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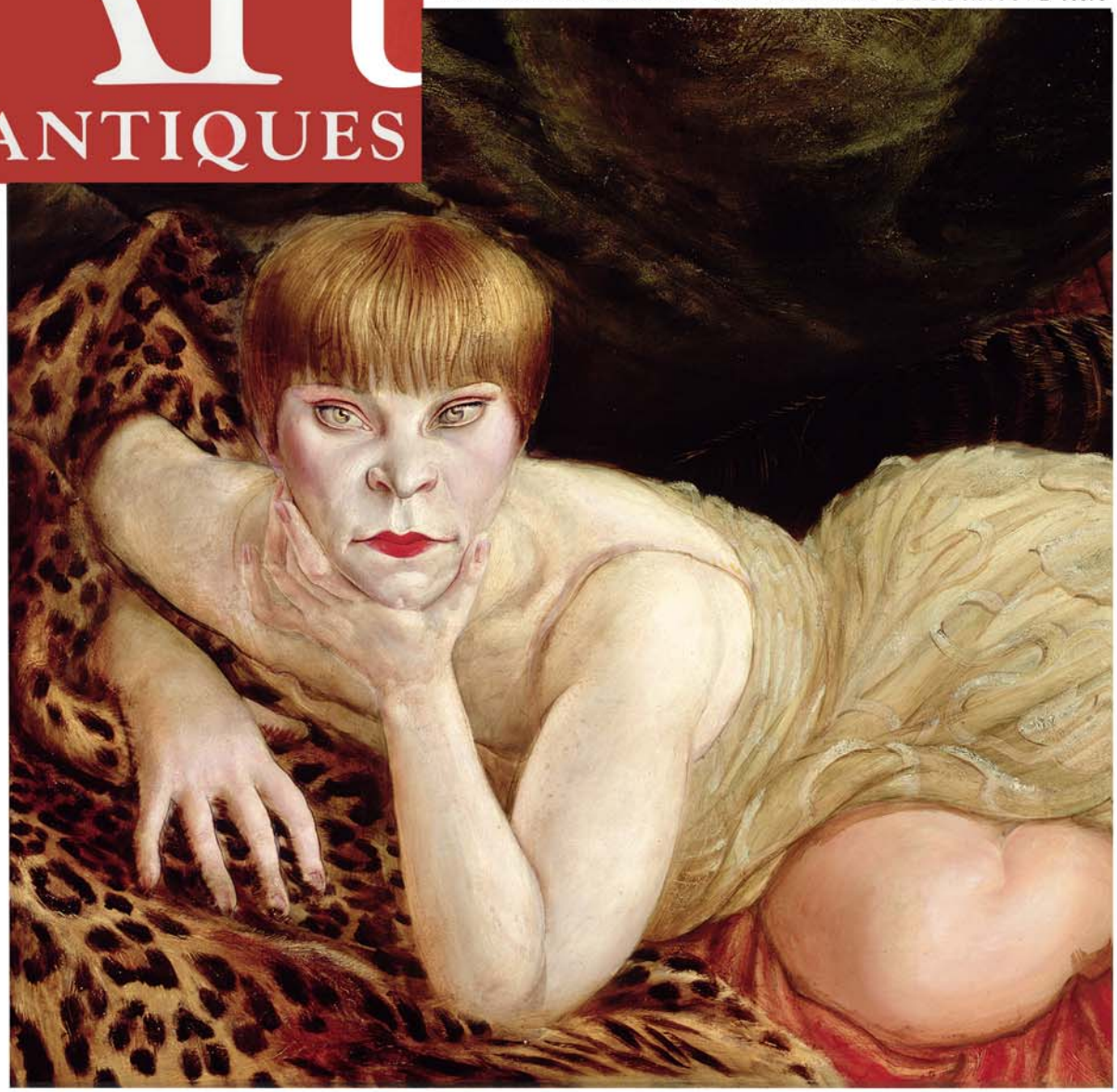
FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ART



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Otto Dix's Portrait Gallery

Art &ANTIQUES

A Haunting Humanism

64

In his "New Objectivity" works of the 1920s, the German artist Otto Dix took a piercing view of his fellow beings, as revealed in his first-ever U S show

STORY BY EDWARD M. GOMEZ

Help Wanted

74

The job of museum director has gotten a lot harder of late, and the country's top institutions are chasing a small pool of superstars to guide them through uncertain times

STORY BY TED LOOS

Otherworldly Masquerade

82

Rare and intricately carved, Shinto shrine masks personify the spirits of Japan's ancient faith

STORY BY JOHN DORFMAN

Art &ANTIQUES

A HAUNTING HUMANISM

From left: Otto Dix, Group Portrait: Günther Franke, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt and Karl Nierendorf, 1923, oil on canvas, mounted on wood; Reclining Woman on Leopard Skin, 1927, oil on wood.

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IN HIS "NEW OBJECTIVITY" WORKS OF THE 1920S, THE GERMAN ARTIST OTTO DIX TOOK A PIERCING VIEW OF HIS FELLOW BEINGS, AS REVEALED IN HIS FIRST-EVER U.S. SHOW.

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

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NEARLY A CENTURY AGO MUCH

of Europe waited with trepidation for war to break out. In August 1914, the conflagration that would become World War I finally erupted, and the German artist Otto Dix was one young volunteer who eagerly headed to the front. An avid reader of the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th-century philosopher who had championed an ideal "superman" or "overman" who would overcome the limitations of mere humanity as it had evolved thus far, Dix would soon find his illusions shattered. In the words of the German art historian Matthias Eberle, the drawings Dix "jabbed on paper at the front [were] images not of supermen but of sub-men." The war taught Dix, as he wrote in late 1914, that, "while the sensations of the heart and the systems of the mind may be refuted, there is no refuting the world of objects—and the machine gun is just such a 'thing.'"

This "sobering realization of the power of *things*," as Eberle put it, lay at the very heart of a new style of art that arose in defeated Germany after the war. It became known as "Neue Sachlichkeit" (meaning "New Objectivity"). Characterized by precise technique and harsh satire, the style seemed to offer a postwar antidote to the wild, deformed imagery and primitive, joyous energy of Expressionism, an earlier style that numerous German and Austrian artists had embraced. Neue Sachlichkeit took its name from the title of a 1925 exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Mannheim, Germany, that featured works by such artists as Otto Dix, George Grosz and Max Beckmann, some of whom had previously worked in an Expressionist vein.

That show's organizer was interested,

The Businessman Max Roesberg, Dresden, 1922, oil on canvas;

Art &ANTIQUES

he wrote at the time, in artists who had "reaffirmed their loyalty" to "positive, concrete reality." At least for a while, those whose works he presented became indelibly associated with Neue Sachlichkeit's trenchant outlook and sometimes unsettling sensibility. Christian Schad was another leading artist who was associated with Neue Sachlichkeit, but only some of Beckmann's paintings may accurately be tagged with that same label. For the most part, though, Beckmann's oeuvre defies the Neue Sachlichkeit classification.

In his version of this kind of art, Dix tended to depict his human subjects—female nudes, businessmen and figures from the Weimar era's nocturnal demimonde—with a candor that presented them as deeply vulnerable, pathetic, grotesque, ugly or worse. In Dix's work of the 1920s, reality did not only bite—often it could startle or even repel a viewer, too.

Now, the art historian Olaf Peters, a professor at Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg, in eastern Germany, has curated *Otto Dix*, an exhibition on view through August 30 at the Neue Galerie Museum for German and Austrian Art in New York. (After its New York run, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts will present *Otto Dix* from September 20, 2010, through January 2, 2011.) In the show's catalogue, Peters notes that Dix's works, more than those of "almost any other German painter...have influenced our visual impression of the Weimar Republic." Recall the bony woman sporting a monocle and a severe haircut who languidly holds a long cigarette aglow in *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926), a well-known Dix tableau that is now housed at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. That iconic image and others like it served as vital references for director Bob Fosse's 1972 film *Cabaret*, whose superbly evoked atmosphere of decadence and eccentricity owed much to such emblematic visual

***Portrait of the Lawyer Dr. Hugo Simons*, 1925, tempera and oil on wood.**

records of an era in which a war-battered Germany succumbed to the rising power of the Nazis.

In the late 1920s, Dix himself noted that, as a painter, he was interested in "a heightening of the forms of expression that are in essence already found in the Old Masters." For him, he emphasized, "the object is primary....For that reason, it has always been a question of extreme importance whether I get as close as possible to the thing I see."

The son of an iron-foundry worker and a seamstress, Dix was born in a village to the west of Dresden in 1891 and began taking drawing lessons in primary school. He served as an apprentice to a house painter and landed a place in the Royal School of Arts and Crafts in Dresden, where he studied until he joined the military. During the war, Dix fought as a gunner and, miraculously, still managed to produce hundreds of gouaches and drawings, including self-portraits and images of soldiers, trenches and bomb-blasted craters in the landscape.

After the armistice, Dix returned to Dresden, where he studied at that city's art academy. Later, he moved with his family to Berlin, then back to Dresden, where he became a professor of painting at the art school. First, though, in 1924, the Berlin-based art dealer and publisher Karl Nierendorf, who played a key role in establishing Dix's position in the German art world, issued the artist's limited-edition print series *Der Krieg* (War).

Consisting of 50 etchings depicting bomb-crater fields, dead and wounded soldiers, horses' carcasses and marching, battle-weary troops, Dix's vivid portrayal of the horrors of war is gripping and gruesome. With its images of men whose faces have been ripped apart by shrapnel, skulls infested with worms and terrified city dwellers fleeing for safety as airplanes sweep down to bomb their homes, Dix's disturbing portfolio has been compared in its intensity and technical sophistication to Francisco Goya's print series *The Disasters of War* (circa 1810–20; published posthumously in 1863).

Edvard Munch, the Norwegian Expressionist painter who had strongly influenced the German Expressionists, had once stated

From left: Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber, 1925, oil and tempera on plywood; Portrait of the Laryngologist Dr. Mayer-Hermann, 1926, oil and tempera on wood.

SAMMLUNG LANDESBANK BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG IM KUNSTMUSEUM STUTTGART/ARS; THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK/ARS

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"In his version of this kind of art, Dix tended to depict his human subjects—female nudes, businessmen and figures from the Weimar era's nocturnal demimonde—with a candor that presented them as deeply vulnerable, pathetic, grotesque, ugly or worse. In Dix's work of the 1920s, reality did not only bite—often it could startle or even repel a viewer, too."

that he did not believe in "art which is not the compulsive result of man's urge to open his heart." By contrast, even though it was consciously rooted in and had assimilated the collective tradition of such German Old Masters as Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach, Dix's art seemed to spill forth from a ripped-open gut.

Dix approached his human subjects objectively, with a combination of a detached observer's dispassion and, at the same time, a probing sense of psychological insight. His humanistic sensibility informs his portraits of prostitutes and maimed soldiers, even if it might be harder to discern in his images of female nudes with ghoulishly colored skin and sagging breasts and of women victims of sex-related murders.

Peters notes that during the Weimar period, "lawyers, doctors and other members of the upper middle class" commissioned and purchased Dix's paintings. "Even when some of these sitters were not pleased by his gaze, they supported him because of the extraordinary quality of his art." Museums also bought his works. Peters says, "That was quite surprising, since his art was highly controversial in its time." Still, he points out, because Neue Sachlichkeit was both an avant-garde and a popular movement, "a lot of works by these artists entered private and public collections," especially after the 1925 exhibition in Mannheim helped make them well-known.

The exhibition Peters has assembled includes such memorable Dix paintings as *The Artist's Family* (1927) and *Portrait of a Young Girl (Erni)* (1928), which seem to channel the refined brushwork and precise draftsmanship of the German Old Masters whose work the artist admired, as well as *Portrait of the Lawyer Dr. Fritz Glaser* (1921). The subject of this anguished-feeling painting was a Dresden-based Jewish arts patron, one of Dix's most avid supporters. Glaser's slumped posture, ghostly countenance, tense hand gesture and lost look in retrospect seem to presage the calamity that would before long befall Germany's Jews in the run-up to another war. The Neue Galerie show also features numerous self-portraits, as well as the vibrant *Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons* (1925); the detailed *Portrait of the Laryngologist Dr. Mayer-Hermann* (1925); *Reclining Woman on a Leopard Skin* (1927), a portrait of a red-lipped figure in a come-hither pose; and the dazzling *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (1925), which Peters describes as "without a doubt the icon of the Weimar Republic."

A nearly full-figure image of a notorious enter-

BERLINISCHE GALERIE, LANDESMUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST, FOTOGRAFIE UND ARCHITEKTUR, BERLIN/ARS; ???

Above: *Portrait of the Poet Iwar von Lücken*, 1926, oil and tempera on canvas. Opposite from top to bottom: *Foxhole, Mealtime in the Trench* and *Machine-Gun Squad Advances*

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"Dix's vivid portrayal of the horrors of war is gripping and gruesome. With its images of men whose faces have been ripped apart by shrapnel, skulls infested with worms and terrified city dwellers fleeing for safety as airplanes sweep down to bomb their homes..."

Art &ANTIQUES

tainer around whom, it was said in her time, "everything turned to scandal," Dix's picture shows Berber standing with her right hand on her hip in a high-necked, long-sleeved dress of cool scarlet against a fiery-red background. (After the Nazis came to power and purged Germany's art community, they confiscated this painting and labeled Dix's art "degenerate"; the artist only managed to reacquire the work in 1963 from a Munich art dealer for the price of 18,000 marks.)

For a while, Dix and his wife were friendly with Berber, who had not even turned 30 when she died in 1928. Film directors, well-known artists like Grosz, prostitutes and Berlin's most famous transvestites attended the dancer's funeral. Peters notes: "An entire era went down with the aimlessly wandering Berber," a kind of "taboo-violating tramp who had devoured both men and women." If, with her antics, the controversial artist had tried to "gloss over the loss of meaning and values" so many Germans had felt after World War I, that kind of exercise in decadence as a nostrum for a society's aching soul "was replaced beginning in the late 1920s," Peters points out, "by the athletic, healthy female members of the Hitler Youth," who became more visible in Germany as the Nazis' influence increased.

After Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933, Dix was dismissed from his teaching job in Dresden. He then produced *The Seven Deadly Sins*, an oil-on-tempera painting in which, to disguise the politically critical nature of its themes, Dix took an allegorical turn. In this picture, he depicted Hitler in the role of Envy, riding on the back of Avarice. (The artist did not paint in Hitler's famous moustache until after World War II.) Later in his career, Dix painted landscapes and continued to exhibit his work publicly, even during the Nazi era. He was drafted to serve in the German army during the final months of World War II and was taken prisoner by French forces in early 1945. After he was released, he returned to his home near Lake Constance, in southern Germany. He died in 1969, after having received numerous honors.

Peters notes that Dix "never developed a big following" in the United States, even though some of his paintings "were exhibited in Pittsburgh as early as 1927 and again

STADEL MUSEUM, FRANKFURT AM MAIN. PROPERTY OF THE STADELSCHERMUSEUMS-VEREIN E.V./ARS

Above: *The Artist's Family*, 1927, oil on wood.
Opposite from top to bottom: *Dr. Heinrich Stadelmann*, 1920, *Portrait of a Young Girl (Erni)*, 1928

in 1931 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York." However, Peters says, the Nazis' rejection of his work, the chaos of World War II and the rise of abstract art after the war "relegated him to the background, and unlike Beckmann and Grosz—the Berlin painter with whom Dix is often linked—he did not immigrate to the U.S." Peters recalls that it was "only in 2006, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York presented the critically acclaimed survey *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits From the 1920s*, did Dix begin to emerge again in the U.S. Out of some 100 works on display in that exhibition, 53 were by Dix." Remarkably, the show that is now on view at the Neue Galerie is Dix's first-ever solo exhibition in North America.

The German-born dealer Eva-Maria Worthington, who founded Worthington Gallery in Chicago in 1970 and specializes in the work of German modernists, says, "It's interesting that, after the Soviet Union collapsed and Germany became reunified, some experts assumed that modern-art admirers in the former East Germany would go for Picasso or other Western European art that they had not had opportunities to see. Instead, it turned out that many became interested in those early 20th-century German modernists whose themes felt closer to their own lives."

Nowadays, prices for available works by Dix are wide-ranging. His more inexpensive etchings can still be found for under $10,000; more costly are unique works like a 1925 charcoal-and-pencil preparatory drawing on tracing paper for a portrait of patron Fritz Glaser and his family. That piece sold for more than $2.5 million in a Christie's New York sale in late 2007. Jane Kallir, a co-director of Galerie St. Etienne in New York, which specializes in German and Austrian Expressionism, among other fields, explains that the most coveted works by artists like Dix and Grosz date from the late Teens and the 1920s, and their one-of-a-kind pieces, like superb watercolors from that era, can fetch six-figure prices. Regarding Grosz's works, Kallir notes, "The more desirable watercolors from this [Berlin] period are his street scenes," which can command those latter, higher prices. By contrast, she adds, Grosz's photomechanically printed lithographs can be found in the $1,500–2,500 range, while the artist's regular, limited-edition prints can sell for $4,000–5,000. At press time, one of Grosz's female nudes, a 1927 watercolor on paper, was listed for sale in a May 5 Christie's New York auction. Its estimated sale price was $20,000–30,000.

Peters notes that, unlike Grosz, who, among Weimar-era artists, is considered to have been the hardest-hitting political and social critic of his time, "Dix always denied or played down the political significance of his art." As a result, Peters adds, "Dix was not collected as much as a political artist, as was Grosz. Still, it was quite something to be painted by Dix, since he was merciless; he was the most popular and important portrait painter of the 1920s in Germany, rivaled only by Beckmann, who was more metaphysical." Peters explains that Dix, in positioning himself as the heir and exponent of a German art-making tradition that dated back to late-medieval times, "played an important role in fusing avant-garde tendencies, a recognition of the growing, significant role of photography in art and that art-historical tradition."

The veteran New York dealer Richard L. Feigen, who has long handled the work of distinguished Old Masters and modern masters, too, including Beckmann and Grosz, observes: "Whatever movements they may have been associated with, many German artists' paintings of the 1920s, like those of Dix, Beckmann and Grosz, remain powerful, probing and compelling statements about the human condition." A