

Letter by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to the Prussian Academy of Art (July 12, 1937)

Abstract

As Nazi culture policy encroached on Germany's modernist art scene, many artists found themselves under increasing scrutiny and attack. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) was a German expressionist painter and graphic artist, whose artwork raised the ire of the regime. By the time the National Socialists came to power, Kirchner, once active in Dresden and Berlin, had been living in Davos, Switzerland, for more than a decade, although he still maintained active ties to the German art scene. Kirchner had never joined a political party and did not support the regime. Although he was considered an Aryan, and despite his voluntary service in the First World War, the Prussian Academy of Art stripped Kirchner of his membership in 1937, and two dozen of his works were displayed as part of the Nazi's "Degenerate Art" exhibition that same year. In an attempt to redeem his reputation and restore his position, Kirchner wrote a carefully crafted letter to the Prussian Academy, in which he tried to strike a balance between his apolitical nature and his pro-German credentials. His protestations were unsuccessful, and Kirchner was ultimately removed from the Academy's membership roster six weeks after he penned this letter. Kirchner shot himself to death in Switzerland in 1938.

Source

Davos, July 12, [19]37

Dear Dr. Schumann,

I received your letter dated July 8. I have been living abroad for 20 years and because of my illness I live a very lonely and withdrawn life. I am not informed about the artistic events in Berlin. I certainly do not want to stand in anyone's way or create a stir. If my name is a nuisance in the Academy, delete it. I would feel arrogant or silly if I wanted to resign from this great, honorable institution, to which my grandfather already belonged. I am not an enemy after all. If I were healthy, I would so gladly collaborate in the creation of a new German art. I have worked on it all my life and have been attacked for it often enough. I have never belonged to a political party. My work comes from simple human feeling and is directed at the same. I intended to gift the best of it to my country upon my death in order to serve my country. Some young artists are interested in it. I wish with all my heart that Germany would develop a new, beautiful, and healthy art. I and many other older people have worked honestly and faithfully for it, and sooner or later people will realize that.

With German greetings

Your devoted

E. L. Kirchner

Source: Archive of the Academy of Arts in Berlin; reprinted in Joseph Wulf, ed. *Die Bildenden Künste im Dritten Reich. Eine Dokumentation*. Gütersloh: Sigbert Mohn, 1963, p. 309.

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