

# Dix: War

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So long as the First World War lasted, there was little but his obsessive draughtsmanship to distinguish Otto Dix from other young Germans of his age and social background. He joined the artillery within weeks of its outbreak, fought as an infantryman in Champagne between autumn 1915 and mid-1916, then in the Battle of the Somme, then on the Russian front before it collapsed. Back on the Western front he may have been briefly at Verdun, and was certainly in the fighting around Ypres. He was wounded in the neck, was awarded the Iron Cross class 2 and worked his way up from ordinary machine-gunner to Lance-Sergeant. In 1918, not long before the war ended, he applied to become an airman and was sent back to Bautzen in Saxony for training. This left him at the age of 27 some sixty kilometres away from Dresden and his interrupted education as an artist.

Dix had taken into the army with him a passion for drawing in charcoal or soft black pencil, and the self-evident model for his violently black war drawings was the work of Umberto Boccioni and other Italian Futurists, a selection of whose pictures had been touring central Europe after their introduction by the Berlin 'Sturm' gallery in spring 1912; they were shown in Dresden, though opinions differ as to whether Dix saw them. He made hundreds of such drawings - many of them on postcards - during his service in France, Russia and Flanders, showing the destruction of villages, trees and trench systems, the upturning of fields by shellfire, the savage confusion of hand-to-hand fighting, the vast rushing of projectiles, men and vehicles, all in terms of those Futurist conventions of overlapping shapes and quasi-rayonist 'lines of force' which stemmed from Marinetti's profascist dynamism.

There is a superficially similar chopping-up of the war landscape on Futurist lines in the work of August Stramm, the outstanding poet of *Der Sturm*, whose dissection of language springs from the same modernist technique; thus 'Shrapnel':

The sky casts clouds  
Crackling into smoke.  
Jagged lightning.  
Feet shift pebble spray.  
Eyes titter at tangle  
And  
Slope off.

But what seems to set Dix's on-the-spot sketches of front-line feelings and experience so puzzlingly apart from his mature war etchings of 1923-24 is not so much a Nietzschean, Dionysiac urge to participate, or even their Futurist echoes, as their almost complete absence of living persons. Often there are no faces to such figures as he includes there; at best they show a stereotyped set of snarling teeth; it is as if the artist dare not make them as lively as the torn-up soil.

For many of Dix's colleagues and contemporaries the violent traumas of the war changed their entire attitude, not only to the existing order in Germany, but also to the direction, style and technique of their own work. It is interesting how the two things went together. The Austrian cavalryman Oskar Kokoschka, after being badly wounded in the head, went to convalesce in Dresden, where he developed a rich new style of painting. Of the Brücke artists, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner broke down and settled in Switzerland; Max Pechstein was interned in Japan, then spent two years on the Western Front, made some remarkable etchings of the Battle of the Somme and returned to take a leading part in the post-war arts structure. Max Beckmann at first became a medical orderly and made some drawings on the Russian and Flanders fronts, but broke down in 1915 and was discharged to Frankfurt, where he abandoned his pre-war Impressionism to paint *Resurrection*, 1917/18 and *Night*, 1918-19 and embark on the socially critical graphics of *Die Hölle* and other series. Of Dix's Dresden contemporaries, George Grosz volunteered, broke down, was discharged, called up again, put in an asylum and rescued by Count Harry Kessler to work on a propaganda film. The young Conrad Felixmüller, who designed the cover for the Dresden magazine *Menschen* at the beginning of 1918, refused to be conscripted and was sent as a nurse to a military asylum, where he found that his charges were:

...all human like me. Flesh, bodies, bones - curious shapes,  
part soft, part hard. Pain everywhere, most of all in the head...

Back in the Dresden area as the war ended, Dix joined with Felixmüller, Otto Griebel, Otto Schubert and Lasar Segall to form the radical Gruppe 1919 of the Dresden Sezession. Kokoschka, a professor at the Academy for the next four years, was an honorary member. There are paintings or drawings where Dix, Felixmüller, Griebel and Karl Günther portray one another in various combinations. Meanwhile Dix applied to go back to art school as a student at the Academy, where he soon became a master pupil of Pechstein's former teacher Otto Gußmann, and was given a studio of his own. It was these two steps that launched Dix on his ambiguous new course of the early 1920s: pacifist and socially critical on the one hand, technically tradition-based on the other. For a very short while his post-war work seems like a development of his front-line drawings, with recognisably the same dynamism and Futurist simultaneity. Then his friends in the Group introduced him to the Berlin Dadaists, of whom Grosz and John Heartfield had joined the new Communist Party along with Felixmüller and Griebel, and from then on the Futurism was virtually forgotten; he found himself on a new and stimulating platform; a small Dresden Dada unit was formed, and the advanced critics paid attention to his work.

Like Grosz and the Karlsruhe Dadaist Rudolf Schlichter, Dix now launched his attack on the German social and military Establishment as it had emerged from the war: bemedalled ex-officers, upper and lower bourgeoisie, whores of almost unrelieved ugliness; and also beggars, war victims with artificial limbs, and worn-down workers of his own class. At first the angle was satirical; Dix used a collage technique derived from Cubism by the Dadaists and well suited to depicting those war wounded (as in *Prager Straße* and *The Skat Players* of 1920) whose limbs and other organs had been blown off and mechanically pinned together by army surgery. Then the Berlin 'Dada Club' headed by Grosz, Heartfield and Raoul Hausmann invited him to contribute in June 1920 to the First (and last) International Dada Fair which they staged in a private gallery in Berlin. Here, among some 170 other exhibits, there were three eye-catching contributions: Grosz's painting *Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen*, Dix's two-metre wide procession of *War Cripples* and, floating just below the ceiling, Schlichter's stuffed effigy of a German soldier with gas mask and a pig's head. 'If drawings could kill,' said Kurt Tucholsky, who contributed a short review to the *Weltbühne*, 'the Prussian military would long since have been dead'.

It was after the war, rather than during his front-line service, that Dix 'kept having these dreams where I had to crawl through demolished houses, through passages I could hardly get through. My dreams were full of débris'. According to an interview which he gave near the end of his life they recurred over a period of some ten years. And his first big, nearly eight foot-square painting of *The Trench*, 1920-23, did look (in contrast to those of his Dada period) like a desperate attempt not to satirise but to exorcise them in a classically academic style. He began this work of minutely detailed gruesomeness when he was still at the Dresden Academy, brought it with him to Düsseldorf in 1922, and sold the finished work in 1923 to the great Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne. This caused a major art controversy, with Max Liebermann in favour of the picture and Julius Meier-Graefe and Cologne's mayor Konrad Adenauer against it, with the upshot that the picture was returned to Dix, who lent it to the travelling show called *Nie wieder Krieg! or Never another War!*. This pacifist exhibition was designed to mark the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of war. Clearly his new Berlin dealer Karl Nierendorf was conscious of the occasion, for he commissioned the artist of *The Trench* to make a series of fifty prints on the same theme, to be published in Berlin during 1924. The big picture itself was bought by Dresden State Art Gallery after the end of its tour, and put uncontroversially in the city's reserve collection, where the Nazis would confiscate it when Hitler came to power; it has since disappeared and was presumably destroyed. The prints - *Der Krieg* - have survived, to constitute Dix's finest, most famous and passionate work.

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Dix's war etchings have been compared with Goya's *The Disasters of War*, which it seems the German artist had partly in mind. They were published by Nierendorf from the Lützowstraße in West Berlin in five linen-bound portfolios, each priced at 300 new (post-stabilisation) Marks, or 1000 Marks for the lot. A selection of twenty-four gravure reproductions by the same printer, Felsing of Berlin, was issued at the same time for 2 Mks 40 Pf. There were seventy sets of the complete work, of which only one was actually subscribed, thanks to the drastic currency reform which entirely disrupted the market for modern graphics; the sales of the cheap selection, however, must have run into the thousands. Fifteen hundred were ordered by the trade unions for their 'anti-war' day, and Nierendorf sent out some hundreds of copies to the press, leading writers and local branches of peace and human rights societies. 'There has never been a bigger campaign to sell a work in portfolio form', he told the artist.

Linked by their theme, the Western Front between 1916-1918, and by their technique, which is a mixture of etching and aquatint, the fifty prints are in other respects extremely varied. They seem to be presented in a random order, neither chronological, thematic nor topographic. Their plate sizes differ: sometimes they are in line on a white ground, sometimes on a tint, sometimes white areas are sharply bitten out of the drawing, sometimes the line is white on black. We see soldiers advancing, waiting, alone, in groups, in featureless gasmasks, in village brothels, lustful, looting, wounded, dead, skeletons and skulls. The shattered (and often shattering) scene switches irregularly between Champagne in 1916, the first battle of the Somme, Brussels, Antwerp, a Verdun fort, Mons, Tournai, Ypres. It is all very unlike the drawings in the wartime *Illustrated London News* or, for that matter, in *Krieg und Kunst*, the fortnightly instalments of lithographs by Lovis Corinth, Willy Jaeckel, Moriz Melzer and other artists of the Berlin Sezession which appeared from 1914 on. And as soon as you take them up - the actual prints, that is, rather than even the finest reproductions - you are conscious of having great works in your hands.

Given Dix's distortions and his ingrained love of the grotesque there was (and still is) a certain absurdity in pretending that his work was cool and objective in the spirit of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, let alone 'matter of fact' (which is perhaps the most literal translation of 'sachlich', and the best description of that mid-1920s movement). But within the field covered by the Mannheim exhibition of that name (which was toured to Dresden and five other mid-German cities) he was certainly on the more socially critical side. In 1926, after he had been in Berlin for some months, Nierendorf held an exhibition of Dix's portraits and launched a 'new club', the Society for Politics, Science and Art, which was like a successor to the Red Group. A week later, the dealer Alfred Flechtheim, who like Nierendorf had transferred his main effort from the Rhineland to Berlin, gave a show to Grosz, whose revolutionary impulse was already fading when the Red Group petered out. All in all, the particular kind of 'realism with a social flavour' which characterised the Mannheim exhibition not only brought Dix to prominence but formed the core of a particularly German form of 'Socialist Realism', sharper and more modern than the Russian brand, which would re-surface two decades later as the mainstream tradition of East German art. It shows perhaps how little an artist can determine what impact his work is going to make; its energy and originality are in the pictures; they do not necessarily stem from his conscious will.

On 30 January 1933 Hitler, most famous of the world's failed artists, became Chancellor; on 27 February the Reichstag Fire allowed him to start eliminating all opposition; on 21 March the Weimar Republic was liquidated to make room for the Third Reich. On 8 April Manfred von Killinger, the Reich Commissar for Saxony, had Dix ('that swine') removed from the Dresden Academy, which was now headed by Grosz's old bête noire Richard Müller, a new recruit to the Nazi Party. Then in mid-May Dix was asked to resign from the Prussian Academy, along with all the other left-wing appointees to that eminent body; he got no pension. In the course of that summer most of the museum and gallery directors favourable to modern art were removed, naturally including Paul Ferdinand Schmidt from Dresden. Of the artists there Griebel and Hans Gründig finished up in Sachsenhausen concentration camp; Erich Ohser was eventually executed; others, like Günther, were forbidden to paint; Dix was briefly arrested in 1939.

Even before the end of 1933 Müller organised 'purges of filth and muck' from the city collections, culminating in a show of 'illustrations of the decline of German art' in the town hall. Fortunately Dix was a friend of Fritz Lenk, one of the advisers to Goebbels's powerful Art Chamber - the new monolithic art organisation - and this enabled him to become a member. In 1934 he prudently moved to the south-east corner of Germany, where he built a house, not far from those of Erich Heckel, Walther Kaesbach and the photographer Hugo Erfurth. Turning to landscape painting, which he had effectively abandoned before the First War, he pursued the tradition favoured by the Nazis - a mélange of Albrecht Altdorfer, the Brueghels, Hans Baldung Grien. Such pictures he was able to sell, and even to exhibit with Nierendorf in Berlin.

The real attack on Dix came as part of the purge of the German public collections under the leadership of the Munich painter of nudes Adolf Ziegler, the Art Chamber's tasteful president, and it centred on his notorious undermining of the military spirit and his 'degradation of the German front-line soldier'. Ziegler had been commissioned by Hitler on 30 June 1937 to select 'works of decadent art in the sphere of painting and sculpture since 1910', initially for showing in that year's Degenerate Art Exhibition, and subsequently for sale abroad or ultimate burning. One of this man's aides was the painter Wolf Willrich, a former prisoner of war and student at the Dresden Academy from 1920-27, whose ensuing book on *Cleansing the Temple of Art* 'in the spirit of the Nordic Race' commented thus on the final plate of *Der Krieg*:

Here is a notably competent draughtsman making subtle use of all the various possibilities provided by drypoint and etching techniques for the conduct of a boishévistic anti-war campaign . . .

The catalogue of that exhibition included nine of Dix's paintings, of which the Dada *War Cripples* and *The Trench* were in the big Room 3 and two working-class pictures of the same period in Room G2 downstairs, along with the Berlin Kupferstichkabinett's complete set of *Der Krieg* in Room G1. In all, 260 of Dix's works were purged, as against 151 by Felixmüller and 285 by George Grosz.

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Looking at *Der Krieg* more than a century after the artist's birth, one has little sense of any propagandist 'campaign'; nor is there evidence of shrewd mockery as found in nearly all the German work by Grosz; the individualised faces of the ordinary soldiers are neither critically nor distortedly portrayed. If there are hints of the artist's own features they seem to recall his participation. He too was there; like Goya he is saying 'I saw it'. This is a feeling that is not present in any other comparable wartime cycle since Jacques Callot. Frans Masereel's passionate ink drawings and woodcuts are mostly those of a deeply concerned outsider, painfully observing from the margin. The Franco-Swiss Félix Vallotton's woodcuts *C'est la Guerre!* show the battlefield, but in a style that carries on from his anarchist prints in the old *Revue Blanche*. Henry Tonks's little-known watercolours of shattered faces are appalling but objective, like Dix's plate 40 and the photographs in Ernst Friedrich's *War Against War*; they were not made for publication. There are traces of a similar approach to Dix's in Ludwig Meidner's apocalyptic drawings from the eve of that war, and in the occasional plate by Beckmann; Pechstein's etchings of the Somme are also impressive, but they have nothing like the same richness and variety. The one truly comparable series, by its timing (from 1922 on), its scale (58 plates, plus some 40 rejects), its use of etching and aquatint, and its over-arching grandeur, is the *Miserere et Guerre* of Georges Rouault, though its feeling is notably more reflective and religious and it was not published until after the next great war.

In the East German re-edition of *Der Krieg* there is a quotation from a letter home written by an unidentified soldier in 1943, the year of the Battle of Stalingrad and the surrender in North Africa:

I often find myself having to think of some pictures I saw long ago in an illustrated paper. Probably because they were accompanied by an article ridiculing them, I felt repelled and couldn't understand them. I've forgotten the artist's name. But his pictures won't let me alone. One of a wounded soldier, gazing into emptiness like a madman; another of a ghastly mining landscape. A stretch of ripped-up earth like where we lie at the moment. You will know what I'm trying to say. For the first time I understand the indictment which those pictures contain.

The force which was in them twenty years earlier was still there. Has anything happened since then to make it irrelevant today?