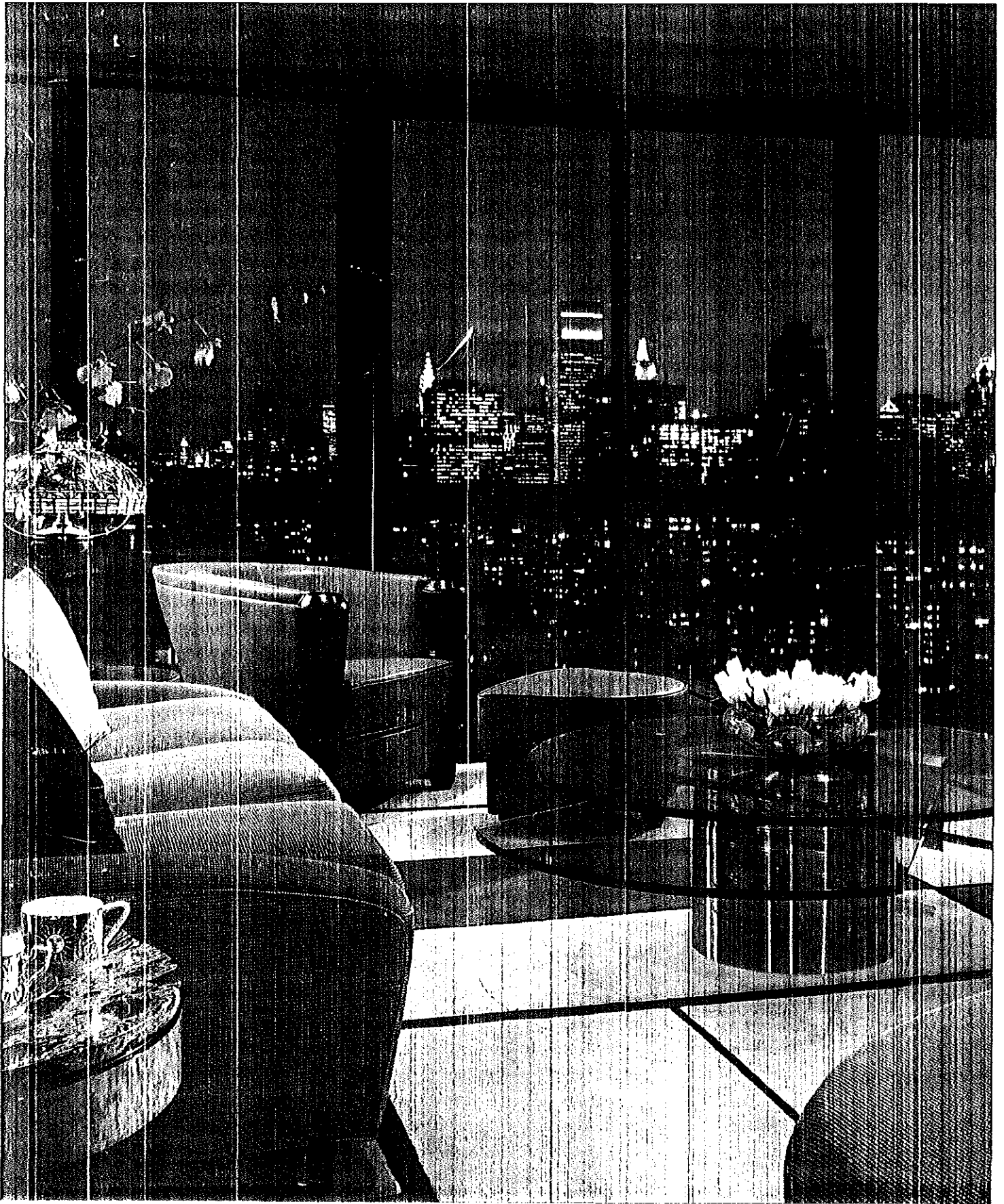


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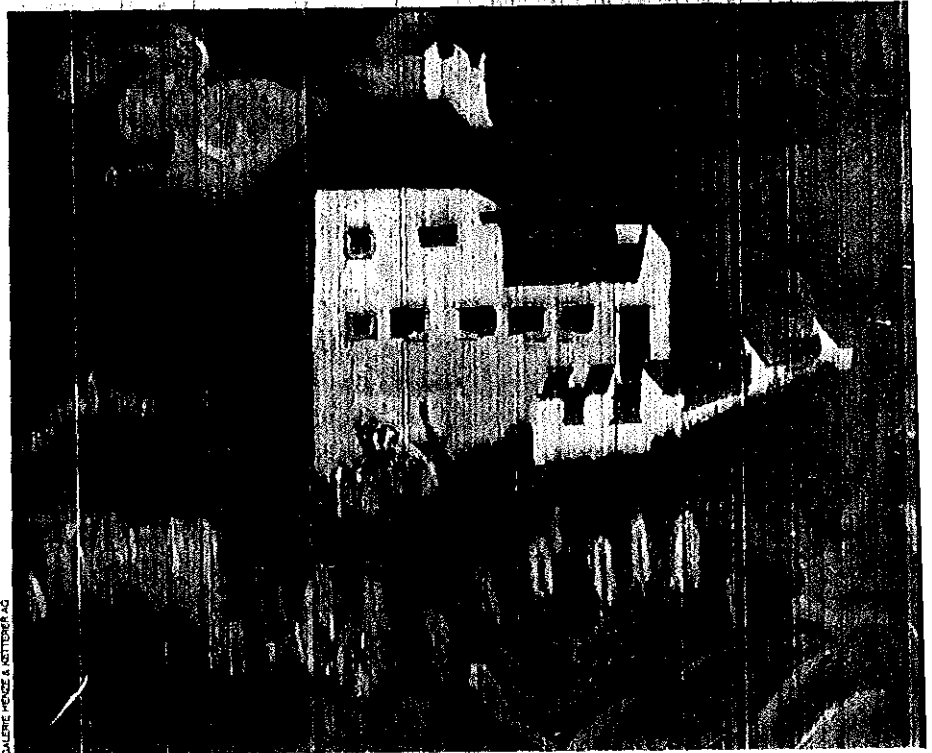
THE KIRCHNER MUSEUM AND RESIDENCES

LEGACIES OF THE GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST IN SWITZERLAND

Text by Nicholas Fox Weber Photography by Marina Faust



"Here I can, at least on good days, work and live in peace among these good people," wrote German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (above) about Davos, Switzerland, where he lived from 1917 until his suicide in 1938. RIGHT: His 1920 painting of his first house in the area.



Kirchner lived at In den Lärchen until 1923. "I am so happy to be allowed to be here," he wrote after leaving Germany. ABOVE: The traditional Swiss house belongs to gallery owner Eberhard W. Kornfeld, who has filled it with Kirchner's art and furnishings.

In the tumultuous life of the German Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the Alpine town of Davos, Switzerland, offered asylum and inspiration. Emotional serenity was rarely his good fortune, but there he found a sense of home amid the natural beauty and everyday sights that fired his art. Today Davos is a gold mine for the Kirchner enthusiast, as the Kirchner Museum Davos—designed by Zurich architects Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer—has opened its minimalist façade. Moreover, a few miles from the town center, the simple rural dwellings where Kirchner lived and worked still survive. Although these two modest farmhouses are not open to the public, they contain rich evidence of Kirchner's prolific artistic existence.

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was already a well-known pioneer of modern art by the time he settled in Davos. In 1905 he had been one of the founders in Dresden of the Brücke (Bridge), and he was instrumental in the development of the bold and highly charged style ultimately known

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THE KIRCHNER MUSEUM AND RESIDENCES

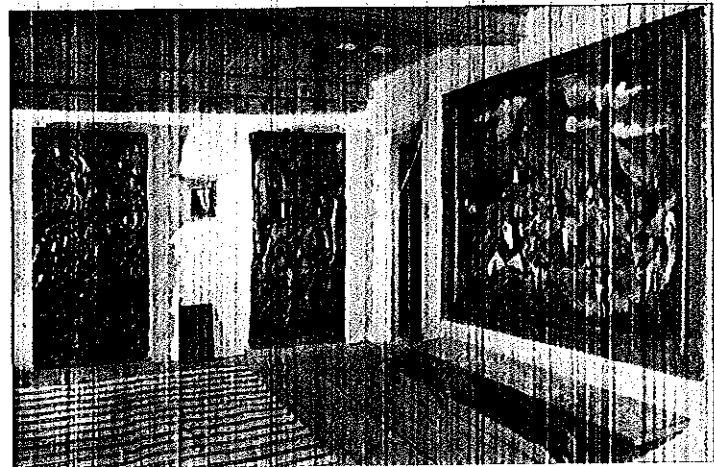
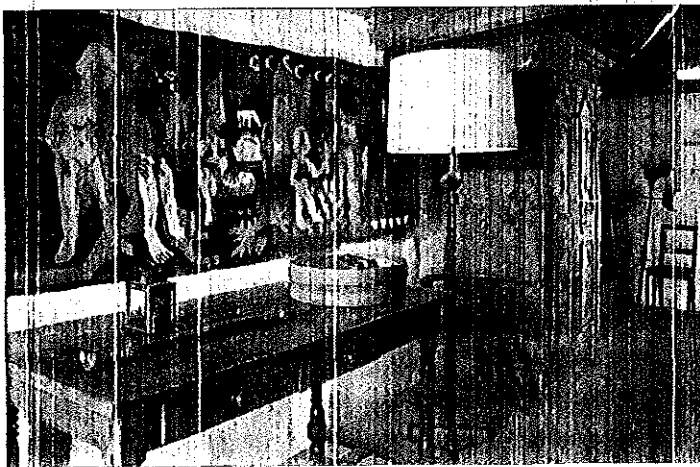
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as German Expressionism. By 1913 Kirchner was having major one-man museum exhibitions and was considered one of the most important artists of the time.

But he also was suffering from severe attacks of anxiety and had become a heavy consumer of absinthe. In 1915, following his induction into the army, he had a mental breakdown and was granted military leave. He went to Berlin, and for the next few years his life consisted of periods of tremendous achievement interrupted by sanatorium stays. Suffering from endless psychological difficulties, he became dependent on the sleep-inducing drug Veronal, alcohol and morphine.

In January 1917 Kirchner's close friend the philosopher Eberhard Grisebach arranged for the artist to go to Davos, where Grisebach's in-laws, the lung specialist Lucius Spengler and his wife, Helen, lived. Helen Spengler wrote Grisebach

RIGHT: Kirchner carved the African-inspired chairs after moving to In den Lärchen. His 1923 *Black Spring*, which depicts the Alpine scenery that figures prominently in his later canvases, hangs next to a tapestry of the painting woven by Lise Gujer.



that Kirchner said that "he no longer has the courage to live, and that he would joyfully welcome, rather than fear, an end to life. And yet he told me that it was the desire to become healthier and stronger that made him come to Switzerland."

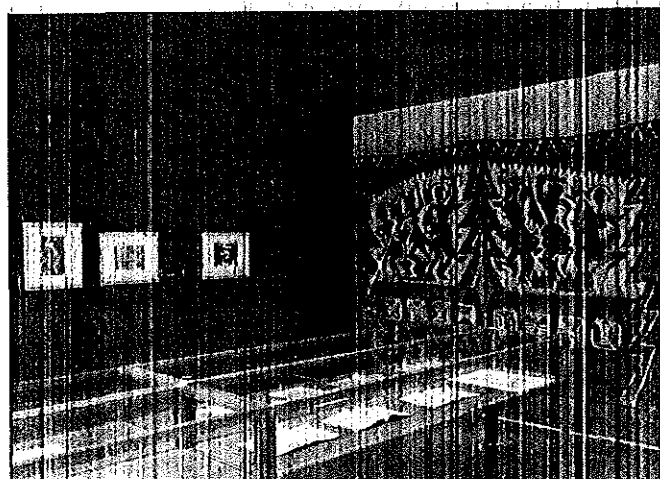
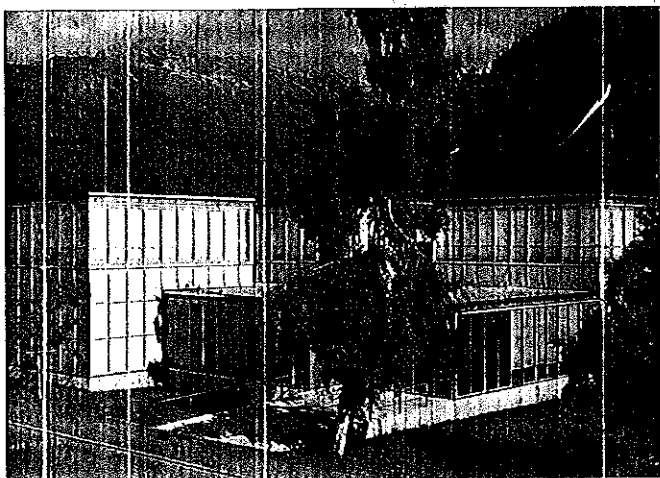
The artist moved back and forth between Berlin and Davos that year, staying at first in a pension and then in a farmer's hut, where he was cared for by a nurse. The next year he moved into In den Lärchen, his first residence in the region, situated in the tiny village of Frauenkirch. He

"Work here has reached the ideal standard of being done with love," wrote Kirchner. "You can see it in the movements of [the people's] hands. And that, in turn, ennobles the facial expression." ABOVE LEFT: A tapestry of Kirchner's 1923 *Human Beings in Landscape* is in the entrance hall. ABOVE RIGHT: The two bronze castings were made from wood reliefs Kirchner carved during his second year in Switzerland.

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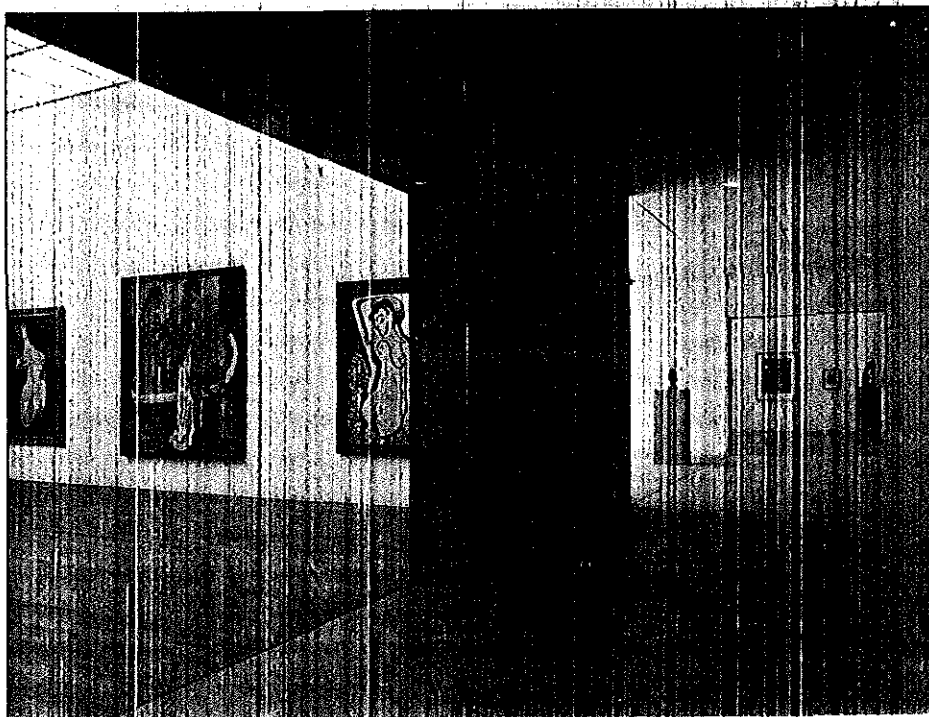
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ABOVE: Designed by Zurich architects Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer, the Kirchner Museum Davos contains the artist's furniture, letters, books, photographic plates and more than 500 paintings and drawings. "With its horizontal roofs, the museum complements the architecture of Davos," Kornfeld points out. "And the light gray color complements the landscape, especially in winter."

ABOVE RIGHT: A theater curtain Kirchner painted for a 1921 dance performance of Nina Hard hangs in a red room along with etchings of dancers. A glass case displays some of his 160 sketchbooks. RIGHT: Three studies of nudes are in one of the galleries reserved for paintings.



seemed transformed. As he wrote to Henry van de Velde, his new sanctuary was "a beautiful old Crisons house with a kitchen that looks like Rembrandt's studio." Three years later his lifetime companion, Erna Schilling (she later took his name although they never married), moved to In den Lärchen. Kirchner lived quietly and productively "in this wonderful, democratic country, where work itself and the individual are valued without prejudice."

Although some of the narrow switchback roads that climb the hillside to In den Lärchen were paved in recent years, the house is hard to find and nearly inaccessible, the last part of the route following a grassy drive with perilous drop-offs.

Today In den Lärchen belongs to the Swiss gallery owner and auctioneer Eberhard W. Kornfeld. When he acquired the house in 1981, Kornfeld faced a three-part task. He wished to preserve its history (a 1477 letter he found in the log core of the house dates it back to the mid-fifteenth century), keep it as a Kirchner monument and make it habitable for modern living.

The interiors are much as they were when Kirchner lived there, furnished with the artist's hand-carved chairs, paintings and prints and the old Swiss bed in which he did a famous self-portrait. In the dining room, a reproduction of one of Kirchner's finest colored woodcuts hangs next to a window overlooking the view it depicts. There

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are the identical mountain peaks and nearby barn; only a few trees have changed since Kirchner's time.

Ebi Kornfeld also owns Wildboden, the house across the river from Frauenkirch that Ernst and Erna Kirchner moved into in 1923. Kirchner was devastated about giving up In den Lärchen because of the return of its owners, but he wrote about the move, "This will really come to be a turning point in my life. Everything must be put in clear order and the little house furnished as simply and modestly as possible, while still being beautiful and intimate." Wildboden is set on a high flat plain with steep mountains all around. It is furnished with a combination of Kornfeld and Kirchner pieces, such as an Eames armchair next to a hand-carved table that held the artist's brushes and paints.

Kirchner produced some of his best art at Wildboden, but his existence there was far from easy. In 1938, after an exceptionally long and hard winter, he was worn out not only by the weather but by the lack of sales of his art (in spite of a large exhibition at the Basel Museum) and the fear of war. Once his work was blacklisted by the Nazis as "*Entartete Kunst*"

had a telephone, to call for a car. "While she was telephoning, Kirchner passed the window of the room in which she was and threw something in—the little Swiss temporary passport," writes Valentiner. "A moment later she heard a shot: he had killed himself in the meadow in front of their house."

Yet as one sees at the Kirchner Museum Davos, the art this anguished man produced in Switzerland is more a celebration of his existence there than a statement of torment. Some of Kirchner's most exuberant oil paintings of town life, houses, bell towers and the local landscape hang there.

The museum is a permanent Kirchner retrospective, showing not only work that is recognizably of Davos but also major paintings of dancers, archers, old ladies under their black hats, buxom young nudes emerging from the tub, lovers and acrobats. There are also hundreds of works on paper on view: etchings, woodcuts and drawings. The collection is hung in a spacious, modern setting. Annette Gigon and Mike Guyer's principal concept was to design a building that would in no way detract from the art.

In addition to canvases and draw-

The art Kirchner produced in Switzerland is more a celebration than a statement of torment.

(degenerate art), he "got the feeling," according to the German Expressionist expert W. R. Valentiner, who visited him in Davos, "that he was no longer safe even in his mountain retreat. . . . He had been further frightened by a new regulation of the Third Reich requiring all Germans resident in Switzerland to register for possible future need in Germany." Kirchner could not bring himself to go to Zurich to get his expired passport renewed. One evening late that spring when the artist seemed especially dejected, Erna Kirchner crossed the field to the next farmhouse, which

ings, the museum houses Kirchner's printing press, a display of printmaking techniques, and wood sculptures and furniture he made while living in Frauenkirch. The fantastic carved bed he built—"He made it for Erna in 1919, but it broke down the first time they made love on it, so she would never use it again," says Kornfeld—is on view in one of the galleries. The display is both irreverent and respectful and never too far from the realities of Kirchner's life. Thanks to Ebi Kornfeld and the other generous donors to the museum, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's art and world live on in Davos. □
