

Hommage à Martha

Von Annäherungen und Grenzen

Karin Schick

Prolog

Zwischen 1921 und 1933 porträtierte Otto Dix seine Geliebte und spätere Ehefrau Martha immer wieder. In über siebenzig Gemälden, Aquarellen und Zeichnungen stellte er sie in immer neuen Varianten dar. Außer sich selbst hat er keiner Person so viel Raum in seinem Werk zugestanden, keine erscheint als Figur so facettenreich.

Die meisten Bilder von Martha Dix entstanden in den Jahren nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg – in Dresden, Düsseldorf und Berlin. Sie fallen damit in eine wichtige Phase deutscher Kunst, in eine Zeit des Neubeginns und Experimentierens. In Literatur, Musik, Theater, Architektur und Film machten sich in den 1920er Jahren Tendenzen bemerkbar, die häufig mit gesellschaftlichen und politischen Interessen verbunden waren, und auch die bildende Kunst und die Fotografie widmeten sich der veränderten Realität. Die Künstler wandten sich ihren Gegenständen und Inhalten mit betont nüchternem Blick zu und setzten sie gestochen scharf ins Bild. Themen der »Neuen Sachlichkeit« waren der Krieg und seine Auswirkungen, die bürgerliche Welt und ihre Außenseiter und das Großstadtleben mit seinem Glanz und Elend.

Auch Otto Dix verarbeitete seine Kriegserlebnisse und gab einen kritischen Kommentar auf die Zeit, vor allem aber wurde er zum gefragten Porträtisten. In seinen Gemälden und in Hunderten von Aquarellen¹ schilderte er die Randfiguren der Gesellschaft – Bettler, Krüppel, Dirnen, Zuhälter –, aber auch Künstlerfreunde, Intellektuelle und großbürgerliche Auftraggeber. Wie andere Künstler seiner Zeit widmete er sich vor allem dem Bild der Frau in ihren traditionellen und neuen Rollen; besonders die Dirne und die mondäne Großstädterin faszinierten ihn. Für seine analytische Sichtweise entwickelte Dix neue Darstellungsformen und eine an die Alten Meister angelehnte präzise Maltechnik.

Dix hielt das Porträt für »eine der reizvollsten und schwersten Arbeiten für einen Maler«.² Keineswegs sei das Porträtmalen durch die Fotografie abgelöst worden, denn: »Das Ganze sehen und bilden kann nur der Maler.« Und er fuhr fort: »Nun ist nicht nur die Form, sondern auch die Farbe von größter Wichtigkeit und ein Mittel, das Individuelle auszudrücken. Jeder

Hommage à Martha

On Approaches and Boundaries

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Prologue

Between 1921 and 1933, Otto Dix painted his mistress and later wife Martha again and again, depicting her in ever new variations in over seventy paintings, watercolors, and drawings. Aside from himself, no other person appears so frequently in his work, no other figure is imbued with such complexity.

Most of the images of Martha Dix were created in Dresden, Düsseldorf, and Berlin in the years following the First World War. They are thus associated with an important phase in German art, a period of new beginnings and experimentation. In the literature, music, theater, architecture, and film of the 1920s, tendencies were emerging that were often bound up with social and political interests, and visual art and photography devoted themselves to this changing reality as well. Artists approached their subjects with deliberate sobriety and sharp observation. The themes of the "New Objectivity" were the war and its aftereffects, the world of the bourgeoisie with its outsiders, and city life with its brilliance and wretchedness. Otto Dix, too, interpreted his war experiences and provided a critical commentary on his times, but it was above all as a portrait artist that he made his mark. In his paintings and in hundreds of watercolors¹ he depicted figures on the margins of society—beggars, cripples, prostitutes, and pimps—as well as artist friends, intellectuals, and wealthy patrons. Like other artists of his time, he was fascinated above all by images of women in both traditional and new roles, and in particular by prostitutes and sophisticated city women. To suit his analytical approach, Dix developed new forms of representation and a precise painting technique derived from the Old Masters.

Dix considered the portrait "one of the painter's most interesting and difficult tasks."² For him, photography

was no substitute for portrait painting, for "only the painter can see and give form to the whole." He continued: "Not only the form, but color as well is of the greatest importance and serves as a means of expressing what is individual. Each person has his own special color that affects the entire picture. Color photography has no emotional expression, but is only a physical record, and a poor one at that. Underlying every good portrait is a *vision*.—The essence of every person is expressed in his *exterior*; the *exterior* is the expression of the *interior*, that is, exterior and interior are identical. This goes so far that even the folds of the clothing, the person's posture, his hands, his ears, immediately give the painter insight into the emotional side of the model; the latter often more than the eyes and mouth. One always envisions the portrait painter as a great psychologist and physiognomist, able to immediately read the most hidden virtues and vices in every face and represent them in his pictures. This is conceived in literary terms, for the painter does not *evaluate*, he *looks*. My motto is: 'Trust your eyes!'"³

Dix repeatedly emphasized the necessity of distance from the model for the success of a portrait: "When you paint someone's portrait, you should know him as little as possible. Whatever you do, better not know him! I don't want to *know* him at all, I only want to see what is there, the exterior. The interior comes of its own accord. It is reflected in the visible. As soon as you know him too long [...] you become irritated. The impartiality of the gaze is lost. The *first* impression you have of a person, that is the right one. When I am finished with his picture, I can revise my opinion if necessary [...], it doesn't matter to me then. I have to capture the first impression in its freshness. If I lose it, I have to find it again."⁴ "When I say to someone, I would like to paint you, then I already have the picture inside me. If someone doesn't interest me, I