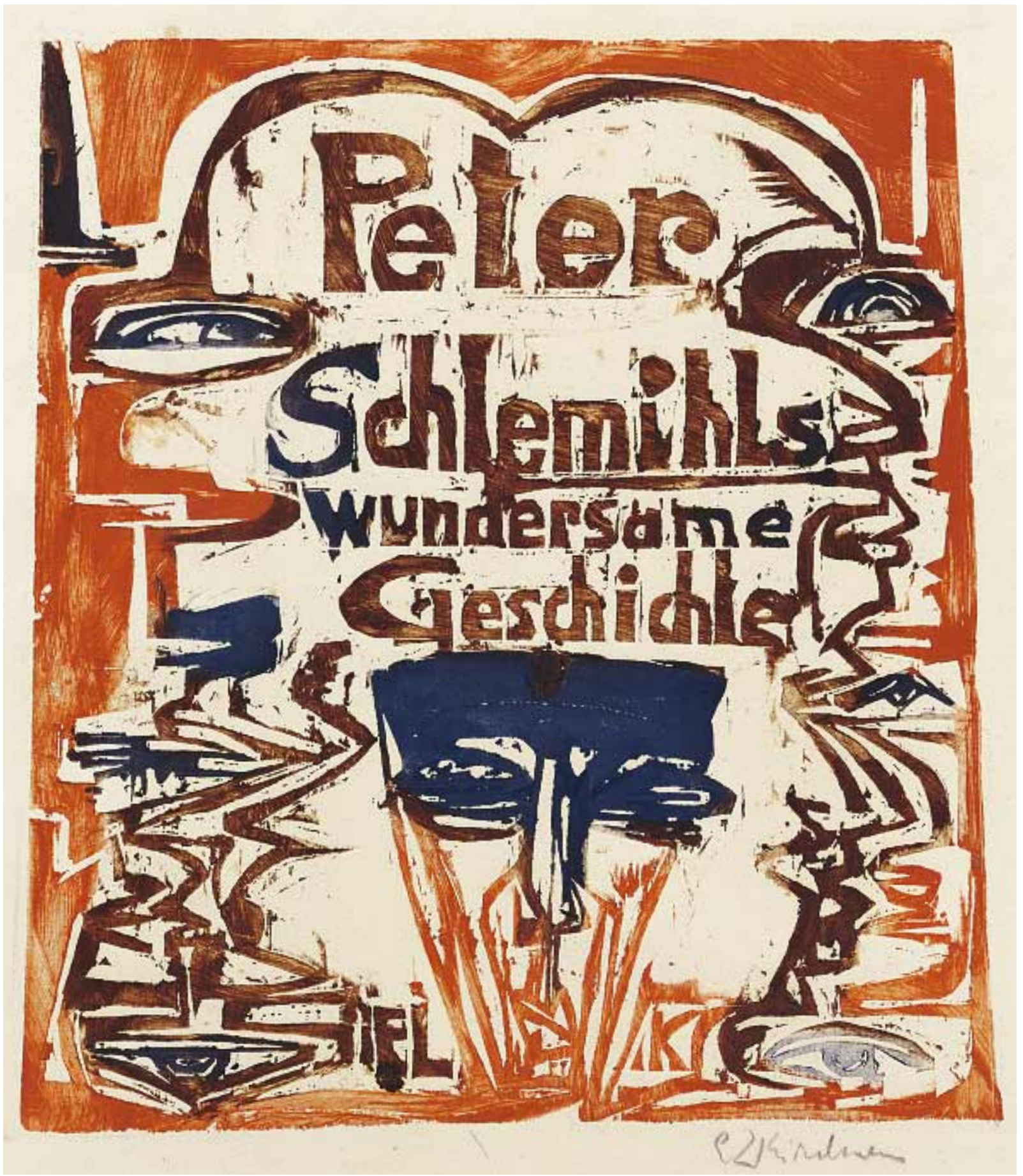


ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER —

**Peter Schlemihl's  
Wondrous Story**



Peter

Schlemihls

wundersame

Geschichte

E. K. Schmidt

ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER ———  
**Peter Schlemihl's**  
**Wondrous Story**

Magdalena M. Moeller and Günther Gercken

**PRESTEL**  
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## Foreword and acknowledgements

It was an important moment in the history of the Brücke-Museum when in autumn 1996 the Board of Trustees of the Karl and Emy Schmidt-Rottluff Foundation decided to buy Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Schlemihl* series. The Foundation had been offered – on the open art market – the copy formerly belonging to the collection of Gustav Schiefler, Kirchner's tireless advocate and editor of the first *catalogue raisonné* of the artist's prints. A short time later the last available copy of the series, albeit without the cover lithograph, found its way into the National Gallery of Art in Washington. With that, all five complete series of Kirchner's *Schlemihl* cycle were now in public collections, as the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Städel in Frankfurt am Main and the Museum Folkwang in Essen already owned copies.

The *Schlemihl* series, consisting of one lithograph and seven colour woodcuts, is the most important of Kirchner's works in print form. The images were created at a time when, with the outbreak of World War, I Kirchner's life began to fall apart. On every side he was surrounded by upheaval, and everything was subject to change and re-evaluation. After his discharge from military service the artist felt he had been cast adrift – as lost as Peter Schlemihl, who had sold his shadow to the little grey man, and in so doing found himself a social outcast. Kirchner would leave his studio only at night, as if – like Schlemihl – he were hiding in the loneliness of his room, not wanting to attract attention, since his discharge from military service meant that he was contributing nothing to his homeland. Kirchner felt an affinity with the figure of Peter Schlemihl, who had been created some hundred years previously in the fairy-tale novella by the poet Adelbert von Chamisso. Kirchner's existential crisis and his state of mind were played out in the *Schlemihl* woodcuts, although their relationship to their literary inspiration was limited. Kirchner was given leave from military service in Halle at the end of September/beginning of October 1915, and a month later, in November, he was discharged completely. He felt cut off from his art and from his true existence. He seems to have created the seven woodcuts and the lithograph extremely quickly, as if in a trance. Just a year later, on 12 November 1916, he wrote to Gustav Schiefler: 'The impact of the war and the ever-increasing shallowness is the heaviest burden. It always seems to me to be like a bloody carnival ... everything is turned upside down. We stagger about bloatedly trying to work. [...] We're now like the prostitutes I used to paint. Wiped out, and the next time completely gone.'

The *Schlemihl* woodcuts represent a penetrating, highly personal testament to Kirchner's own mental condition, and the artist gave them only to close friends such as Gustav Schiefler, Botho Graef, Ernst Gosebruch, and to the man who would later become his doctor in Davos, Frédéric Bauer.

Apart from the series' iconographic and psychological aspects, however, the technique used to create individual sheets is innovative and quite

astonishing. Each set is distinctive, each sheet and pull is different, and thus a unique work of art.

This book is published on the occasion of an exhibition at the Brücke-Museum in Berlin, which has succeeded in bringing together all five series so that all the individual motifs can be seen side by side, and the differences in printing and colour variations can be compared directly. Such a collection has never been previously assembled. Echoing the exhibition's approach, the book also features a number of fold-out pages which permit comparisons to be made while reading. Each illustration has been checked against the original to ensure the highest degree of authenticity in reproduction.

Both the exhibition and this book have been the subject of careful preparation over a long period of time. The project itself would not have been possible without the help of Prof. Dr. Günther Gercken. I am extremely grateful to him for agreeing to take part and for his generous collaboration. Günther Gercken is the acknowledged and most experienced Kirchner specialist working in the field of fine art prints today. His extensive research on Kirchner's prints, which will be published in the seven-volume *catalogue raisonné* of prints he is currently editing, has informed this publication – in his introduction, his analysis of the images and in the preparation of this catalogue.

I would like express my heartfelt thanks to Günther Gercken for the wonderfully inspiring and friendly cooperation – hopefully not the last – which has culminated in the publication of this book.

Special thanks are also due to the lenders who recognized the importance of our project, and made their *Schlemihl* series available to us. I should also like to thank Dr. Tobias Burg, Museum Folkwang, Essen; Dr. Christian Müller, Department of Prints and Drawings, Kunstmuseum Basel; Dr. Andrew Robison, National Gallery of Art, Washington; and Dr. Jutta Schütt, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

Many thanks also to Prestel Verlag in Munich, in particular Katharina Haderer, Gabriele Ebbecke and Cilly Klotz, who have made our ideas a reality in a quite unique way. Seldom has the production of a book been managed with such commitment and enthusiasm.

The publication was financed by the Karl and Emy Schmidt-Rottluff Foundation. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Trustees for their support.

I hope that both the exhibition and this book will inspire great interest, and that from now on Kirchner's *Schlemihl* cycle will be regarded in a new light.

Prof. Dr. Magdalena M. Moeller  
Director, Brücke-Museum Berlin





Günther Gercken

**Peter Schlemihl's  
Wondrous Story** \_\_\_\_\_  
by Adelbert von Chamisso:  
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's 1915 set of woodcuts



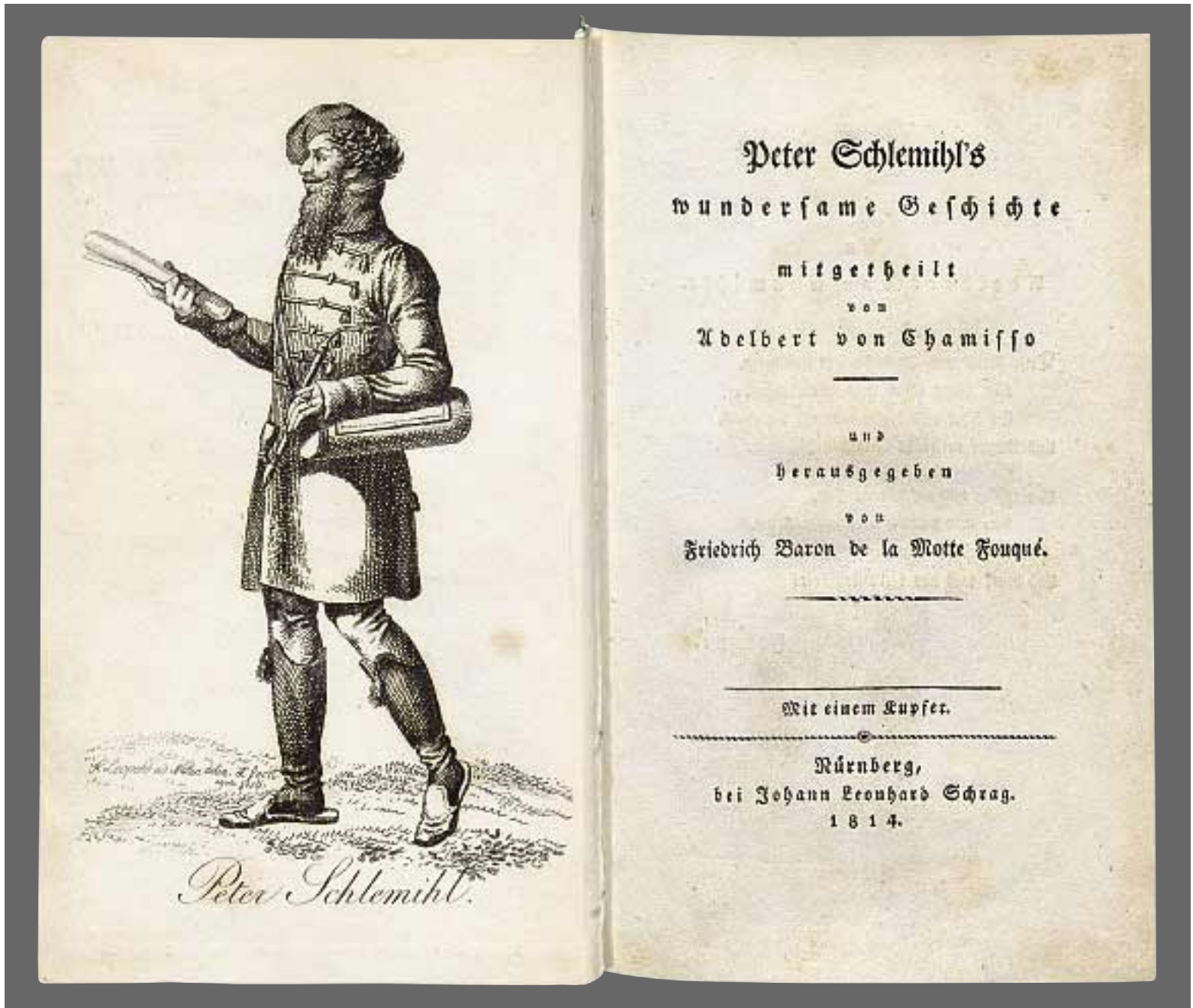


Fig. 1

Frontispiece and title page of the first edition,  
Nuremberg 1814

During his time in the army in the city of Halle during the First World War, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner read Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story* (Fig. 1), a fairy tale in which he saw his own fate foreshadowed by that of Schlemihl, and which inspired the artist to produce a set of colour woodcuts. Kirchner used the text as a means to conceal his anguished mental state in the army, and chose the loss of his shadow to represent the loss of his emotional stability. Chamisso, too, in his novella described his situation as a refugee forced out of his homeland, as an outsider in an unfamiliar country. 'This is the story of an outcast who, with giant strides, distances himself from human society, and who, as a naturalist working in the world's deserts and steppes, finds solitary happiness.'<sup>1</sup> He conceals his authorship of Schlemihl's story by stating in the framing introduction to the fictional story that he is recounting someone else's words. To reinforce the sense that he is not the first-person narrator, and to sustain the hoax, on a number of occasions throughout the narrative Schlemihl addresses him directly as 'my dear Chamisso'. The first German edition of *Schlemihl* (1814) dispels any doubts about its authorship, however: Franz Josef Leopold's ornamental frontispiece gives *Peter Schlemihl* as its title and shows Chamisso in his coat, with a vasculum – a botanist's collecting box – slung over his shoulder, and his rolled-up manuscript in one hand and a pipe in the other. While Kirchner's colour woodcuts of *Peter Schlemihl* are unmistakably autobiographical in nature, they can still be read as illustrations of the literary original. It is not only this ambiguity that distinguishes these works from all other illustrations of Schlemihl. By adopting Schlemihl's role, Kirchner on the one hand lends contemporary substance to the story, while on the other hand the historical association lends his personal fate a universal and symbolic significance.

Both Chamisso and Kirchner felt they were outsiders in society, and therefore identified with the figure of Schlemihl who was shunned for want of a shadow. Later in Switzerland, Kirchner wrote: 'Do I have a home? No: an outsider here, an outsider there; no one will have me. Am on my own with my art... and I want to keep hold of this demure mistress of mine who becomes ever lovelier the older I grow – even if it means losing the little bit of recognition I still have.'<sup>2</sup> The autobiographical content of the novella – as indicated by the description of the role of the outsider and, particularly, the ending with its seven-league boots – should not be overrated, however. The text might also be read as a parable in which the limitations of the power of money are shown with respect to inalienable personal qualities, especially in view of the story's concluding lines: 'But you, my friend: if you wish to live among mankind, then learn to revere your shadow first and foremost, and money next. But if you only wish to live for your own, for your better self's sake – oh – then you need no advice.'<sup>3</sup> Among all the possible interpretations, the novella needs to be seen as a literary invention in which fantastic and realistic representation combine artfully in a new, fictitious reality – just as Kirchner's set of woodcuts relate to the text and at the same time constitute their own pictorial reality. In a letter to Gustav Schiefler, Kirchner rejected too personal a reading of his set of woodcuts, and instead emphasised the universality of the man portrayed.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
**Self-Portrait as a Soldier in his Studio**  
**Berlin-Friedenau, Körnerstrasse 45, 1915**  
**Kirchner Museum Davos**

A shadow is necessarily bound to an individual's physical existence and can contribute to that person's self-assurance. It accompanies the human body inseparably, not as part of it, but as its projection – pure phenomenon, not a material thing. In the novella and the illustrations, however, the shadow is treated as an object that can be detached from its 'owner', sold, rolled up like a piece of fabric, and pocketed. Others perceive Schlemihl's lack of a shadow not just as a crucial flaw; it also unnerves them because his missing shadow makes even his physical presence illusory. The existential link between the body and its shadow is an ancient literary motif. In the third canto of *Purgatory*, Virgil informs the shadowless souls who marvel at the sight of Dante's shadow, 'This is a human body that you see, / By which the sunlight on the ground is split.'<sup>5</sup> Among these disembodied souls, a shadow is a mark of distinction; it is proof of a physical body through which light cannot pass. Chamisso the scientist also drew attention to this natural phenomenon in his subsequent ironic interpretation of the tale with a cryptic admonishment to 'Give some thought to what is sound!'<sup>6</sup> In Ingeborg Bachmann's poem *Shadows Roses Shadow*, one's shadow 'on an alien earth ... in alien waters' attests to one's origins and existence.<sup>7</sup> Here the shadow is understood to be one's familiar other self that keeps one company even in unfamiliar territory. In the novella, Schlemihl fails to appreciate the worth of his shadow; its loss appears to have less adverse an effect on his sense of self than society's reaction to his lack of a shadow, which pains him more. When it comes to social recognition, a shadow carries more weight than riches. Regardless of external perception, Kirchner, in contrast, is the cause of his own suffering, and makes this circumstance the theme of his illustrated narrative.

While commentators on the novella have puzzled over the symbolism of the missing shadow – Chamisso gives no explanation for it, he merely describes the disastrous consequences that arise from it and the difficulties Schlemihl experiences – Kirchner equated the missing shadow with his loss of identity during his time in the army. 'It was not volunteering to join the army that made me feel shadowless, as it were. Instead, what meant the loss of my shadow was having to surrender my own will in military service, losing my individuality – as made visible by the disguise of the uniform.'<sup>8</sup> The photograph (Fig. 2) that Kirchner took of himself in his studio should be interpreted in this light.<sup>9</sup> With a spiked helmet on his head and a sword in his left hand, he poses booted and spurred in his oversized regimentals. Kirchner the artist disappears in the soldier's uniform that he felt resembled a disguise – 'for a bloody carnival', as he put it – that makes everyone uniform, and depersonalizes the man wearing it.<sup>10</sup>

Kirchner's experience of losing his identity among a mass of soldiers is alarmingly expressed in his 1915 oil painting, *Soldatenbad (Artillerymen in the Shower)* (Gordon 434; Fig. 3). All traces of the individuality of each of the young men in the shower have been erased; they are now just numbers, cannon fodder to be expended in battle. Kirchner's fear of death is understandable in the light of his practically delusional obsession with the thought that – given his lack of skill – he would be shot dead as soon as he arrived at the front.



Fig. 3

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner  
*Artillerymen in the Shower*  
 (*Das Soldatenbad*), 1915  
 Oil on canvas, 140.3 × 151 cm  
 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

### Illustrated editions of *Peter Schlemihl*

The fantastical theme of Chamisso's novella encouraged 19th and 20th century artists and publishers to produce numerous illustrated editions.<sup>11</sup> The text was re-interpreted using ever newer images, and given a new look to reflect the prevailing *zeitgeist*. Modern illustrations removed *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story* from its original context, and updated it for new generations of readers. Illustrations can be expected to be more than pleasing visual decoration in books. At their best, they amplify the text, and make it visually coherent. Yet in principle, it is worth asking whether illustrations – by translating the written form into a pictorial form – *enhance* a text's range of meanings, or whether they *limit* scope for interpretation. Moreover, an illustrator might misinterpret a text and create images that do not apply to it. No matter what, illustrations are doubly flawed in relation to words – both on account of how artists understand the text and their visual style.

Among the early illustrations, only the best known – those by George Cruikshank (1792–1878), Adolph Menzel (1815–1905) and Emil Preetorius (1883–1973) – are considered here as examples of how illustrations have changed over time, and are compared with Kirchner's interpretation. The first illustrated edition appeared in English translation in 1823; it contained eight etchings by



Fig. 4  
**A. R. Penck**  
*No title, illustration for  
Peter Schlemihl's wundersame Geschichte*  
watercolour, 1993

Fig. 5  
**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
*The Sale of the Shadow, 1915*  
colour woodcut, Brücke-Museum Berlin

Fig. 6  
**George Cruikshank**  
*The grey man detaching Schlemihl's  
shadow from the ground, illustration for  
The Amazing Tale of Peter Schlemihl*  
etching, London 1823

Fig. 7  
**Adolph Menzel**  
*The grey man detaching Schlemihl's  
shadow from the ground, illustration for  
Peter Schlemihl's wundersame Geschichte*  
drawing; cut by Ludwig Unzelmann,  
Nuremberg 1839

Fig. 8  
**Emil Preetorius**  
*The grey man rolling up Schlemihl's  
shadow, illustration for Peter Schlemihl's  
wundersame Geschichte*  
drawing, Munich 1907

the English illustrator and caricaturist George Cruikshank.<sup>12</sup> For the 1839 edition, Adolph Menzel produced 15 drawings and a tailpiece that Friedrich Ludwig Unzelmann reproduced as wood engravings for the edition.<sup>13</sup> From the early 20th century, there are eleven full-page illustrations and 23 vignettes by Emil Preetorius.<sup>14</sup> More recently, A. R. Penck also produced a series of illustrations.<sup>15</sup>

The historical illustrations are faithful to the text's superficial meaning without hinting at the novella's existential autobiographical ambiguity and its moralizing tone, which are difficult to convey graphically anyway. The illustrations by George Cruikshank, Adolph Menzel and Emil Preetorius illustrate the imaginative story in the fashion of a book of fairytales. Cruikshank's etchings are roughly contemporary with the text, yet they modify our perspective on it by stressing its unreal quality – which Chamisso narrates realistically – and by having the grey man appear from the start as the Devil – or rather as the stage character of Mephisto. Cruikshank reproduces events with detachment, as if they were in a play, and in so doing loses the immediacy of the text. Moreover, his work as a caricaturist affects his illustrations in the exaggeration of bizarre features, particularly in the figure of the Devil. From a modern perspective, his etchings appear rather contrived and more bound to their time than the restrained and objective language of the novella. 'Chamisso, on the other hand, conceived elements of 'tragedy and comedy', 'the idealised and the caricatured' for his text that he found best expressed in the early illustrations of George Cruikshank.'<sup>16</sup>

Menzel's illustrations – unfortunately in the unconventional medium of the wood engraving – take the fantastical to be a natural occurrence, as Chamisso himself does. His realistic style emphasises the normality of fictional elements. In the illustrations by Emil Preetorius, attention is focused less on the association between the words and the images than it is on the decorative, *Art Nouveau*-inspired draughtsmanship that relocates Schlemihl to another age, and transplants the artistic realism of Chamisso's narrative to an artificial world. Kirchner was critical of Emil Preetorius, who had already designed books for the Kurt Wolff publishing house: '[...] unfortunately he is all the rage there, but produces really dull Biedermeier-rococo-like books on style'<sup>17</sup> – a comment that aptly describes how Preetorius's illustrations lagged behind the times. Rather than reference the text, the illustrated edition of Schlemihl by A. R. Penck offers an example of illustration that reveals more about his style as an artist. Here the artist imposes his distinctive style on the text. In the example shown (Fig. 4), which could be a reference to the discovery by Schlemihl's sweetheart that he has no shadow, two features of Penck's artistic development are combined: his early style of the Picasso-influenced, full-figured woman, and the shadowless stick figure that is typical of his later work.

## Comparisons between illustrations of The Sale of the Shadow

Almost all the artists illustrate the lively introduction and the key scene in the story, the sale of the shadow. As a result, illustrations of this one scene permit comparisons between the artists' varying interpretations and compositional styles. Departing from the text – in which the grey man conjures up odd items, but is otherwise shown to be modest and unobtrusive – in the earlier illustrations, he is unequivocally shown to be the Devil.

With the exception of Kirchner (Fig. 5), the illustrators pick out the moment in the plot when the Devil peels Schlemihl's shadow off the ground: the exchange of his shadow for gold is done, and Schlemihl is already in possession of the inexhaustible 'purse of fortune'. George Cruikshank's etching (Fig. 6) places Schlemihl and the Devil in extensive parkland, detached from the others in their party, the country house of wealthy Thomas John visible in the background. The spider-legged Devil lifts the shadow off the ground, starting with the feet rather than the head, as in the text. With his back turned, Schlemihl is not involved in the process – as if relinquishing his shadow is of no interest to him. Adolph Menzel's wood-engraved illustrations look like reproduction drawings (Fig. 7), and thus appear livelier than Cruikshank's etchings. In the scene illustrating the sale of the shadow, Menzel is greatly influenced by Cruikshank's image: Schlemihl and the Devil are shown more in the foreground, with the grey man making a pantomime about taking possession of the shadow. His animated state forms a sharp contrast to Schlemihl's statuesque figure. In both Cruikshank and Menzel's work, Schlemihl's bearing indicates how naïve and unsuspecting he is about the calamitous deal. Emil Preetorius's silhouette-like figures fill a sheet that lacks background detail (Fig. 8). Intersected by the edge of the picture, the Devil enters from the right and rolls up Schlemihl's shadow into a bundle, while Schlemihl, looking back over his shoulder, observes this strange activity with some surprise. Given the artificiality of the illustration, the scene seems playful rather than diabolical.

Kirchner did not follow the example of the earlier illustrators – and this is the significant feature of the uniqueness of his colour woodcuts. Their large format affords a close-up view of scenes that – despite their heightened expressivity – still make a realistic impression. While the other artists chose to illustrate the deal just after it had been struck, Kirchner illustrates his colour woodcut with a different event: the scene in which Schlemihl and the grey man meet. By doing so, Kirchner avoids the surreal event of the grey man lifting the cloth-like shadow off the ground and slipping it folded into his pocket. Although the two main figures stand commandingly in the foreground, they are not isolated from the others in the company. Fanny and another woman can be identified in the background, portrayed in the style of the artist's images of Berlin prostitutes.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

### **Kirchner's personal circumstances during the evolution of his Schlemihl illustrations**

For a fuller appreciation of his set of woodcuts, the artist's physical and mental condition that gave rise to the illustrations, and lent them their fateful significance, needs to be understood. More expressively and powerfully than his writings, his works of art from around this time reveal his physical and mental condition. *The Drinker; Self-Portrait*, 1915 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg; Gordon 428) provides the most striking evidence of his despair and hopelessness at the time. In his live-in studio in Berlin's Friedenau district, the artist sits alone at a table that is recorded in a photograph of his studio (Fig. 9). The room is painted from a number of perspectives, and causes an effect of dizziness in the viewer, who experiences the sensation of drunken swaying. On account of the inverse perspective, the objects in the room appear to recede, thus emphasizing the figure of the artist in the foreground. As solid as a millstone, the table is tipped forwards, with a bright green glass of absinthe resting on it. Enclosed by the oval shape of the table, the artist's pale green-yellow head and the glass are level; he gazes fixedly into space. The brightly coloured edging of the dressing gown contrasts with the melancholic expression of the drinker, who appears to be frozen in dull resignation. Incapable of doing anything, his open hand hangs



Fig. 9

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner  
*The Drinker; Self-Portrait*, 1915  
oil on canvas, 118.5 × 88.5 cm  
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg





Fig. 10

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
***Self-Portrait as a Sick Man*, 1917**  
 woodcut, 56.9 × 27.3 cm  
 Brücke-Museum Berlin

down. The sunken cheeks and the brutish features anticipate the harrowing woodcut titled *Self-Portrait as a Sick Man*, 1917 (Fig. 10). Kirchner's suffering began with the onset of the First World War and lasted until 1919 when the paralysis that affected his hands and feet began to ease slowly; his drug dependency continued to be a problem, however. Donald E. Gordon described this painting as 'one of the greatest masterpieces of German art in the twentieth century.'<sup>18</sup>

If the dominant theme of that painting is alcohol-induced lethargy and depression, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915 (Gordon 435; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College) reveals a further escalation of the artist's psychological crisis (Fig. 11). Wearing the uniform of the 75th Mansfeld field artillery regiment, he raises his bloody right arm from which the hand has been severed. Amputation of his creative right hand expresses his loss of ability to work. What is harrowing here is not the bloody stump in the painting, but the thought that Kirchner felt so savagely thwarted in his work. A cigarette droops from the corner of his mouth; his eyes are lifeless, symbols of powerlessness and the end of artistic vision. Kirchner generally makes use of constructional figures to anchor his pictures: here the blood-red stump, the red epaulettes and the red lips constitute the corner points of a rhombus. The female nude standing behind the artist is a reminder of the main theme of his erotically-inspired art, and – as in other works such as the woodcut of the *Head of Ludwig Schames* (Fig. 12) – symbolises art itself. These two paintings should not be dismissed as works of theatrical effect: they deserve to be taken seriously as declarations of the artist's emotional state.

Kirchner's own fate finds a place in the Schlemihl woodcuts. Elevated to the timelessness of a literary and artistic art form, it is transformed into a universal symbol. His explanation of the novella, which ranges between fantastic fiction and objective representation – that 'when Schlemihl's tale is divested of

Fig. 11

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
***Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915**  
oil on canvas, 69.2 × 61 cm  
Allen Memorial Art Museum,  
Oberlin College



all its Romantic trappings, what it is, in fact, is the story of a man with a persecution complex<sup>19</sup> – presumably applies more to Kirchner himself than it does to Schlemihl. Kirchner did indeed feel scarred and persecuted, and worked himself into a terror at the prospect of being killed in action. To assuage his fears, he took to absinthe and arrack. Both Kirchner and Schlemihl shunned the light – albeit for different reasons. Schlemihl has to take care at all times not to expose himself to sunlight, to avoid attracting attention to his missing shadow. When Kirchner experienced a time of crisis in Berlin, he ventured out onto the streets only during the hours of darkness for fear that he would be identified as a man who was not taking an active role in the war.

### Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's woodcuts of *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story*

Kirchner breaks rank with his fellow illustrators by not placing his woodcuts at the service of the text – as traditional series do. Instead he projects his own fate onto the text as an incentive to produce an illustrated narrative of his own. This lends his woodcuts an existential 'presentness' that transforms the text into a prelude in the past. However the crucial difference between the story (in which the central focus is the exchange of a shadow for wealth, and the practical and moral repercussions that arise from it) and Kirchner's woodcuts is that Kirchner's woodcuts address only the loss of his own identity through the allegory of the shadow. This is what distinguishes Kirchner's set of woodcuts as his very own story, one that lends new life to the historical text.

Apart from the theme of being an outsider, as signified by the missing shadow, strictly speaking there are few points of contact with the content of the novella. Kirchner's set of woodcuts revolves around issues of self-determination, artistic genius and the rejection of love – which explains the choice of motifs for his woodcuts. No object of exchange can compensate him for the loss of his peace of mind, no object of exchange can remedy his inner turmoil, not even something as desirable as the money and the gold that recompense Schlemihl for the sale of his shadow. His inner conflict over his status in bourgeois society is not an issue for Kirchner, and the tale's fantastic elements – such as the deal Schlemihl strikes with the Devil over his soul, or the deceased Thomas John being conjured out of the Devil's pocket (Fig. 13), as illustrated by Cruikshank – have no place in the reality of Kirchner's woodcuts. Yet even the author cannot deny his sense of reality at this juncture. While his tale includes the popular theme of the sale of a soul to the Devil, Chamisso the scientist does not refrain from criticizing the concept of the soul using the Devil's own words: 'And, if I may ask, what kind of a thing is it, your soul? Have you ever seen it, and what do you hope to do with it once you are dead?'<sup>20</sup>

The very fact that Kirchner limits himself to six woodcuts indicates that he did not want to retell the novella in a picture story. While the illustrations by the other artists form part of published texts – meaning that the images and text are closely matched and can be verified – the prints of Kirchner's original Schlemihl portfolio were not published in conjunction with the text, and for that reason alone allow greater scope for interpretation. As the images and text are linked only in the broadest of terms, various associations have been made between them in the literature. Kirchner had not been commissioned by a publisher and certainly had no thought of publishing his prints in a book. Given the intimate nature of their revelations, he printed only a few sets for friends and confidants.

Among his prints of *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story*, Kirchner's colour woodcuts are certainly the most significant in artistic terms. At the same time, in terms of style and technique, they represent the pinnacle not just of his own graphic work, but of expressionist woodblock printing as a whole. Indeed, one can go further and say that they occupy a distinguished place in the entire



Fig. 12

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner  
*Head of Ludwig Schames, 1918*  
woodcut, 56 × 27 cm  
Brücke-Museum Berlin



Fig. 13

George Cruikshank  
*The grey man exhibits the ghost of Thomas John, illustration for The Amazing Tale of Peter Schlemihl*  
etching, London 1823

history of German woodblock printing. In a review of the set of prints, Philip Larson observed that, 'As an ensemble, *Peter Schlemihl* presents the invention of the artist-storyteller on a crest of passion not seen in Germany since Dürer's *Great Passion* woodcuts of 1511.'<sup>21</sup>

### **The date of origin of the Schlemihl woodcuts**

Based in the town of Halle (Saale), Kirchner began his service as a recruit in the 75th Mansfeld field artillery regiment on 1 July 1915. The set of Schlemihl woodcuts was produced following his release from military service, that was arranged by his riding instructor, a Swiss lieutenant called Hans Fehr. In mid-September 1915, Kirchner was initially sent on convalescent leave, following which, at the beginning of November, he was declared 'temporarily unfit for military service, on condition that he enters a sanatorium immediately.'<sup>22</sup> A letter to Gustav Schiefler dated 9 December 1915 attests to the date of origin of the woodcuts as autumn 1915: 'Have been away from the army for a while, and have now finished a set of woodcuts based on Schlemihl.'<sup>23</sup>

### **The composition of the series of Schlemihl woodcuts**

The set of Schlemihl woodcuts is typical of Kirchner's method of working. He enjoyed being inspired by literary sources when producing graphic series – not so much in order to illustrate a text literally as to be able to interpret it as he saw fit. Universal themes allowed him to produce multi-part works in which individual prints were self-contained works that at the same time formed a whole. In fact, numerous sets can be found throughout his graphic output. His major sets of woodcuts from 1918 – *Triumph of Love* and *Absalom* – also draw on literary sources that he reframes autobiographically, albeit less obviously than in his Schlemihl woodcuts.<sup>24</sup>

The composition of the set of prints is not pre-determined by the plot; instead it is influenced by Kirchner's emphases and his artistic intentions. Both the large format and the elaborate technique of colour woodblock printing give the illustrations a distinct character in relation to the text. Removed from their context, the woodcuts also hold their own as individual works of art, despite being parts of a series that, thanks to the narrative thread, is associated in terms of time and content.

Despite Kirchner's unconventional portrayal, four woodcuts in the series can be assigned with certainty to specific passages of the text.

Sheet 1 opens the series with its illustration of a deed that proves disastrous both in the story and in Kirchner's life. The portrayal of the sale of the shadow finds its equivalent in Kirchner's enlisting in the army – as an 'involuntary volunteer'. *The Beloved* and *Pangs of Love* are companion woodcuts; they relate not so much to scenes in the text as to the artist's own life and experiences, his

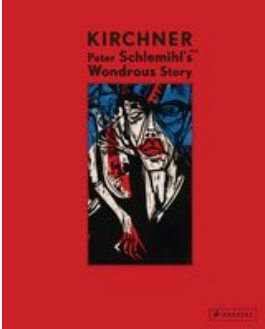
musings about love, and the fate of being an artist. In terms of form and content, *Schlemihl Alone in His Room*, a colour woodblock, stands at the mid-point of the set. Taking on the role of the persecuted Schlemihl, who has sought refuge in his room, Kirchner produces a nude study of himself in a cramped cell, gawked at by those who taunt and despise him. In this harrowing image, Kirchner draws on the pictorial tradition of 'Ecce Homo' – 'Behold the Man' (St. John's Gospel, ch. 19, v. 5). In exemplary fashion, Philip Larson has drawn attention to the work's formal and psychological congruence with the *Ecce Homo* of Hieronymus Bosch, c. 1490, in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt am Main.<sup>25</sup>

The last two prints in the set illustrate – in an almost carefree and playful fashion – the futile attempt to regain possession of his shadow, i.e. his own identity. Given the design and nature of the series, it necessarily followed that Kirchner could not deal with the remarkable manner in which Schlemihl's stigmatisation on account of his missing shadow is resolved. Kirchner was unable to illustrate the end of the story, where Schlemihl bounds across the globe in his seven-league boots – a productive theme that none of the other illustrators omitted. As one of his comments reveals, he did plan to produce a woodcut to mark the completion of the set, but it was not produced: 'There is no Sheet 7. It was to have shown the process of reconciliation to this spiritual deficiency, and Schlemihl racing around the world in his seven-league boots, as in Chamisso. But I have not yet been able to find a way of doing this picture.'<sup>26</sup>

### Style and technique

Kirchner produced his prints of *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story* at the height of his skills in woodcut production. He wrests from the unwieldy technique a dramatic, rhythmic versatility, and a nuanced diversity that had not previously been seen. The artist's acute nervous excitement is evident in the rapidly executed drawing of the lithographed cover and the decisiveness of the form. The sense of pathos that is aroused, mentioned by Friedrich Nietzsche in connection with his 'art of style', is curbed in an arresting use of form: 'To communicate a state, an inward tension of pathos by means of signs, including the tempo of these signs – that is the meaning of every style.'<sup>27</sup> In combination, the design in black on the keyline block and the colour sections produce the multicoloured image on the printed sheet. In contrast to painting, woodblock ink prints in uniform, glazed surfaces. Given the technique and the limited usability of the blocks, there is hardly any overlapping of the pigments – and so no mixed colours. Kirchner's choice not to use the colours of external reality, but those in accordance with his aesthetic considerations, appears natural and convincing. The unbroken, transparent colours lend the woodcuts the vibrancy of medieval stained-glass windows.

Stylistically and technically, the *Schlemihl* woodcuts are very closely associated with the colour woodcut titled *Streetwalker*, 1915 (G 771, Dube H. 257; Fig. 14). There is even a connection in terms of subject matter: Kirchner compared



Magdalena M. Moeller, Günther Gercken

**Ernst Ludwig Kirchner**  
Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story

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Ein Hauptwerk expressionistischer Druckgrafik

Mit 50 Ausklapptafeln sowie einem beigelegten Plakat, das alle Varianten der Schlemihl-Folgen zeigt

› Zum ersten Mal werden Kirchners Schlemihl-Folgen in einer bibliophilen und prachtvollen Publikation gewürdigt

Der aus einem Titelblatt und sechs Blättern bestehende Holzschnittzyklus „Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte“ nimmt in Ernst Ludwig Kirchners Schaffen eine zentrale Stellung ein. Nach seiner vorzeitigen Entlassung aus dem Kriegsdienst im November 1915 sind innerhalb kurzer Zeit die Illustrationen zu Adelbert von Chamisso's gleichnamiger Erzählung entstanden. Die 1813 im Geist der Romantik verfasste Novelle interpretierte er auf ganz subjektive Weise. Er identifizierte sich mit der Hauptfigur, die dem Teufel ihren Schatten verkauft und dadurch zum Außenseiter der Gesellschaft wird. Drangsalierter durch die Zeitumstände, eine durch den Ausbruch des Krieges veränderte Welt, und labil aufgrund seines psychischen Zustands, fühlte sich Kirchner vom Sinn des Daseins, von seinem Leben als Künstler abgeschnitten. Die Schlemihl-Illustrationen sind eine verschlüsselte Selbstdarstellung des leidenden Künstlers. Es existieren fünf komplette Folgen und eine rekonstruierte sowie eine Anzahl Einzelblätter und Probedrucke. Jede der Folgen ist ein Unikat, einmalig in farbiger wie in technischer Hinsicht. Dank zahlreicher Ausklappteile bietet die prachtvoll bibliophil angelegte Publikation die Möglichkeit, die einzelnen, ganzseitig reproduzierten Motive nebeneinander zu betrachten und miteinander zu vergleichen.  
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