OTTO DIX

Edited by Olaf Peters
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PREFACE

When I began to collect Austrian and German Expressionism as a teenager, I was captivated by the exhilaration of Vienna at the turn of the last century, and by Berlin of twenty years later. I was fortunate enough to be able to purchase works by the artists who were painting at that time, many of which are now in the Neue Galerie. But it was almost thirty years after I started to collect that I acquired my first Otto Dix.

It was in Salzburg, in September of 1987, that I saw and bought a drawing of his at Galerie Welz, entitled Sitzender Raucher (Seated Smoker). It was done in 1916, during World War I, and depicted the human side of war. It was very different from his 1924 portfolio of 50 prints, Der Krieg (War), which I acquired ten years later, the strongest anti-war statement since Goya’s “Disaster” series, where one sees men without arms, legs, and parts of faces. Then came Die Skatspieler (The Skat Players), ca. 1920, and two powerful prints, both from the 1920s, Streichholzhändler (Matchbook Seller) and Die Strasse (The Street). This collection of prints and drawings captures the mood of Berlin at that time, and the horrors of war.

Dix also showed another side of Berlin filled with cabaret, music, art, and an exciting spirit, despite the disastrous financial crisis. His 1922 self-portrait watercolor depicts a stern but urbane man; his 1921 portrait of Dr. Fritz Glaser shows a successful lawyer, but there lurks a vestige of anti-Semitism in this painting.

My most unusual purchase of a work by Otto Dix was in Paris in April of 1997. I met an art dealer on the street as I was going to the airport, who showed me a great Dix painting of 1926, Halbakt (Half-Nude). In it, a nude woman is holding her breasts, but she has a haunting face right out of Cranach. I bought the painting on the spot, perhaps in the way that many tourists in the past purchased nude photos of women. I still consider it my best Otto Dix.

Otto Dix is without any doubt one of the greatest German artists of the twentieth century. I never believed, when I purchased the pictures I have described, that they would some day be part of a collection, and would be shown together at the Neue Galerie.

RONALD S. LAUDER
President, Neue Galerie New York
FOREWORD

The paintings, drawings, and prints that Otto Dix produced can be tough, even brutal, but they are always captivating and often touched by genius. Neue Galerie co-founder Serge Sabarsky described Dix as "an artist for whom I have a particular love…. He was able to represent the banality of life, the unadorned face of humanity, as no one else can."

It is with great pride that, along with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, we are able to organize the first Otto Dix exhibition in North America, reaching a large English- and French-speaking audience. We trust that the exhibition and its catalogue will contribute to the artist's international reputation.

Our Dix exhibition is not a full-flanked retrospective. From the outset, we decided to present masterpieces produced between 1919 and 1939, the decisive two decades of Dix's career. This artistic evolution begins with his Dada phase, followed by a focus on Dix's superb work in the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) vein, concluding with works from the 1930s that were influenced by the northern Old Masters.

Four conceptual areas are covered in the exhibition. The first are images of war. The artist's transformative experience as a soldier in World War I gave him first-hand knowledge of the horrors of combat. A separate room will display his entire portfolio Der Krieg—perhaps the most powerful images of war since Goya—as well as studies for the lost painting Schützengraben (Trench). The second is portraits. Dix's iconic, unsurpassed portraits of the 1920s, of famous and other more shadowy figures, established the artist as the premiere portraitist of the Weimar era. The scandal-ridden dancer Anita Berber; the important philosopher Max Scheler; the famous actor Heinrich George—all are examples of the finest work that was produced during this period. Dix shaped the personae of these individuals with his unforgettable images.

The representation of sexuality is another key theme in Dix's oeuvre; in fact, it may be the central topic for the artist. The extraordinary self-portraits with models from 1923 and 1924, as well as numerous watercolors, are exemplary. And finally, paintings created during the early years of the Third Reich are included in this exhibition. With their mysterious allegorical and religious overtones, they formed a personal critique of the era, one that Dix chose to express in metaphorical terms.

Neue Galerie board member Olaf Peters, our guest curator, eagerly agreed to assemble this exhibition. His mastery of the subject and quietly persistent approach has resulted in an astonishing collection of works for display. The Otto Dix Stiftung in Vaduz and numerous kind lenders from Europe and the United States provided invaluable support.

We are fortunate to be able to show works that were never on view at the Otto Dix retrospective staged in Stuttgart, Berlin, and London in 1991–92. Although many paintings we sought were too fragile to travel, we assembled a significant group of work from between the wars, testimonials of Dix's unquestionably high artistic stature. The catalogue essays by Olaf Peters, with fellow contributors Karsten Müller, Dietrich Schubert, James A. Van Dyke, and the translation of essays by Ernst Kállai and Willi Wolfraadt that were never before published in English, bring this multi-faceted artist into focus and offer current, important art historical research. We owe all mentioned above our deepest, heartfelt gratitude and thanks.

Our partner for this exhibition is the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. We wish to extend our sincere appreciation to Nathalie Bondil, director; Pascal Normandin, head, exhibitions management; Anne Eschapasse, executive assistant—special exhibitions; and the entire staff for their enthusiastic participation. We hope to realize more exhibitions together in the future.

We are pleased to collaborate again with Federico de Vera on the exhibition design. Federico brought his discerning eye to our landmark Alfred Kubin exhibition, and he interprets the work of Otto Dix with grace and understanding. Judith Hudson has designed the exhibition catalogue with her usual sense of clarity and creativity.

The Neue Galerie staff, including Scott Guterman, deputy director; Sefa Saglam, director of exhibitions and registrar; Janis Staggs, associate curator; Geoffrey Burns and Michael Voss, preparators; Leah Ammon, communications manager; and Sophie Mikes, assistant to the registrar, deserve recognition for their commitment to realizing this exhibition.

Otto Dix's work has helped define our historical image of the Weimar Era more than that of any other artist of the period. With its penetrating, unidealized depictions, it remains relevant today. We wish our exhibition viewers a memorable encounter with many unforgettable masterpieces, but also, to quote Otto Dix, a direct experience of "life without dilution."

RENÉE PRICE
Director, Neue Galerie New York
FOREWORD
Düsseldorf 1925—Montreal 1993
From Easel to Museum, a Cautionary Tale

This work of art should not be allowed to go without a fight.¹

“How Montreal could lose a masterpiece.”² In January of 1993, an event that shook the Montreal community was being talked about far beyond the city’s limits. Otto Dix’s Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons was in danger of leaving the country. “Are we to repeat the economic disaster of the Gustav Klimt portrait that we lost with no fuss a few years ago?”³ worried one concerned citizen, referring to the Portrait of Eugenia Primavesi that had been in the possession of the sitter’s daughter, a resident of Montreal, but had been sold in New York before ending up in a Japanese museum.

“Should we buy a painting or fund an AIDS hospice?”⁴ railed another newspaper reader. Rarely had a work of art inspired such controversy in the city. What followed was a textbook case—a cautionary tale.

Düsseldorf, 1925. Otto Dix was pleased. The lawyer he had chosen, the brilliant Hugo Simons (1892–1958), had just won a lawsuit on his behalf. Dix would finally be paid for the portrait commissioned by the father of a certain Miss Grünthal. The former had, in the end, refused to accept the painting on the grounds that it was a poor likeness. No less than artistic freedom of expression was on trial. A knowledgeable connoisseur, Hugo Simons admired the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit movement and collected German Expressionist works. A man of conviction, he had a keen intellect and was extremely eloquent. Dix painted his portrait to thank him (cat. 150), but not only for that reason: “When I tell people I would like to paint them, I already have their portrait in mind. I don’t paint people who don’t interest me.”⁵ A friendship sprang up between the two men that would last a lifetime—a cautionary tale.

Berlin, 1933. “The Third Reich is upon us after all . . . . I suppose that you have other worries now, but perhaps you don’t see matters so tragically after all,” wrote Dix⁶ to his friend, concerned about a future commission for a Simons family portrait, a work that would never see the light of day, and for good reason.⁷ The anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws were enacted soon after. Simons was prohibited from practising his profession, and the family was stripped of their German citizenship. Warned one night by a cousin whose papers had just been confiscated by the Gestapo, Hugo Simons decided to flee along with his wife and children on the first train to The Hague, taking only a minimum of pos-
sessions—among them, his portrait. Simons remained there, living off his personal fortune as he could not practise law, until the brink of World War II. During those years, sometimes at the risk of his life, he helped many other Jews escape from Germany and settle in the Netherlands, as well as get their money out of German banks through a procedure that the Nazis themselves dubbed “the Simons loophole.” As for Dix, he was dismissed from his teaching position at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, his art being considered “degenerate,” an outrage to public decency and patriotism.

Hemmenhofen, 1946. “Dear Dr. Simons,” wrote Otto Dix, “I was happy to hear from you again. Above all I am glad that you have escaped the filthy Nazi business. Perhaps you have heard that in these last twelve years I was constantly being harassed—house searches, arrests by the Gestapo and, to top it all off, conscription into the army and a year as a French prisoner of war. You probably also know that throughout the whole time I was not allowed to exhibit. But the filthy pigs did not consider it beneath their dignity to remove my works from museums and auction them off in Switzerland.”⁸

Along with his wife Madeleine, their two children⁹ and his mother-in-law, Simons had succeeded in escaping to Canada in 1939, settling, as did so many others, in Montreal. During this time of privation in the German countryside, Dix was reduced to asking for food parcels from his friend: “The food is so boring without spices (there is a lack of spices as well) that one feels as if one were a cow.” He went on to complain: “And yet, I have exhibited for years at the Carnegie Institute, I have pictures in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but apparently it doesn’t occur to anyone there to help in any way. It is indeed a rather sorry thing that one has to turn like this to one’s friends in the West with such requests.”¹⁰ Simons continued to provide support for his painter friend in spite of his own limited means. Unable to practise his profession in his new home, this highly educated man preferred to hold low-level jobs, rather than return to Germany and take up the prestigious position that had been offered to him. “I am astonished that you are selling cooling systems. I thought it was already cold anyway, so that it would be more advantageous to sell central heating systems.”¹¹ Simons died in 1958. Dix’s portrait of him always hung in his room on the wall opposite his bed.

Stuttgart, 1991. Andrea Hollmann, curator of the major exhibition celebrating the centenary of Otto Dix’s birth, could not hold back her tears on seeing the painting that she believed had been lost forever, relates the sitter’s youngest son, Jan Simons.¹² So many works from the period had been destroyed, but the Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons was in
pristine condition. Devoid of caricature, this warm, intense portrait also shows the technical experiments undertaken by Dix following his return from a trip to Italy. At that time the artist used a mixed media technique of egg tempera on wood panel covered by an oil glaze that allowed no room for improvisation. During its travels between Stuttgart, Berlin and London, the rediscovered painting quickly became a highly coveted work. In spite of many attractive opportunities to sell the work, the three Simons children, George, Jan and Ellyn, decided to offer it to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts for a fraction of its actual value. "We have a close attachment to Montreal. Our family was made welcome here at the time when Canada was being difficult about immigrants." At the end of a year-long saga, the money needed to acquire the work was finally raised thanks to the concerted efforts of a group led by the then-director of the Museum, Pierre Théberge, with the support of the city’s mayor "for the benefit of our people" and the Société des musées québécois. The degree to which people rallied together for the sake of an artwork was without precedent in Canada. Under the pressure of public opinion and scathing media coverage, the federal minister responsible at the time ultimately agreed to follow the unanimous recommendation of the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board’s experts and award a subsidy for its purchase. Nahum Gelber, Chairman of the Museum’s Acquisition Committee, set up a special private-sector fundraising initiative to collect the both large and small donations from many individuals that were necessary for finalizing the sale. For its part, the Simons family made one express condition; that the Museum pledge never to sell or exchange the painting. Who could object to that?

It is only natural, then, that this exhibition, the first major North American presentation of Otto Dix’s work, also be held in Montreal. Among others, it relates the stories of two men, Hugo Simons and Otto Dix; whose fates were entwined by history, and of the battle over a highly symbolic work won by a determined city. I would like to thank the director of the Neue Galerie, Renée Price; its president, Ronald S. Lauder; and the exhibition curator, Olaf Peters, for having initiated this project. I also thank all those who fought to keep Otto Dix’s painting in Montreal. This exhibition is a tribute to them.

NATHALIE BONDIL
Director and Chief Curator
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

1  The Gazette (Montreal), January 11, 1993.
2  Le Devoir (Montreal), January 8, 1993.
6  Undated. The excerpts of letters quoted are from the Dix-Simons correspondence held in the archives of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
7  Hugo Simons owned two other family portraits that had been painted by Dix in 1926: Anna Grünebaum (The McMaster Museum of Art, cat. 151) and Josef May (Cleveland Museum of Art, cat. 152).
8  June 6, 1946.
9  George, his eldest child from his first marriage, was then studying in England.
10  February 7, 1947.
11  December 30, 1952.
14  His son, Ursus Dix, had a career as a conservator of paintings at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Thank you to the following people who have contributed to making this a successful project:

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Dix in America: About the Exhibition

More than almost any other German painter, Otto Dix and his works have influenced our visual impression of the Weimar Republic. Paul Ferdinand Schmidt observed in 1926 that Dix was “without a doubt the representative painter in Germany today—perhaps even in Europe today.”¹ His paintings were among the most graphic visual representatives of their era: one need only think of such outstanding portraits as Anita Berber, Sylvia von Harden, and Alfred Flechtheim, the triptychs Großstadt (Metropolis) and Der Krieg (War), and the portfolio of prints from 1924 that was also titled Der Krieg. In equal measure, these works mirror the myth of the so-called Golden Twenties and reflect the political and social ruptures and fault lines of their day.²

In an unsurpassed formulation, the writer and art critic Carl Einstein observed in 1923: “Dix gives this era—which is only the caricature of one—a resolute and technically sound kick in its swollen belly, wrings confessions of vileness from it, and produces an upright depiction of its people, their sly faces grinning an array of stolen mugs.”³

Dix’s work found appreciation in the United States relatively early, albeit briefly. Three of his paintings were shown as early as 1927, at the Twenty-Fifth Annual International Exhibition of Painting at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. In spring 1931, he was represented by five paintings in an exhibition organized by Alfred H. Barr: German Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (figs. 1 and 2). The catalogue referred explicitly to Dix’s reception of the Old Masters, which is evident in a number of works from the early 1920s onward: “Dix’s art is not merely a reaction to the abstract, cubist or expressionist denial of natural appearances. It is, rather, a deep seated passion for the appearance of the real world which he shares with his artistic ancestors of the early 19th century and his greater forebears of four centuries ago—Dürer, Holbein, and Grünewald.”⁴

German Romanticism and German Renaissance painting were thus emphasized as central points of reference for Dix’s oeuvre. At the same time, his work was seen as standing out from the general course of development in modern art, interpreted less as a reaction to the avant-gardes than as a symptom of a German national Kunstwollen—artistic volition, a concept from Alois Riegl—that had endured for four centuries. For his exhibition, Barr selected works by the painter that provided evidence for the latter view. He deliberately avoided Dix’s Dadaist and verist works and especially the unprecedentedly horrible depictions of sexual murder and war. One of the five paintings shown in New York entered the collection of The Museum of Modern Art the following year, as a gift from Philip Johnson, the famous modernist architect, who at the time was in charge of the museum’s architecture department. Portrait of the Laryngologist Dr. Mayer-Hermann (1926), an important example of Neue Sachlichkeit, was praised by the museum in a

Opposite: Portrait of the Laryngologist Dr. Mayer-Hermann (detail), 1926, cat.146

1 Cover of the exhibition catalogue German Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1931

2 Installation view of the exhibition German Painting and Sculpture with works by Otto Dix and Max Beckmann, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1931
press release as the “first important modern German painting” in its collection. Finally, the art dealer Israel Ber Neumann organized the artist’s first solo exhibition in the United States at his New Art Circle in New York. Neumann showed watercolors and drawings, but the exhibition met with little response.

When the Neue Galerie in New York and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal present Otto Dix today, it is in fact the artist’s first museum exhibition in North America. In light of the painter’s central importance to German art in the twentieth century, that is an almost unbelievable fact. It is an exhibition that is long overdue and yet is, in a sense, too late. The ground prepared by Barr was destroyed again by political developments (the Third Reich and the Second World War) and by the modernist paradigm. In Germany, too, the reception of Dix’s work only resumed again in the 1960s as part of a revived interest in Dadaism, Realism, and Neue Sachlichkeit. The history of the reception of his work is one factor; the willingness of lenders to part with the painter’s major works, which are now more than eighty years old, is another, and the latter has not improved in recent years. One major factor is the serious conservation problems that lending entails: Otto Dix painted his works on wood panels, some of which were glued together. Nevertheless, we have assembled a concentrated presentation of works from 1920 to 1940, which will establish a new foundation for the perception of Dix in America.

It is the Dix characterized by Carl Einstein—the unsparing, sarcastic verist but also the subtly, ironically diagnosing realist—whose aesthetic strategies will be presented in greater detail in this exhibition and catalogue; they are the reason his work is still relevant today. But we will also present the painter characterized by Alfred Barr, one who from very early on measured himself against the German Romantics and Old Masters; whose portraiture took up the thread of Lucas Cranach, Albrecht Dürer and Philipp Otto Runge and whose images of war, allegories, and landscapes follow in the tradition of Albrecht Altdorfer, Hans Baldung Grien, Matthias Grünewald, and Caspar David Friedrich. Only this reorientation around the critical potential of Romanticism and early German painting enabled Dix to assert himself, at least to some degree, under National Socialist rule as the critical artist he had been in the Weimar period. The exhibition deliberately concentrates first on the first half of the 1920s and Dix the verist and then goes on to clarify the process of artistic transformation in which he moved from verism by way of Neue Sachlichkeit to a kind of critical traditionalism.

Beginnings: His Parents, the War, and Nietzsche

By the early 1920s, Otto Dix had explored all the artistic options, had a masterly command of them, and had already rejected many of them again. In the thoroughness of this forced run through all the movements of the avant-garde, he is comparable to, at most, Picasso and Duchamp, and like them he is a perfect example of the fragility of established aesthetic positions and the forced radicalness of constantly beginning again. In that situation, Dix did not choose the myth of the artist as constantly reinventing in the mirror of his own work and that of art history, as the Spanish artist did, nor did he withdraw from painting into a theoretical, reflective, conceptual art on the verge of non-art, as the French artist did. Rather, he decided to pursue a radical verism and a post-Expressionist Neue Sachlichkeit. He chose a form of modern painting that was decidedly focused on society, and he operated within the tension between art historical tradition, the avant-garde, new visual media, and aesthetic and philosophical discourses that transcended genres.

His social origins in a working-class home, with a father who was politically active as a Social Democrat, and his basic artistic education—beginning with drawing lessons in primary school, the difficult period as an apprentice to a house painter in Gera, the important years at the Königliche Kunstgewerbeschule (Royal School of Arts and Crafts) in Dresden, and finally his time at the academy there after the First World War—were central influences on and turning points for Dix. His choice of a critical approach to art was thus a conscious one.

Otto Dix came from rather modest proletarian circumstances; he was born on December 2, 1891, as the second (but first legitimate) of six children of the mold maker and caster Franz Dix and his wife, the seamstress Louise Pauline née Amann, in Untermhaus, now a district of Gera. Although the painter never denied his origins later when he was famous, he left them behind during the Weimar period. Even so, he produced an artistic monument to his parents, with whom he maintained a good relationship throughout their lives, in the form of two forceful double portraits (figs. 3 and 4).

Both show his two parents with calloused fingers and scarred physiognomies, sitting on a Biedermeierlike sofa. Both paintings
are marked equally by subtle empathy and scrutinizing distance, but they differ significantly in composition.

The earlier double portrait, painted in 1921 and now in Basel, pushes the figures close together in a cramped space and wedges them into the picture frame. The structure of the work still draws on Expressionism, even though the figures have been captured with extreme realism, reminiscent of the famous portrait of his parents by the Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge (fig. 5). The composition is revealed as unstable if one follows the slanting lines of their heads, the contours of their shoulders, and the lines of their heavy hands. The diagonal glide down toward bottom right is counteracted by the blocky, unwieldy figure of his father, even though the latter takes the diagonal orientation of his wife. The composition is stabilized above all by the bare, brightly shining lower arms and the inclination of the upper body.

The later portrait, painted in 1924 and now in Hannover, shows the same situation, with his parents sitting on a sofa, but comes across very differently. The view looks frontally at the couple, who are austerely arranged next to each other; they seem glued to the old-fashioned-looking furniture in a three-quarter-length portrait. Once again, the lack of connection between the figures is striking. It contrasts with the similarity in the way the physiognomies of the figures are rendered and with the correspondences in the color values of their clothing and in their rough hands deformed by work and gout. In both paintings, the eyes look in divergent directions and intersect but do not meet. Distance and empathy, communicative expression and sober objectifying, realistic figure study and constructive, planimetric composition achieve a tension-filled synthesis in Dix's work, because the painter was equally interested in the theme of the portrait (specifically, the double portrait), in academic training, and in knowledge of the most recent developments in art.

The particular role that Dix played as an artist in the Weimar Republic can only be understood against the backdrop of the painter's experiences during the First World War, from 1914 to 1918. The essay in the present volume by Dietrich Schubert, which is also a summary of important earlier research on this subject, discusses this theme using Dix's wartime self-portraits as his examples. In 1914, at a time of general enthusiasm for the war, the artist volunteered for the front. He experienced the entire war as a machine gunner in the trenches of the western
and eastern fronts. In October 1918 he was promoted to vice sergeant and began his training as a pilot, perhaps in order to escape dying at the front during the final weeks of the war. Dix sketched throughout this time, and the postcards he sent from the field to his girlfriend in Dresden, Helene Jakob, and the impressive wartime gouaches of intense color are central groups of works from this period (figs. 6 and 7). As a soldier, he put to paper, using a wide range of styles, himself, his comrades, and above all the disheveled, cratered landscapes of the battlefields. Between 1914 and 1918, building on important influences from the prewar years and his visits to Dresden's rich art collections and to avant-garde exhibitions at the Galerie Arnold and Galerie Richter (e.g., van Gogh, the Expressionism of Die Brücke, Futurism), the painter produced impressive works that combined early efforts at verism with Expressionist, Cubist, and Futurist styles. Dix's mastery of avant-garde styles helps explain why several of his wartime scenes resemble abstract still lifes.

It is difficult to determine today what position Dix took on the events of the war, especially as the artist's central statements on the subject were made only decades later. Unlike fellow artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, George Grosz, and Max Beckmann, Dix did not find a way to escape the horrors of the war, but he did not really try either. Instead, he repeatedly joined cutthroat battles of matériel and direct hand-to-hand combat with the enemy. After the war, he is said to have told a fellow painter in Dresden, Conrad Felixmüller, what an indescribable feeling it was to thrust a bayonet into an enemy's body. Such a statement, which can barely be understood today, surely conceals a healthy portion of provocation of Felixmüller, who was politically active as a socialist and pacifist. But clearly Dix both wanted to and had to experience everything with his own eyes, and it is this agnosticism founded in Nietzsche's philosophy, the seemingly value-neutral, emphatic, philosophical affirmation of all phenomena of life, that makes it difficult, even today, to approach the painter's work without prejudice.

One indication of just how much Nietzsche's influence shaped him is that the only sculpture the artist ever produced was a portrait bust of the philosopher—who had died in 1900, after suffering a long period of insanity—that probably dates from 1914 (not 1912, as is always claimed) (fig. 8). Beginning in 1911, Dix studied Nietzsche's writings intensely, above all Die

6 Otto Dix, *Granattrichter in Blütenform* (Granade Crater in Bloom), 1916, gouache, 28.2 x 28.7 cm (11 ¼ x 11 ¼ in.). Private Collection

7 Otto Dix, “Ein schönes Grab” ("A Beautiful Grave"), 1916, pencil on field postcard, 9.4 x 14.8 cm (3 ¾ x 5 7/8 in.). Kunstsammlung Gera

8 Otto Dix, Friedrich Nietzsche, ca. 1914, green-tinted plaster, almost lifesize. Formerly Städtische Kunstsammlungen Dresden, confiscated in 1937, missing since 1939
Fröhliche Wissenschaft (The Gay Science) and Also sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra), as is clear from the painter's correspondence with his old friend Hans Bretschneider. The Nietzsche bust was created in the aftermath of the Nietzsche cult that was cultivated in the circles of Harry Graf Kessler and the "new Weimar" around 1902–06 and a plan for a Nietzsche monument. The philosopher's head comes forward and out of an amorphous mass of plaster, as if his revolutionary thinking were materialized in the gloomy, imperious physiognomy of his furrowed brow, sharp nose, and deep-set eyes beneath bushy, straggly eyebrows. This singular work, purchased by the Stadtmuseum Dresden during Paul Ferdinand Schmidt's directorship in the early 1920s, was confiscated as "degenerate" in 1937 and auctioned in 1939 at the Fischer auction house in Lucerne, and has been lost ever since. The sculpture was unusual not only because of its dynamic brutality but also because Dix colored it green; it was as if he wanted to emphasize the philosopher's extremely unusual position by using an eccentric color, which in turn earns this sculpture a special place within the sculpture of Expressionism.

Dada and Coming to Terms with His Wartime Experiences

Otto Dix was released from the military and returned to Gera in December 1918. He resumed his prewar studies at the Kunstakademie Dresden. From 1919 to 1922 he studied with Max Feldbauer and Otto Gußmann and became their master student. In Dresden he was both a highly controversial figure of the avant-garde and a founding member of the Dresden Secession "Gruppe 1919," which had a strong literary bent and whose main principles were "Truth—Fraternity—Art." At the time, Dix was still a searcher, and his work reflected the influence of Marc Chagall, Robert Delaunay, and Paul Klee, though the contours of the philosophical premises of his art were already established—and had in part already been formed prior to the war. In the period that followed, the artist left behind the Expressionist and Cubo-Futurist beginnings that still characterized his wartime drawings and gouaches. Increasingly, he turned to a penetrating verism, for which he initially still employed the Dadaist technique of the collage (often painted), so that around 1920 Dadaism and verism could often coincide in a single work. From the outset, his œuvre was obsessively preoccupied with the theme of war. When Dix took part in the now legendary Erste Internationale Dada-Messe at Otto Burchard gallery in Berlin in 1920—along with George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Hannah Höch, Rudolf Schlichter, and Georg Scholz—he exhibited the large-format painting Kriegskrüppel (War Cripples). Such works polarized critics because of their use of collage and because of their image of humanity, and Dix was attacked as much by critics from the left as by critics from the right.

His wartime experiences also shaped his shocking, incredibly brutal depictions of sexual murders and his paintings of prostitutes, the subject of one of the essays in the present volume. The themes of war and prostitution or sexual murder quickly made Dix one of the era's "star painters," surrounded by scandal, and distinguished him from the so-called right wing of Neue Sachlichkeit. Becoming "famous or infamous" seems to have been the alternative he saw for himself, and soon he was both. At the same time, it was scarcely possible to identify which elements in his paintings were due to existential shock and traumatized reappraisal and which to cynical calculation aimed at a sensation-seeking public. The two things went hand in hand for Dix, provoking shrill effects and creating an aesthetic of shock that was unparalleled in its day. The critic Curt Glaser saw it as mere speculation "aimed at the lower instincts for horror of a public lusting for sensation." But Dix's position as an artist was due not only to provocation for provocation's sake but was supremely reflective about aesthetics. Kriegskrüppel, also known as 45% erwerbsfähig (45% Employable), and Schützengraben (Trench) are two completely different works in terms of their aesthetic qualities. The Kriegskrüppel collage (fig. 9), one of the central works at the aforementioned Erste Internationale Dada-Messe in 1920 and acquired early on by the Städtische Kunstsammlung Dresden, related or simulated in painting the avant-garde cutting techniques of collage and montage. Using this artistic method, they reflected the breakdown and fragmentation of reality immediately after the First World War. By contrast, the painting Schützengraben (fig. 10)—also begun in 1920 but not finished until 1923—assaulted the viewer with its painstaking, literally dissecting description of the horror of the war, from which there is no escape. Above the grenade-torn battlefields, which reminded contemporary critics of a "saltwater aquarium" for their colors and which they called "mountains of decay" for their composition, the painter erected the gruesome symbol of a German soldier's corpse impaled on a steel girder.
It is one of the many paradoxes and surprises of the period that Dix’s impressive works later perceived as “antiwar paintings” were probably neither intended as such nor were always received that way. It is true that pacifist circles—including, for example, the journalist Franz Leschziner in Die Weltbühne in 1927—instrumentalized Dix’s Schützengraben, and in particular his Der Krieg series of prints of 1924 (fig. 11), which his dealer, Karl Nierendorf, launched early on with international publicity, was read in that spirit.30 At the same time, however, right-wing circles—in the journal Germania, for example—saw his works as realistic depictions of the horrors of war he had experienced first-hand. The artist himself played with the aesthetic ambivalence of his works and, in a curriculum vitae dating from around 1924, emphasized his consciously indifferent attitude: “Today, I live in Dusseldorf, am married and have a daughter named Nelly. I merely add that I am neither political nor tendentious nor pacifistic nor moralizing nor anything else. Nor do I paint in a symbolic or Frenchified way—I’m neither pro nor contra.”31

In an article titled “Dämonie der Satire” (The Daemonic Power of Satire), published in Das Kunstblatt in 1927, which remains relevant today and is reprinted in the present volume, the art critic Ernst Kállai identified the fundamental ambivalence of Dix’s depictions of war: “Defending against the awfulness [of war] is practiced with a pathos-laden ceremony of evoking precisely this awfulness, which ultimately leaves entirely open the question whether it constitutes a rejection or a cult.”32 Kállai did not simply express the viewer’s possible, difficult-to-bear conflict between fascination, on the one hand, and rejection, on the other. He also offered the important hint that an adaptation of Romantic landscape painting around 1800 was evident in Schützengraben: “When one juxtaposes the painting Trench with a mountain landscape by Caspar David Friedrich or Blechen, the intellectual affinity of their visions, however different their subject matter, is almost astonishing. What Dix drew out of the sketch for Trench is a mountain, a mountain of corpses and decomposition, which, for all the flagrant materiality, transports us to precisely the fantastic, unapproachable emotional realms, seen with the same unfathomable shuddering and great gloom as the eternal icy regions of the Romantics.”33 Already in this early phase, the realistic, critical depiction of horror depends on working through a pictorial tradition in order to be able to articulate the terrors of war at all, and Kállai

9 Opening of the Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First International Dada Fair), in Otto Burchard’s Berlin art gallery, June 1920; left to right: Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch (seated), Otto Burchard, Johannes Baader, Wieland Herzfelde, Margarete Herzfelde, Dr. Oz (Otto Schmalhausen), George Grosz, and John Heartfield. John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter’s Preussischer Erzengel (Prussian Archangel) hangs from the ceiling and Otto Dix’s Kriegskrüppeln (War Cripples), formerly Dresden, Stadtmuseum, confiscated in 1937, whereabouts unknown; presumably destroyed in Berlin in 1942 is partly visible at left.

10 Otto Dix, Schützengraben (Trench), 1920–23, oil on canvas, 227 x 250 cm (89 3⁄8 x 98 3⁄8 in.). Formerly Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, returned in 1925, 1930 Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, from 1933 defamed, confiscated in 1937, missing since 1940, presumably destroyed

11 Title page of Der Krieg (War), published by Karl Nierendorf, 1924
recognized that Dix almost inevitably approached the image of the sublime in the process.

Dix's own intentions were probably to depict war—which he interpreted in a Nietzschean way as a "natural event"—realistically out of a compulsion to come to terms with the traumatic experience and out of a desire for an aesthetic scandal, which Schützengraben did indeed provoke.33 This culminated in the approach that the art dealer Karl Nierendorf, whose enthusiastic commitment to the artist had earned him the nickname Nierendix, and who jealously sought to "protect" his artist from other dealers such as Flechtheim and Cassirer, took the work back after selling it to the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne.34 Although the painting was hidden behind a curtain, it had been the object of fierce attacks. The famous critic and advocate of Impressionism Julius Meier-Graefe even allowed himself to be carried away within the supposedly Romantic pictorial composition behind a curtain, it had been the object of fierce attacks. The famous critic and advocate of Impressionism Julius Meier-Graefe even allowed himself to be carried away—excuse the harsh word. Brains, blood, and guts are so dressed up, rather than painted, such that all animal reactions are forced into high tension.35 This quotation demonstrates the critic's ideological prejudices in art and his underestimation of Dix's highly differentiated, albeit not easily categorized painting.

Dix's major works of the early 1920s clearly constituted a paradoxical pictorial invention that was as programmatic as it was provocative, given that the critic Kállai could be reminded of the landscape painting of the German Romantics and the critic Meier-Graefe lost control in the face of the execution of the painting itself. The painter dovetailed the ennobling of the relationship to tradition in painting with a deliberate affront to an artistic culture of French provenance, which led to a double shock for the viewer: in terms of content, to the extent that horror of the battle of matériel was inscribed within the supposedly Romantic pictorial composition with a scorching acuity, and in terms of form, insofar as the overly refined tradition of painting shimmering color was replaced by a sometimes coarse impasto—that is, with an emphatically ugly painting—and a brutal punch below the belt.

The Object Is Primary

"Dix comes along like a natural disaster: outrageous, inexplicably devastating, like the explosion of a volcano. One never knows what to expect from this wild man. Again and again, he turns the helm to new shores and, like Proteus, transforms his ability, changing objects, points of view, and techniques."36 That was the view of Paul Ferdinand Schmidt (fig. 12), an enthusiastic supporter of Dix, on the occasion of the artist's retrospective in Berlin in 1926. The artist's ability to move between various stylistic traditions, seemingly without direction, to which Schmidt alludes here, certainly perplexed his contemporaries, and indeed it urgently raises the question of the function and explanation of this pluralism in the artist's work. Looking at Dix's oeuvre around 1920–21, one sees a confusing juxtaposition of diverse forms of artistic expression. Cubo-Futurism, Expressionism, naive amateur painting, Dadaism, and verism abruptly collided. It reveals a stylistic pluralism that is unique in this form.37 Since the early 1920s, Dix increasingly turned to a verist Neue Sachlichkeit, which often borrowed its iconography and painting technique from the Romantics and Old Masters.38

The stylistic adaptations evident in Dix's works were not, however, simply the expression of an almost naive passion for the real but also obeyed highly differentiated criteria and always appear to have been grounded in function. A particular stylistic mode was chosen by him in order to characterize and interpret a specific person or set of circumstances. The artist formulated the program of his aesthetic approach, which clearly separates him from the majority of painters of Neue Sachlichkeit, in a brief text published under the title "Das Objekt ist das Primäre" (The Object is Primary) in the Berliner Nachtausgabe for December 3, 1927. In one of the artist's rare statements, he wrote: "In any case, the innovative aspect of painting lies in the broadening of the subject area, in a heightening of the forms of expression that are in essence already found in the Old Masters. For me, in any case, the object is primary, and the form is shaped by the object. For that reason, it has always been a question of extreme importance whether I get as close as possible to the thing I see, for the how is more important than the what! The how only develops out of the what!"

The important thing about this question is that the reception of the Old Masters that is always associated with Dix cannot by any means be limited to a simple
attempt to continue the tradition, much less to reduce it to a conservative turn. Dix confronted the tradition of painting but also contemporary art; he reflected on both in a variety of ways. Dix's effort to come to terms with the centuries-old history and techniques of painting, his adaptation of the kitschy "established oil print", in the words of Paul Westheim, and his aggressive use of the avant-garde principle of montage were always motivated by the subject matter and connected to function. The stylistic idiom, the "how," was justified by the content, the "what." As considered aesthetic procedures, as artistic strategies, his stylistic adaptation and pluralism fit into an integrated overall picture of Dix's painting from the second through the fourth decades of the twentieth century without sacrificing their own aesthetic explosiveness. At the same time, this view justifies, now as ever, the modernity of the sometimes anachronistic-seeming "old master" Dix.

The Berlin-based art dealer Israel Ber Neumann and his Cologne-based business partner Karl Nierendorf had a considerable influence on the course of Otto Dix's career in the early 1920s and supported him in difficult situations. In late 1922, the painting *Mädchen vor dem Spiegel* (Girl in Front of the Mirror; fig. 13) was confiscated from the Juryfreie Kunstschau (Juryless Art Show) in Berlin and proceedings initiated against Dix. The critic Max Osborn remarked unequivocally about this action: "But the whole nature of the application [of paint] is of such delicateness here that no one capable of seeing art at all could ever think it conceals something 'obscene.'"

Nevertheless, there were legal proceedings against the artist's "indecent" depictions of women, featuring a tired-out whore with drooping breasts and exposed pubic hair in front of a mirror—an adaptation of traditional vanitas iconography. Neumann—unlike the Munich-based dealer Hans Goltz, who canceled a planned Dix exhibition in 1922 because of the subject matter—organized the first significant exhibition of Dix in Berlin in 1923, in the context of that trial. In addition, that same year he also initiated and published the first, brief monograph on the artist, written by the critic and museum director Paul Ferdinand Schmidt. Together with the monograph by Willi Wolfradt published in 1924, it was a milestone of the early reception of Dix in Germany (fig. 14). The art dealer and publisher Karl Nierendorf played a central part in Dix's achieving an important position in the

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12 Otto Dix, *Bildnis Dr. Paul Ferdinand Schmidt* (Portrait of Dr. Paul Ferdinand Schmidt), 1921, oil on canvas, 85 x 65 cm (33 ½ x 25 ⅝ in.), Staatsgalerie Stuttgart
German art world in the 1920s. They met around 1921–22 in the context of Dix's move to the Rhineland, when he enrolled at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in order to improve his working conditions. It was precisely the prints and watercolors, which were comparatively easy to sell after the First World War, that sparked Nierendorf's interest in Dix and led him to decide to do more for the artist. From 1922 to 1927, Nierendorf was the most important figure for Dix's career as an artist. His Berlin publishing house brought out Der Krieg, seventy copies of a portfolio of fifty prints in all. It was subdivided into five separate portfolios of ten sheets each, which could be purchased for 300 marks each; the full set cost 1,000 marks. At the same time, Nierendorf issued a cheap trade edition of twenty-four offset prints, whose print run of about 3,000 copies was preceded by a foreword from the French antiwar author Henri Barbusse. Nierendorf wrote his author that the unions had ordered 1,500 copies of this trade edition for their antiwar celebration on September 21, 1924.

Few works of art have captured the experience of war more precisely than the fifty prints in the Der Krieg portfolio by Otto Dix that Karl Nierendorf published. The artist had spent more than three years in the trenches and suffered the most frightful events close-up. Against the backdrop of his intense preoccupation with the masters of the graphic arts (Urs Graf, Jacques Callot, and Francisco Goya), he condensed his own experiences into an aesthetically rich sequence that alternates among various stylistic models and different levels of context. Dix established the sequence and the captions of the prints himself. There is no apparent logic to the subdivision of the series into five portfolios of ten sheets each. The prints show aspects of the everyday lives of soldiers on the front, trench warfare and its consequences, from grenade-ravaged landscapes and the shot and ripped-open bodies of soldiers to assaults, bombardments, bordello visits, and drinking bouts.

The quotidian madness of dehumanizing war, which transforms a human corpse into the cadaver of an animal or a desecrated landscape, is illuminated in these sheets by Bengal light or excessive, blinding light (fig. 15). So the events themselves either sink into the deep black or radiate before the viewers' eyes in painful clarity. These effects are achieved through virtuoso handling of print techniques that Dix juxtaposes in tension-filled contrasts. Etching penetrates deep into the plate to produce a grainy black, while nervous drypoint engraving captures...