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Curator Susan Reed talks about the Heym/Kirchner book of poems *Umbra Vitae*

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For details see <http://www.bl.uk/breakingtherules>

My name is Susan Reed. I'm head of the Library's German printed collections, and I'm talking about a book of poems by the German poet Geog Heym called *Umbra Vitae*, with woodcuts by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, which was published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag in Munich in 1924.

It's a book that really jumps out at you when you see it. The poet and the artist and the publisher are all important figures in German Expressionism and it's recognised as a masterpiece of book design. But even if you don't know that, even if you know nothing about German Expressionism, you see this book... It's got this stunning cover with a green background with yellow and black, and this almost skeletal figure on the front cover and then this skeletal figure's shadow-brother on the back. It's just stunning to look at.

Then you open it up, and in complete contrast, you've got the pink and purpley-blue endpapers with more woodcut figures on, and again, you open it a bit more, and you have a very striking woodcut title page. And again, you've got a live figure standing on a shadow of a death's-head figure, all in red and black, it's an incredibly striking book.

The artist, Kirchner, designed the whole thing. He chose the typeface, he chose the colours for the cover, for the endpapers, and how it was going to be put together, and he obviously made the woodcuts, which illustrate most of the poems in it.

Heym was a fascinating character. He was one of the first generation of German Expressionist poets, and from about 1910 he was very active in the German cafe and cabaret scene. And he was a very contradictory character; he had this fast-living, rather macho exterior, and yet he also had this great self-doubt; he was in great fear of going mad - one of the poets he greatly admired was the German poet Hölderlin, who went mad in later life, and I think Heym very much feared this would happen to him.

He died tragically young in a skating accident - he was skating with a friend, the friend fell through the ice, Heym tried to save him, and drowned in this freezing water. It's a bit tempting to look at some of his poems and think ah yes, he's foreseeing his early death, because there's a lot about death and loss... One of the ones which I remember for its very striking imagery is called *Der Krieg*, which means 'The War', and it personifies war as a kind of demonic figure, which first spreads this silent fear and coldness among people, and then unleashes forces of increasing violence and chaos. And he talks about fire like a dog with a thousand mouths, rushing across the land; and there's a lot of imagery of storms, of winds, of fire and flames, of blood... the colour red appears an awful lot.

His own fear of madness means that that is a very recurrent theme. There's a cycle of poems in this collection called *Die Irren*, 'The Madmen' or 'The Mad Ones'. That looks at madness from both within and without, so parts of it are describing people in an asylum, and parts of it are actually spoken in the words of the madman. He describes the bits spoken by the madman as a variation, and it does pick up themes from elsewhere in the poem, but subtly changes them.

He writes a lot about the City, which was another big theme for the Expressionists both in art and literature, with the City and with what modern metropolis life was doing to humanity and to the world around.

He can also be surprisingly gentle and almost elegiac. One of the poems in here is actually, the whole page is a woodcut, the entire poem is cut, the text as well as the illustrations, and Heym actually called this *Träumerei in hell Blau*, which means 'Dreams in Pale Blue', and when his friends came to put this collection together after his death they thought that sounded kitschy, so they titled it with the first line of the poem.

Also he uses very strong imagery, a lot of colour, especially red, but also blue, gold, green, and contrasts between light and darkness - he's a very visual poet, and actually he longed to be a visual artist. He talks in his diary about how frustrated he is that he can't give shape to what he calls his "imagination". One of the poems about madness he tries to illustrate, he tries to draw this image he has in his head of a raving madman. It's a dreadful picture, it looks like a schoolboy doodle, so you can see how this frustrated him.

But obviously this very visual quality to his work and his desire to be an artist makes this illustrated edition very very appropriate. Kirchner was one of the major artists of German Expressionism.

Kirchner and Heym never actually met, but apparently Kirchner acquired a copy of *Umbra Vitae* when it first came out in the year of Heym's death, and he started illustrating his own copy in the margins, on the bottom of the page, quite early on. So when someone came up with the idea of doing this illustrated volume, Kirchner was the obvious choice to do it. He described the woodcuts to the volume as being like the accompanying melody to a song, so they're not just illustrating what goes in the poems, they're responding to them, they're perhaps reflecting the mood of it, and some of them do illustrate very much images or ideas. Others are more oblique, more reflective.

Woodcuts were a very popular form among Kirchner and the other artists of *Die Brücke*, which was the group he belonged to. Like Heym's poems, which often use very simple words in very complex ways or to convey very complex ideas, the woodcuts can be deceptively simple.

They're almost miniatures: most of them are less than 10cm high and some of them a lot smaller, but they can be incredibly detailed. So, for *Der Krieg* for example, you've got the face of this war demon in a kind of explosion. When you first look at it you just see an explosion going on, and then you realise there's this fearful face in the middle of it, and people all around running, falling, dying, chasing...

Others are sparer. There's one poem called *Die Städte*, 'The Cities', and that's very similar to Kirchner's large-scale paintings of Berlin streets, with a narrow street and one of these rather angular women standing in the middle of it. Some of them are very abstract in form, and others quite realistic; some are very dark, some are very light. They're wonderful pictures, and they really complement the poems. They help you understand the poems and the poems help you understand the pictures, it's a wonderful marriage.

One good example of how close, how in tune Kirchner was with Heym's work and Heym's imaginative world, is that the woodcut for the poem about madmen is in some ways very similar to Heym's diary attempt to draw the madman. Now Kirchner wouldn't have seen that, that was Heym's private diary, but it does show how much he saw the poems as Heym saw those "imagination" in his own mind.

Also, again, you've got the idea of a kind of synaesthesia, and the idea which was important to a lot of Avant Garde artists of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total work of art' with different genres coming together and complementing each another.

Finally I should say, as I said at the beginning, the publisher of this book is very important as well, and it just completes the circle of a poet and artist and publisher who together encapsulate German Expressionism and do it so beautifully in this book.