Comparative analysis of selected self-portraits from the expressionist movement; Reasons for Creation.

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INTRODUCTION

The self-portrait is one of the most interesting subjects for a painter. A self-portrait as representation of the artist who made it, puts that artist in a dual position, as the observer and the observed. ¹ It has piqued the interest of artists through the ages and very little have managed to evade the subject. ¹ It is no surprise that the expressionists were among the many that found their muse in themselves. Expressionism as a movement emphasized the artist's feelings or ideas over replicating reality. ² With bright colors and gestural marks the expressionist materializes a tense dynamic in a self-portrait that sends the outside viewer down a path of questions. ²

This research will focus on one of those questions: What are the reasons for the creation of a self-portrait by artists of the expressionist movement? With the goal of establishing themes or trends in the motivations behind self-portraits within expressionism. To address this question various self-portraits by Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Gabriële Münter artists will be compared. This will be done on the basis of a visual analysis, aided by literature on the paintings' creation and the artist's psyche.

By comparing self-portraits by different artists in one study, this research adds a dimension to the existing literature. Research has been done on various aspects of the self-portrait. Current studies have delved into specific artists' portfolios or have done a thorough analysis of stand-alone paintings. ^{1,3,4,5}Although this gives an excellent explanation of singular motivations, it lacks the collecting and connecting element. Taking a broader viewpoint, across multiple artists, can be beneficial for the overall understanding of the wide scope of motivations possible. Additionally, this study brings tangibility to studies on self-portraits from an art-psychology perspective.⁶

In what follows, the methods used to conduct this research will be explained. After which, the results of the study will be discussed. The first chapter will revolve around a comparison between Van Gogh and Kircher. The second will look at Kirchner and Münter together as members of, respectively, 'Brücke' and 'Der Blaue Reiter'. The last chapter will evaluate three artworks, one of each painter, on the theme of 'Creativity and Identity'.

METHODOLOGY

The method applied for the research of this paper is a qualitative literature review, combined with a visual analysis of 9 paintings. For the literature review the TU Delft Library and the 'Koninklijke Bibliotheek', for books and 'JSTOR' for most of the articles were the main databases used. Since this is a qualitative literature review the relevant data was extracted in quotes which were then grouped based on multiple categories.

The paintings to be analyzed were chosen in two steps. Firstly, selecting the artists to be analyzed. Secondly, selecting the paintings from those artists. For both these steps the MoSCoW- method was used as a way of prioritizing attributes of the artist or painting. This process yielded the following artist: Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kircher and Gabriële Münter

RESULTS

The self-portrait is a subject that has fascinated the artist throughout the ages. It developed in Europe as a publicly recognized part of an artist's work between the 15th and the 16th centuries because of three main reasons: improvements in glassmaking, providing better quality mirrors, the perfection of oil painting as a technique and the changing status of the artist. In that time period the western artist went from an artisan to a member of the elite. They became subjects worthy of portraiture, and self-portrait became a way for the artist to leave behind their trace on the world. ⁷

In the 19th century the invention of photography caused the focus of portraiture to move away from exclusively likeness and forced artists to explore new ways of expressing outer or inner reality. The artists of the expressionist movement took this challenge very seriously and sought to penetrate beneath the surface of appearances. Their works put feeling in the foreground, dominating reality and form. For an investigation into the motivations behind self-portraits this period is especially exiting since the motivations are so deliberately expressed on the canvas. According to Van Gogh a portrait can penetrate the soul where the camera cannot. He is one of the artists that will be discussed in this study. Not only for his immense influence on the expressionist movement, but also for his incredibly charged self-portraiture. Alongside Van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kircher and Gabriële Münter will be discussed.

1. From Post- Impressionism to Expressionism- Van Gogh and Kirchner

Vincent van Gogh was of huge influence on many expressionist painters, especially to the Brücke movement which Kirchner headed. ⁹ Kirchner and his contemporaries were drawn in by Van Gogh's use of color and technique and a deeper psychological source as they sought a medium for intense artistic expression and creatively revolting against set standards. ¹⁰

When comparing Vincent van Gogh's, 'Self-Portrait with pipe and straw hat' (1887) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchners first-ever self-portrait, 'Self-portrait with a pipe' (1907) they are similar in many ways. The most apparent similarity being the subject of the paintings: a self-portrait while wearing a straw hat and smoking a pipe. The way the paint is used is also similar, applied in distinct strokes that communicate the texture of the brush. This technique, that characterizes Van Goghs innovative style, clearly formed the inspiration for Kirchners work. Then, there is a deviation from reality in the use of color in both paintings. However, this is something Kirchner takes further than Van Gogh did. While van in Van Goghs portrait the colors are brighter and more outspoken than they would have been in real life, they still are in some ways realistic. In Kirchners work the colors represent the color value rather than the tone of the model subject. Using yellow for areas that are hit by light and purple for areas that are covered in shadow.



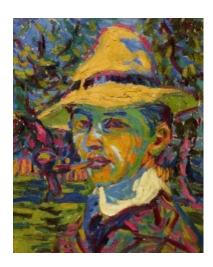


Figure 1 Vincent van Gogh, 'Self-Portrait with pipe and straw hat', 1887

Figure 2 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 'Self-portrait with a pipe', 1907.

The impression given by the self-portrait of Kirchner does not seem to be one of intense emotional load. The motivation behind it is therefore not likely to come from an emotional source. More likely, this work by Kirchner was a way to practice and develop his painting style. This is supported by its similarities to van Goghs work, especially since critics like John Sillevis, Cristian Weikop and Jill Lloyd have pointed out on multiple occasions the heavy impression van Gogh made on Kirchner and his contemporaries. ^{9, 11, 12}

Although his and Kirchners' are certainly not the only ones, it is worth noting that many of Van Goghs self-portraits were made for the reason of practice. The Van Gogh Museum has

identified the 'Self-Portrait with pipe and straw hat', 1887 as one of those self-portraits. ¹³ As have others. In 'Van Gogh: Self-portraits', Karen Serres writes that in the two years Van Gogh spent living in Paris he made 27 self-portraits that played a critical role in his artistic evolution as they offered a way for Van Gogh to experiment with his art style. The 'self-portrait with pipe and straw hat' 1887 is part of that series of studies and were made specifically for stylistic exploration according to Karen Serres, and as such played an important role in the artists speedy technical and stylistic development. ¹⁴ An overview of these 27 portraits showcases the enormous progress. This supports the notion of study being the main motivation.

Throughout both their careers the artists started using their self-portraits to express emotional distress, as their own mental health problems became more prominent. Especially with the work 'self-portrait as a soldier' 1889, the literature points to a shift in Kirchners psyche. The painting has been said to showcases the slide from youthful enthusiasm for war to disillusionment and fear. Cristian Weikop mentions the existential crisis Kirchner would experience was also precipitated by the mental and physical strain of the military service. The London Magazine writes: "Like other artist victims passing through the indiscriminating abattoir of modern warfare, Kirchner somehow survived in body but was ultimately psychologically fractured. The experience of dehumanization so explicitly provided by the conflict was to determine the remainder of Kirchner's work." The self-portrait is started using their self-portraits to experience of dehumanization so explicitly provided by the conflict was to determine the remainder of Kirchner's work."



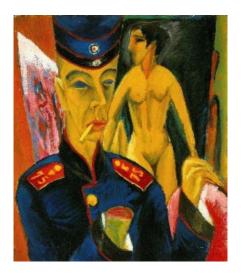


Figure 3Ernst Ludwig Kirchners 'Self-portrait as a Soldier, 1915

Figure 4 Vincent van Gogh, 'Self-portrait with bandaged ear and pipe', 1889

The paintings 'Self-portrait with bandaged ear and pipe' (1889) by Vincent van Gogh and Ernst Ludwig Kirchners 'Self-portrait as a Soldier (1915) have been pointed to as a comparison that can speak to this theme, because of they focus on the same subject: injury. In van Goghs painting this subject is seen in the bandaged ear, which is a physical manifestation and a direct result of his mental illness. The injury portrayed in Kirchners painting is the severed right hand. This is non-existent physical damage to reflect mental damage he had suffered during

his time in the army. ¹⁰ Kirchner deviates from reality as a way of expressing a feeling. The motivation behind painting governs the outcome of the painting in an unprecedented way.

In the comparison (figure 3, 4) above a completely different side of self-portraits can be seen from the first two portraits discussed in this chapter (figure 1, 2). The self-portrait becomes something introspective and representative of real emotions. This is a motif that returns throughout art history in many artists self-portraits. Peter Springer describes the self-portrait as an examination of one's own being. It is a chance for the artist to investigate, reflect question, discover and analyze themselves as artists and humans. When a self-portrait takes on this role, the motivation behind it becomes much more personal.

The reason behind the self-portrait of van Gogh is speculated to be one of consolidation with himself. The 'Self-portrait with bandaged ear and pipe' was made in 1889 after Van Gogh emerged from a severe mental health episode. Karen Serres writes: "The self-portrait ... represented a welcome return to a familiar theme, as well as an opportunity to reconstruct his [Van Goghs] identity following these difficult periods." ¹⁴ This explanation is very plausible since self-portraits were used before to establish a sense of self. Besides, the centering of the bandaged ear in the painting is another indication of Van Goghs attempt to consolidate with himself. Meticulously painting the bandage, staring at it for hours, helps him face the difficult reality of what he has done and how he feels. The other attributes he wears (hat, pipe, coat) are a way of communicating a personality beyond the injury. In this painting two selves are brought together.

There are many different viewpoints as to why Kirchner painted 'Self-portrait as a soldier' Though they all view the catalyst for the painting to be Kirchner's time in the war, due to the soldiers uniform and the mutilated arm, the exact meaning of the painting and the motivation behind is interpreted in many different ways. The portrait is seen as an anti-war protest, but also as a personal way to cope with trauma or a search for identity. ¹Though these ideas are valid, there is another aspect to the self-portrait not yet mentioned. The fabrication of the injured hand adds an exhibitionist quality to the way he confronts his trauma. Kirchner felt the need to show people his injuries, that are not seen in daily life because they are mental.

In the public mind the works of both Kirchner and Van Gogh are inextricably tied to their mental health problems. Their struggles are often thought to be the sole motivation behind their works and the reason for their brilliance. But when observing the works of both Kirchner and Van Gogh more closely it can be seen that these paintings do not exist of pure emotion wildly poured onto a canvas. Especially the self-portraits chosen for the comparison are actually composed very technically and geometrically. ¹ For both works it can be said that even though the artists were certainly driven by conveying emotion, these artists painted self-portraits despite their mental struggle and not because of them. ¹⁴

2. German Expressionism, Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter- Kirchner and Münter

Since Kirchner has a broad repertoire in self-portraits and was prominent figure in the German expressionism movement, the comparison in this chapter will again include one of his paintings. Kirchners 'Self-Portrait with Model', 1907 will be compared with Gabriële Münters 'Self-portrait, 1909'. During the twentieth century two artist-groups formed under the

umbrella of German expressionism, these groups were called 'Der Blaue Reiter' and 'Brücke', which respectively Gabriele Münter and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner were a part of. ^{16,17} These collectives operated during the same period, but even though they both strived for a detachment from conventions in art, they did so in different ways. ²





Figure 5 Gabriële Münter, Self-portrait, 1909

Figure 6 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Self-Portrait with Model, 1907

Looking at these two paintings next to each other it can be brought up that, though the paintings are made in the same period and focus on the same subject (a full body view of the artist at work in their studio), there seem to be more differences than similarities between them. This is related to the fact that these painters were part of different movements within German expressionism. The first apparent difference is that of colour and tone. The bright colours and busy patterns in Kirchners 'Self-portrait with Model, 1907' turn the painting into an emotional outcry, a distinct goal of members of the 'Brücke' movement.¹⁸ This goal is also achieved through elements like the stark eye contact made by the painter and the defining strokes in the painting, like the thick dark line outlining artists figure. This contrasts with Münter's style. Münter, as a part of 'Der Blaue Reiter', strived for a certain meditative or spiritual quality in her works. ⁴ This is the most visible in this portrait through the subdued dark colours that give the painting a certain dream-like atmosphere. The limited colour pallet also ensures that no one aspect has more emphasis than another.

Another difference is the model that is featured in Kirchners self-portrait. The featuring of a female form is a commonly recurring theme in the works of the 'Brücke'. For the group, formed of only male artists, the self-portrait with female model, often depicting a sexually charged relationship, became another way of expressing primal emotions and declaring their bohemian status. But this study of the female form was rare for 'Der Blaue Reiter'. ¹⁸

These differences in the groups styles also relate to the individual motivation of the artist. The motivation behind Kirchner's self-portrait was to establish an identity for himself and

communicate this self-image to the world. In his book on the 'Brücke', Ulrike Lorenz propagates this idea and writes that Kirchner designed himself in his paintings. 'In the same way Kirchner thought he could "only love people through art." He only "perceived himself through his work": according to Lorentz. ¹⁹ Supporting this notion are the comments by Whitney Chadwick on the staging involved in the creation of the portrait. The whole environment of the self-portrait functions to give a sense of the standing of the artist. The location of the studio of the artist, Kirchner as a dominating presence on the canvas and the hints to a sexual relationship with the model establish the social standing of the artist. ²⁰ Here, the motif of the female model that was mentioned before is also used to show a deliberate self-image.

The self-portrait of Gabriële Münter forms a perfect contrast to the work of Kirchner because this work is not intended to establish a self-image. The 'self' in this self-portrait is almost hidden. With a coat the color of the floor and a face the color of the walls, the figure is hardly distinguishable from the studio environment. This effect is only heightened by the abstract style Münter favors. Answering the question what the motivation behind Münters self-portrait was, Katy Klaasmeyer writes: "Münter's artwork was an exploration... of her potential as an artist and her ability to distil and depict the essential nature of her experiences." Is In this train of thought the self-portrait was made with similar reason as Van Goghs self-portraits between 1886 and 1888 (The Paris paintings mentioned in Chapter 1), as a way of exploring and advancing personal painting styles. This idea is strengthened by the investigation of her other self-portraits where the colours and the paint application also seem to be the subject of the painting.

Frances Borzello asks of this self-portrait indicates that Münter views her own personality as less assertive than her art.²¹ But, this idea can be dismissed since in her other works Münter does assert personality. She does this through different subject than the self-portrait. Klaasmeyer writes about the revealing choices in subjects of Münter, with still- life arrangements of domestic objects, views of the rural Bavarian countryside, as well as portraits of her close companions (examples shown in figure 7,8) Münter defines herself through her surroundings and community.¹⁸



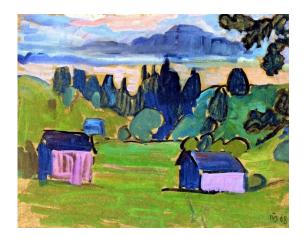


Figure 7 Gabriële Münter, 'Portrait of a jong women with a large hat', 1909

Figure 8 Gabriële Munter, View of the Murnau Moor, 1908

3. Creativity and Identity

To an artist the themes of creativity and identity are inextricably linked, but they can also be difficult to unite. This chapter will discuss the coming together of these two themes in self-portraits through three examples.

The first example is the 'Self-portrait with hat, 1909' by Gabriële Münter. During her time as an active artist, Münter was subject to the difficult balancing act that comes with being a woman. On the one hand, she was confined by this gender-identity. For a long time, her work was not talked of without mentioning her romantic partner and artist Kandinsky. ¹⁸ Her works were dismissed as, feminine and naïve, and for a long time the significance of her role in German Expressionism was understated. ¹⁸ On the other hand she was not a was not a woman in the way she 'ought to have been'. She was an active creator in a time where that was frowned upon and did not have children in a time where that was expected of her. ²²



Figure 9 Gabriële Münter, Self-portrait with hat, 1909

In Gabriële Münters "Self-portrait with hat" (1909), the focus falls onto the pained expression on her face. The large eyes, small mouth and downturned eyebrows are aided in their

emotion by the figure's hands crossed over her chest, holding onto a necklace. Frances Borzello writes: "Until 1916, the year Kandinsky left her, there is a quizzical quality in her many self-portraits." ²¹ Combining this statement with earlier comments by Borzello on the still conditioned role of female artist, willing to listen to a man's wishes, Borzello might be saying that in her time with Kandinsky, Münter struggles with her separate identity. But the choice of making a self-portrait is exactly what establishes this separate identity. While Kandinsky moves on into the world of non-objective painting, Münter continued to explore subjects ignored by her male colleagues. ²³ The self-portrait, deemed "minor" and "feminine", becomes a vessel for her explorations of flattened planes of surface colour. ^{18,22}



Figure 10 Vincent van Gogh, Self-portrait, 1889

The second self-portrait that is heavily related to identity is Vincent van Goghs self-portrait from 1889. Van Gogh, in a letter to his brother, called this work "an attempt from when I was ill.". ¹⁴ It has often been pointed to as the portrait most heavily influenced by the artists' psychosis episodes. In the summer of 1889, he suffered several mental health crises, while admitted at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum. During this time Van Gogh returned to painting self-portraits, resulting in this work, among others. ¹⁴ Elements to this painting distinctly differ from previous self-portraits. The darker tones used in this painting as well as the fading of physical likeness, signal a loss of identity in the painter due to his psychosis episode. This loss also manifests itself in the countenance of the figure, in the piercing and suspicious look in his eyes, and the orientation of the subject: turned away and looking over his shoulder.

Van Gogh's motivation behind this self-portrait was to heal. He believed working on his painting was necessary for his recovery. He writes: "if I recover sooner or later, up to a certain point it'll be because I've cured myself by working." ¹⁴ And though there was most likely some psychological introspection involved in the making of this portrait, it was not a means of establishing a tortured artist to the world. The reason Van Gogh painted self-portraits during this time was because models, besides himself, were inaccessible to him. It was the working, the creating, that mattered to him, not his own identity.



Figure 11 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Self-portrait. 1931

Third painting is the self-portrait from Ernst Ludwig Kirchner from 1931. This is one of the later works by the artist. From a time in Kirchners life where his painting style was subject to many radical changes. Around 1926 Kirchner moved on to the abstract form, breaking from his earlier work, while later, a few years before his death, he returned to the figurative style. He self-portrait above is one of the more figurative works. It also seems more realistic than earlier work, due to the use of colors and the lack of imagined figures and merging elements. This return from his more abstract phase, back to the figurative, for some indicates that Kirchner considered his abstract phase a failure. He sufficiently pursuing his method to its logical conclusion.

In any case, this incoherent trajectory is remarkable for an artist who, in his meany self-portraits, weaved together his art and his identity. So much so, that it elicits compassion as well as critique among specialists. Critics say that Kirchner loses grip on his very own style and expression. "He seems to lack the power to resist strong influences from Picasso, Braque and even Raoul Dufy." Sillevis writes. ¹⁶ Whether said with a positive or negative connotation, critics regard the motivation behind his work of this period to be one of wanting to be like the other. ^{9,24,25}

So, Kirchner was losing his identity and style but still had a strong craving for recognition and a hankering to prove himself. ²⁴ This point is supported by the following quote from Sillevis: "... in writing about himself... he [Kirchner] stresses his strict originality, denying all influences and ... he started to antedate his pictures. ⁹ In such a context the self-portrait can be a way to establish a certain image or idea about himself. A way to prove to others and himself who he is. If this is true, the choice to obscure and darken half of his face is the most interesting aspect of the painting. His mental turmoil and struggle with identity are addressed with the metaphor of the split face.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the research question: "What are the reasons for the creation of a self-portrait by artists of the expressionist movement?" various self-portraits by Vincent van Gogh, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Gabriële Münter were compared based on a visual analysis and aided by literature on the paintings' creation and the artist's psyche. All with the goal of establishing themes or trends in the motivations behind self-portraits within expressionism.

Results showed a recurring motivation of practice. As many artists before them, these artists used their own likeness as a subject to evolve their painting style without having to find and pay a model. In these paintings the focus is on the painter's style, their colors and brushstrokes. Discussed regarding Vincent van Gogh's, 'Self-Portrait with pipe and straw hat' (1887) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchners first-ever self-portrait, 'Self-portrait with a pipe' (1907). Kirchners painting was established to be a way to practice and develop his painting style because of its many similarities to van Goghs work. The 'self-portrait with pipe and straw hat' 1887 is part of that series of studies and was made specifically for stylistic exploration and as such played an important role in the artist's speedy technical and stylistic development. Gabriële Münters 'self-portrait 1909' is also motivated by exploring and advancing her personal painting style. When she does assert personality, she does this through different subject than the self-portrait. For this she chooses the subject of her surroundings and community.

For other self-portraits discussed in the results the motivation behind them becomes much more personal. Throughout both their careers Van Gogh and Kirchner started using their self-portraits to express emotional distress. Pushing the genre in a direction it had rarely gone before. They take liberties with realism to uncover something more true than the eye can see. The self-portraits become a way of dealing with trauma and to confront the artist with themselves, as was the case for Kirchners 'Self-portrait as a soldier' (1915) and Van Goghs 'Self-portrait with bandaged ear and pipe' (1889). These paintings are examples of the introspective allure a self-portrait holds and are milestones in self-expression throughout art history.

The results also show that for an artist a reason for the creation of a self-portrait could be to curate an image of themselves. 'Self-Portrait with Model' (1907) is such a painting, in which Kirchner designs himself. The whole environment of the self-portrait functions to give a sense of the standing of the artist. Closely related to this is the finding that self-portraits are heavily linked to identity. The motivation behind a self-portrait could be for an artist to show themselves and the world, who they are. Of course, the role of an artist in society had long been a subject in self-portraits, but with this motivation the artists discussed in this paper are not merely following their predecessors. The last three portraits that were discussed, 'Self-portrait with hat' (1909) by Münter, 'Self-portrait' (1889) by Van Gogh and 'Self-portrait'

(1931) by Kirchner, are examples of how these artists dared to reveal more. Their identity, their multifaceted characters are exposed not just to remember but to discover.

However, they do manifest in different ways. With her self-portrait Münter establishes herself as a separate identity to her partner Kandinsky, by making a deliberate discission to stick to the figurative while her contemporaries dabbled in the abstract. Van Gogh's motivation was to heal and so this portrait is directed at himself. It was not a means of establishing a tortured artist to the world, but a way for him to understand himself. Kirchners work was made in a time where his style and his identity were incoherent and changeable. He felt he had to keep up with new voices from, for example, Picasso and Braque. In such a context the self-portrait can be a way to establish a certain image or idea about himself. A way to prove to others and himself, who he is.

The invention of photography forced the expressionist artist away from realism. Almost as a rule, these painters laid bare their souls through the medium of the self-portrait and pushed it to be the deeply enchanting, confusing, introspective and truthful genre it now is.

This study contributes to the current body of knowledge on self-portraits and why artists of the expressionism movement felt the need to create them by adding the dimension of comparison and reflection. By collecting notable paintings and life-stories and pairing them with critical views on existing literature about the artists and their works, this thesis addresses the research gap in the existing studies. By taking a broader viewpoint across multiple artists, this research was able to uncover a wide scope of motivations and, more importantly, establish reoccurring themes.

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Images

- Fig.1 Van Gogh, V. (1887) 'Self-Portrait with pipe and straw hat', [Painting] https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0163V1962
- Fig. 2 Kirchner, E.L. (1907) 'Self-portrait with a pipe', [Painting] https://news.artnet.com/market/first-self-portrait-kirchner-2134527
- Fig.3 Kirchner, E.L. (1915) 'Self-portrait as a Soldier', [Painting] https://allenartcollection.oberlin.edu/objects/3758/selfportrait-as-a-soldier
- Fig.4 Van Gogh, V. (1889) 'Self-portrait with bandaged ear and pipe', [Painting] https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/all-stories/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-van-goghs-self-portraits
- Fig.5 Münter,G. (1909) 'Self-portrait,' [Painting] Borzello, F. (1998). Seeing ourselves: Women's Self-portraits.
- Fig. 6 Kirchner, E.L. (1907) 'Self-Portrait with Model', [Painting]

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- Fig.8 Münter, G. (1908) 'View of the Murnau Moor', [Painting]
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- Fig.9 Münter, G. (1909) 'Self-portrait with hat', [Painting] https://arthur.io/art/gabriele-muenter/self-portrait-with-hat
- Fig. 10 Van Gogh, V. (1889) 'Self-portrait' [Painting] https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/art-and-stories/stories/all-stories/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-van-goghs-self-portraits
- Fig.11 Kirchner, E.L. (1931) 'Self-portrait' [Painting] https://www.artchive.com/artwork/self-portrait-ernst-ludwig-kirchner-1931/