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Rolf Nesch (1893-1975)

**From Second Generation Expressionist
to Cultural Identity in Exile.**

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Abstract

An intriguing print, *Three women on the rock* (1939), by the German born artist Rolf Nesch that reminded me of a print by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was the motivation triggering my research into Nesch's relationship with first generation Expressionists. Since Nesch's graphic production was extensive, I narrowed the investigation down to a consideration of three critical portfolios, the series *Bridges*, *Snow* and *Bathing Scenes*. These had strong iconographic and formal links with the prints of established Expressionists, yet such links have hardly been commented on by Norwegian art historians. In this dissertation Nesch's oeuvre will therefore neither be examined in its entirety, nor in a monographic context. Rather the selected prints will be used primarily as a way to explore his relationship with important members of the Expressionist movement. Here the key notions of 'genealogy' and the 'transhistorical' inform the exploration of Nesch's relationship with Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Kurt Schwitters; I will inevitably discuss some of their works but this will remain the foil against which Nesch's avant-gardism is investigated.

In the first chapter, Nesch's interaction with a complex network of mentors will be discussed: the Director of the *Hamburger Museum of Kunst und Gewerbe* Max Sauerlandt, the high ranking district judge turned art collector Gustav Schiefler, as well as Nesch's Hamburg artist colleagues, Karl Kluth, Karl Ballmer and Richard Haizmann. This chapter also provides an introduction to the German print tradition, from the revival of the woodcut in the early twentieth century to avant-garde experimentation with graphic media. Through the lens of Walter Benjamin's pivotal essay 'Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction' (1936), the dissertation reinforces how the 'lowly' print became invested with 'high art' status and easily marketed as a conveyor of 'artistic authenticity'.

The second chapter is devoted to the *Bridges series* (1932) and the theme of 'print making as assemblage', which is once again examined in light of Walter Benjamin's thoughts, in this case his use of the word 'montage' as a political and aesthetic device in the essay 'The Author as Producer' (1934). An introductory section analyses the historical importance of the 'bridges' iconography. Thereafter the dissertation focuses on Munch's influence on the Hamburg artists and the increased level of abstraction this caused. A discussion of the Brücke ideal of spontaneity provides a context in which to decipher Nesch's technical innovations. A comparison with Schwitters' collages highlights the connection between assemblages and Nesch's new 'metal print' techniques.

The last chapter explores Nesch's enforced immigration to Norway in 1933, and how this compares with Schwitters' flight to Norway and Kirchner's relocation to Switzerland. The relationship between exile and nationalism and its impact on Nesch is discussed in depth with the help of texts by the postcolonial cultural theorists Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. In concluding, it is argued that Nesch's referencing of the Brücke artists' bathing scenes and 'primitive art', usually interpreted as idyllic, could be construed as subversive given the contingent circumstances of war-torn Europe. This continuation of avant-garde tendencies combined with the concurrent affiliation with Munch and Picasso raises the issues of 'hybridity' in light of Nesch's complex formation of cultural identity.

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Rolf Nesch and his assistant Embrik Medgard.
 From Hjelle, Eivind Otto, *Rolf Nesch, Kunstneren og hans verk i Nesch-museet, Ål*
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Introduction

Rolf Nesch is best known for his invention of the metal print technique, radically extending the potential for the printing plates as autonomous objects for artistic display. In September-October 1924, the German-born artist Rolf Nesch spent six weeks with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in Davos and according to Nesch: 'Kirchner was the artist who made the most impression on me'¹ In this essay I will argue that this might not be correct. As the art historian Maike Bruhns points out, the influence of Edvard Munch on Nesch, both directly and indirectly, during his years in Hamburg (1929-33) was immense.² In addition, what Nesch learnt from Kirchner was, as we shall see, mainly elements of what Kirchner in turn had learnt from Munch. Indeed, in 1933 it was because of Munch that Nesch moved to Norway. In the 1904 publication *Die Entwicklungsgeschichte der Modernen Kunst* (History of Modern Art), the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe had discussed the terms by which the avant-garde was defined in turn-of-the-century Germany. Interestingly, Meier-Graefe was a close friend of both Munch and Nesch. The art historian Patricia Berman points out how Meier-Graefe attempted to reconcile the German national tradition with the international avant-garde. For instance, Meier-Graefe's plan for the Sonderbund exhibition back in 1912 began with Munch and van Gogh as precursors to the Expressionist movement. Meier-Graefe intended to reassure the public that modern art was familiar and that modernism was inevitable.³ He did so by reconstituting the romantic concept of genius within a process of

¹ 'Kirchner war der Künstler, der mich am Meisten beeindruckt hat....' Rolf Nesch in a television program in the series: 'Kunst-autentisch', produced in 1965 by *Süddeutsche Rundfunk*, Cologne. The transcript was given to me by Eivind Otto Hjelle, Nesch's step-son in law and author of *Rolf Nesch*, (Oslo, 1998). In the sequence of exhibitions focusing on Kirchner's 'students', the Kirchner Museum Davos in the spring of 2005 showed the exhibition: *Rolf Nesch. Schneefarben und Metallformen*.

² Bruhns, Maike, 'Kluth und Munch', in *Karl Kluth zum 100. Geburtstag Gemälde 1923-1970*, Hamburg, 1998, 46. Bruhns also points out that Munch's influence on the Hamburg artists has hardly been researched.

³ Patricia G. Berman, 'The Invention of History: Julius Meier-Graefe, German Modernism, and Genealogy of Genius', in *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889-1910*.

genealogy building, constructing elaborate genealogies of genius in which past and contemporary artists were removed from their national and temporal contexts. Instead they were relocated to a 'transhistorical realm in which they were not restricted to membership in any particular culture or normative category.'⁴ For Nesch, Munch was such a genius.

Nesch has historically been considered an outsider in Norway and is, therefore, to a certain extent removed from the Norwegian national context.⁵ However, he has neither been properly 'relocated' as a follower of Munch, nor considered an extension of German Expressionism.⁶ Norwegian art historians have on the whole focused on Nesch's technical innovations but have not seen the iconography and his increased level of abstraction in a wider European context.⁷ Neither have they explored the formation of Nesch's German national and cultural identity in exile. In this essay, via the three print series *Bridges* (1932), *Snow* (1934) and *Bathing Scenes* (1935-9), I intend to explore the complex interaction between Nesch, Kirchner and Munch, and show how Nesch's artistic identity and aesthetic preoccupations were predicated mainly on Meier-Graefe's model of genealogy.⁸ I will investigate whether the increased level of abstraction and the synthesizing of forms seen in the *Bridges*, *Snow* and *Bathing scenes series* could have been inherited from Munch, conveyed through a complex network of mentors: the Director of the *Hamburger Museum of Kunst und Gewerbe* Max Sauerlandt and the high ranking district judge turned art collector Gustav Schiefler, as well as by Nesch's Hamburg artist colleagues, Karl Kluth (1898-1972),

⁴ Berman 91.

⁵ For instance, Sidsel Helliesen in *Norsk Grafikk Gjennom 100 år* denotes Nesch: 'En Fremmed Fugl.' Hjelle's excellent biography on Nesch seems to be the first work to properly investigate Nesch's early German years.

⁶ With the exception of Frances Carey and Antony Griffiths: *The Print in Germany 1880-1933*.

⁷ For instance, in the *Nasjonalgalleriet*, Oslo, Nesch is now classified under 'New material.'

⁸ In the case of Munch and Nesch, it is more useful to apply the model of genealogy than that of direct influence. Stephanie Barron has dated the 'second wave of Expressionism' to 1915-1925. See her *German Expressionism. The Second Generation 1915-1925*, Los Angeles, 1988. Most of Nesch's important works were done after this time. Nesch met Munch only once.

Karl Ballmer (1891-1958) and Richard Haizmann (1895-1963). I will examine the changes in Nesch's formal language and technique at the time of his relocation to Norway, as seen in the *Snow series*, in light of the writing of Georg Simmel, one of the founders of modern sociology. Interestingly, Nesch's development potentially shows similarities with the changes taking place in the art of both Kirchner and Kurt Schwitters when they emigrated from Germany.⁹ Finally, by examining Nesch's works through the ideas expressed in Edward Said's article 'Reflections on Exile', I will explore whether the bathers' scene, usually interpreted as idyllic, can be construed as subversive given the contingent circumstances of war-torn Europe, unconsciously revealing the loss inherent in his life in exile.

⁹ Under different conditions, Kirchner moved to Davos in Switzerland in 1917 and Schwitters moved to Norway in 1936.

CHAPTER 1

Nesch and the Hamburg avant-garde milieu in the 1920s.

(i) Nesch's network of mentors and colleagues.

As the art historian Peter W. Guenther points out, the second generation Expressionists, such as Nesch, grew up admiring those who had previously broken with the past.¹⁰ Nesch attended the *Kunstakademie* in Dresden where the Brücke movement had been founded in 1905.¹¹ In February 1922 he exhibited together with the group 'Die Schaffenden' at the *Galerie Emil Richter*, a gallery well known for its Brücke exhibitions.¹² When he moved to Berlin one year later he met the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe, leader of the *Marées-Gesellschaft*, who had already published a portfolio of eight of Munch's intaglio prints in 1896 and who had also written an introduction to Munch's art as an appendix to the portfolio.¹³ Meier-Graefe had in 1921 moved from Dresden to Berlin and started up *Ganymed-Press* as a continuation of the *Marées-Gesellschaft*.¹⁴ Over the next few years, Nesch gradually built a network which would support him for many years to come. In Berlin Nesch met the gallerist Paul Cassirer, as well as the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim who arranged an exhibition for Nesch in 1923.¹⁵

¹⁰ Barron 1988, 99.

¹¹ Nesch first attended the *Dresdner Kunstakademie* in 1913-1914. After having served as a soldier in World War I he got a 'Meisteratelier' at the same Akademie in 1920.

¹² The group 'Die Schaffenden' had been founded in 1919 but did not seem to have had any particular artistic programme. It had its breakthrough in 1922 in *Sächsischer Kunstverein*. Hjelle 1998, 46 and 54.

¹³ Ten signed and sixty-five unsigned copies of the portfolio were issued. *Munch und Deutschland* 46. Note Munch's painting *Julius Meier-Graefe*, (1895). Of his venturing into prints, Munch himself said: 'I must have money for my work, which I think will be significant at least as the beginning of an art form which is not known at home, namely the reproductive art.' Undated letter to Valborg Hammer, autumn 1896 as cited in Woll, G., *Munch – The Complete Graphic Works*, London, 2001, 12.

¹⁴ In 1921 Meier-Graefe curated a Munch exhibition at the *Galerie Arnold*. After 1922 he continued to review exhibitions for e.g. *Frankfurter Zeitung*. For a full account of his critical work, see Moffet, K., *Meier-Graefe as art Critic*, Munich, 1973.

¹⁵ Flechtheim in 1922 founded the art periodical *Querschnitt*. Julius Meier-Graefe congratulated Nesch when the exhibition was launched. Hjelle, Eivind Otto, *Rolf Nesch*, Oslo, 1998, 50.

During this time Nesch developed his friendships with Carl Vincent Krogmann, who in 1933 was to become the Mayor of Hamburg, and with the art historian Otto Fischer.¹⁶ Director of the *Galerie der Stadt*, Stuttgart, Fischer arranged the largest exhibition of Expressionist art since the Sonderbund exhibition in Stuttgart in 1924.¹⁷ Nesch temporarily joined the *Stuttgarter Sezession* in 1924 but moved to Berlin in 1925 where he met 'Reichskunstwart' Edwin Redslob, who was responsible for art within the Ministry of Culture.¹⁸ In 1929 Nesch relocated to Hamburg where he joined the *Hamburgischer Sezession*. The 'anti-traditionalist' Secessions had been formed to provide alternative support and exhibition possibilities to artist members and the Hamburger Secession gave Nesch friendship, discussion panels and a sense of belonging. The foreword to the catalogue of the first exhibition of the Secession in December 1919 had pointed out that: 'The works in this first exhibition are evidence of tolerance toward any [stylistic] direction.'¹⁹ After Nesch had seen the second *Ausstellung der Hamburgischen Sezession* in 1932, he wrote to Gustav Schiefler: 'there are so many possibilities in the works of my colleagues that I must believe in a great development in the years to come.'²⁰ As we shall see, from May 1932 Nesch had a unique insight into the works of his colleagues Kluth, Ballmer and Haizmann through the sharing of an atelier in

¹⁶ Nesch and Krogmann first met in 1916 when the latter was a lieutenant in the army and had his portrait painted by Nesch who worked as a war artist. Hjelle 1998, 34 and 50. Krogmann's brother in law, Reinhard des Art subsequently became an important friend and collector of Nesch's art.

¹⁷ Hjelle 1998, 62. Fischer later became director of *Basel Museum of Art*.

¹⁸ Hjelle 1998, 68.

¹⁹ Barron 1988, 110. And the foreword continued: 'In the last twenty years even the names of small towns have sometimes gained a fine reputation because artists' associations have been formed in them. Hamburg's name has never been mentioned in this connection.'

²⁰ 'In den Arbeiten meiner Kollegen sind so viele Möglichkeiten, daß ich an eine großartige Entwicklung, auf Jahre hinaus, glauben muß.' Nesch in a letter to Schiefler dated February 1932. Bruhns, Maike, *Rolf Nesch, Zeugnis eines ungewöhnlichen Künstlerlebens in turbulenter Zeit*. Gifkendorf, 1993, 128.

‘Ohlendorffhaus.’²¹ ‘Ohlendorffhaus’ was part of an emergency help plan for artists, through which the county provided free studio space for around seventeen artists.²²

In his seminal essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, Greenberg stated that: ‘No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.’²³ Nesch’s ‘umbilical cord’ was attached to several groups of friends, many of whom had also supported Munch and the Brücke artists.²⁴ The Brücke artists had drawn on the print cycle as a promotional device in their annual *Jahresmappen*, published from 1906 to 1912 for distribution to their so-called passive members or subscribers.²⁵ Along the same lines, in 1926, Meier-Graefe, who by then was an important supporter of Nesch,²⁶ initiated the so called *Nesch-Aktion* through which ten subscribers paid a monthly sum of 30 marks in exchange for Nesch’s art.²⁷

²¹ Bruhns 1993, 101-103.

²² Hjelle 1998, 100.

²³ Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, *Partisan Review*, vol. 6, no. 5, Fall 1939, 34-49, reprinted in F. Frascina (ed.), *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (London, 1985), 29.

²⁴ Reisenfeld points out that the Brücke’s list of subscribers tied in with the new middle class. It is also interesting to note the overlap between Munch and Nesch collectors. Several of the supporters mentioned had substantial collections of both artists. This was also the case for Rolf Stenersen, the Norwegian art collector/friend of Munch’s who became Nesch’s instrumental supporter.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that Munch had produced graphic versions of the major painting cycles in order to reach a large audience. Woll points out that this also explains why he wanted to paint large scale decorations in public buildings where more people could see it, and lastly, why he bequeathed the majority of his work to the city of Oslo.

²⁶ ‘Donnerstag war Meier-Gr. Mit Frau u. Dr. Fischer bis ¼ 2 Uhr nachts bei mir im Atelier. Die neuen Bilder warden auf der ganzen Linie anerkannt und gut befunden.’ Undated letter from Nesch to Carl Vincent Krogmann. Bruhns 1993, 64.

²⁷ Hjelle 1998, 73. The *Nesch Aktion* was initiated by Meier-Graefe and Dr Otto Fischer with Carl Vincent Krogman being the secretary of the group. Other members included the Meier family from Hamburg, Dr von Schven, Fürst von Thurn und Taxis in Regensburg, Oberbaurat Schad, Direktor Schwab, Dr Freund and Dr Lippmann (The latter six are mentioned in Bruhns, Maike, *Kunst in der Krise, Band 2, Künstlerlexicon Hamburg 1933-1945*, Hamburg 2001, 298. See also Nesch’s letters in Bruhns 1993, 15 and 23.

Leading authorities and influential personalities, such as Gustav Schiefler, collected works of Munch, the Brücke artists and Nesch and introduced these artists to each other. Schiefler had become interested in graphic art through his friendship with Alfred Lichtwark, the director of *Hamburg Kunsthalle*. He also acted as chairman of the *Werkbund Geistiger Arbeiter* (Working Association of Intellectual Workers).²⁸ Schiefler, whose relationship with Munch went back to 1902,²⁹ characterised his first meeting with the artist's work as: '...the strongest, I think I can say the most exciting impression, that I had from any contemporary work of art.'³⁰ He catalogued Munch's prints and published *Verzeichnis des graphischen Werks Edvard Munch* (Catalogue of Edvard Munch's Graphic Work) in 1907 and the updated *Edvard Munch. Das graphische Werk 1906-1926* in 1928.³¹ Schiefler was instrumental in the contact between Munch and the Brücke artists and as a collector would have introduced Nesch to the works of Munch.³² Finally, it was Schiefler who in 1933 wrote the letter introducing Nesch to Munch,³³ giving Nesch four Munch prints to finance his travel to Norway.³⁴

Max Sauerlandt was equally crucial for Nesch's career.³⁵ In 1908, at the age of only 28, Sauerlandt became director of the art museum in Halle, and then from 1919 was a

²⁸ Barron 1998, 110.

²⁹ Bruhns 1993, 171. Note Munch's painting *Gustav Schiefler* (1908). See Eggum, Arne (ed), *Edvard Munch/Gustav Schiefler: Briefwechsel. Band 1. 1902-1914*, Hamburg, 1987.

³⁰ '...der stärkste, ich kann wohl sagen aufregendste Eindruck, den ich je von Werken der Gegenwartskunst empfangen habe.' *Schieflers Tagebuch*, Eintrag vom 11. Oktober 1902, Schiefler – Briefe Bd.1, 37, as cited in *Munch und Deutschland* 50.

³¹ Note that Schiefler used Meier-Graefe's collection of Munch prints as reference when writing the first volume of the *Graphic Works of Munch's*.

³² It was Kirchner who introduced Nesch to Schiefler. Bruhns 1993, 102.

³³ Per Rom, (ed), *Kunsten idag*, nr 2, 1948, 12.

³⁴ Hjelle told me in conversation that these were: *Madonna*, *Syk Pike*, *Påfugl* and *Dr Max Asch*. *Dr Max Asch* is still owned by Nesch's step-daughter's family.

³⁵ Note Nesch's print: *Max Sauerlandt with a wooden sculpture by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (1930) and the portrait of Sauerlandt's daughter (1938). See also Bruhns 1993, 111-112.

director of the *Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* (Museum for Art and Crafts).³⁶ He believed that Nesch was 'at least as printmaker without doubt the most alive and inventive of the Hamburg- based artists.'³⁷ In 1931 he convinced the Hamburger Senat to let Nesch make a print series of the conductor Karl Muck which became Nesch's real breakthrough. Schiefler, for one, was in 'ekstase' over the *Muck series* characterising the prints as 'famos.'³⁸ During Sauerlandt's time as director of the *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* the museum acquired more than three hundred works by contemporary artists.³⁹ The exhibitions he curated were used as examples for many other museum directors.⁴⁰ Luise Schiefler in a letter to Munch claimed that 'Prof. Sauerlandt is the defender of modern art and a friend who is willing to help the young artists.'⁴¹ To be approved in Hamburg by the likes of Schiefler and Sauerlandt clearly had a positive effect on Nesch's reputation and sales.

Unusually for the period, some of Nesch's supporters were women, including the Jewish art historian Dr Rosa Schapire who had been a passive member of the Brücke and who had published the collected work of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. Schapire had founded the *Frauenbund zur Förderung Neuer Deutscher Kunst* (Women's Association for the Promotion of New German Art) in 1916.⁴² She commissioned portraits by both Kirchner and Nesch⁴³

³⁶ Askeland points out that it most likely was the Krogmann, des Art and Schapire group of friends who encouraged Nesch to visit Kirchner. Roland Scotti of the Kirchner Museum Davos believes the introduction could have been the work of Max Sauerlandt. It was through Sauerlandt that Nesch received the Muck commission. Hjelte points to Nesch's good friend, the director of the *Württembergische Nationalgalerie*, Otto Fischer. Nesch's letter to Fischer dated 15.9.24, I believe, supports the latter view.

³⁷ 'Zumindest als Graphiker ohne Zweifel der Lebendigste und erfindungsreichste unter des darstellenden hamburgischen Künstlern.' Bruhns 1988, 88.

³⁸ 'Die Besichtigung hat mich in eine wirkliche Ekstase versetzt, so famos finde ich die Blätter.' Schiefler in a letter to Nesch dated 20.4.31, Bruhns 1993, 115.

³⁹ Part of the collection was later destroyed or dispersed as part of the *Entartete Kunst* campaign.

⁴⁰ Barron 1988, 110.

⁴¹ 'Prof. Sauerlandt is der Verfechter der modernen Kunst und der hildsbereite Freund der lebenden jungen Künstler.' Letter from Luise Schiefler to E.Munch dated 10.1.32, as cited in Bruhns 1998, 58.

⁴² Barron 1998, 108.

and on 27 October 1932, during Nesch's *Brücke series* exhibition at the Commeter Galerie, Schapire gave a speech with the title: 'Über Nesch's graphische Arbeiten.'⁴⁴

Another of Nesch's close friends from Hamburg was Heinrich C. Hudtwalcker, a German businessman and art collector who, during World War I, had purchased a large number of prints directly from Munch.⁴⁵ Hudtwalcker bought several drawings as well as prints from the *Snow series*.⁴⁶ In 1935 his son invited Nesch to northern Norway for the fishing season from which trip stems the *Lofoten series*.⁴⁷ These German collectors remained an important source of income, inspiration and support. Indeed, during Nesch's first years in Norway, the German print collectors were more important than the Norwegian.⁴⁸

(ii) The German print tradition.

Prints in general went from being an ignored, marginal genre in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century to flooding the market by the early 1920s. By the end of World War I, most major German artists executed prints. It went so far that critics such as Gustav Hartlaub, the assistant director of the *Mannheim Kunsthalle*, who was mainly very positive towards prints, claimed in 1920 in the first comprehensive study of Expressionist printmaking that print collecting: 'demands a new type of collector who unhesitatingly proceeds more on the

⁴³ Nesch's *Head of Rosa Schapire*, drypoint, (1931), is the last of twenty recorded portraits of her, made by fourteen different artists.

⁴⁴ Mentioned in a letter from Nesch to Schiefler dated 8.10.32, Bruhns 1993, 133.

⁴⁵ The catalogue for the 1922 Munch exhibition in Zurich, Bern and Basel was based on his collection. Woll 20.

⁴⁶ Aldeburgh catalogue, 6.

⁴⁷ Askeland, *Nesch*, 47 and Rom, Per (ed), *Kunsten idag*, nr 4, 1972.

⁴⁸ For instance, Mr and Mrs des Art between 1935 and 1938 visited Nesch three times. Also the collector Geheimrat Budczies from Berlin paid Nesch a visit in Norway.

basis of artistic content, [and is] less [concerned with] rarity and all sorts of connoisseur's values.'⁴⁹

As the art historian Robin Reisenfeld points out, corresponding to this print revival was the increasing popularity of the print portfolio which consisted of a set of images. These sets were conceived as thematic units and meant to be viewed in sequential order.⁵⁰ From his earliest exhibitions Munch also grouped individual paintings together and referred to them as series or friezes with specific titles and clearly defined themes.⁵¹ True to German tradition, from early on Nesch already expressed himself in series, not producing single prints but graphic cycles related in theme and to a certain extent in composition.⁵² The twenty-four prints of the *Muck series*, for instance, were organised in a deliberate order, as explained in a letter to Schiefler of April 1931.⁵³ Depicting orchestral instruments, at the start of the cycle was a triptych of three prints of the strings balanced by a triptych of three prints of woodwind at the end [fig 1]. In between were seven prints of the same size of the brass, percussion and double-basses. These three sequences were separated by groups of portraits (eleven in all) of the conductor. The Muck series was published in an edition of six.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Gustav Hartlaub, *Die neue deutsche Graphik* (Berlin, 1920), 32, as cited in Washton Long, *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, (New York, 1993), 143.

⁵⁰ Reisenfeld 19. For instance *the Frieze of Life* consisted of *Jealousy* (1896), *Ashes* (1896), *Attraction* (1896), *Separation* (1896), *Death in the Sickroom* (1896), *By the Death Bed* (1896), *Angst* (1896) and *the Sick Child* (1894).

⁵¹ For instance at Blomqvist's gallery in Kristiania (as Oslo was called until 1925).

⁵² For instance in *Die Schwabischen drei Könige* of 1922. After the *Muck series*, Nesch made a set of twelve prints entitled *St. Pauli*, showing figures and scenes from the infamous red-light district by the port of Hamburg. The third series of prints that Nesch made in Hamburg was the twenty plates of *Hamburg Bridges*, published in 1932. According to the Nasjonalgalleriet in Oslo the edition for this series was eight.

⁵³ Bruhns 1993, 115.

⁵⁴ Of the six copies, Dr Siegfried Julius, Dr Reinhard des Arts and Rosa Schapire bought one complete set each.

In her study, Robin Reisenfeld reveals how the print cycle remained a secondary aesthetic genre until the intervention of the dealer, who legitimised the print and print cycle as a fine art commodity. As the newly-emerging prosperous middle class withdrew from the public life of the city to their exclusive residences in the suburbs, collecting art became a means to validate their position in society.⁵⁵ Maike Bruhns points out how, in Berlin and Hamburg for instance, Munch's art was shown as part of the official exhibitions to a lesser degree, rather it was frequently presented in the avant-garde galleries such as Cassirer and Commeter.⁵⁶ These galleries were also later to become important for Nesch.⁵⁷

Munch's influence on Nesch was mainly indirect through Kirchner and, as we shall see, through Nesch's Hamburg colleagues. In 1912 the Brücke artists and Munch exhibited at the same Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne. The 1912 Sonderbund exhibition was the most comprehensive exhibition of Post-Impressionist art that had been held anywhere. Part of the exhibition was a Munch retrospective with thirty-two paintings in rooms solely devoted to his oeuvre.⁵⁸ Munch clearly made a large impression on Kirchner since Kirchner subsequently called Munch a 'fine personality'⁵⁹ and in a letter to Schiefler wrote that: 'I value Munch highly.'⁶⁰ Kirchner would have also known Munch through Meier-Graefe's *Entwicklungsgeschichte der moderne Kunst*. Writing in 1919 Kirchner observed that his

⁵⁵ e.g. see J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society* (published in Germany in 1962), MIT Press, Mass, 1989.

⁵⁶ Alfred Lichtwark, the director of *Hamburger Kunsthalle*, was not in favour of Munch. The important galleries for exhibition of Expressionists also included the *Arnold Gallery* in Dresden.

⁵⁷ Both *Commeter* and *Gurlitt* kept Nesch's work in their offering during the war years, despite it being considered 'Entartet'. *Galerie Commeter* represented Nesch's works until May 1941. Thereafter Dr. des Art took over 7 packages containing 271 prints, aquarelles and drawings, as well as 4 material pictures. Bruhns 1993, 205.

⁵⁸ Munch and Die Brücke 10. Eggum points out how for instance Munch's *Self portrait with a wine bottle* (1906) influenced Schmidt-Rottluff's *Weinstube* (1913).

⁵⁹ 'I find him very sympathetic, a fine personality'. 'Er ist mir sehr sympatisch, eine feine Persönlichkeit.' Undated letter from Kirchner to Schiefler, 1912, Bruhns 1993, 31, also cited in Munch and Die Brücke 10.

⁶⁰ 'Ich schätze Munch sehr.' Undated letter to Schiefler cited in Eggum 19.

work originated 'from the longing of loneliness', very much fitting into Munch's state of mind.⁶¹

The art historian Arne Eggum points out that the influence was mutual. Munch wrote to Mrs Schiefler that: 'perhaps this time Kirchner worked the best.'⁶² Eggum reveals how Kirchner's *Reclining Nude* (1906) influenced Munch's *Seated Nude* (1925/6) and how Kirchner's *Seated Nude* (1907) influenced Munch's *Morning* (1922/4). This perhaps explains why Kirchner in later years denied the influence of Munch. After 1917 Kirchner re-dated paintings to hide the influence from, amongst others, Munch.⁶³ 'I have absolutely nothing in common with Marc and Munch', he later claimed.⁶⁴ Kirchner had even furiously called his wife an 'enemy in his own house' because of her praise for Munch's work.⁶⁵

In a radio interview in 1963, Nesch stated that 'He [Kirchner] was the only one who had any influence on my education...'⁶⁶ Already in 1926, Nesch believed that: 'After Cézanne and van Gogh. Then Kirchner.'⁶⁷ In a letter to Otto Fischer which Nesch sent during his stay with Kirchner in Davos he wrote: 'I found that all I knew was now forgotten...I can only be very thankful that you have sent me here...there are prints all over,

⁶¹ Galerie Ludwig Schames, *Ausstellung von Gemälden von E.L.Kirchner*, exhib.cat., Frankfurt, 1919, as cited in Simmons 28.

⁶² 'Vielleicht hat diesmal Kirchner am besten gewirkt', Munch in a letter to Frau Schiefler as cited in Eggum 30.

⁶³ Donald Gordon 'E.Kirchner in Dresden. In the *Art Bulletin*, Vol XLVIII, 1966.

⁶⁴ 'Mit Marc und Munch hab ich garnichts Gemeinsames.' Letter of 23.3.1917.

⁶⁵ 'Frau Schiefler erzählte umlängst ein Gespräch, das sie einmal mit Frau Kirchner hatte. Diese lobte Arbeiten var Munch, worauf Kirchner wütend erwiederte, daß er den Fend im eigenen Hause habe.' Nesch's letter to Fischer dated 11.2.33, Piechorowski 44.

⁶⁶ 'Han var den eneste som virkelig hadde innflytelse på min utdannelse...' From a radioprogram in the series 'From the artist's workshop', sent in NRK 15.2.1963, transcript given to me by Hjelle.

⁶⁷ 'Nachden Cezanne u. van Gogh. Dann Kirchner.' Undated letter from Nesch to Carl Vincent Krogmann 1926, Bruhns 1993, 48.

and there are an infinite number of ideas in them.’⁶⁸ Nesch confirmed the influence from Kirchner in another letter to Fisher some years later: ‘The strong colours which I learnt at Kirchner’s’⁶⁹ Interestingly, when the *Bridge series* was completed in 1932 Nesch wanted to show it to Kirchner as if to get approval from an old teacher.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ ‘Ich fant Alles was ich konnte, vergessen und verlent habe... ich kan Ihnen nur dankbar sein daß Sie mir hier eschickt haben’... ‘All diese viele Graphik sind dabei, dazu unendliche Einfälle in Allem.’ Nesch in a letter to Otto Fischer dated 15.9.24, Piechorowski 10.

⁶⁹ ‘Die starke Farbigkeit, die ich bei Kirchner gelernt habe...’ Nesch in a letter to Otto Fischer dated 2.1.27, Piechorowski 17.

⁷⁰ In a letter to Fischer Nesch mentions potentially sending a copy of the *Bridge series* to Kirchner, indirectly admitting the source of inspiration. Letter to Fischer dated 11.2.33, Piechorowski 144.

CHAPTER 2

Print Making as Assemblage – *Brücke series*.

(i) The Bridges iconography.

Nesch's *Bridges series* was the third Hamburg cycle after the *Muck series* and the *St. Pauli series*.⁷¹ *St. Pauli* had been Nesch's equivalent of the Brücke artists' Berlin city scenes with its focus on nightlife, bars and cabarets.⁷² In a self portrait from the journal *Der Kreis*, Nesch himself stated that: 'I love Hamburg as a city, I cannot imagine anywhere else where one in the long run can get stronger impressions.'⁷³ The *Bridges series* investigates the provincial modernity of Hamburg's inner city and suburb with views from the bridges over the Elbe and Alster, but also over the canals and the Hochbahnbrücken. It consists of twenty plates of 'metal prints' in which various metal elements have been placed on the surface of the printing plates. The prints are a combination of colour and black/white. Artists such as Munch [fig 2] and Kirchner had already depicted the theme of bridges in their art.⁷⁴ For instance, as Sherwin Simmons points out in the essay: 'To stand and see within. Expressionist space in ELK Rhine Bridge at Cologne,' [fig 3] the spaces and monuments depicted in Kirchner's cityscapes, painted during 1914 and 1915, such as the Rhine Bridge at

⁷¹ Commeter exhibited Nesch's Hamburg *Brücke series* from 20 October to 12 November 1932. The invitation card to the exhibition included comments by Schiefler. Nesch's letter to Fischer dated 28.11.32. Piechorowski 43.

⁷² 'Ich möchte St. Pauli machen, nicht vom Amüsier Standpunkt aus, sondern aus unserer Schweren Zeit heraus empfunden, eine Lust, die tragisch wirkt.' Letter to Schiefler 1931, Bruhns 1993, 116.

⁷³ 'Ich liebe Hamburg als Stadt restlos, denn ich kan mir nicht denken, irgendwo anders auf die Dauer stärkere und nachhaltigere Eindrücke zu bekommen.' Quote from Nesch, *Geschiebenes Selbstportät in Der Kreis*, 1933, as cited in Hamburger Kunsthalle, *Eine Revolution des Formgefühls, Karl Ballmer – Richard Haizmannn – Rolf Nesch in Hamburg*. Hamburg, 2005, 10.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Munch's *The Girls on the Bridge* (1903), (Woll 232/Schiefler 200) or *The Girls on the Bridge* (1918-20), (Woll 628).

Cologne, were historically significant and established in the national imagination.⁷⁵ Simmons points out how the viewer is projected into an empathic space that resonates with Kirchner's response to cultural signs of German national identity.⁷⁶ The social theorist Georg Simmel published 'Bridge and Door' in 1909, an article in which the bridge is used as a metaphor to 'make one cosmos out of all the individual elements.'⁷⁷ The bridge is what overcomes separation and is meant to give the world continuity similar to one's inner life. The door, on the other hand, 'separates the uniform, continuous unity.'⁷⁸ Nesch, through the *Bridges series*, for instance in *Abschied* [fig 4], the first print in the series, explores some of the same themes (as did Munch in the 1890s), namely parting, distance, longing and loneliness.

In February 1932, Nesch in a letter to Schiefler saw the potential for another sort of continuity, namely that of the Brücke work: 'it is clearly here in Hamburg that the Brücke tradition will continue.'⁷⁹ And when it came to the Brücke tradition of innovation, this held true. In 1936, Walter Benjamin pointed out in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' how lithography took reproduction to a new stage.⁸⁰ And in 'The Author as Producer' he further reveals how 'montage interrupts the context into which it is inserted', and why this technique enjoys 'special, and perhaps supreme rights.'⁸¹ Indeed,

⁷⁵ Simmons, 'To stand and see within. Expressionist space in ELK Rhine Bridge at Cologne.' *Art History*, v 27, no 2, April 2004, 250-281.

⁷⁶ Simmons reveals how Kirchner involved the observer in these cityscapes through the exaggerated perspective. Simmons, 274.

⁷⁷ Simmel, G., 'Brücke und Tür', *Der Tag*, 15 September 1909. English translation by Mark Ritter, 'Bridge and Door', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 11: 1994, 5, as cited in Simmons 272.

⁷⁸ Simmel 1909, 9.

⁷⁹ 'Es wird bestimmt hier in Hamburg die Tradition der 'Brücke' fortgesetzt werden.' Undated letter to Schiefler, February 1932, Bruhns 1993, 128.

⁸⁰ And continued: 'To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.' W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Fontana, London, 221+226.

⁸¹ Like in Brecht's 'epic theatre' which obtains its 'conditions' by allowing the actions to be interrupted, 'action is created out of the smallest elements of behaviour.' W. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer.' 28-9.

lithography was not the end result for Nesch. Increasingly, his printing technique approached montage.

Bruhns argues that the direct influence from Munch on the young Hamburg artists such as Kluth and Nesch was 'immens' and that he was imperative for the development of a distinct formal style in Hamburg.⁸² In some ways 'Ohlendorffhaus' became a subculture of Expressionism with its own distinctions. During the Hamburg period Nesch's formal language changed towards larger, more ornamental, synthesized whole forms. Increasingly Nesch used curving contour lines with larger colour fields and more abstracted forms.⁸³ In a letter to Krogmann Nesch ambivalently commented on his increased level of abstraction: 'so in the end I am neither abstract nor extreme'⁸⁴ and in a letter to Schiefler he claimed that: 'I don't like clean, abstract forms, neither will I have a copy, instead I will rather have a mental image.'⁸⁵

Of the Hamburg artists, Kluth, Ballmer and Haizman in particular stand out as significant sources of inspiration for Nesch's movement towards abstraction. Bruhns points out how Kluth's visit to Munch influenced the development of the entire *Hamburger Secessions*' style.⁸⁶ In a letter from Schiefler to Munch dated 29 September 1929 it is clear that this visit was important: 'Kluth has told us a lot about his visit to you, which made him very happy.'⁸⁷ Bruhns reveals how Munch inspired a simplification of natural forms, in

⁸² Bruhns 1998, 46.

⁸³ Bruhns 2001, 301.

⁸⁴ 'Schließlich bin ich weder abstract noch extrem.' Undated letter to Krogman 1925. Bruhns, 1993, 33.

⁸⁵ 'Ich denke gar nicht daran, reine, abstrakte Formen zu erfinden, ich will auch kein Abbild, dafür aber ein Sinbild schaffen.' Bruhns, 1993, 134.

⁸⁶ Bruhns 1998, 34.

⁸⁷ 'Kluth hat uns viel von dem Zusammen sein mit Ihnen, das ihn sehr beglückt hat, erzählt.' Bruhns 1998, 30.

particular via the depiction of people, trees and stones. Kluth introduced broad coloured lines which contrasted with fields of colour. The lines started to 'flow' differently in Kluth's paintings from this period as can be seen, for instance, in *Wegespuren II* (1933) [fig 5]. From Munch he learned to use the line depicting the clouds, landscape and figures to hold the composition together. The art historian Steinar Gjessing has pointed out how Munch's *The day after* (1894/5) inspired Kluth's *Akt auf rotem Sofa* (1933) [fig 6] which again points forward to Nesch's *Elskende par* (1935-36) (Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo).⁸⁸ Also in Kluth's portrait of Schiefler from 1932/4 the influence from Munch can be seen, from the coloured contour line to the depiction of the clouds.⁸⁹

In 1933 Max Sauerlandt considered Ballmer a more important member of the avant-garde than both Picasso and Kirchner.⁹⁰ During the period 1929-1933 Ballmer painted a range of pure landscapes that both iconographically and thematically approached his Secession colleagues' Nesch, Kluth and Grimm.⁹¹ Next to expressive landscapes Ballmer's main theme was the human figure.⁹² In *Nordische Landschaft* (1931) [fig 7] the theme focuses on monumental nature. In 1932 Ballmer started to depict transparent, abstracted human figures superimposed over landscapes.⁹³ A similar use of this configuration can be seen in several of Nesch's *Bridge series* prints such as *Hafenbrücken* [fig 8], in which human figures are set against the backdrop of the bridge. Commenting on his art in 1957, Ballmer

⁸⁸ Steinar Gjessing in conversation. *The Day after* and *Akt auf rotem Sofa* are reproduced in Bruhns 1998, 38 and 39 respectively. Nesch's *Elskende par* is depicted in Helliesen 1987, 11.

⁸⁹ Reproduced in Bruhns 1998, 34. After the second visit to Munch in 1934 Kluth started to combine abstract forms with realistic elements, the painterly with draughtmanship. From his travels to Norway he exhibited 24 aquarelles with the title 'Nordisches Land' at Ferdinand Möller in Berlin. This exhibition was a great success with a third of the works sold straight away. Bruhns 2001, 46.

⁹⁰ Bruhns, 2001, 46.

⁹¹ Bruhns, 2001, 46.

⁹² Bruhns, 2001, 46.

⁹³ Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau, *Karl Ballmer*, 57.

explained how ‘the philosopher works on the objectification of nature, and the painter makes nature appear.’⁹⁴ ‘My activity was roughly split equally between painting and philosophy,’ he said.⁹⁵ ‘If I should say something general about my artistic intentions, then it would be this: that I through painting try to show for myself and for others, that the world from a spiritual point of view looks very different from the world seen through the camera.’⁹⁶ However, after his visit to Ballmer’s atelier on 26 November 1936, Samuel Beckett noted in his diary: ‘wonderful red Frauenkopf, skull earth sea sky [...] Would not occur to me to call this painting abstract. A metaphysical concrete.’⁹⁷ Ballmer saw similarities between being in control of the philosophical ideas and controlling the technical means of painting.⁹⁸ During the summer of 1933 he, together with Nesch, in the search for the ‘neuen Malerei’ experimented with varnish and coloured powder.⁹⁹ Nesch continued these experiments in Norway.¹⁰⁰

On 5 October 1929 Sauerlandt opened an exhibition of Rolf Nesch and Richard Haizmann at *Galerie Commeter* consisting of a wide range of media, including painting, print, wooden sculpture and metalwork. Haizmann’s choice of material was influenced by

⁹⁴ ‘Der Philosoph arbeitet an der Objektivierung des Wesens, der Maler bringt das Wesen zur Erscheinung.’ Bruhns 2001, 46.

⁹⁵ ‘Meine Tätigkeit richtet sich zu ungefähr gleichen Teilen auf Malerei und Philosophie.’ Aargauer Kunsthhaus Aarau. *Karl Ballmer*, 14.

⁹⁶ ‘Sollte ich allgemein etwas sagen über meine künstlerischen Intentionen, so wäre es etwa dieses: dass ich mir – und meinetwegen anderen – beim Bildermalen klar zu werden suche, dass die Welt, geistig angesehen, ganz anders aussieht als für den Photographenapparat.’ Aargauer Kunsthhaus Aarau. *Karl Ballmer*, 10.

⁹⁷ Samuel Beckett, as cited in *Hamburger Kunsthalle* 2005, 18.

⁹⁸ ‘Ich empfinde die Beherrschung der philosophischen Begriffs-Technik als vollständigen Analog zur Beherrschung der Mittel, über die der Maler bei der Ausführung eines Bilden verfügen muss, also im weitesten Sinn der Mal-Technik.’ *Karl Ballmer 1891-1958, Der Maler*, Aarau, 1990, 160.

⁹⁹ Bruhns, 2001, 301.

¹⁰⁰ Note Nesch’s influence on the Norwegian artists Strømme, Winge and Enger who all went through a period of ‘pulver maleri’. For a discussion of Nesch’s influence on these artists, see Steinar Gjessing’s excellent *Studier i Norsk Modernistisk Maleri 1930-40. Bjarne Engebret, Erling Enger, Gert Jynge, Olav Strømme, Sigurd Winge, Rolf Nesch*. (Oslo, 1977).

Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical philosophy:¹⁰¹ 'Therefore material must be natural. Stone, metal, the colours which the painter uses, that is all material; the spirit can only mirror itself in the materials' he wrote to Maria Bamberger in 1932.¹⁰² From 1926 Haizmann already believed that he could represent the 'Grundform' or the essence of the object through a deliberate reduction and softening of the natural proportions. In his memoirs he explained how 'abstraction is not the reduction of the form until the loss of content, rather abstraction is the highest simplification of form which intellectualises the pictorial expression and brings in an element of mysterious magic.'¹⁰³ Haizmann's interest in magic may also have been the reason for his interest in sculpture and ceramics from East Asia, Egypt and Africa.¹⁰⁴ As we shall see, possibly this, combined with the influence from Kirchner, explains Nesch's interest in 'primitive' art.

Sauerlandt wanted to assist Nesch with the transition to an abstract formal language, which at the time, Kluth, Ballmer and Haizmann had already been through.¹⁰⁵ Sauerlandt's letters to Nesch reveal how involved he was in Nesch's move towards greater abstraction, in particular his letter of 7 April 1930: 'I have already for several weeks felt that you would come to this point...I believed that you had to come to this insight on your own. Now that

¹⁰¹ Bruhns 2001, 173.

¹⁰² 'Also Materie muß natürlich sein. Stein, Metall, die Farbe, die der Maler benutzt, das ist doch Materie; der Geist kan sich nur in der Materie spiegeln.' Letter from Richard Haizmann to Maria Bamberger dated 24.5.32, as cited in Hamburger Kunsthalle 2005, 48.

¹⁰³ 'Abstraktionen is nicht die Verminderung der Formen bis zum gänzlichen Verlust des Bildinhaltes, sondern Abstraktion is die höchste Vereinfachung der Form, um die dargestellte Bildaussage zu vergeistigen und die Gestaltung ins geheimnisvoll Magische bringen zu können.' Haizmann in *Erinnerungen*, 1950, as cited in Hamburger Kunsthalle, 50.

¹⁰⁴ Bruhns 2001, 173. Haizmann should also be kept in mind as a potentially important source of inspiration also for Nesch's sculptures.

¹⁰⁵ Bruhns 1993, 111.

you have reached this crisis, I hope that you will be won over. It is perhaps good that you change sides quickly.’¹⁰⁶

Schiefler also promoted the ‘new’, more abstract formal language as a mentor to the likes of Nesch.¹⁰⁷ He arranged ‘Graphic evenings’ in his house in Hamburg in which Nesch, Kluth, Grimm, Ruwoldt, Ballmer and the publicist Heinrich Kohlhaussen participated.¹⁰⁸ Nesch wrote to Schiefler on the topic of abstract art: ‘when others like abstract abstractions, I get pleasure from life and the environment.’¹⁰⁹ Clearly the new level of abstraction seen in the *Bridge series* pleased Schiefler; in a letter to Nesch he writes about the ‘very powerful effect, both formally and compositional.’¹¹⁰

(ii) Technical innovation

Throughout this period, Nesch remained true to the Brücke ideal of spontaneity and innovation. During his stay with Kirchner in Davos, he had seen how Kirchner’s involvement with the Brücke had provided him with both the conceptual and the technical roots that would serve him for his entire career. Even during his Swiss period, many woodcuts still display fundamental principles of the Brücke movement. This is particularly seen in the rural, slightly exotic setting and the primitive, blockish, simplified depiction of the landscape and the figures. It can also be seen in the increasing use of colour woodcuts. Between 1909 and

¹⁰⁶ ‘Ich habe schon seit Wochen gefühlt, daß Sie auf diesen Punkt kommen mußten und daß ich so lange nicht bei Ihnen war, hängt damit zusammen. Ich meinte, diese Einsicht müsse Ihnen ganz allein kommen. Nun, da sie da ist, wird die notwendige Krisis, hoffe ich, auch überwunden werden. Es ist vielleicht gut, daß Sie auf eine Zeitlang fortgehen, um auf die andere Seite hinüberzukommen.’ Sauerlandt in a letter to Nesch dated 7.4.30, Bruhns 1993, 111

¹⁰⁷ Bruhns 1998, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Bruhns 1993, 130.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Wenn sich andere abstrakte Abstraktionen aus den Fingern saugen, mögen sie es tun ich habe Freude am Dasein u. an der Umwelt.’ Undated letter from Nesch to Schiefler, 1932. Bruhns 1993, 125.

¹¹⁰ ‘Es sind wieder famose Blätter mit ihren so sehr eindrucksvollen Wirkungen, sowohl formal wie kompositionell.’ Letter from Schiefler to Nesch dated 4.12.32, Bruhns 1993, 137.

1911 Kirchner's Brücke 'colleague' Heckel had adopted from Munch the method of sawing and separately colouring parts of a single block. In 1912 Heckel followed this by the use of two blocks, one of which carried the design and was printed in black. The other was inked with as many different colours as required. Munch had sawed the woodcut printing plate, inked the various sections independently, and put it together like a jigsaw before printing. As a boy, Munch had already been taught to use a fretsaw by a neighbouring carpenter. All his life he kept his old carpenter's bench.¹¹¹ Coloured woodcuts could also be printed from one 'painted' block thus making prints which, in principle, became monotypes. Munch had an unusual ability to understand the technical skills of the printer and to use the opportunity to experiment and develop the print medium creatively. In addition to using professional printers, Munch also printed a great deal of his woodcuts himself.¹¹²

Nesch had learned from Kirchner how to cut, colour and print the woodcut blocks. In Hamburg, Nesch believed that he was one of the most technically innovative of the graphics artists and even planned a book together with Schiefler concerning graphic techniques.¹¹³ In a letter to his patron, Nesch enclosed the first chapter of the planned book on Munch's graphic techniques and in particular pointed out: 'preference for separate parts', 'makes the colour prints himself' and 'cut and coloured the individual parts.'¹¹⁴ Nesch considered Munch's solution for woodprints 'ingenious'. The above points can clearly be seen in some of Nesch's *Bridge series* prints, even to the extent that Munch believed that Nesch was copying his

¹¹¹ For a discussion regarding the possible sources of inspiration for Munch's sawing of woodblocks to print several colours simultaneously see Woll 13.

¹¹² In a letter to Meier-Graefe he wrote that 'Ich habe selbst eine kleine Presse-womit ich Litographien und Holzschnitte drucke.' Undated letter to Meier-Graefe late 1897, cited in Woll 14. Woll points out how some prints such as *The Woman at the Urn* (Woll No 119) and *Burlesque Couple* (Woll No 120) are quite rough and experimental with a deliberate unprofessional effect.

¹¹³ Bruhns 1993, 102.

¹¹⁴ 'Hang zur ein fachheit', 'Selbst Farbdrücke herzustellen', 'Zersägte und färbte die einzelnen Teile', in an attachment to an undated letter to Schiefler, 1932, Bruhns 1993, 126.

work. Munch told Hudtwalker that for 40 years he had already ‘sawn wooden pieces through, and that the young should not believe that they had invented it themselves.’¹¹⁵

In his *Bridges series*, Nesch used the copper plate as he would normally treat the wooden block, sawing it up and putting it together again before printing (fig 8). For some of the plates Nesch coloured each copper piece separately, not with the brush but with the fingertips and subsequently placed the pieces loosely on a plate (fig 9). This passed through the press only once. The plate and the pieces were re-coloured and put back in place for the next impression. It is, therefore, not only the colours but also the composition which differs from one print to another.¹¹⁶ No two prints are exactly identical. One could, therefore, argue that his metal prints should be considered a category between the traditional print and the monotype, alternatively as ‘serial works’.

This ties in with Max Klinger’s 1891 theoretical treatise *Malerei und Zeichnung* which Nesch had most likely read. Klinger wanted to emphasise the print’s unique formal features in his treatise, and included the print under the heading ‘drawing’ so as not to connote reproductive printing. Instead, he sought to promote the print’s role as an aesthetic medium equal to, but different from, painting.¹¹⁷ And he promoted it with great effect. After reading Klinger’s treatise, artists such as Munch and Kollwitz intensified their printmaking.

¹¹⁵ ‘Schon vor 40 Jahren Holzstücke durchgesägt habe u., daß die Jungen ja nicht glauben möchten, si hätten Alles allein erfunden.’ From Hudtwalker’s diary.

¹¹⁶ According to Askeland, Elbe Bridge I is one of the earliest of his prints in which he uses movable parts on top of a basic metal plate. Detroit 4.

¹¹⁷ Reisenfeld 21.

In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Walter Benjamin pointed out that 'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.' He continues: 'The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.'¹¹⁸ A few years later, the art critic Clement Greenberg stated: 'to restore the identity of an art, the opacity of the medium must be emphasised.'¹¹⁹ This is exactly what Nesch does by taking a reproductive medium, making it less reproducible but more authentic. And as we shall see, this 'sublimation' of low into high built on an existing German tradition.

Most of Nesch's early prints were published in numbered editions of twenty-five or thirty-five. Gradually his techniques became so time consuming, due to changes in composition and colours from one print to the other, that supposedly only one print could be completed per day. Due to the complexity, the artist himself always did the printing, as did Kirchner and sometimes Munch, experimenting with variants which differed from each other in colour and composition. After Kirchner moved to Davos, he increasingly worked with drypoint, and experimented with the application of colour and the printing process, keeping full control over the whole process. Lloyd points out how this relationship between the artist and his materials was interpreted by Simmel as a means of preserving authenticity in the machine age.¹²⁰ This knowledge was fundamental to Nesch's development as an artist.¹²¹ He gradually ceased to produce regular editions and the later plates rarely had more than ten impressions taken from them.

¹¹⁸ W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Fontana, London, 222.

¹¹⁹ Greenberg, 'Newer Laocoon', *Partisan Review*, VII, (Fall 1940), 296-310, as cited in Crow, 238.

¹²⁰ Lloyd 62.

¹²¹ Hjelle 1998, 61.

The late 1930s are important in Nesch's work; he began to make long vertical prints composed of two to six sheets and turned away from his predominantly monochrome approach to become, perhaps, the most striking colourist in the printmaking of his time. As Askeland points out, whereas the plates of the *Muck series* were all monochrome, a number of the *St Pauli* prints from 1931 were printed in colour by a most unconventional process involving the double-inking and printing of a single plate.¹²² However, starting with the 1937 series *To Poems by Henrik Rytter* we find indications of stronger use of colours, which then in the *Bathing Scenes* become very pronounced. The colour combination in *Bathers on Stone* [fig 10], for instance, represents an experiment that was relatively new for Nesch and it is this combination that gives the print its vibrancy. The sea is printed in a blue that contrasts with the white figures and the green stone. Coloured inks, prepared by Nesch himself, have been wiped onto the raised surface areas of the plate by hand, and small patches of colour are applied to define for instance a mouth. Such hand-colouring is perhaps the most important purely technical device that Nesch learnt from Kirchner.

The Brücke ideal of spontaneity is further developed by Nesch.¹²³ In 1925-6 he first began to etch right through plates and by coincidence discovered that embossed areas created by the holes made striking white impressions.¹²⁴ In the years to 1931 he concentrated on developing his facility with aquatint and experimented with colour printing. The *Bridges*

¹²² In some of these prints Nesch used a combination of high and low reliefprint from the same plate. Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2005, 91.

¹²³ 'It is boring to repeat oneself, and I am always concerned about doing something I have not seen before. I do not want to repeat myself. And to steal from others, I also do not like.' 'Det er kjedelig å gjenta seg og jeg er alltid opptatt av å gjøre noe jeg ikke har sett før. Jeg vil ikke gjenta meg. Og å stjele fra andre, det liker jeg heller ikke...' From a radioprogram in the series 'From the artist's workshop', sent in NRK 15.2.1963, transcript given to me by Hjelle.

¹²⁴ Carey and Griffiths, 223-30.

series go far beyond Nesch's previous prints in artistic and technical originality. The technical innovation that Nesch first used on certain plates of this series consists of placing or welding metal elements onto the surface of the plate, thus creating a 'montage like' new class of work now known as 'metal prints'. Both Schiefler, Meier-Graefe and Glaser were impressed.¹²⁵ In a letter to Schiefler, Nesch writes how he 'in Berlin showed the *Brücke* prints to Meier-Graefe, who was very 'perplexed' [...] at the end he thought it was terrific and he had to heartily congratulate me.'¹²⁶ Nesch described how the idea came to him by chance one afternoon as he went past a shop containing a soldering iron and metal wire: 'if metal could be taken out of a plate, it could equally well be added to it.'¹²⁷ To wire thread he later added pieces of wire netting, perforated plates and scraps of metal. By hammering and chiselling the copper pieces, the motifs of the composition and the texture of the prints became more and more enriched. As we shall see, his experiments continued in Norway. In many prints Nesch etched heavy patterns in the aquatint grain on the basic plate and let soldered tin form a relief. This printing process required exceptionally strong pressure in the press and unusually tough paper [frontispiece]. The strong embossing which creates a clear relief impression is an important part of the final design and transforms the print into a plastic work. This is particularly pronounced in the black and white *Snow series* of 1933/4, the first print series he made after settling in Norway, but can also be seen in some of the prints from the *Bridges series*.

¹²⁵ Schiefler in a letter to Edvard Munch in December 1932. Hjelle 1998, 102. Note that Meier-Graefe had advocated the cultivation of handiwork and craft tradition in the decorative arts. Lloyd, J. *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991. 6. Following the Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne in 1912, Kurt Glaser started to build up a private collection of Munch's work, wrote books on the artist, and made sure that the Kupferstich kabinet in Berlin, where he was Head of the department of modern prints until 1926, acquired a substantial collection of Munch prints. Woll 20.

¹²⁶ 'In Berlin zeigte ich die 'Brücken' Meier-Graefe, der sehr perplex war, er wurde ziemlich him un hergerissen, traute u. mißtraute, er meinte aber zum Schluß, es ware eine tolle Arbeit, er müsse mir von Herzen gratulieren.' Bruhns 1993, 137.

¹²⁷ From Nesch's 'Lichtwark-prize' speech. This speech is reproduced e.g. in Hjelle, Eivind Otto, *Rolf Nesch, Kunstneren og hans verk i Nesch-museet, Ål kulturhus*, Oslo, 2004.

In *Hafenbrücken* [fig 8] Nesch cut the plate and coloured each part separately. The thin line encompassing the figures stems from the sawing of the plate. In *Barmbek bridge* he drilled holes in the plates through which various copper strings were drawn. This drilling was something he had learned from Ruwoldt, a colleague from the Ohlendorffhaus atelier.¹²⁸ Another idea from Ruwoldt is seen in *Hochbahnebrücke II*, in which Nesch, according to his Lichtwark speech, has added metal mesh. The art historian Beat Wismer points out how the ‘mesh effect’ in *Frau auf der Brücke* (1932) seems inspired by Ballmer’s *Figur* (1930/32), an argument which seems very credible.¹²⁹

Nesch in a letter to Schiefler states how, in the *Bridges series*, the technique of building bridges involving welding, scrap metal, wire netting etc. is reflected in the printing technique itself. ‘Bridges are technique’, he claimed.¹³⁰ It tries to be that of which it speaks. ‘I have now got hold of my own drill, saw and piston rod’ he continues.¹³¹ A natural follow on from his new graphic technique, and the new found symbiosis between form and material, led to experimentation with material pictures. In 1929 Sauerlandt had already exhibited 45 of Nesch’s print plates together with the prints themselves.¹³² To Fischer, Nesch wrote: ‘He was very interested in the finished prints and wanted to see the original printing plates. I showed

¹²⁸ Bruhns 2001, 338.

¹²⁹ Both *Frau auf der Brücke* and *Figur* are depicted in Aargauer Kunsthau Aarau 1990, 49.

¹³⁰ ‘Brücken sind Technik, man muß ihnen daher mit Technik auf den Leib rücken.’ Undated letter from Nesch to Schiefler, 1932, Bruhns 1993, 131. This ties in with Simmel’s theories about the link between technology and the crafts.

¹³¹ ‘Angeschafft habe ich mir eienen Drillbohrer, Lambsäge u. einen LötKolben.’ Bruhns 1993, 131.

¹³² ‘In der Ausstellungshalle der Kunst u. Gewerbe museums Gängen seit gerstern etwa 45 Platten mit den dazugehörigen Druckens, sehr schön aufgemacht.’ Letter from Nesch to Fisher dated 28.10.29. Piechorowski 34.

him some and he was indeed very interested.’¹³³ In a newspaper article Sauerlandt wrote about Nesch as ‘the modern printmaker as seen in particular in the treatment of the lines and the fields.’¹³⁴ Sauerlandt was particularly interested in the relationship between ‘original’ and ‘reproduction’ and wanted to write an essay on the topic.¹³⁵ Nesch enthusiastically wrote to Reinhard and Levi des Art: ‘The metal plates taken apart look fantastic and I have planned to make metal pictures when I have finished the print making. Away from the canvas, something stable for the wall! A new [type of] art!’¹³⁶ In 1934 he made the first ‘material picture’ by collaging elements onto a backing sheet – a development from the plates made for the ‘metal prints’ but no longer intended for printing. This ‘neue Kunst’ consisted of a mixture of picture, mosaic and relief. In reality it was a collage of metal, glass, stone, wood etc., like the ‘objets trouvés’ from Dadaism and Cubism. For example *Fred (Peace)* (1935-36) was made of wood, pieces of mirror and copper.

Nesch’s use of string, meshed metal and other collage elements bring to mind the work by Kurt Schwitters.¹³⁷ This is particularly so since Schwitters also chose Norway as a place of exile from January 1937 to April 1940. Writing on collage, Greenberg named Schwitters as one of the most important exponents of this ‘most succinct and direct single

¹³³ ‘Er interessierte sich besonders für die fertigen Drucke und wünschte die Originalplatten zu sehen. Ich zeigte ihm einige, die ihm sehr interessierten.’ Letter from Nesch to Fisher dated 17.9.29. Piechorowski 33.

¹³⁴ ‘Der moderne Radierer in den Wechsel der Behandlung von Linien und Flächen zu der tiefsten Fülle des Formklängen seiner Platten gestegert hat.’ Nesch in a letter to Fischer dated 23.11.29, Piechorowski 38.

¹³⁵ ‘Prof. Sauerlandt schreibt weder im ‘Kreis’ u. denkt sich den Aufsatz (wie er selbst sagt), als Fortsetzung von ‘original oder Reproduktion’, er will also in erster linie die Originalplatte zeigen.’ Letter from Nesch to Fischer dated 28.10.29. Piechorowski 34.

¹³⁶ ‘Die Metallplatten sehen teilweise phantastisch aus u. ich habe den Plan gefaßt sowie ich mit der Graphik fertig bin, Metallbilder zu machen; weg von der Leinwand, etwas Stabiles für die Mauer! Eine neue Kunst!’ Nesch in a letter to Reinhard und Levi des Art dated 14.2.34, Bruhns 1993, 203.

¹³⁷ For instance, as Gjessing has pointed out to me, Nesch’s *Melkeveien* (1941-2) in the Stenersen collection, Oslo, seems like it could have been inspired by Schwitters. Reproduced in Eggum, *Rolf E. Stenersens gave til Oslo by – Akersamlingen*, Oslo, 1974, 99.

clue to the aesthetic of the genuinely modern art.’¹³⁸ Schwitters created his earliest collages towards the end of 1918. From 1918 he collaborated with Herwarth Walden’s *Der Sturm* in Berlin and between 1919 and 1924 there appeared more than seventy poems, prose poems, articles and reproduction of his work in this periodical.¹³⁹ During the period 1918-20 Schwitters made several half painted, half collaged ‘Merzbilder’. The art historian Dorothea Dietrich points out that Schwitters adopted collages in response to the experience of ‘rupture and displacement’ between print work and the assemblages.¹⁴⁰ Schwitters declared repeatedly that his collage materials lost their particular ‘characteristics of origin’ when brought into the new context of the collage. He stated that: ‘I will use any kind of material [...] if the picture demands it’, and continued: ‘By juxtaposing different materials I have an advantage over traditional oil painting in as much as I not only place colour against colour, line against line, shape against shape and so on, but also one material against another, wood against sackcloth.’¹⁴¹ Schwitters was concerned, not with content, but rather with the radical realism of the material, with bringing life in the form of found objects into art. At that time, his reality consisted of fragments of garbage of civilisation which were discovered at random.¹⁴² Nesch, on the other hand, in his material pictures utilised objects found in nature, e.g. stones or pieces of wood. In 1924 Schwitters wrote that ‘the creative process consists in the selection, distribution and deshaping of the materials. This deshaping process begins as soon as the materials are spread over the picture and is further assisted by the actions of

¹³⁸ Karin Orchard argues that both Rauschenberg and Beuys were inspired by Schwitters. Meyer-Büser, S., Orchard, K., (eds.), *In the beginning was Merz – from Kurt Schwitters to the present day*, Hannover, 2000, 10.

¹³⁹ Schmalenbach, Werner, *Kurt Schwitters*, London, 1970, 43.

¹⁴⁰ Dietrich, Dorothea, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters, Tradition and Innovation*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 7.

¹⁴¹ ‘Merz’ in *Der Ararat*, I, no 5, 1921, quoted from Fiedhelm Lach (ed): *Kurt Schwitters. Das Literarische Werk*, Cologne, 1973-81, vol.3, 76-77, as cited in Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Newsletter No.4. *Kurt Schwitters and the MERZbarn*. 1999.

¹⁴² While in exile in the Lake District, this changed for Schwitters.

cutting, bending, overlapping and overpainting.’¹⁴³ This focus on ready-made forms and products of urban culture can be seen in pictures such as the *Arbeiter picture* (1919). Schwitters often used metal mesh, strings and metal bits.¹⁴⁴ A good example is *Merzbild 29A. Bild mit Drehrad* [fig 11] which remained with him for life, and which must have been seen in Norway by Nesch who was a frequent visitor.¹⁴⁵ Elderfield points to the ‘dichotomy between the progressive and the conservative, between avant-garde and tradition...His work blurs boundaries, and progressive and conservative attitudes may be present simultaneously within a single work.’¹⁴⁶ Similarly to Nesch, Schwitters also links technology and the crafts.¹⁴⁷ A picture, he once said, ‘reproduces the world without depicting the world. Then it’s a true picture, but not a reproduction.’¹⁴⁸ The same could be said in Norway of Nesch's increasingly synthesized forms.

¹⁴³ *Die Merzmalerei* (1919)..., note 6 in Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Newsletter No.4. *Kurt Schwitters and the MERZbarn*. 1999.

¹⁴⁴ Schmalenbach, 1970, 59.

¹⁴⁵ Schwitters most ambitious collage project was his *Merzbau*, the transformation of parts of his house into an all-encompassing, ever expanding collage environment which he undertook in Hannover, Norway and England. Due to the space limit, I will not go into this in detail.

¹⁴⁶ Elderfield, John, *Kurt Schwitters*, London, 1985, 4.

¹⁴⁷ Dietrich, 1993, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Kurt Schwitters as cited in Per Kirkeby, *Schwitters* 11.

CHAPTER 3

Cultural Identity in Exile.

(i) Freshness of Conception – *Snow series*.

It was because of his admiration for Edvard Munch that Nesch immigrated to Norway in 1933, after the Nazis had his 'degenerate' works rejected from the exhibition 'Nord Deutschland – Leute und Landschaft in Hamburg.'¹⁴⁹ Nesch and his colleagues' work in Ohlendorffhaus had by then already been repeatedly disturbed by the SA. However, instead of joining the vibrant German literary culture and theatre life in Prague, or moving to Paris which was considered the international centre of modern art, Nesch and Schwitters moved independently of each other to Norway.¹⁵⁰ The art historian Jutta Nestegaard points out how Norway was seen as 'the exotic country in the North, near in distance, but far away in time.'¹⁵¹ 'The Norwegian clock goes differently (and slower)', a contemporary Dumont travel guide said.¹⁵² Furthermore, as Nestegaard points out, untouched nature and the possibility of a more 'primitive life' close to unspoilt nature was something already in short supply in the rest of Europe.

It was in particular the vastness and solitude of the Norwegian winter landscape which attracted Nesch. In a letter to des Art he explains how: 'one can paint around every

¹⁴⁹ Bruhns 2001, 299. This followed after the NS had come to power in Hamburg on 5 March 1933. Sabine Eckmann points out that emigration generally is distinguished from exile 'by the active and voluntary nature of the decision to leave one's native country for political, economic, or religious reasons. In the case of exile the same motivation applies, except that here the state is the active party, compelling the individual to relocate.' Barron, 1987, 30.

¹⁵⁰ For a discussion of the German cultural life in these cities at the time, please see *Modern German Art for Thirties Paris Prague, and London*, Keith Holz, 2005.

¹⁵¹ Nestegaard, J., *Das figurative Werk* in Stadtmüller, K.,(ed) *Schwitters in Norwegen*, 20.

¹⁵² Nestegaard, J., *Das figurative Werk* in Stadtmüller, K.,(ed) *Schwitters in Norwegen*, 20.

corner. Close to the Oslo fjord, woodcutting, a sea, other stretches of water in the background, fine looking mountains, a lot of fir trees and lovely roads, between them houses, which make black and white lines, in between them completely green wooden houses, some of which have a burning red colour.'¹⁵³ Two weeks later, in another letter to des Art he writes that: 'every day I go walking, see the fjord and slowly, finished paintings appear in my mind.'¹⁵⁴ In a letter to Schiefner, Nesch specifically comments on the *Snow series*: 'For every leaf I look for a different way of representing the shape of the tree [...] beech, birch, spruce, fir. The most difficult is birch, in particular in snow [...] Snow is soft, and one must set something hard against it, otherwise it becomes just a sentimental postcard.'¹⁵⁵ [figs 12+13] And Nesch clearly worked very hard transferring the new impressions into prints: 'I slowly work my way into the landscapes, which is absolutely not so easy.'¹⁵⁶ 'When I first have the material, the press and the colours, then the letters become more infrequent, then I make night into day.'¹⁵⁷

It was not only the iconography which changed in Norway. Bertolt Brecht said of emigration that: 'it is the best school of dialectics', and clearly Nesch did reinvent himself in his new country.¹⁵⁸ However, the influence from Munch remains clear. 'The Munch

¹⁵³ 'An jeder Ecke kann man malen. In der Nähe Oslofjord, Holzsägerei, einen See, anderes Gewässer iim Hintergrund ansehnliche Berge, viele Tannen und herrlich schöne Wege, dazwischen Häuser, die Schwartz und weiß angestrichen sind, dazwischen ganz grüne Holzhäuser und manche haben ene brennend rote Farbe.' Letter to Reinhard und Leni des Art dated 7.11.1933. Bruhns, 1993, 172.

¹⁵⁴ 'Jeden Tag gehe ich spazieren, sehe mir den Fjord and und langsam zeigen sich in meiner Innersten Bilder, gemalt, fertige Bilder.' Bruhns, 1993, 182.

¹⁵⁵ 'Für jeden Blatt suchte ich die Form der Bäume anders zu gestalten [...] Buchen, Birken, Fichten, Tannen. Am schwersten sind natürlich die Birken, besonders in Schnee [...] Schnee is weich u.dammuß man eben Härte entgegen setzen, sonst gibt es sentimentale Postkarten.' Letter to Schiefner, Bruhns, 1993, 206.

¹⁵⁶ 'Ich arbeite ich langsam in die Landscaft ein, was garnicht so einfach ist.' Bruhns, 1993, 188. This letter goes through the *Snow series* in some detail.

¹⁵⁷ 'Habe ich erst Material, die Presse, Farber, Leinwand, warden die Briefe wohl etwas seltener, dann mache ich die Nacht zum Tage. Bruhns, 1993, 165.

¹⁵⁸ Bertolt Brecht as cited in Wilson, S., *Kurt Schwitters in England*, The Hatton Gallery, 1999.

paintings in the museum are wonderful,' he wrote to Schiefler in a short letter just after arrival to Norway.¹⁵⁹ 'The Norwegians say that for them this concept of nature is new, but that they recognise it. I hope there are no traces of Munch in it.'¹⁶⁰ However, as the art historian Askeland observes, it is clear that there were similarities between the art of Munch and Nesch and that they were united, in particular by their love of the Nordic landscape and the attempt to express the essence of mountains, trees and snow.¹⁶¹ There are also, in the way of depicting the landscapes, similarities with Ballmer's art, as seen e.g. in his *Nordische Landschaft* (1931). The 'freshness of conception' which comes through in Nesch's letters (and prints!) from this period also had much in common with that experienced by other artists when they relocated, such as Schwitters and Kirchner.

Schwitters' first visit to Norway was to Spitzbergen in 1929 on the recommendation of Hannah Höch. In 1930 he took his family on a tour of the whole country and over the next couple of years he made longer stays at Loen, Olden, Djupvasshytta and Hjertøy near Molde. During the winter of 1936/7 Schwitters fled from Germany with his son Ernst and settled at Lysaker outside Oslo. The same year his work was expropriated from German museums, and exhibited at the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Munich. In Norway, the natural beauty also exerted a strong influence on his work. Sarah Wilson argues that some of Schwitters' Norwegian snowscapes signal 'the rediscovery of his Expressionist roots, the energetic scribbles of his sketches, the handling of the oils, the purplish-green palette.'¹⁶² Contrary to

¹⁵⁹ 'Die Munchs im Museum sind herrlich.' Bruhns, 1993, 185.

¹⁶⁰ 'Die Norweger sagen, daß ihnen die auffassung ihrer Natur ganz neu ist, daß sie sie aber wiederkennen. Von Munch soll keine Spur darin sein, ich hoffe es ja auch nicht.' Letter from Nesch to des Art dated 11.4.34, Bruhns, 1993, 207. For more of Nesch's comments on Munch see Bruhns 1993, 198.

¹⁶¹ Askeland in *The Graphic Art of Rolf Nesch*, The Detroit Inst. of Arts, 27.

¹⁶² Sarah Wilson in BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newsletter No.4. *Kurt Schwitters and the MERZbarn*. 1999.

the experience of Nesch, for Schwitters in Norway it was his naturalistic work which took precedence, perhaps because it was more saleable. 'Whether I paint the nature abstract or not [...] for me the light is the most important, and that is what connects my works.'¹⁶³

It is informative to compare Nesch's experience of Norway with Kirchner's experience of Switzerland. Towards the end of World War I, Kirchner retreated into the world of sanatoriums.¹⁶⁴ Three different stays at the Königstein Sanatorium near Dresden were followed by periods of psychiatric treatment in Davos and Kreuzlingen in Switzerland. In the middle of July 1918 he moved to the village of Frauenkirch near Davos and settled there for a quiet mountain life until his death in 1938.¹⁶⁵ Kirchner's choice of this location brings to mind the writing of Georg Simmel who, as one of the founders of modern sociology, believed that: 'small town life... rests more upon deeply felt and emotional relationships' and that in rural life 'the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly [than in the city].'¹⁶⁶ The changes taking place in Kirchner's work during the period 1916-1921 echo Simmel's perception of 'mental

¹⁶³ 'Ob ich nach der Natur oder abstract male oder baue, für mich ist das Licht wesentlich, und das ist das Verbindende meiner Arbeiten.' Kurt Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, v. Köln, 1981, 369/70, as cited in Jutta Nestegard 25. Gjessing has pointed out to me the similarities between Nesch, Schwitters and Nay, who also visited Munch and was influenced by him. Nay met with Nesch in 1936. (Bruhns, 2001, 300). In 1936/7 Munch invited Nay to Norway. (Retrospektive E.W.Nay 13.) He was in Lofoten in 1937-8 and in the Lofoten works the 'element of rhythm broke through and took possession of the entire pictorial structure.' (Retrospektive E.W.Nay 29.) 'The big dynamic swings of the landscape, its elementary force brought the theme of my art for the first time, the dynamic and the elementary,' Nay himself wrote. (Nay cited in Retrospektive E.W.Nay 31.)

¹⁶⁴ Scotti argues that Kirchner did not suffer 'war psychosis', rather the mental condition was self inflicted by alcohol and drug abuse. Only gradually did his 'make-believe sickness' become the 'real thing'. Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed), *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2003, 27. This view is supported by Peter Springer in *Hand and Head: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Self-Portrait as Soldier*, University of California Press, 2002, 39-40.

¹⁶⁵ Kirchner's first stay in Davos only lasted from the end of January until the 4th February 1917. However, he came back at the beginning of May. From mid June he rented a cabin in Stafelalp, a small village above Davos. From September 19th 1917 to mid July 1918 he was at the Kreuzlingen Sanatorium, before he subsequently moved to Frauenkirch. For a more detailed description of these years see e.g. Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed), 2003, 220-2.

¹⁶⁶ Simmel, Georg, *Metropolis and Mental Life*, (1903), Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, 131.

imagery' caused by 'small town life.'¹⁶⁷ The portraits of fellow patients first express Kirchner's existential fears. Gradually the woodcuts depicting the farmers in the 'ideal community' show a 'softer' form of expression, indicating a different state of mind and pace of life [fig 14].

Yet, as the art historian Colin Rhodes points out, 'the expressionist desire to respond emphatically to one's surroundings does not disappear; rather it is transformed, through what seems to be the artist's need to maintain a greater physical distance.'¹⁶⁸ Like Nesch, the depiction of landscape, barely influenced by mankind, was now to become the touchstone of Kirchner's art until 1925/6. The monumentality of the landscape motif made a great impression on him, and he used this motif, and that of peasants, in drawings, paintings and prints until 1924-25. Kirchner expressed the belief that: 'here one learns to see and penetrate deeper than in the so called "modern" life, which despite its rich surface is so much more superficial.'¹⁶⁹ And thus one could, to paraphrase Simmel, interpreting Kirchner's and Nesch's move to Davos and Ål respectively as a form of 'resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.'¹⁷⁰

Rhodes reveals how Kirchner's 'self-imposed isolation and almost paranoid desire to exorcise the ghost of the Brücke resulted in new works which, through his constant struggle

¹⁶⁷ During this period, which to a certain extent has been neglected by art historians (even the 2003 exhibition at the Royal Academy in London only included the Dresden and Berlin years), his production of woodprints was particularly prolific. A study of this medium, therefore, gives the best insight into the changes taking place in his oeuvre.

¹⁶⁸ Rhodes 133.

¹⁶⁹ 'Hier lernt man tiefer sehen und weiter eindringen als in dem so genannten "modernen" Leben, das meist trotz seiner reichen äußeren Form so sehr viel oberflächlicher ist'. Letter to Helene Spengler, dated 3rd July 1919, as cited in Beloubek-Hammer, 39.

¹⁷⁰ Simmel 324.

to remain at the forefront of Modernist developments in art, maintained a freshness of conception and execution rarely found in the post-war paintings of other ex-Brücke members such as Erick Heckel.¹⁷¹ This 'freshness of conception' is clearly seen in Kirchner's first impressions of the Swiss mountains, and it is the same 'freshness' we have seen in Nesch's *Snow series*. Kirchner called his search for primary forms the 'ekstase des ersten sehens.'¹⁷² This is an expression which also fits perfectly for Nesch's first Norwegian works.

In Norway Nesch found himself alone in 'exile', separated from his own milieu.¹⁷³ Partly because of this he chose to exhibit the *Snow series* in Germany. However, the exhibition which opened in April 1934 at Commeter, was closed after two days on instruction from the NS Parteizentrale München. Only through the intervention of Krogmann, the Hamburg mayor (who, as we have seen, was also an avid Nesch collector), did the exhibition re-open.¹⁷⁴ In some ways Nesch continued to be treated as a 'degenerate artist' even in Norway since people in charge of the *Nasjonalgalleriet* prevented him from getting State commissions. Nesch said of the Direktør of the *Nasjonalgalleriet* (and probably rightly!): 'Thiis hates Germans.'¹⁷⁵ After April 1940, Nesch as a German exile in a German occupied territory found himself reclassified as enemy alien and subject to very strict regulation.

¹⁷¹ Rhodes, Colin, 'The body and the dance: Kirchner's Swiss work as Expressionism', 133.

¹⁷² *Davoser Tagebuch*, 19 November 1928, as cited in Beloubek-Hammer 14.

¹⁷³ One of the exceptions being Kurt Schwitters who often visited Nesch during these years. He, George Grosz, Otto Dix and Rolf Nesch all studied together at *Dresden Kunstakademi* under Robert Herman Sterl. Hjelle 1998, 25.

¹⁷⁴ In 1937, in the *Entartete Kunst Aktion*, seven Nesch prints were confiscated from *Hamburg Kunsthalle*. Bruhns, 1993, 155. A total of 82 works of Munch's and 16 of Kluth's were confiscated as 'degenerate' from German museums. Bruhns, 1998, 44. Three prints from Nesch's *Muck series* were exhibited in the 1937 *München Entartete Kunst* exhibition. Bruhns, 1993, 155.

¹⁷⁵ 'Thiis is Deutscherhasser.' Letter from Nesch to Fischer dated 19.1.38, Piechorowski 58.

(ii) Reflections on Exile – *Bathing Scenes series*

Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile* defines exile as the ‘unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home...[It is] a solitude experienced outside any group.’¹⁷⁶ Said points out how the interplay between exile and nationalism ‘inform and constitute each other.’ Nationalism, according to him, is an assertion of belonging in and to a place. It is affirmed by language, culture and customs.¹⁷⁷ However, as we shall see, Nesch and Kirchner’s focus on ‘being German’ ties in less with this definition of a nation than with Benedict Anderson’s anthropological definition: ‘it is an imagined political community’ akin to a ‘deep horizontal comradeship.’¹⁷⁸

Is it possible to avoid the loneliness of exile without ‘falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride?’¹⁷⁹ Clearly not for Nesch. Given that exile often fosters self-awareness as well as the less attractive forms of self-assertion, it is interesting to note the artist’s insistence on ‘being German.’ Nesch believed that: ‘art means the same as religion, home country and fatherland [...] for me it is sacred.’¹⁸⁰ ‘I have not changed intestinals. I am not a Norwegian,’ he once said.¹⁸¹ And interestingly, when in 1943 he was drafted to potentially take part in World War II, Nesch in his will gave all his belongings to

¹⁷⁶ Said, E., ‘Reflections on Exile’ in *Out There, Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Ferguson, R (ed), New York, 1990, 357 and 359. By this definition, Munch was also in exile in his own country, misunderstood and isolated. Yet, Kirchner’s stay in Switzerland is strictly speaking not that of exile. He did not have to relocate for political reasons, neither did he gain cosmopolitan or international experience by the move. In addition, he continued to produce art, to a large extent, for a German clientele.

¹⁷⁷ Said 359.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, first published 1983, revised edition 1991, 6-7.

¹⁷⁹ Said 359.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Für mich ist Kunst gleichbedeutend mit Religion, mit Heimat und Vaterland, es darf ihr nichts geschehen, denn für mich ist sie heilig.’ Bruhns 1993, 5.

¹⁸¹ Hjelle mentioned to me in conversation.

the city of Hamburg.¹⁸² Even as late as 1955, when exhibiting at Dokumenta 55, twenty two years after he moved to Norway, Nesch exhibited as part of the German contingent.¹⁸³

Did the ‘need for being German’ also influence Nesch’s and Kirchner’s choice of the print medium? Was the woodcut-like expression meant as a play on tradition and nationalism? For Kirchner the denial of the industrialisation and urban nightmares manifested itself in the technical and stylistic process of the woodcut technique, the oldest graphic process in picture making. Robin Reisenfeld points out the ‘imbrication’ between the woodcut medium and Germany’s quest for a cultural identity.¹⁸⁴ It represented an alliance to a traditional and nationalistic artistic past and preserved the German identity within the shift to modernism.¹⁸⁵ More than any other German artist, with the possible exception of Nolde, Kirchner identified himself very strongly with his national tradition, trying to reconcile a sense of national and international identity in the Gothic spirit of Worringer.¹⁸⁶ In the years after he had moved to Switzerland, Kirchner repeatedly stressed that ‘my work is German, even these days the gentlemen over there do not see it that way, and not French, as it is so often accused of being.’¹⁸⁷ To the collector Georg Reinhart he wrote: ‘I was very interested that you feel my work is German. I am very glad about this, because I have always thought

¹⁸² According to Fru Strøm, wife of Mr. Strøm, a close friend of Nesch, as mentioned by Hjelle in conversation.

¹⁸³ This led to complaints from the *Norwegian Graphic organisation* that Nesch had to choose nationality, Hjelle mentioned to me in conversation.

¹⁸⁴ Reisenfeld, R., *Cultural identity and artistic practice: The revival of the German woodcut*, The University of Chicago, 1993, iv.

¹⁸⁵ Note the marked increase of admiration for Dürer in Germany around 1900 as exemplified by the large membership of the Dürer-Bund (Dürer association). Kirchner had seen Dürer’s woodcuts in Nuremberg in 1903. Dürer used internal modelling, so that the contour lost its dominant function as well as hatching and richly contrasting light and dark values. For Kirchner this led to a suggestive and powerful use of line and form. Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed.), 2003. 23-25.

¹⁸⁶ Lloyd 81.

¹⁸⁷ In a letter to Luise Schiefler in 1936, Henze, W., (ed.), in collaboration with Annemarie Dube-Heynig and Magdalena Kraemer-Noble, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Gustav Schiefler, Briefwechsel 1910-1935/8*, Stuttgart and Zurich, 1990, 710, as cited in Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed), 2003. 24.

that my origins, not being purely German – we have French blood in our family – came out in my art in the same way that as a person I do not, for example, feel myself to be a true son of the German flag. Being German is certainly not something to be confined by political boundaries.’¹⁸⁸

Also Munch, despite being Norwegian, felt German. In the words of Schiefler, Munch would ‘rather live in Berlin than in Paris, he always feared that in Paris he would lose his ‘Germanic’ characteristics.’¹⁸⁹ Moeller argues that the expressive, the excessive and the subjective interpretation of the world are indeed ‘German’ characteristics going back to Dürer, via Matthias Grünewald and Lucas Cranach the Elder. Interestingly Nesch, in a radio interview also mentions both Grünewald and Dürer for having been particularly important for his artistic development.¹⁹⁰ Distorted proportions and mystery was hidden behind the external form in comparison to Romanesque art which was built on harmony.¹⁹¹ Woodcuts were also allied with religious, reformatory spiritual concerns. It was an apt way of shaping the symbolic imagery of changed times. Ernst Barlach, for instance, turned from lithographs to woodcuts to formulate his new religious motifs.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ In a letter to the collector Georg Reinhart, 7 July 1924, as cited in Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed), 2003. 24. In 1925-26 Kirchner made his first long trip back to Germany. Note that he kept the relationships with patrons during his stay in Switzerland. He was supported by collectors such as Dr Carl Hagemann and the architect Henry van de Velde, in addition to the family of his physician Dr Spengler. Kirchner shared this sense of ‘belonging’ with several other artists who left Germany in the thirties. For examples see Barron, Stephanie and Eckmann, Sabine, *Exiles and Émigrés: The flight of European Artists from Hitler*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997.

¹⁸⁹ ‘...lebe lieber in Berlin also in Paris; er fürchte immer, in Paris seine germanische Eigenart zu verlieren.’ Schiefler-Briefe Bd.1, Nr. 52, Tagebuch Schiefler, 6 November 1903, 66, as cited in *Munch und Deutschland* 131.

¹⁹⁰ Nesch in a radiointerview with Knut Berg from 1971, transcript kindly provided by Eivind Otto Hjelle.

¹⁹¹ Lloyd, Jill (ed) and Moeller, M.M. (ed), 2003. 24-5.

¹⁹² Heller 1994, 17.

Simmel had argued that: 'the smaller the circle which forms our environment and the more limited the relationships which have the possibility of transcending the boundaries, the more anxiously the narrow community watches over the deeds, the conduct of life and the attitudes of the individual and the more will a quantitative and qualitative individuality tend to pass beyond the boundaries of such a community.'¹⁹³ Living on the periphery of the continent, cut off from Europe's intellectual life, both Munch, Kirchner and Nesch were aware of the danger that the geographical isolation posed to their development of style and reputation and that, indeed, they needed 'to pass beyond the boundaries' of the village community. Munch travelled extensively to Europe and spent longer periods of time in both France and Germany. Kirchner, when living in Switzerland, widely read books produced by Le Corbusier¹⁹⁴ as well as the Bauhaus school,¹⁹⁵ whilst Nesch, as we have seen, corresponded intensively with the leading authorities and collectors of art in Germany. Schwitters seems to be the artist who was the most isolated, missing contact with people who understood his art, writing that: 'what I really miss is the intercourse with people who love and understand abstract art; there is nothing like that here [in Norway].'¹⁹⁶ Despite frequent contact with Nesch¹⁹⁷ he still saw himself as secluded.¹⁹⁸ Schwitters, like Nesch, always regarded Germany as his home, but at times even declined to use German.¹⁹⁹ Increasingly

¹⁹³ Simmel 1903, 333.

¹⁹⁴ He characterised Corbusier as 'ein Genie von dem alle gelernt haben. Ich habe einige Bücher von ihm, die ich gerne lese, sie sind so einfach und frei und künstlerisch sachlich, wie kaum ein einziges deutsches Kunstbuch.' Kirchner an Hansgeorg Knoblauch; Brief vom 25. Dezember 1933, in: *Briefwechsel mit Ehepaar*, 1989, 141, as cited in Beloubek-Hammer 42.

¹⁹⁵ Kirchner's library, sold at auction in 1951, contained nine volumes of Bauhaus books. K. Gabler, *E.L. Kirchner: Dokumente*, Aschaffenburg, 1980, 361 as cited in Rhodes note 1.

¹⁹⁶ Sarah Wilson in BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newsletter No.4. *Kurt Schwitters and the MERZbarn*. 1999, note 14.

¹⁹⁷ Bruhns, 2001, 300.

¹⁹⁸ 'Let me continue to bloom in my seclusion.' *In the beginning was Merz* 236.

¹⁹⁹ Schmalbach 63. Schwitters held an exhibition at Blomqvist Kunsthandel in Oslo in February 1934 during which he only sold three paintings. No museum or critic expressed any interest in his work and gradually this led to a deepening melancholy.

also Nesch led an isolated life in Ål in the Norwegian mountains similar to how Kirchner had lived in Davos.²⁰⁰ As we have seen, after Kirchner moved to 'Wildboden' in Frauenkirch above Davos, the theme of his art changed from cityscapes to landscapes, the woodprints became more decorative and less 'busy' reflecting the slower pace of life. The same process happened with Nesch upon his move to Norway, away from the busy streets of Hamburg to snow, mountains, fjords and bathing.

Still, even after he had acculturated into the Norwegian society and become a Norwegian citizen in 1946, Nesch wanted to be perceived as a German artist.²⁰¹ He had lost the sense of belonging to a nation, but continued to belong to the German cultural tradition. The ambivalence inherent in his rejection of Germany through emigration and his continuing obsession with his dislocation from 'Heimat' would prove to be paradigmatic for his years in Norway, as reflected in the hybridity of the cultural indicators to which he refers. Homi K. Bhabha in the essay 'Location of Culture' has pointed out how we try to 'locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond.'²⁰² The move away from the singularities such as 'nation' as a primary conceptual category means that we need to think beyond narratives of origin and initial subjectivities and focus on the process which is produced in the articulation of cultural differences.²⁰³ Bhabha reveals how these 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies which initiate new signs of identity. It is here the experience of community and cultural value is negotiated. Following Nietzsche, Meier-Graefe believed that great works of art were only produced by artists who went through alienation and

²⁰⁰ Note that Nesch in 1951 moved to Ål, a small village in the Norwegian mountains.

²⁰¹ Hjelle 1998, 9.

²⁰² Bhabha, H., *Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1998, 1.

²⁰³ Bhabha, H., *Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1998, 1.

oppression.²⁰⁴ Did the isolation give Nesch the inspiration and strength to seek new paths in his art? Or did it instead lead him to reinvent Munch's depiction of nature, and subsequently, as we shall now see, reinvigorate the 'old' Brücke motifs of bathers, seeking to re-establish a genealogical link with Kirchner and Munch?²⁰⁵

On the whole, Norwegian art historians have failed to investigate properly the iconographical links between Kirchner's and Nesch's graphics. This is particularly so in the case of the relationship between Nesch's *Bathing scenes* series and the Brücke artists' almost hallmark bathing scenes. Furthermore, few scholars have questioned why Nesch would choose the familiar bathing motif – yet using an inventive technique – at such an historical moment in time as 1937 with its focus on 'degenerate art.'²⁰⁶ The Brücke artists' bathers again pointed back to the iconography of Cézanne, 'an important step in the trans-temporal and trans-geographic genealogy back to El Greco.'²⁰⁷ This would have also tied in with the German romantic notion of genius extending back to Kant which, according to Berman, 'suggests sublime creative power existing outside the contingencies of time and space.'²⁰⁸

Kirchner and the other Brücke artists projected into the bathing scenes an idyllic, utopian vision of a care-free life in which an ever-shining sun glowed on scenes that displayed 'humanity and nature as unity.'²⁰⁹ Women in nature provided access to a paradise-

²⁰⁴ Berman 96.

²⁰⁵ Kirchner would probably not have subscribed to the concept of Meier-Graefe's genealogy. Roland Scotti pointed out to me that Kirchner was upset for not having been included in Meier-Graefe's list of important artists. Neither did Kirchner mention Nesch's visit in the *Davoser Tagesbuch*.

²⁰⁶ Indeed, the *Bathing series* has generally been seen as 'Ausdruck der Lebensfreude und wunderbarer Gelöstheit.' Bruhns, 1993, 162.

²⁰⁷ Berman 94.

²⁰⁸ Berman 96.

²⁰⁹ Max Pechstein, *Erinnerungen*, ed. L.Reidenmester (Wiesbaden, Limes Verlag, 1960) 26, as cited in Heller, *Stark impressions*, 308.

like innocence that preceded civilization. Max Pechstein recalled that, in 1910, when Heckel and Kirchner visited him in Berlin, they decided to paint nudes together at the Moritzburg Lakes near Dresden: ‘We needed to find two or three people who were not professional models and thus would guarantee us movements without studio discipline.’²¹⁰ By using untrained models, Kirchner achieved the sense of uninhibited natural movement and freedom sought by the Brücke members. In order to depict a new social structure that could remedy or reform society of pre-war Germany, the artists rendered the elementary qualities of life such as the alliance with nature, sensual pleasure, and uncomplicated human relations.

Bathers at the seashore or in lakes were a recurring motif of the Brücke artists. The theme gained significance in the work of Edvard Munch in particular between 1895 and 1899.²¹¹ Furthermore, as Heller points out, Cézanne’s *Great Bathers* (1898-1900) was seen as the major work of the eighteenth *Berlin Secession Exhibition* in 1909.²¹² There were also widespread reformist nudist movements which argued for the uninhibited experience of nature, and finally, perhaps one should not ignore the painters’ pleasure derived from exotic experience and voyeurism.²¹³

The Brücke artists’ ideal of a new society based on simple living, rustic pleasure and a search for uninhibited freedom explains the use of stylistic devices largely derived from African and Oceanic sculpture. The *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Dresden had one of the largest collections of ‘primitive’ art in Europe, and here Kirchner, and later Nesch, found

²¹⁰ Pechstein, *Erinnerung*, 41-3, as cited in Heller 1988, 40.

²¹¹ See for instance the drypoints *Women Bathing* (1895), (Woll 18/Schiefler 14), *Boys Bathing* (1896), (Woll 61, Schiefler 85), or *Man Bathing* (1899), (Woll 149, Schiefler 126).

²¹² Heller 1988, 130.

²¹³ ‘...men of this race...who are more horny than they are loving’ Kirchner p 336-7 as cited in Heller, *Brücke*, 130. Also note Kirchner’s pornographic prints of 1911.

inspiration from carvings and sculptures from the Pacific Palau-islands.²¹⁴ The figures were neither idealised nor naturalistic, instead the mask-like facial and bodily features were reduced to signifiers of a natural or 'primitive' sexuality. The nude stylised bodies expressed sexuality imagined outside of 'bürgerlich' society and morality, and was a recurrent theme in the works (and lives!) of the Brücke artists. In Kirchner's print the tendency to reduce the torso to a cylinder to which arms and legs are attached was a marked feature of several works of 1912.²¹⁵ [Fig 15]. It derives from African wood carvings from the Cameroons, and is also seen in Kirchner's sculptures from this time. The lack of detail, 'blockiness' of figures and flatness of image all ties in with the stylistic vocabulary of Oceanic and African 'primitive' influence.

Nesch's *Bathing Scenes* are from Hellvik in the Oslo fjord,²¹⁶ where Nesch stayed in a small cottage during the summer of 1935.²¹⁷ Between 1939 and 1940, the sketches and preparations from that summer were used to make the eighteen piece colour metal print series, of which *Bathers on stones* [fig 10] is one.²¹⁸ The idyllic theme stood in sharp contrast to Nesch's own life at the time. The 1939-40 winter was fierce even by Norwegian standards

²¹⁴ One of Kirchner's wooden sculptures is depicted in Nesch's print: *Max Sauerlandt with wooden sculpture by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (1930). As Lloyd points out, the Expressionists' visits to the ethnographic museums in Dresden, Hamburg and Berlin, were not one-off voyages of discovery, but rather an integral part of their work. Lloyd 4. The Brücke artists' initial interest in the carved Palau beams probably related to the important role woodcuts played in their own work. Lloyd 29.

²¹⁵ Such as *Cameroon Figure*, inks and coloured crayon, 1912. Altonaer Museum, Hamburg. Depicted in Lloyd 28.

²¹⁶ 'Ich werde an den Fjord gehen, zu den Badenden, zeichnen und malen, all de schönen blonden Wikingermädchen...' Bruhns, 1993, 205.

²¹⁷ Norwegian art historians such as Askeland and Helliesen have historically dated this stay to 1939, however, Hjelle dates this stay to 1935. Hjelle 1998, 153-4. I believe the latter view is supported by Nesch's letter to des Art dated 6.8.35. 'Ursprünglich wollte ich noch 12 Radierungen für Commeter machen mit Badenden, farbig, aber es ist doch vernünftiger, ich mache die Bilder...' Bruhns, 1993, 230.

Also note that *Three women on the beach*, the pastel in the Stenersen collection, Oslo, is dated 1936.

²¹⁸ The printplate used for Nesch's print *Bathers on stones* was later owned by Henrik Finne who was trained by Nesch and who himself printed his own version of a series of bathing motives.

so that 'during the nights I'd wrap myself in sheets of cardboard, newspapers and blankets to keep from freezing to death.'²¹⁹

In 1924 when Nesch visited Kirchner in Davos, Kirchner complained in a letter to Gustav Schiefler that Nesch was copying his current painting style.²²⁰ However, it rather seems like it was the large collection of older work that Kirchner kept in Davos, including the *Three Bathers by stones* [fig 15], which had inspired Nesch.²²¹ After Nesch's return to Germany, only a few parallels with Kirchner's then angular etched forms could be discovered, making his style more squared, rough and abstracted. The prints in Nesch's *Bathing Scenes* are built up of flat, outlined colour surfaces. The bathers' elbows are more pointed than in Kirchner's print and their faces sharply triangular. Apart from the stones, nature is abstracted and the background hills are gone. There is an 'expressive' use of lines which 'describe' the figures, both in the dramatic shift between blue, red and yellow, but also in the way it adds plasticity to the print.

The *Bathing Scenes* series needs to be seen in relation to Nesch's interest in 'primitive art and wood carvings.'²²² Inspired by the Brücke artists, and as we have seen, possibly also by Haizmann, Nesch started to collect 'primitive' art when living in Hamburg from 1929 to 1933, and continued to collect and focus on Norwegian folk art following his

²¹⁹ From a speech given in Hamburg in 1958 when Nesch was awarded the 'Lichtwark-prize'. Reprinted in *Rolf Nesch – Prints*, 27th Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts, 1974.

²²⁰ In a letter of 30 December 1924 to Gustav Schiefler as cited in R.Scotti, *Rolf Nesch. Schneefarben und Metallformen*. Kirchner Museum Davos, 2004. 3.

²²¹ Scotti mentioned to me in conversation that Kirchner in Davos had an imprint of each print he had made. These were used by Schiefler to catalogue his work.

²²² In a letter to Fischer dated 29.7.30, Nesch tells him that 'ich sammle Überseekunst, Südseeplastik u Negermasken u. exotische Ketten, Halsschmuck. Die letzte Erwerbung ist eine Beninbronze.' Piechorowski 39. It is important to note that this letter is dated after he started to share the atelier with Haizmann. Note also the Nay painting *Menschen am Strand*, 1939, which depicts Kirchner like squatting women, with strong zig-zag elements.

arrival in Norway.²²³ In a radio interview from 1971 with Knut Berg, later to become director of *Nasjonalgalleriet* in Oslo, Nesch explains how, for him, Norwegian folk art was as good as ‘negro sculptures.’ He points to a wooden spoon with an ‘exquisitely wonderful shape – it could have been a sculpture by Brancusi.’²²⁴ Some of his works remind of the ornamentation found in Norwegian wooden churches, but also, as Alfred Hentzen points out, of carved and painted cabinets such as found in peasants homes.²²⁵

This influence from ‘primitive’ art is visible particularly in the faces of figures depicted in the *Bathing Scenes*, which resemble African and Oceanic masks. The nudes appear less as living figures than representation of female sexuality and women’s procreative function. Accentuated angular and bulbous breasts and buttocks are emphasised as hieroglyphs of sexuality and fertility. The bellies and limbs are reduced to thin, linear elements that convey motion and the interaction between bodies. Hjelle points out that Nesch’s style changed from the time of the sketches to the actual printing of the *Bathing Scenes*. According to him, Nesch was influenced by the French exhibition in *Kunstnerenes Hus* in 1938, and in particular by Picasso’s bathers. This ties in with a 1971 interview, in which Nesch points to Picasso as one of the artists with the greatest influence on his own art.²²⁶ In letters to des Art, Nesch characterises the bathers as having ‘very detached limbs, face and breasts in particular, also the feet and hands had unusual and unconventional

²²³ According to a letter to Otto Fischer as cited in Hjelle 1998, 93.

²²⁴ From an interview with Knut Berg from 1971 in connection with the making of a film about Nesch made by Clifford West. Transcript kindly supplied by Eivind Otto Hjelle.

²²⁵ Hentzen 1960, 68. Note Nesch’s friendship with the ethnograph Arne Martin Claussen. Claussen’s book *Kunstsosiologi, Oslo, 1977*, contains a chapter on Nesch.

²²⁶ From a radio program in the series ‘From the artist’s workshop’, sent in NRK 15.2.1963, transcript given to me by Hjelle. Nesch was well aware of the exhibition of Picasso, Braque, Matisse and Laurens which included 103 paintings and 20 sculptures. It opened the same day as Nesch’s Blomqvist exhibition. Piechorowski 50. ‘Ich...habe ‘bade’-Graphik angefangen, etwa 20 werden es wieder einmal. Kein Kopf soll werden wie der andere, keine Brust, keine Hand und kein Fuß. Bin bereits auf ganz neuen Wegen.’ Letter to des Art dated 13.9.39, Bruhns 1993, 277.

forms.’²²⁷ ‘I am ready to go completely new ways’ he states.²²⁸ The figures depicted in the print *Bathers on stones* are good examples of this new, increased level of abstraction. Whilst Nesch still valued his German cultural associations, he nonetheless maintained a positive disposition towards contemporary foreign art.

²²⁷ ‘Die ”Badenden” sind teilweise sehr gelöst in ihren Gliedern, Gesichte u. Brüste vor allem, auch Füße u. Hände bekamen etwas ungewohnte u. unkonventionelle Formen.’ Letter to des Art dated 17.12.39, Bruhns 1993, 279.

²²⁸ ‘Ich...habe ‘bade’-Graphik angefangen, etwa 20 werden es wieder einmal. Kein Kopf soll werden wie der andere, keine Brust, keine Hand und kein Fuß. Bin bereits auf ganz neuen Wegen.’ Letter to des Art dated 13.9.39, Bruhns 1993, 277.

Conclusion

In his 1904 History of Modern Art, Julius Meier-Graefe stated that: 'Everything valuable being done today has its antecedents, relates to a prior set of existing values.' When it comes to considering Nesch, this is true only if we include Munch and also the Brücke artists' willingness to experiment and innovate as one such value. Through his invention of the metal print and the introduction of a startling range of colour into his prints, Nesch took the German Expressionist printmaking tradition one step further. In the 'Über die plastischen Arbeiten' Kirchner had described the avoidance of representational detail and the simplifications in his sculpture as 'an impulse towards monumentality' rather than as a move towards greater abstraction.²²⁹ And Nesch's Hamburg colleagues had also discovered how abstraction intellectualises the pictorial expression. Nesch seems to have come to the same conclusion about his own abstraction: 'I am mad about the new Bathing graphic. In this I take the abstraction as far as I can defend to myself.'²³⁰

The peaceful bathing scenes contrasted with the political tensions building up in Europe at the time. Having been a war prisoner and reporter during World War I, reporting from both Somme and Verdun, Nesch certainly knew what war implied.²³¹ So in the same way as the Brücke artists used the bathing scenes to critique industrialisation, Nesch, perhaps unconsciously, used them to deny the war, providing us with a startling instance of how a

²²⁹ *Davoser Tagebuch* 220 as cited in Lloyd 81. Marsalle, L.de., 'Über die plastischen Arbeiten von E.L.Kirchner', *Der Cicerone*, XVII/4, 1925, 695-701.

²³⁰ 'Ich bin in die neue Graphik versessen (Bade-Graphik) wie ich bereits schrieb. Dabei gehe ich in der Abstraktion so weit, als ich es überhaupt vor mir selbst verantworten kan.' Letter to des Art dated 3.10.39, Bruhns 1993, 278. Hjelle pointed out to me that Nesch's abstraction of form could have been amplified as a consequence of his work with the material pictures in which accurate representation is more difficult to achieve.

²³¹ Hjelle 1998, 34-9.

bathers' scene, usually interpreted as idyllic, could be construed as subversive given the contingent circumstances of war-torn Europe.

'Exile' in the words of Wallace Stevens is 'a mind of winter' in which the summer with its Nesch-like bathing scenes is nearby but unobtainable.²³² Edward Said points out that 'what is true of all exile is not that home and love are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both. Perhaps by quoting Brücke art at a time when life is at its most challenging, Nesch, despite now living in the country of Munch, unconsciously reveals the loss inherent in his new life. While retaining his ties to Germany, he had gradually accultured into the Norwegian society, married a Norwegian and, therefore, never re-migrated. Nesch's continuation of avant-garde tendencies, the referencing of the Brücke movement, the concurrent affiliation with Munch and with foreign tendencies such as Picasso raises the issues of 'hybridity' in light of Nesch's complex development of identity. To paraphrase Homi K. Bhabha, for Nesch these 'in-between' spaces provided the terrain for elaborating strategies which initiated new signs of artistic identity.

²³² Said 367.

Fig. 1. Rolf Nesch, *Bratschen, Celli, Kontrabässe* from the *Muck series*, 1931



Fig. 2. Edvard Munch, *The Girls on the Bridge*, 1918



Fig. 3. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bridge over the Rhine in Cologne*, 1914



Fig. 4. Rolf Nesch. *Abschied*, from the *Bridges Series*, 1932

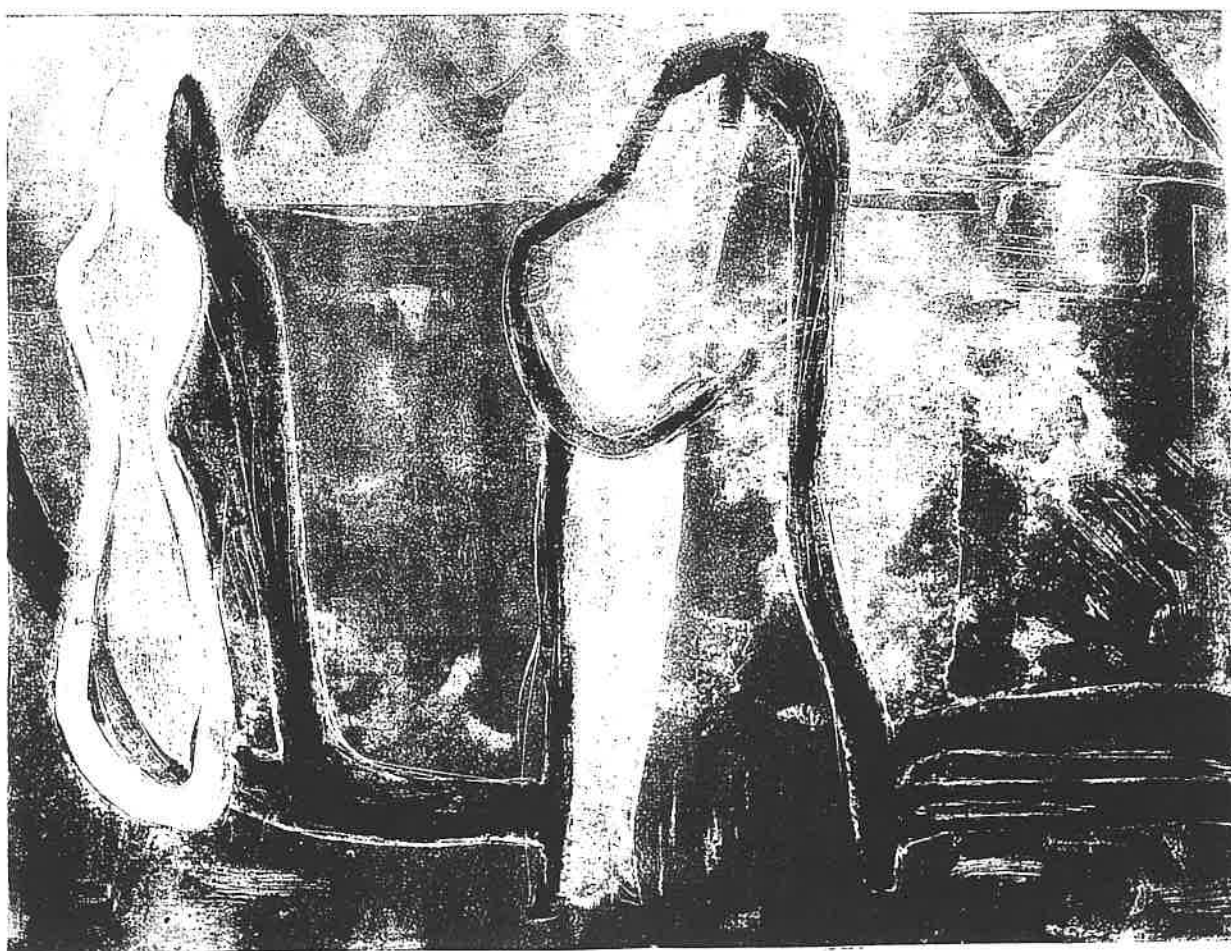


Fig. 5. Karl Kluth, *Wegespuren II*, 1933

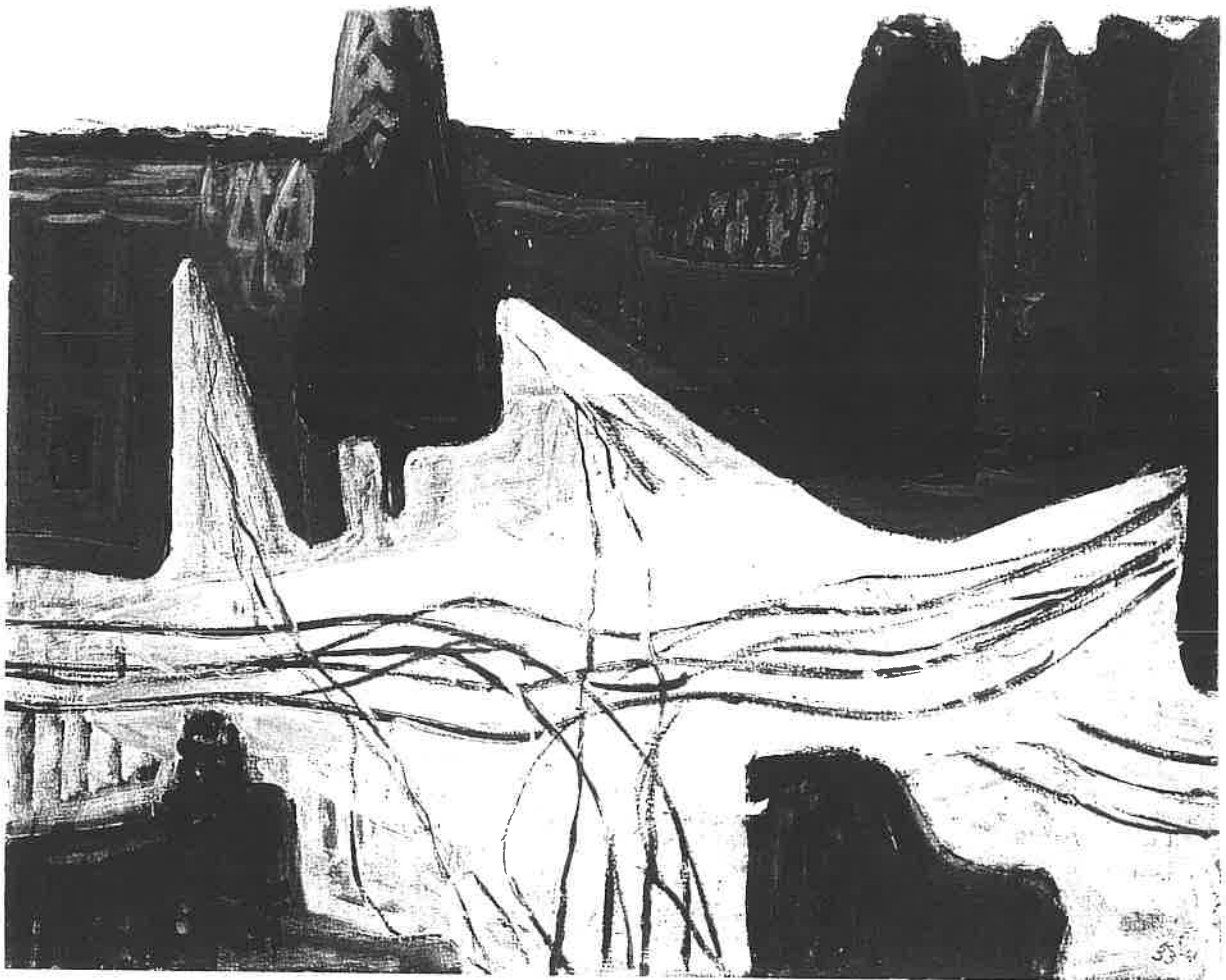


Fig. 6. Karl Kluth. *Akt auf rotem Sofa*, 1933

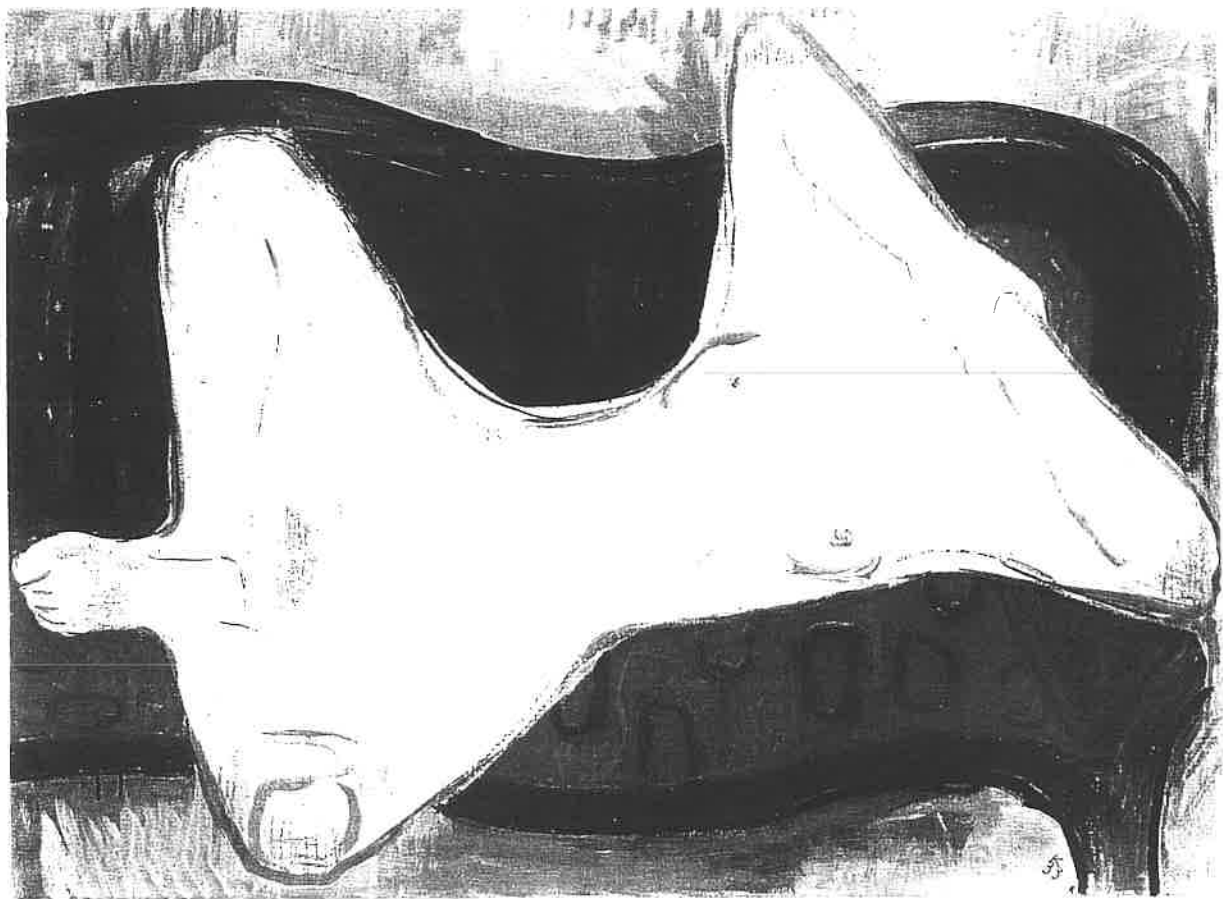


Fig. 7. Karl Ballmer, *Nordische Landschaft*. 1931

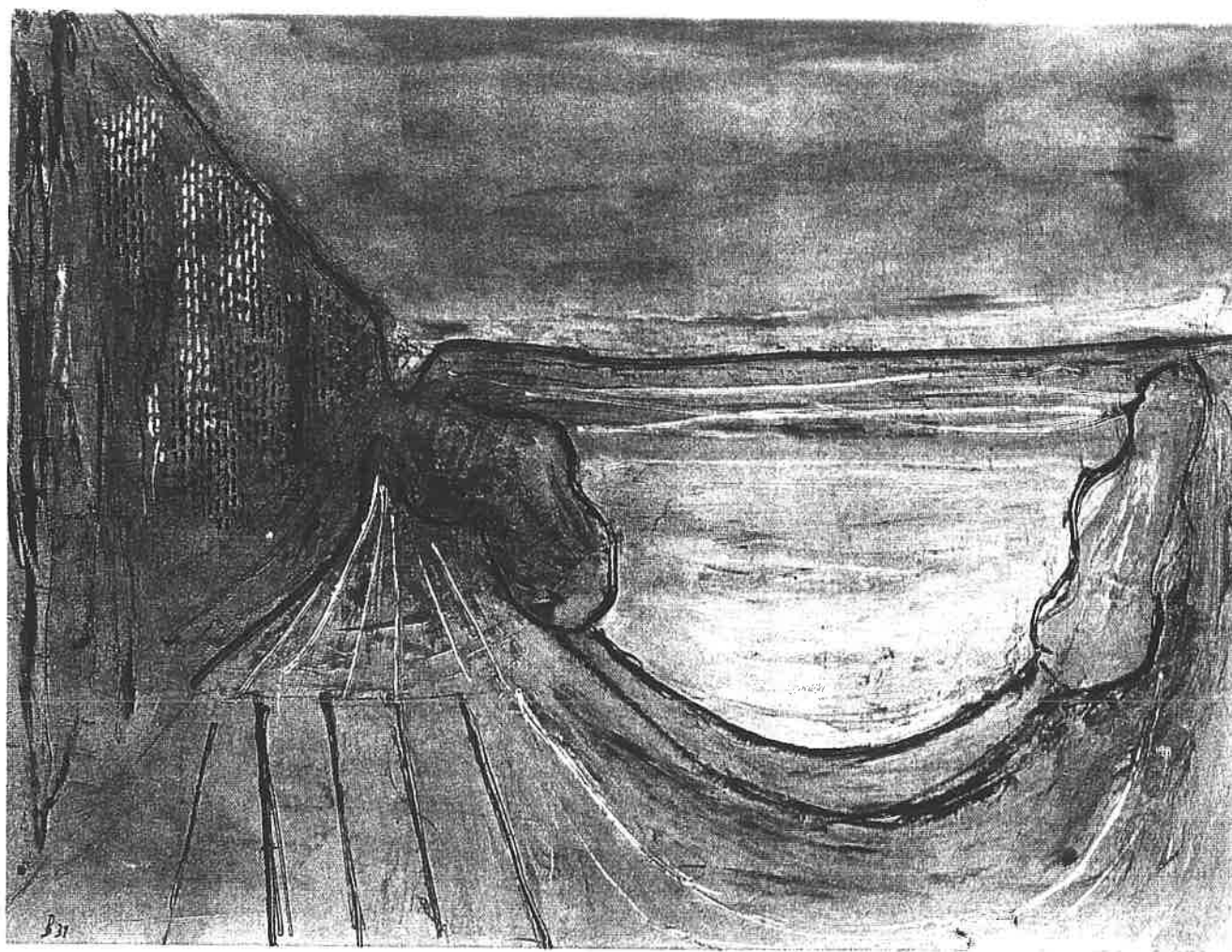


Fig. 8. Rolf Nesch, *Hafenbrücken* from the *Bridges Series*, 1932

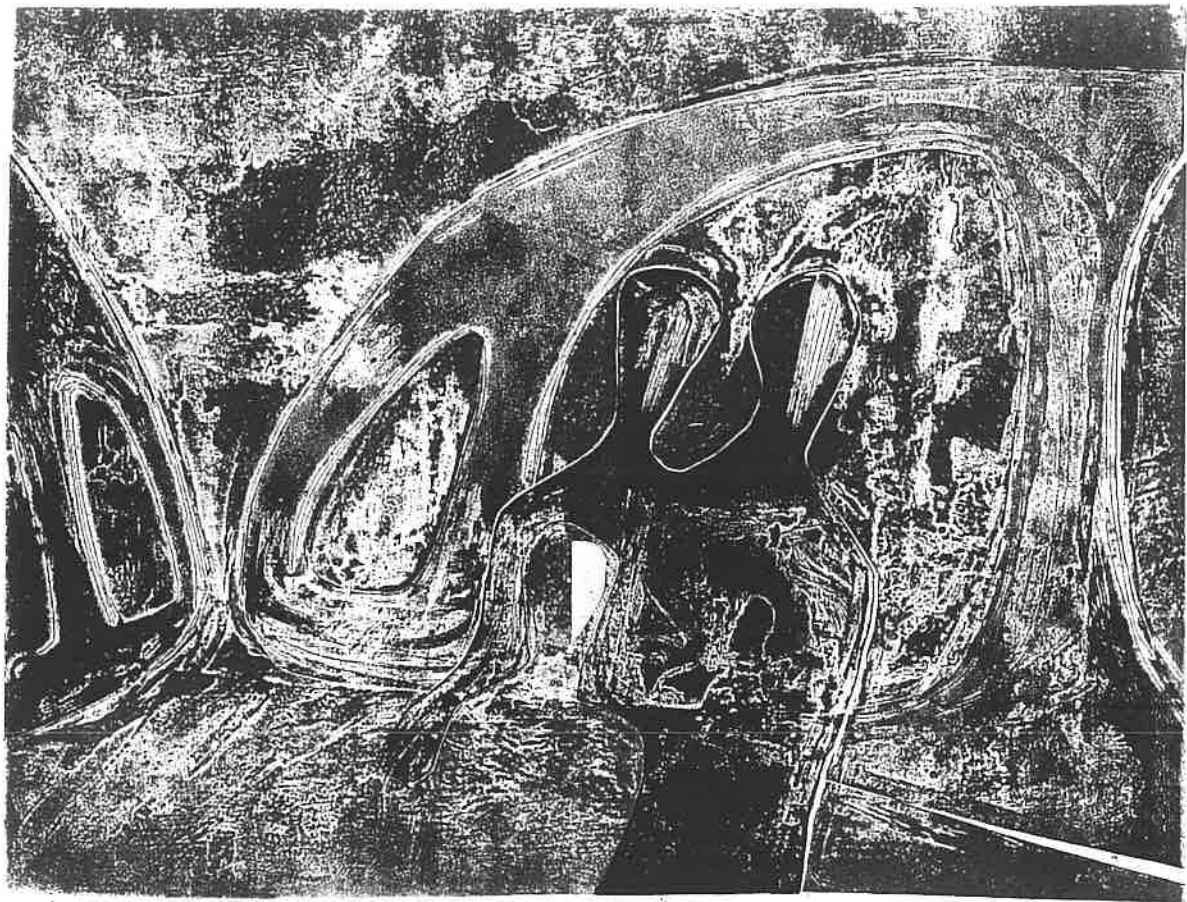


Fig. 9. Rolf Nesch, *Elbbrücke II*, from the *Bridges Series*, 1932

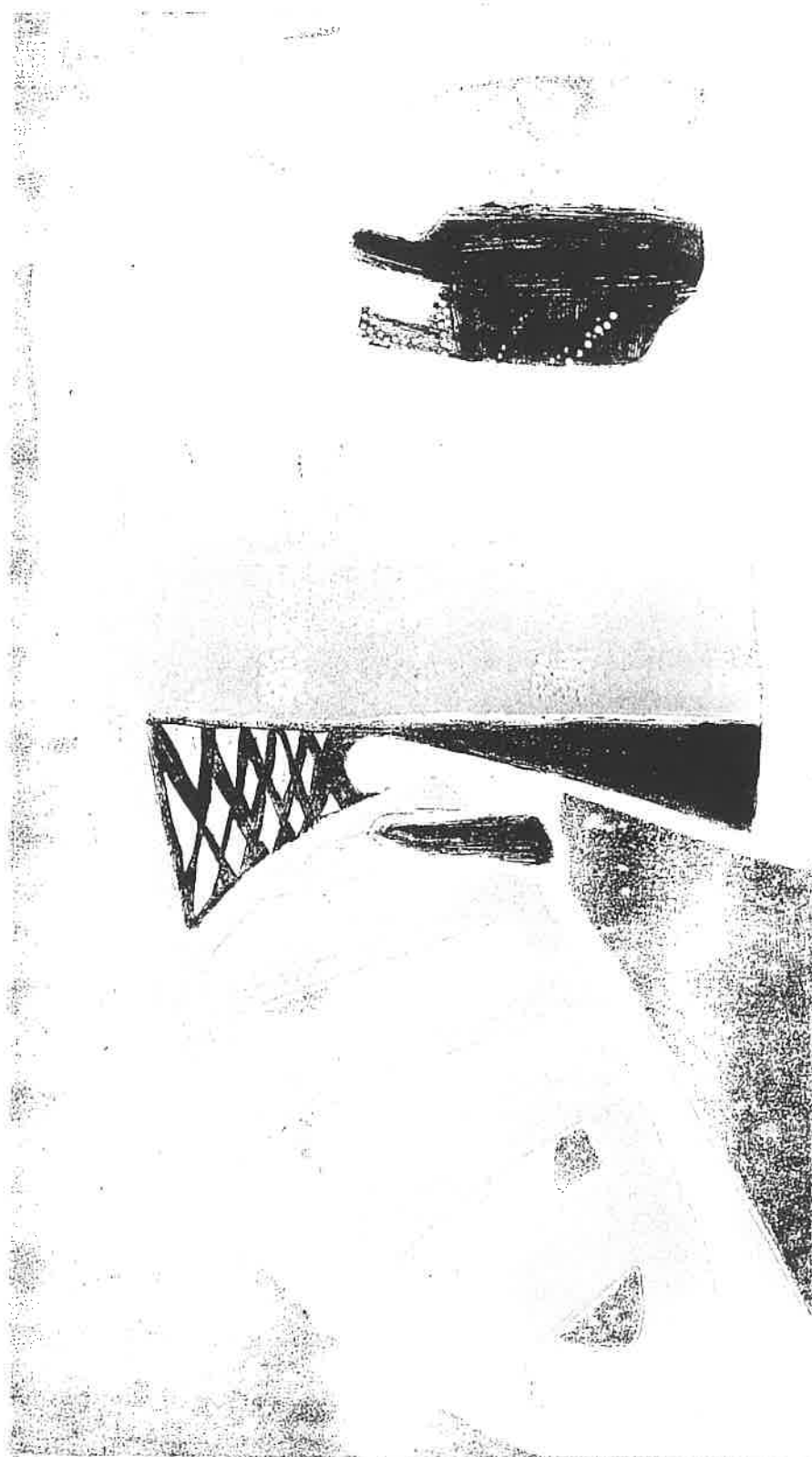


Fig.10. Rolf Nesch, *Bathers on stones*, 1939



Fig. 11. Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbild 29.4. Bild mit Drehrad* (Picture with Flywheel), 1920 and 1939

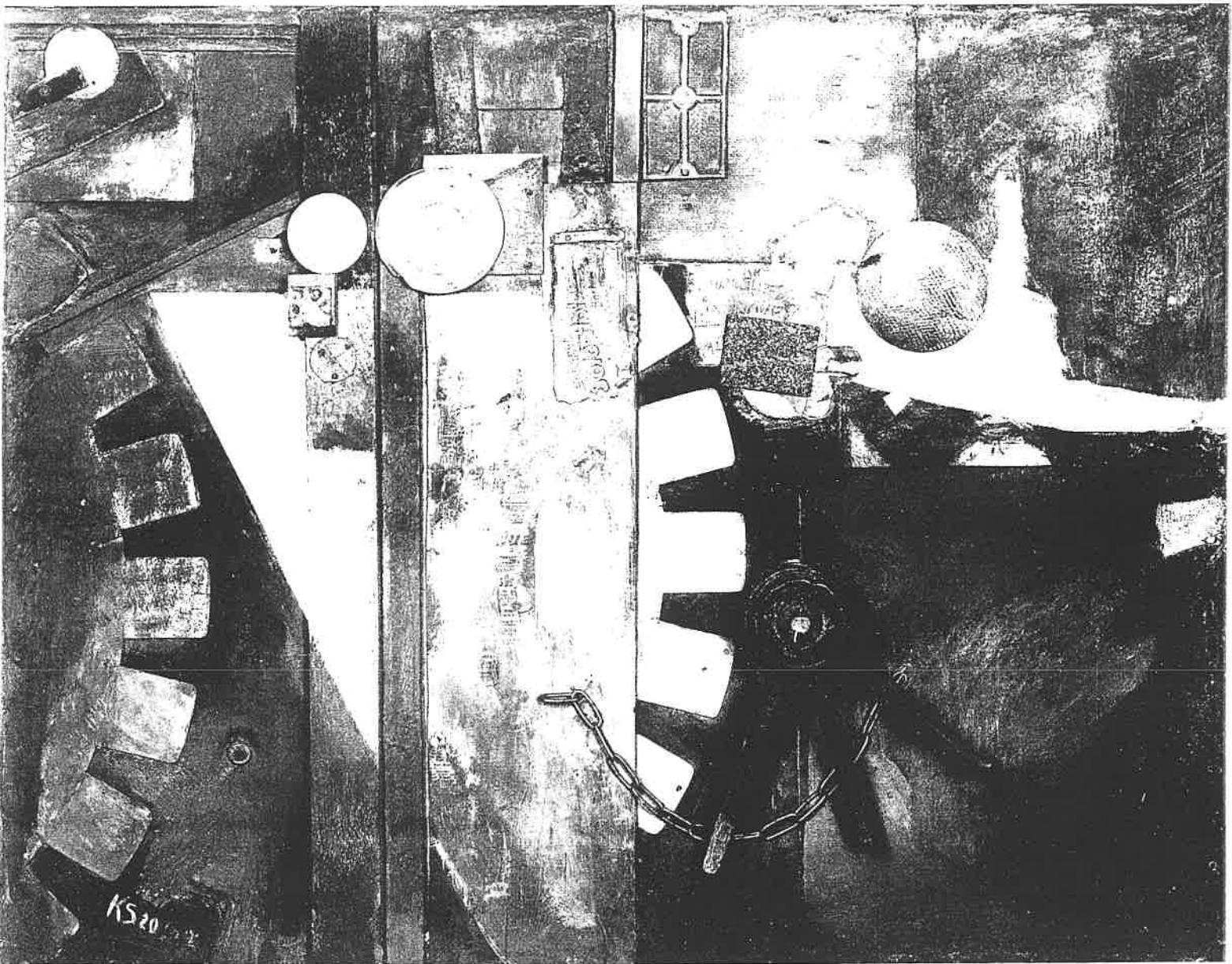


Fig. 12. Rolf Nesch. *Fichte und Tannen* (Pine and Fir Trees), from *Snow Series*, 1933/34

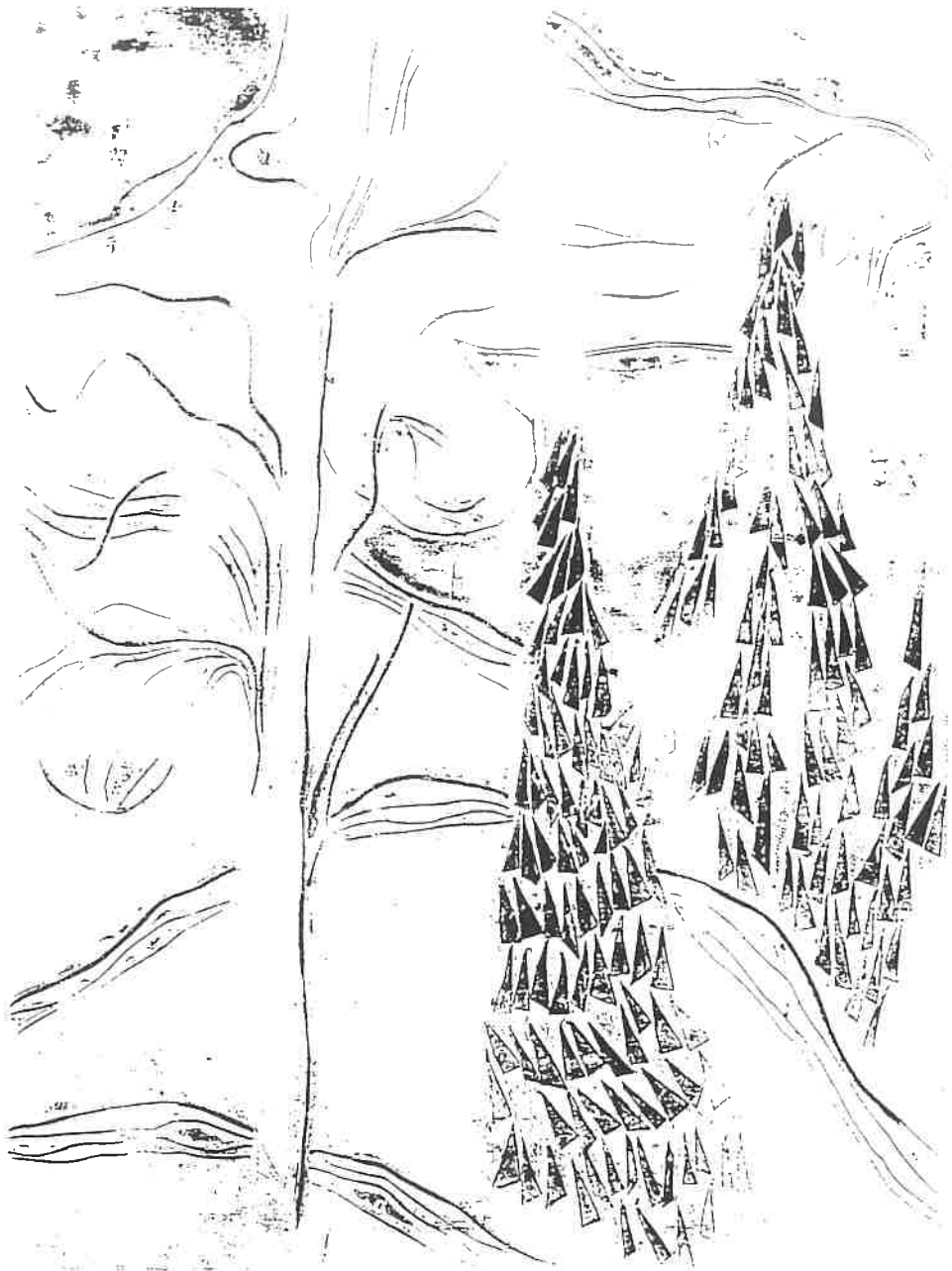


Fig.13. Rolf Nesch. *Skaugum*, from the *Snow Series*, 1933/34

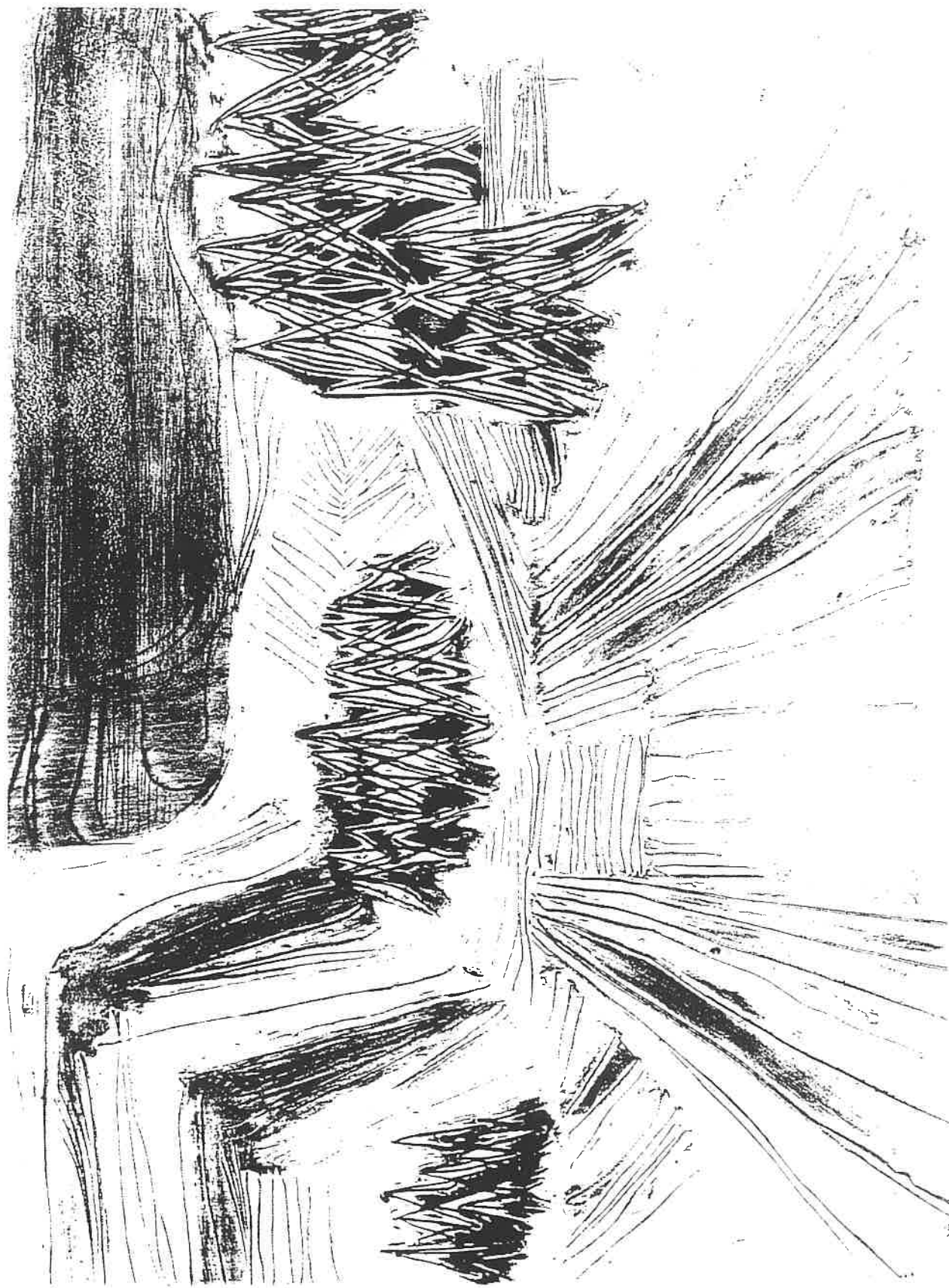


Fig.14. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bauern, Plaudernd*, 1921

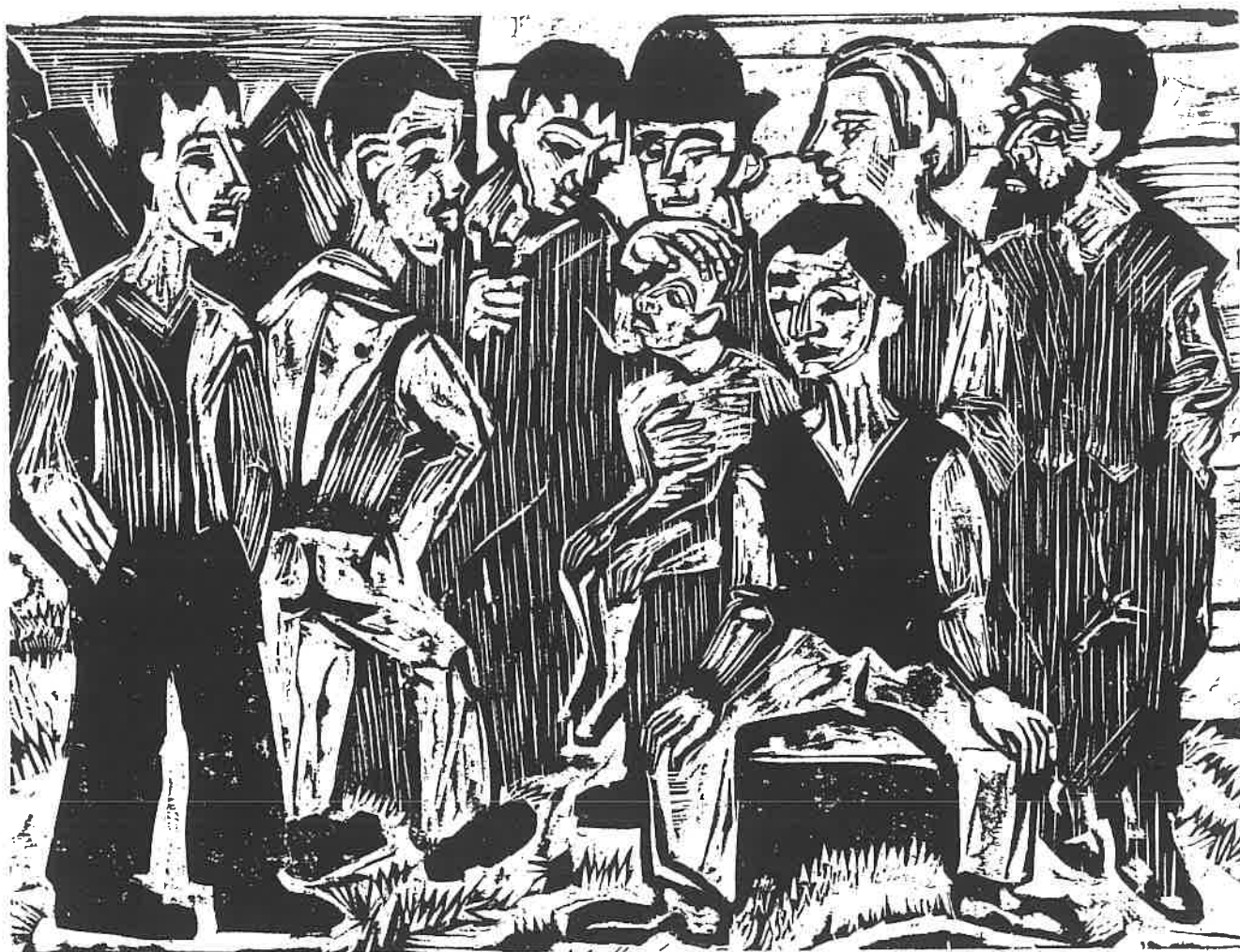


Fig.15. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Bathers by stones*, 1913



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