁹

He commented on the artwork of the Great German Art exhibition in quite a negative manner:

“No human beings ever looked like most of these vapid and characterless effigies. The feelings for the plastic materials they evince is equal to their verisimilitude.”⁸⁰ He stated that the Nazis had “intended to give substance to fixed ideas and awaken warlike patriotic sentiment. They seem to have fallen short even of this object. The crowd avoided the exhibition of them and flocked to that of ‘degenerate art.’”⁸¹ In the article, Rosenfield even specifically praised the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. It is especially interesting to note America’s comments and opinions

⁷⁷ Cyril Connolly, “Year Nine,” *New Statesman and Nation*, Jan 29, 1938, 162.

⁷⁸ Baron, “*Degenerate Art*,” 19.

⁷⁹ Paul Rosenfield, “Readers Guide Retro,” *New Republic*, June 22, 1938, 183.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

on Nazi art politics, since up until this point America had largely ignored German art and emerging German Expressionism.

All of these data demonstrate that this grand-scale denunciation of Expressionism gave this type of modern art international fame and gave America incentive to support and even admire it. This further develops the idea that politics can greatly shape artistic taste, and this example is the epitome of that notion. Kirchner's work in particular was almost immediately noticed. Upon the 1936 Nazi confiscation of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, a New York art dealer, Curt Valentin, and art historian, Wilhelm R. Valentiner, contacted Kirchner about running an exhibition of his work; during Valentin's visit to Switzerland, they agreed on a deal to run a summer Kirchner exhibition in 1937 at the Institute of Art in Detroit.⁸² Never before had Kirchner received this kind of attention from people in the United States. The exhibition did indeed commence in 1937, and as Dr. Kornfeld and Christine Stauffer describe, "the exhibition in Detroit was well received, and Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art in New York contacted Kirchner."⁸³ Ironically, this happened at the exact time that Kirchner was dismissed from the Academy of Arts in Berlin.⁸⁴ This is no coincidence; his Nazi "defamation" put him on the map, in a sense. Although this first American exhibition did not yet launch Kirchner's fame in America completely, it did provide a premonition for what would become of his reputation.

⁸² Dr. E. W. Kornfeld and Christine E. Stauffer, "Biography Ernst Ludwig Kirchner," 14.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 3: From Degeneration to Idolization; *The Painting's Journey to America*

The journey of the painting from display in the Degenerate Art exhibition to the underground art market in Germany and finally to the United States demonstrated several key indications about the acceptance of the painting; Nazi denunciation of this type of modern art created profound intrigue and precipitated a rise in its value, partly due to its forbidden nature. Most importantly, this change in reception grew as people, especially Americans, began to equate German Expressionism with a symbol of anti-fascism. An examination of the years directly following the Degenerate Art exhibition and World War II displays this initial change in reception of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. The painting was one of the few pieces to survive Nazi persecution, which is highly meaningful by itself, and its swift removal from the Degenerate Art exhibition and private display in art collector Kurt Feldhäusser's house illustrated a secret modern art market in Germany at the time of denunciation. From there it was brought to the United States and used as a symbol of cultural preservation and anti-fascism, sparking immediate interest. Oberlin College's purchase of the painting and positive student reactions to German Expressionism illuminated a new desire for this art in America. However, as Americans began to identify Expressionists as "the good Germans" and a force against oppression, the reception of German culture in America was partly limited to that which was denounced by the Nazis.

Although the Nazis were fixated on displaying the "degeneracy" of modern art, they did make sure to sell the works that would be greatly profitable, rather than keeping them in the exhibition. These "degenerate" works almost certainly realized a spike in monetary value, primarily from the popularity German Expressionism was gaining internationally. Those pieces that the regime deemed financially "valuable" were sold quickly⁸⁵; the works that the Nazis

⁸⁵ Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 125.

believed to have no value were destroyed.⁸⁶ Due to the fact that *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was displayed in the show starting in 1937, but was already removed by 1938, one can deduce that the painting held higher value than the Nazis suggested in the exhibition. Most of the pieces were sold through the Lucerne auction at the termination of the exhibition.⁸⁷ In the early years of the show, however, the Nazis established a system through the Propaganda Ministry in which they permitted a few art dealers to sell pieces from the Degenerate Art exhibition. The four main dealers were Ferdinand Möller, Karl Buchholz, Bernard Alois Böhmer, and Hildebrand Gurlitt.⁸⁸ Though there is no way to be certain of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*'s exact path, there is evidence that can allow for serious conjecture and illuminate the painting as one of the more desired items.

One of the only certain elements of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*'s provenance is that it was not sold in the Lucerne auction through the Fischer Gallery (1939), as most of the degenerate works were, but rather sold through one of these special dealers, indicating its greater value.⁸⁹ Since dealers Gurlitt and Böhmer were established in Hamburg and Güstow respectively, and Buchholz and Möller were in Berlin, it is simple to eliminate some characters.⁹⁰ The painting arrived in Kurt Feldhäusser's private collection in 1943, and since Möller was stationed in Berlin until he left that same year due to bombings, their stories line up.⁹¹ Furthermore, there is solid evidence that Feldhäusser acquired most of his Kirchner works from Möller, a lot of which were sold to the same gallery in New York, the Weyhe Gallery, that would also purchase *Self-Portrait*

⁸⁶ Sauerländer, "Un German Activities," 12.

⁸⁷ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed September, 10, 2015, 2.

⁸⁸ "Möller, Ferdinand, 1882-1956," Frick Collection: Archives Directory for the History of Collecting in America, accessed April 21, 2016, research.frick.org/directoryweb/browse/record.php?-action=browse&-recid=7508, 1.

⁸⁹ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed November 2, 2015, 2.

⁹⁰ Andrew Robinson, "Kirchner Collector Kurt Feldhäusser," *Festschrift für Eberhard W. Kornfeld zum 80 Geburtstag: Kirchner Collector Kurt Feldhäusser. Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. Publications File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed November 5, 2015, 252.

⁹¹ "Möller, Ferdinand, 1882-1956," 1.

as a Soldier.⁹² While the painting's path may never be completely proven, this conjecture is not unmerited. What the painting did, if anything, between 1938 when Möller obtained it and when it ended up in Feldhäusser's collection in 1943 is unknown. However, this swift transaction of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* through Möller instead of through the Lucerne auction indicates its higher value. This exchange and transference of "degenerate" art to other galleries was a way for private collectors to stealthily preserve modern art, underscoring the changes in the reception of Expressionism and the influence that Nazi denunciation had on its rising popularity.⁹³

Kurt Feldhäusser was a collector of modern art and served as an example of underground popularity for German Expressionism immediately following Nazi denunciation. According to his mother, Marie Feldhäusser, Kurt did not object outwardly to the National Socialists but was secretly a key player in bringing German Expressionism successfully to America. In a June 13th, 1951 letter to the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Marie Feldhäusser claimed Kurt's true intentions. While a lot of private collectors acquired degenerate art merely for financial purposes and salability, Feldhäusser had been an art historian who specialized in and advocated for modern art.⁹⁴ He had studied in Vienna, Paris and Berlin and earned his doctorate in 1932; after Hitler came to power, however, all "public galleries" that could be considered of "bolshevist" persuasions, meaning mainly modern art, were shut down.⁹⁵ Instead, Kurt transferred to the music field. He was able to hide his passion and support for modern art by acting as an employee in the *Reichsmusikkammer*, or the Reich Chamber of Music, becoming a music instructor in Berlin "secondary schools," and after moving to Württemberg with his mother in 1943,

⁹² Robinson, "Kirchner Collector Kurt Feldhäusser," 253.

⁹³ Ibid., 252.

⁹⁴ Marie L. Feldhäusser, *Marie Feldhäusser to Herrn Charles P. Parkhurst, June 13, 1951*. Letter. From *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29 General Provenance File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed October 26, 2015.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

continuing to do similar work at a “school in the castle in Kirchberg.”⁹⁶ Underneath this musical facade, however, Feldhäusser continued his commitment to modern art, indicating its post-denunciation value, monetary or otherwise.

Although Marie Feldhäusser’s claims should be taken with a grain of salt, as she was a mother who had the intentions of selling this art in America, it seems that Kurt truly became a symbol of modern art preservation and resistance against Nazi denunciation. Marie wrote that even while Kurt was teaching music in Berlin, his modern art collection, which he had started as a young man, “continued to evolve,” and he was able to “acquire some images that had been shown at the ‘Degenerate Art’ exhibition.”⁹⁷ His interest in works from the Degenerate Art exhibition and the risks he took to promote this art demonstrated a transition in the reception of modern art, as this denounced art was now, in a sense, exalted. Although he did try to evade the Nazis by switching careers, he seemed fearless in his determination to value modern art. In her letter, Kurt’s mother noted that works from his collection were displayed proudly in their home in Berlin, and many people referred to their apartment as an “oasis” for this element of culture, which perhaps indicates that others were interested in preserving this type of art as well; Kurt even displayed degenerate art in his castle rooms in Württemberg when he was closely monitored by the Nazi head of school.⁹⁸ Although Kurt died in an air raid in 1945, his mother felt that his commitment to modern art would live on past his death. She wrote that “his collection, which he described as his life’s work and was more to him than his life, has survived him.”⁹⁹ Feldhäusser signified a fight for modern art at the time of Nazi denunciation, demonstrating the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

influence that politics has on artistic taste and popularity. Kurt's commitment to the preservation of modern art would greatly contribute to the new desire for such works in America.

An examination of art trends in the United States up until this time provides evidence of how Degenerate Art truly prompted the initial change in American perception of German Expressionism. Up through the first half of the 1930s, there was abundant negative sentiment towards German Expressionism in America, but in the second half of the decade, the tides seemed to turn.¹⁰⁰ As the Nazis were denouncing modern art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York was making public the "degenerate" art they acquired by publishing "exiled art," including pieces by Kirchner.¹⁰¹ When the Nazis declared cultural war against "degenerate" art, the United States government endorsed this modern German art in order to prove the democratic values of America at a controversial time.¹⁰² Much of the American public soon equated Expressionists with anti-fascists, whose art was regarded with a false sense of "supposed innocence."¹⁰³ When fighting broke out in World War II, the idea of the "oppressor" and "oppressed" became further polarized and solidified.¹⁰⁴ This nurtured the notion of the "good-German, bad-German" dichotomy. This idea, planted during the war, would manifest itself in the following years in the form of art. Expressionism would come to embody a political association with Nazi oppression, which would provide a space of tolerance and desire for it in American culture. Therefore, when Marie Feldhäusser traveled to the United States in 1948 with a wish to preserve her son's collection, she found a positive art market for these works in New York, reflecting the

¹⁰⁰ Gregor Langfeld, "How the Museum of Modern Art in New York Canonised German Expressionism," *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 1.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰² Ibid., 9.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.

transformation in reception already taking place in Germany.¹⁰⁵ Degenerate Art had created a legacy for Expressionism in America, truly demonstrating politics' influence on artistic taste.

Self-Portrait as a Soldier became an object of desire almost immediately upon its arrival in the United States, illustrating the beginning of its developing fame and transition to positive reception. As she mentioned in her letter, Marie Feldhäusser wished to keep the entire collection together and intact, but when she realized that it was unlikely for all of the works to be moved to a single museum, she “offered the books, prints, and drawings to the E. Weyhe Gallery in New York, and subsequently offered the paintings and sculpture for sale through Weyhe.”¹⁰⁶ The gallery acted as a dealer for much of this collection. The painting proved popular almost at once, as the purchase offers demonstrated, indicating a strong desire for modern art, especially Kirchner works. As provenance researcher Andrew Robinson states, the “availability of works from the Feldhäusser collection was a turning point” for the acceptance of German Expressionism and particularly Kirchner's art in America.¹⁰⁷ *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was initially borrowed by the Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum for Germanic art in 1949, but was returned to the Weyhe Gallery by 1950.¹⁰⁸ Within the year, however, the painting was officially purchased by the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College.

The fact that *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was sought after and acquired by an academic institution is significant, as universities have historically been the birthplace of progressive political and cultural trends. The painting received popular reception from both Oberlin College students and art scholars, indicating a change in overall reception of German Expressionism. Charles Parkhurst, the director of the Museum in 1950, recognized the potential of this art early

¹⁰⁵ Robinson, “Kirchner Collector Kurt Feldhäusser,” 252.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 258.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

on and was avid about supporting the Feldhäusser collection, particularly the works of Kirchner. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was the first Kirchner work that the museum would acquire.¹⁰⁹

Parkhurst wrote a letter to Miss Martha Dickinson at the Weyhe Gallery on March 29, 1950, asking to “be allowed to exhibit the Kirchners here from April 11-30 for our purchase committee to examine.”¹¹⁰ Parkhurst expressed the Allen’s enthusiasm for Kirchner works when he wrote back on April 17th, 1950, “We have received the six Kirchners, and they are now gracing our walls.”¹¹¹ Students also noticed and studied the painting. In 1955 a student published in the Oberlin Review an entire article on the painting, indicating the uniqueness of its Expressionist form.¹¹² The fact that the painting was chosen as a featured piece already in 1955 indicates a new popularity that was emphasized by its association with victimhood of Nazi oppression.

The Allen Memorial Art Museum expressed interest in displaying German Expressionist pieces during its 1950 annual student purchasing show, in which students could help select the pieces the museum would buy; this demonstrated a true evolution in the acceptance of German modern art in the United States. For this annual show, curator Hazel B. King wrote to Martha Dickenson on September 20, 1950 in order to inquire about buying some of the gallery’s Impressionist and Expressionist prints for “this year’s student purchasing show,” including many of Kirchner’s works.¹¹³ Fascinatingly, the German pieces in particular were sought after.

Dickenson wrote back to King on October 5th, 1950, that “we are including quite a number of the German prints, concentrating on them rather than the French group” and that

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Charles P. Parkhurst, *Charles Parkhurst to Martha Dickinson, March 29, 1950*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *Weyhe Gallery, New York 21, N.Y.*, accessed November 9, 2015.

¹¹¹ Charles P. Parkhurst, *Charles Parkhurst to Martha Dickinson, April 17, 1950*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *Weyhe Gallery, New York 21, N.Y.*, accessed November 9, 2015.

¹¹² “Psacharopoulos Views ‘Die Brücke’ Exhibition,” *Oberlin Review*, October 14, 1955, <http://obis.oberlin.edu/record=b1749264n54>.

¹¹³ Hazel B. King, *Hazel King to Martha Dickinson, September 20, 1950*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *The Weyhe Gallery, New York 21, N.Y.*, accessed November 16, 2015.

if the group is too large, we would appreciate your returning the ones you do not need, particularly in the case of the German prints. In having our exhibition we have found a lively interest in them, and would want to have any excess of your requirements back in stock.¹¹⁴

This indicates an intense desire for German work at the time, which displays quite a different narrative concerning American reception of German culture post World War II than one might imagine; Nazi denunciation had greatly influenced that narrative. It should be noted, however, that this desire focused on contemporary art- that which was persecuted- and not earlier German art which the Nazis had exalted.

Regardless, the Oberlin students received these works of art positively, which indicates that a true change in cultural reception had occurred for German Expressionism since Degenerate Art. Hazel B. King wrote to Martha Dickenson on October 18, 1950 that “this is the best show we have had so far and we now have sufficient interest among the students to make it a successful venture.”¹¹⁵ “As things are going so well,” she wrote, “especially the Expressionists, I hesitate to send anything back at the moment.”¹¹⁶ Even among progressive students, this contemporary German culture found appreciation. Degenerate Art had caused a major transition in American cultural reception of German Expressionism, yet the new popularity that met this modern art emerged in large part out of an association with Nazi-oppression. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and other Kirchner works had been taken out of their original political context and given a new sense of identity. In any case, this initial reaction to the painting and German Expressionism in general was only the start of what would be a long journey of fame and travel.

¹¹⁴ Martha Dickenson, *Martha Dickenson to Mrs. Hazel King, October 5, 1950*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *Allen Memorial Art Gallery*, accessed November 16, 2015.

¹¹⁵ Hazel B. King, *Hazel King to Martha Dickenson, October 18, 1950*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *The Weyhe Gallery, New York 21, N.Y.*, accessed November 16, 2015.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 4: *Self-Portrait's Success in the United States and Beyond*

The success of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* at Oberlin College was only the beginning of its post- Nazi fame. Throughout the next six decades it would continue to travel around America and even abroad as various institutions requested to loan it out from the Allen Memorial Art Museum. With each request it would further prove its popularity; positive reviews from each show demonstrated that Kirchner had found his place in the American art market, and that Americans both accepted and desired his work, pushing to incorporate German Expression and contemporary German culture into their own. Yet this acceptance focused on that which was persecuted by the Nazis. Considering the fact that Kirchner had been all but unknown to America before Nazi denunciation, one can conclude that this Nazi denunciation gave *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and Kirchner himself much of his value. Each exhibit seems to highlight the fact that Kirchner's work was prosecuted by the Nazis, and the popularity of these shows seems largely attributed to this notion. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier's* journey exemplified how German Expressionism garnered an impressive reception in the United States. It also demonstrates how art dealers and supporters were active in a political context, determining what would be popular in the art scene; this further exemplifies that politics can largely shape artistic taste.

Kirchner's controversial painting was not at the Oberlin art museum for long before it received its first loan request; this time from a familiar figure. On March 24, 1952, Curt Valentin sent a letter to Charles Parkhurst requesting to exhibit *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in a special biographical exhibition.¹¹⁷ This was the same Valentin that once pursued Kirchner's work for the

¹¹⁷ Curt Valentin, *Curt Valentin to Mr. Charles P. Parkhurst, March 24, 1952*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *Dudley Peter Allen Memorial Gallery of Art*, accessed November 19, 2015.

artist's first ever one-man show, which took place in at the Institute of Art in Detroit in 1937.¹¹⁸ Valentin had lived in Berlin and sold books before he fled the country under Nazi racial restrictions and opened his own art gallery in New York in 1937.¹¹⁹ His partner in art dealing, Karl Buchholz, was not only permitted to keep his gallery open in Hamburg, Germany, but was also one of the four dealers allowed under Nazi authority to sell works of "degenerate" art; he therefore sent many of these works to the Curt Valentin Gallery in the U.S., which was consequently known for its unique accessibility to German exiled art.¹²⁰ In the few years preceding this exhibition, Valentin's shows been advertised in the New York Times as a continuation of "his series of exhibitions of work by European artists- most of them on the Nazi expunged list."¹²¹ It is very likely that this focus on Nazi denunciation gave his shows the success that they achieved, and his reputation as an exiled-art dealer certainly contributed to the gallery's fame. This particular show, titled "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner," ran from April 16th through May 10th, 1952 at the Curt Valentin Gallery, and aimed to highlight the most distinguished of the "degenerate" artist's life works.

Valentin attempted to portray a sense of cultural mission through his exhibition. While there is not much documentation of the actual show, the exhibit pamphlet provides significant information. Page one of the pamphlet merely gives background information on the history of modern German art in America, but the second makes a point of listing the many exhibitions in which Kirchner's works were currently exhibited, underscoring Kirchner's fast growth in popularity since his denunciation. Most importantly, the pamphlet demonstrated Kirchner's

¹¹⁸ *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16- May 10, 1952*, Curt Valentin Gallery, Former Buchholz Gallery, Exhibition Pamphlet. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. Publications File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed November 20, 2015, 1.

¹¹⁹ Langfeld, "How the Museum of Modern Art in New York Canonised German Expressionism," 8.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notebook: Brief Comment on Some of the Recently Opened Shows in Galleries," *New York Times*, December 15, 1940.

innovative commitment to inventing a new German nationalist art. On the third page of the exhibit pamphlet, Valentin chose to display a letter, which Kirchner wrote to him on April 17th, 1937, in which Kirchner stated: “Did you know that as far back as 1900 I had the audacious idea of renewing German Art?”¹²² Displaying such a German nationalistic statement in the exhibit pamphlet was bold in 1952, so closely after the war. The objective of this letter, it seems, was to demonstrate a sense of German cultural pride, and to give a promotion to contemporary German modern art, that is, the art that was denounced by the Nazis.

According to Valentin, the show was relatively successful. Directly after the close of the exhibition on May 12th, 1952, he wrote a letter to Charles Parkhurst, in which he raved about the achievement:

I wish you could have seen the exhibition, which was beautiful and although the success was not sensational, there were many people who were very enthusiastic. Also people who had never seen paintings by Kirchner before were very impressed.¹²³

Given the fact that, at this point in time, so few people in America actually knew who Kirchner was, this was no small accomplishment. Although *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was not specifically mentioned in the pamphlet at this specific show, the growing interest in his work in general was evident from this letter. Valentin, as an important art dealer, was clearly crucial in shaping the politics of the art scene, and there is no doubt that Kirchner’s denunciation is what drew people to his work, since Valentin’s mission so much involved his promotion of “degenerate” art. One must keep in mind though, that this popularity was not necessarily what Kirchner would have

¹²² Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16- May 10, 1952, 3.

¹²³ Curt Valentin, *Curt Valentin to Mr. Charles P. Parkhurst, May 12, 1952*. Letter. From the Oberlin College Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum Records, *Dudley Peter Allen Memorial Gallery of Art*, accessed November 19, 2015.

deemed “success,” given that the fame in large part sprung from a Nazi- victim association and not from his original Expressionist autonomy.

Shortly after its showing at Curt Valentin’s Gallery, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* would become integrated temporarily into an institution that symbolized the strengthening and acceptance of German culture in America. After the Allen Memorial Art Museum briefly lent the painting out to New York’s M. Knoedler & Company Inc. in 1954, the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University requested to display the painting in its exhibition, “War and its Aftermath: 1914-1925,” which ran from March 4th through April 6th, 1957.¹²⁴ The institution had opened in the beginning of the 20th century in correlation with the First World War, so that it could aim to promote a “German-American cultural understanding.”¹²⁵ Unfortunately, due to the difficulties of funding during the war, the museum was not established in a timely fashion, and it could not allow visitors until 1921.¹²⁶ Then, during Hitler’s time in power, the prominent art works that director Charles Kuhn had collected over the years, the same pieces that “had once been the proud possessions of German public collections” were labeled degenerate.¹²⁷ Kuhn continued to promote these works at the museum through very controversial times. While the museum shut down in 1942 due to anti- German sentiment and lack of tolerance for German culture, it had its most “dynamic” time in 1948 when it reopened.¹²⁸ Examining the shift in tolerance for elements of German culture, specifically German Expressionism, indicates a sharp interest in that which was oppressed by the Nazis. While there is not extensive information on the actual exhibition in

¹²⁴ “Expressionist Art: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” Allen Memorial Art Museum, accessed April 21, 2015, http://www.oberlin.edu/amam/Kirchner_SelfPortrait.htm.

¹²⁵ Seymour Slive and Charles Haxthausen, *The Busch-Reisinger Museum; Harvard University* (Cambridge: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1980), 10.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

which *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was displayed, the show was based on the museum's original quest to build cultural ties between America and Germany, and the works displayed were obviously of a "degenerate" nature. This astounding surge in desire for modern German art is profound as it indicates that American curiosity for contemporary German culture developed in large part from its association with Degenerate Art, furthering the idea politics can greatly shape artistic trends.

The painting's next adventure was one of its most significant. Linking back to the roots of Kirchner's fame once more, the painting was loaned out for an exhibition established by Wilhelm Valentiner, the second of the two art connoisseurs who had originally pursued Kirchner's art work in 1937. As a private donor, Valentiner helped to fund the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh and decided to establish a comprehensive Kirchner exhibition there in 1958, titled "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, German Expressionist," which ran from January 10th from February 9th and highlighted both his revolutionary ideas and his Nazi defamation¹²⁹ The museum agreed that Valentiner was the impetus for the museum's early success, and were happy to allow him to organize an exhibition which depicted Kirchner as the artist who "helped revolutionize modern art."¹³⁰ The central focus of the exhibition was to display an elaborate idea of Kirchner's artistic evolution between the years of 1905 and 1938.¹³¹ More specifically, Valentiner wished to illuminate the fact that, "after the many mistakes which have been made in the past in not recognizing outstanding masters during their lifetime," it should be that "an artist of the rank of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner would have been appreciated sooner."¹³² While, again

¹²⁹ Laurence J. Wheeler, "Introduction" in *North Carolina Museum of Art: Handbook of the Collections*, ed. Rebecca Martin Nagy (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art (Raleigh), 1998), 1-2.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 4 and 212.

¹³¹ W.R. Valentiner, *E.L. Kirchner, German Expressionist. North Carolina. Museum of Art, Raleigh: A Loan Exhibition, January 10th- February 9th, 1958*, North Carolina Museum of Art (Raleigh), Exhibition Pamphlet, 7.

¹³² Ibid., 9.

there is no special mention of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in particular, one can understand that the piece was evidently used as part of this Kirchner promotion.

The prestige of Valentiner's project is particularly intriguing for two reasons; Valentiner knew the extent to which Kirchner first floundered in the United States in the late 1930s, and his recent growing popularity under Valentiner's blessing seemed to stem primarily from the story of his oppression under the National Socialist government. After Valentiner and Valentin had initially demonstrated interest in Kirchner in Switzerland in 1937, Valentiner had tried desperately to help the artist gain traction in the United States, but the artist was still largely unknown to the public. He bought several of Kirchner's paintings personally in order to boost the artist's confidence and allow him to feel as though he was making financial headway.¹³³

Therefore the art historian wanted to highlight the recent ascendance of the artist in America when he established this show. In the catalogue of the exhibition, Valentiner stated that,

we have selected as a representative one of the leading masters, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), whose popularity has increased greatly in America in recent years, without his works being shown thus far in special exhibitions in our museums.¹³⁴

Valentiner's statement further alluded to the post-Degenerate Art change in Kirchner's popularity, and the catalogue recognized "the recent interest in Kirchner's work" by citing institutions which had included his works.¹³⁵ It emphasized that Kirchner was one of the Nazi-oppressed artists in the Third Reich and that during this time, "the best German artists were prevented from becoming known;" the catalogue dramatically equated this with how artists like Grünewald and Dürer and "the brilliant rise of the arts in the first decades of the sixteenth

¹³³ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

century [were] so crushed by revolutions and wars.”¹³⁶ This dramatic emphasis on oppression accented the exhibition’s success, further alluding to how intensely politics can influence artistic taste. It also promotes the idea that the American public saw German Expressionists as the “good Germans” who defied the Nazis.

After leaving the North Carolina Museum of Art and passing through a series of prominent art institutions, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* became part of a prominent traveling exhibition. In 1966, from November 23rd through January 5th, The Seattle Museum of Art opened an exhibition titled “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: A Retrospective Exhibition;” the show was also opened at the Pasadena Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.¹³⁷ This exhibition was renowned for its emphasis on Kirchner’s budding accomplishments and America’s growing interest in contemporary German art, specifically Expressionism and other aspects of Nazi- oppressed German culture. The three institutions wanted to “present for the first time in widely diverse centers of the country a large number of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s works in all media, spanning the course of his immensely productive career.”¹³⁸ It also sought to emphasize Germany’s *modern* art, and how “an awareness of German achievements” in the form of art had “flourished in the post war years.”¹³⁹ This further points to the interest in specifically Nazi-era German culture immediately following Nazi oppression- that is, contemporary Expressionism rather than German classics such as Dürer-, and is a key indicator not only of American tolerance of contemporary German culture, but of encouragement for that culture. It is clear that those who organized the exhibition were part of the general impetus for catering artistic taste to political sentiment.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁷ “Expressionist Art.”

¹³⁸ Donald E. Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), Exhibition Catalogue, 1969, 9.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

This exhibition emphasized Kirchner's contribution to modern art especially in the face of political controversy in the Third Reich and his own tragic demise. The catalogue of the exhibition described how essential German Expression was to modern art and how Kirchner, as the founder of *die Brücke* had been a "focal point" of artistic evolution as he had sought to "revitalize German art."¹⁴⁰ It is again interesting to note the focus on *contemporary* German culture and achievements at this time in America. This emphasizes the support for the "good German" within the narrative of the "good German- bad German" dichotomy. The exhibition also aimed to highlight Kirchner's destruction and celebrate him in spite of that. While other Kirchner exhibitions merely mentioned his suicide as part of his biography, this show took place on the anniversary of Kirchner's suicide. The catalogue stated that only now, "three decades after Kirchner's death, is an exhibition of appropriately large scale and broad representation presented to the American public."¹⁴¹ His demise was depicted in anguish of his defamation, which furthered his association with Nazi victimology.

Kirchner's tragic end and oppression granted him even greater fame in the eyes of the American people. In a March 22nd, 1969 article about the Boston rendition of the exhibition, Donald Gordon described how "Kirchner has become historical" due to his contribution of German Expressionism and specifically cites *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* to be "as moving and as relevant to modern feeling as a poem by Brecht."¹⁴² While the article does portray Kirchner for his achievements in the modern art world, it also mentions the importance of Expressionism in the face of Nazi oppression. "History," it states, "-particularly in the person of Hitler and his accomplices- proved the expressionist sense of modern life to be well founded."¹⁴³ This further

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Hilton Kramer, "Kirchner Survey at Boston Museum," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1969.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

points to the theory that when art is denounced, it garners more fame, and thus demonstrates this grand connection between politics and art.

Self-Portrait as a Soldier took a monumental step when it received a loan request from the country in which it was vilified. The Nationalgalerie in Berlin expressed to the Allen Memorial Art Museum its interest in establishing an exhibition titled “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner 1880-1938,” which would be open to the public from November 29th through January 20th, 1979-1980.¹⁴⁴ This was a great step for the nation that had persecuted the work forty years prior. Due to Kirchner’s growing popularity, the Nationalgalerie hoped to open an exhibition that displayed all of Kirchner’s most famous works.¹⁴⁵ The exhibition catalogue, while it merely displayed *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in a Kirchner biographical context, took great note of Nazi denunciation. The catalogue stated that Kirchner was “particularly badly hit” by this Nazi destruction, but that despite this, Kirchner now had a significant gathering in Germany.¹⁴⁶ Clearly his original defamation had become the source of his future fame. The journey symbolized a German acknowledgement of Degenerate Art’s past as well as of the growing popularity of its denounced works in America. The Allen Memorial Art Museum’s decision to lend the painting back to its home country indicated that these art negotiators wanted to emphasize this acknowledgement and further promote this popularity of association with Nazi-oppression.

While the Allen Memorial Art Museum had to become more selective as time went on and as the painting gained value, it allowed for *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* to go overseas again

¹⁴⁴ “Expressionist Art.”

¹⁴⁵ Lucius Grisebach and Annette Meyer, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: 1880-1938, November 1979-January 1980*, Nationalgalerie Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Exhibition Catalogue, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1979, 7.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

from October to December of 1985 for the Royal Academy of the Arts exhibition in London, titled, “German Art in the 20th Century, Painting and Sculpture 1905-1985.”¹⁴⁷ The exhibition aimed to choose the most prominent masterpieces and developments in the last one hundred years of Germany’s art culture; more specifically, it desired to demonstrate the evolution of German art from the years of Kirchner’s early work through the time of the National Socialists and into “the remarkable flowering of painting and sculpture” in recent German art.¹⁴⁸ It is essential to note that the exhibition creators chose the Nazi era to be a defining point in this evolution. This is perhaps what drew in the public, since Nazi denunciation was such an intriguing concept. While the exhibition did, of course, discuss the monumental nature of Kirchner’s work, it focused on the fact that, “ironically it was not until the campaign against ‘degenerate’ art in 1937 that the artist’s work attained recognition abroad.”¹⁴⁹ The fact that the exhibition chose to examine this aspect is telling and indeed further demonstrates the relationship between politics and art.

Self-Portrait as a Soldier hit its exhibition stride in the beginning of the 1990s, when it traveled to Los Angeles in order to participate in a reenactment exhibition of “Degenerate Art.” On June 23rd, 1989, Curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Stephanie Barron, wrote a letter to Director William Chiego at the Allen Memorial Art Museum in request of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* for her proposed exhibition:

The exhibition will include approximately 200 paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints and books which were actually included in the original exhibition. Together these works of art reflect the extraordinary vitality and importance of contemporary art in Germany as well as the present acquisition

¹⁴⁷ “Expressionist Art.”

¹⁴⁸ *German Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1905-1985*, ed. Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal, and Wieland Schmied, Royal Academy of Arts (London), Exhibition Catalogue, London: Prestel-Verlag, 1985, 7.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 427.

policies of so many German museums.¹⁵⁰

Ms. Barron aimed to bring to light again the tragedy of the Degenerate Art exhibition, and show the public, a new generation, this type of art persecution. The exhibition naturally painted this villainized art as heroic and valued, and ready for another examination. In the show's pamphlet, the exhibition designer, Frank O. Gehry, stated that "the idea is to let people know not only how maligned this art was, but how beautiful it is. The intention is to show the art for what it is - good art."¹⁵¹ This show and the original Degenerate Art exhibition became the focal points which together acted as the epitome of how politics can shape artistic taste, and how this art gained its fame largely through its recontextualization under an association with Nazi victimology.

The exhibition, titled "'Degenerate Art': The Fate of of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany," which ran from February 17th through May 12th, 1991, sought not only to recreate accurately what the Nazis had presented to the German public more than five decades before, but also aimed to simultaneously create a foreboding atmosphere and demonstrate to the American public that what had happened under the National Socialists was evil and destructive. Gehry designed the exhibition so that it would "evoke a gloomy, institutional look."¹⁵² The setup of the exhibition was deliberate in delivering its clear message. One section displayed the policies in pre-1930s Germany for collecting art and the encouragement that existed for avant-garde art during these years.¹⁵³ Above all else, the exhibition aimed to "establish the sense of cultural oppression that permeated all the arts under the Nazis."¹⁵⁴ This art institution aimed to use past government disapproval in Germany to promote its exhibition, demonstrating how the exhibition

¹⁵⁰ Stephanie Barron, *Stephanie Barron to Mr. William Chiego, June 23, 1989*. Letter. From *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Loans and Exhibitions File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed December 10, 2015, 2.

¹⁵¹ Barron, "Degenerate Art," Exhibition Pamphlet, 4.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

organizers were not politically passive in their shaping of what art the public would view and eventually desire.

The show proved to be wildly successful and featured *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* as an icon of this heroic “degeneracy.” The exhibition was popular enough that it traveled to several other institutions. After it traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the curators, Charles F. Stuckey, wrote a letter to Oberlin’s Director Chiego on September 30th, 1991, stating the success of the exhibition:

During the eleven weeks that the exhibition was open to the public here over 170,000 people had the pleasure to study these works and learn about this incredible episode in the history of modern art.¹⁵⁵

This type of public success seems evidently linked to the once controversial subject matter. The “oppressed” aura of the exhibition drew in the required popularity, and *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* served a symbol of this oppression. The magazine for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art used the painting as its advertisement picture for this 1991 exhibition, and *Time Magazine*, whose March 4th 1991 article, “Culture on the Nazi Pillory,” described the painting as a denounced masterpiece, also used the painting as one of the three to represent the exhibition.¹⁵⁶ This article also struck a chord when it noted that works such as this, that were once considered degenerate, were now considered “classic” because of this.¹⁵⁷ This continues the narrative that the painting was taken out of its original political context and turned into a “classic” piece of art merely because of its victimization.

¹⁵⁵ Charles F. Stuckey, *Charles Stuckey to Mr. William Chiego, September 30, 1991*. Letter. From *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Accession No. 1950.29. Loans and Exhibitions File. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Accessed December 10, 2015, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Hughes, “Culture on the Nazi Pillory: The third Reich’s Mocking Exhibit of ‘Degenerate’ Works Is Re-Created for the First Time,” *Time Magazine*, March 4, 1991, 86-87.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

The overdramatizing of this art was in large part the impetus for the re-creation's success. In a March 25th, 1991 article in *Life & Leisure*, Richard Nilsen portrayed the exhibition as a "Horror Show," which perhaps distastefully "depicts art's 'Holocaust;'" the article, which used *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* for its illustration, also expressed that this exhibition was "the most important current art show in the country" and that it "made Los Angeles for a time one of the leading cultural centers of the world."¹⁵⁸ The dramatic title and mention of art's "Holocaust" grossly misrepresents the fate of "degenerate" art works, but the powerful word use almost certainly brought in readers. Kirchner's life and suicide in particular were exaggerated, which delivered particular attention and popularity to his works, especially since his suicide correlated with his Nazi oppression. On February 15th, 1991, the *Los Angeles Times* posted an advertisement for the exhibition, and noted specifically how Kirchner committed suicide in correspondence with Nazi defamation of his art.¹⁵⁹ All of these reviews point to the popularity that surges with forbidden or repressed cultural elements. As Grace Glueck stated in a July 9th 1990 *New York Times* review about the original Nazi exhibitions, "while most of the works in the 'Great Exhibition of German Art' have disappeared without a trace, many of those subjected to Nazi derision in the 'Degenerate Art' show are now in leading collections."¹⁶⁰ The victimization and recontextualization of this art is evidently responsible for much of its following.

It seems that this LA institution recognized on some level the risk of excessive dramatization and its subsequent effects on popularity, yet interestingly still used this tactic as a

¹⁵⁸ Nilsen, "Horror Show," c1-c2.

¹⁵⁹ "Revisiting the Unthinkable: Nazi Germany's 'Degenerate Art' show at LACMA," *Los Angeles Times*, February 15, 1991.

¹⁶⁰ Grace Glueck, "'Degenerate' Art Works Survive Triumphant Over Nazi Degradation: 'Degenerate' Art Triumphs over Nazi Degradation Re-creating a 1937 Show in Munich that Vilified the Avant-Garde," *New York Times*, July 09, 1990, accessed December 21, 2015, c13.

selling point in order to promote its exhibition. Ironically, designer Gehry seemed to make a contradictory statement about the reception of this art: “What you don’t want to do,” he writes, “is to make a work of art important simply because of its associations.these [works] were not made to deal with specific issues, so you would be maligning them by overdramatizing them.”¹⁶¹ The statement is problematic because this is precisely what the exhibition was accomplishing. The very nature of the Nazi denunciation would forever overdramatize these works of art. One could argue that this dramatization of “degenerate” art persecution further pushed this art into the Nazi-victim relationship ideology that draws it even further from its original intent and true aesthetic value. It seems quite clear that these pieces of art received attention in L.A. because they were, in the words of Gehry, indeed “maligned.”

Yet the exhibition was monumental in other regards as well, in that it became a focal point for German-American relations and a symbol of official American support for contemporary German culture through art. The timing of the exhibition was no coincidence; Stephanie Barron originally hoped to open the exhibit in 1987 on the fiftieth anniversary of the original show, but instead she decided that, ““we wanted to see first what would happen in Germany.””¹⁶² Just as Germany became unified, L.A. Director Earl A. Powell III and Chicago Director James N. Wood made clear that “a newly reunified Germany faces extraordinary challenges; inevitably among them is a reexamination of the events of the Third Reich.”¹⁶³ Yet the aim of exhibition was also to promote a cultural understanding of German art in *America*. Stephanie Barron stated in reference to the original exhibition idea, “I thought we had a chance to do a more ambitious exhibition and to put the original show into a context for an American

¹⁶¹ Barron, “*Degenerate Art*,” Exhibition Pamphlet, 4.

¹⁶² Glueck, “‘Degenerate’ Art Works Survive Triumphant Over Nazi Degradation,” c13.

¹⁶³ Earl A. Powell III and James N. Wood, “Forward” in *‘Degenerate Art’: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, ed. Stephanie Barron (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1991), 7.

audience.”¹⁶⁴ Barron truly had a vision of using this controversial incidence in art history to educate America and solidify the growing acceptance of contemporary German culture and art in America after World War II. Powell and Wood stated astutely that this exhibit would

contribute to the continuing reevaluation of the of the cultural heritage of Germany and the vigilance and reaffirmation that are an essential component of the health of our own nation’s intellectual and artistic traditions.¹⁶⁵

Ironically, the reexamination of Nazi *oppression* is what allowed Americans to find tolerance for contemporary German culture, because they could solidify the concept of the “good German.”

Self-Portrait as a Soldier tells a miraculous story of overturn in cultural reception and revolutionary change in artistic taste; yet this transition in artistic popularity was undoubtedly correlated with political influence. While German Expression may have eventually gained value in America on its own, Nazi denunciation of this work furthered its popularity earlier on and in immense ways. It cannot be denied that oppression and persecution helped lead the way to further cultural understanding, tolerance, and even friendship between Germany and America. Had Kirchner not been, as the L.A. exhibition book advertised, “a prominent target for the enemies of modernism,”¹⁶⁶ and had Kirchner remained sympathetic to Nazi political persuasions and continued to paint in Germany- not in the confines of the Swiss Alps- perhaps *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* would never have traveled the journey that helped pave the way for, an albeit limited, cultural acceptance that occurred through German Expressionism.

¹⁶⁴ Glueck, “‘Degenerate’ Art Works Survive Triumphant Over Nazi Degradation,” c13.

¹⁶⁵ Earl. A. Powell III and James N. Wood, *Degenerate Art*, ' 7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 269.

Conclusion

The dynamically fluctuating reception of *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* in Germany and its growth of popularity in America after the war indicated a type of relationship between politics and art in which the former greatly affects and determines artistic taste. Kirchner's work, as a representation of German Expressionism in general, was popular under Wilhelm II's disapproval, while the public received it relatively indifferently during the flourishing Weimar period. When the National Socialists came to power and denounced this type of modern art, German Expressionism's defamation in Germany established a space for its notable desirability in the United States. As it traveled between art institutions, it became clear that *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*'s popularity was directly tied to its association with Nazi oppression. Perhaps German Expressionism gained its fame in America merely due to the fact that it was equated with "anti-fascism." While this may seem to indicate a tolerance in America for German culture post WW II, this acceptance was somewhat limited because it only recognized the small microcosm of German culture that was denounced by the Nazis, and blatantly ignored the rest. America, and seemingly the rest of the international community, created a notion of "the good-German," for which Kirchner was the poster child, exalting his artwork and demonstrating that the desire for this aspect of German culture was ironically well received *because* of Nazi oppression.

Studying cultural history can help to display social environments in complex political times. Examining in what types of environments *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* was displayed can demonstrate the most influential aspect of its story. While under Nazi ridicule, the painting existed in an environment in which people were looking for a culprit, a group of people on which to blame society's hardships. The political conditions in Nazi Germany took Kirchner's famous work out of its World War I context- the context for which it was intended- and placed it within

the Jewish-Bolshevik theory, giving it entirely new meaning. Its transition to America also provided new context; post-World War II American society provided an environment in which people were searching for ways to be diverse, tolerant, and democratic, in order to contrast with current oppression in the world. This further pulled *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* out of its Kaiser Reich context and further pushed this Nazi-victim ideology onto the work, making it famous as a Nazi-survived artifact, not as a piece of World War I cultural history. While this still provides significant meaning, it should be noted that this piece- and perhaps other works of German Expressionism- became famous for reasons beyond just their genuine nature and original intent. In this regard, can Kirchner's popularity in America with *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* and his other works be truly considered "success" if they were mostly glorified because of his Nazi defamation? Popularity and success are not necessarily the same, and it is unclear whether or not Kirchner would have considered this type of fame to be successful.

Although it seems encouraging that America would demonstrate a desire for German art so closely after the war, this promotion and study of German culture is limited and begs further question about its acceptance even today. In the United States, the education on German history and culture in primary and secondary schools is comprised largely of Nazi oppression and Holocaust memory. While it is essential that this part of history remain in standard education and continue to have a large emphasis in the curriculum, this focus is not balanced with information on other aspects of German culture, giving American students a limited perspective on "Germanness." There exists an everlasting association between German culture and National Socialism; with narrow perception, can there ever be real cultural acceptance and understanding between the two nations and a path forward? Just as *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* should be recognized not only as a piece of Nazi oppression but as a part of German culture in a larger

sense, German history and culture should be studied in a larger context, incorporating the history of National Socialism and Holocaust, but also recognizing the culture as a whole and examining other important aspects of it.

The ways in which studying art can contribute to history should not be overlooked; although politics largely determine artistic taste, art can perhaps also shape politics and societal sentiment. Not only can studying art and cultural history in general indicate a different societal sentiment than political history often depicts, art and other forms of culture can help influence political negotiations. The condemnation of “degenerate” culture in Germany in the long run would develop into the first attempt on America’s part to negotiate once more with the country that appeared at the time a villain to the rest of the world. Did *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* help to kindle a friendship and understanding between the two nations, no matter how skewed the reasoning? If German Expressionism could do this, is it not possible that emphasizing other German art could further an understanding between the two countries, an understanding that is not based so strongly on the history of Nazi oppression? Is it possible that one day, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* could be viewed independently from its victim identity, contributing to the landscape of German culture in the form of its original intent?

““As a German painter,”” Kirchner had written in that fateful letter, ““one is looked at now as something not very pleasant. Thus, my position after the “defamation” has become very difficult.””¹⁶⁷ His letter to Valentiner had stated: ““America has a direct relation to art and

¹⁶⁷ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to W.R. Valentiner, March 15, 1938*. Letter. From W. R. Valentiner, *E.L. Kirchner, German Expressionist (North Carolina, Museum of Art, Raleigh, A Loan Exhibition)*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1958, 48.

therefore a clearer vision of the modern development. It is our land of hope.’’¹⁶⁸ America perhaps was his land of hope but certainly not his genuine artistic preservation. Kirchner will go down in history as a tortured artist whose self-destruction was a direct result of mental illness and Nazi persecution. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, however, should be recognized for what it really is; a brilliant piece of art that ridiculed catastrophic European war and demonstrated a man’s inner struggle to be both a soldier and an artist; a work that helped serve as an epitome of the German Expressionist style; a work by an artist who was the forerunner of a group who all but founded German Expressionism. *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* should be able to gain appreciation without over politicization or dramatization. It should be seen today just as many others of Kirchner’s works should be seen; simply a good work of art.

¹⁶⁸ Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to W.R. Valentiner, January 24, 1938*. Letter. From W.R. Valentiner, *E.L. Kirchner, German Expressionist (North Carolina, Museum of Art, Raleigh, A Loan Exhibition)*, Exhibition Catalogue, 1958, 47-48.

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