Dix at the Met

SABINE Rewald

Associate Curator, Twentieth Century Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Between 1989 and 1994 the Metropolitan Museum acquired one painting, two drawings, and one print (Figures 1–4) by Otto Dix (1891–1969). These four works, dating from 1920 to 1933, display this controversial German artist’s brilliance as a portraitist and draftsman.

Dix was part of the movement toward a deadpan, matter-of-fact realism that later became known as Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) in Germany in the 1920s. What set Dix apart from his fellow Realists, however, was his fascination with the “ugly.” In his work he focused on the nightmare of World War I and its aftermath, the Weimar Republic, with its ubiquitous fat profiteers, raffish demimonde, worn prostitutes, and war cripples.

At the beginning of the war Dix had signed up as a volunteer; he became a noncommissioned officer and spent most of the next four years serving with a heavy machine-gun battery on the Western Front. He was wounded several times, once nearly fatally. His painter colleagues Max Beckmann (1884–1950) and George Grosz (1893–1958) suffered nervous breakdowns after fighting in combat. Dix’s mental and physical toughness, however, allowed him not only to survive this inferno but also to relish the experience. He continued to draw and paint during the war, returning from the mayhem unharmed in body and soul.

The artist had a relentless urge to depict reality of the most horrible kind, an urge that no doubt grew out of his wartime experiences. They shaped his near sadistic delight in shocking his contemporaries with works that reek of ugliness, distortion, perversion, and violence. Dix made his debut as an enfant terrible in 1920 with four ferocious and macabre antiwar pictures. These paintings mark his shift from personal to political engagement with the war. They were his response to the political chaos, rampant inflation, mass unemployment, bloody street battles, and assassinations that followed the Versailles Treaty of January 1920.

The drypoint Cardplayers of 1920 (Figure 4) in the Museum’s collection is based on one of his four antiwar paintings, the famous 1920 Skat Players (Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Figure 5). Dix depicts three hideously disfigured officers playing the German card game skat in a typical German café complete with newspapers and coatrack. The players clutch their cards with foot, mouth, and mechanical hands. Their faces and heads have devastating injuries—to see a real version of this morbid image Dix had only to step out of his studio into the street. One and a half million German soldiers returned wounded from the war, so war cripples were a common sight selling matches or begging in the streets. Dix also consulted photographs of these wounded, some of whom had grotesque deformities. The pictures were published by the left-wing press as a deterrent to the renewed stirrings of militarism.

Employing collage, Dix crammed the Skat Players with diabolically realistic and illusionistic details: the ersatz blue cloth jacket of a player who wears an Iron Cross; the silver foil paper for a mechanical jaw replacement; the black eye patch covering an absent nose; the huge motionless glass eye; the spiffy hairdos confected from patches of hair; the starched white collars, ties, and nubby tweed suits. One sports a cuff link on the shirt-sleeve he wears on his leg—the only leg among the trio—which serves as an arm. Between his preparatory drawing (Figure 6) and the painting (Figure 5), Dix further “crippled” his players by eliminating the second leg from the left figure and the two stumps from the right one. The latter’s torso sits now in a metal contraption. Other picturesque collage elements are the old-fashioned playing cards and front pages of the newspaper Dresden Tagesblatt (now the faded brown of a Cubist collage). The cripples’ ebony “legs” form a decorative pattern with the black legs of the chairs and card table.

The accumulation of these lurid yet colorful illusionistic details muffles to some extent the shocking impact of this painting. By paring the image down to its essentials in the drypoint version, Dix makes this morbid card game more immediate and gripping. The austere black-and-white print evokes medieval images of games between mortals and the Devil or Death. Dix added only one element in the print: one of the players now puffs on a cigar.

Dix found his distinctive style in the second half of the 1920s when he began to adopt a more realistic
still somewhat caricatural approach and turned increasingly to portraiture. He painted a group of pictures of businessmen, lawyers, and doctors, often giving them the attributes of their profession. His most successful portraits, however, are of artists and intellectuals who did not object to being portrayed with an unflinchingly brutal honesty. Dix focused on his sitters’ foibles and weaknesses, magnifying them on canvas. Despite his ruthless realism a surprising number of eminent people wanted to be portrayed by him. Among those he turned down were the dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946) and the German chancellor Dr. Hans Luther (1879–1962). Dix liked to choose his own models, rejecting those that did not interest him. He believed in first impressions and did not want to modify them by closer familiarity with the sitter. Dix made only drawings and preparatory studies of his sitter, later working from these in the solitude of his studio.5

The Businessman Max Roesberg, Dresden, 1922 (Figure 3), is both the first painting by Dix and the first example of German Realism in the 1920s to enter the Museum’s collection.6 The portrait is an outstanding example of the Neue Sachlichkeit, and as such it filled a gap in the collection. The artists working in the Neue Sachlichkeit mode in Germany during the 1920s, Dix among them, depicted their milieu with such clinical objectivity that their work documents the fashion, interior furnishings, and German social life during the 1920s and 1930s. The most up-to-date gadgets and technical inventions such as cocktail glasses, telephones, radios, cars, and airplanes make their debut in these pictures. It is interesting to note that the telephone (one is featured prominently in the portrait of Roesberg) appears first in the works of American and German artists.7

The rather benign character of Dix’s portrait of Max Roesberg might be due to the fact that it is a relatively early picture and that it was commissioned by the sitter, an acquaintance of the artist in Dresden. Max Roesberg (1885–1965) was a businessman and cofounder of Roesberg & Ehrlich, a company that dealt in metal and mining and foundry products.8 Dix liked to age his male sitters; here he added at least twenty years to the then thirty-seven-year-old model (Figures 7, 8). Roesberg is a dapper dresser in typical 1920s fashion: he sports a starched white collar, blue patterned tie, gray waistcoat, and taupe jacket. With his clipped mustache and cropped salt-and-pepper hair Roesberg appears cunning and alert. As Dix was wont to do in his early portraits of lawyers and busi-
nessmen, he included colorful details that relate to the sitter's business. The quaint, unattractive clock on the wall shows 1:32 P.M. (the busy Roesberg can only pose during lunch); the tear-off calendar from Müller & Co A.G., Duisburg; the mail-order catalogue of machine parts in his left hand on cheap pink inflation-period paper, and the registered and already stamped letter to Otto Dix on his desk blotter. The sleek black-and-chrome telephone—the most up-to-date model—takes up nearly one quarter of the desk. It brings an international flair into this provincial office, which Dix depicted in the colors of money and commerce, greens and browns with black and white.

I have been able to piece together the life of Roesberg with information supplied by the sitter's relatives who immigrated to the United States. They contacted the Museum after Carol Vogel's brief note on the painting's acquisition appeared in the New York Times in June 1992.9

Ironically the businessman Roesberg had no head for business. He prospered only briefly during the inflation, at the time he sat for his portrait. After he lost his money through bad investments, he eked out a living as a trade representative for a metal company in Cologne. For much of the rest of his life he was penniless and was supported by exasperated relatives. As one of them exclaimed: "He owed everybody money and we had to support him. Who would have believed that our ne'er-do-well cousin would end up in the Met?"10

In 1939 Roesberg and his wife, Margarete, who were Jewish, immigrated to Santiago, Chile, where he worked in the wholesale milk business and where he died in 1965.11 Far from being the shrewd businessman depicted in Dix's portrait, Roesberg was a colorful, bohemian sort of man who befriended and bought works from artists in Dresden. His nieces and nephews remember him as a gentle, humorous sort who delighted them with puns and doggerel during family reunions.12 Many remembered the portrait from their childhood when it hung in Roesberg's Dresden apartment. They were united in their intense dislike of the painting and thought the green background offensive, the figure wooden, and the posturing as a businessman laughable.

However uncertain Dix's place as a painter might be, he remains celebrated as a draftsman. During the artist's first exhibition in France in Paris in 1972, even
the French critics mustered respect for his "métier."13 Drawing was the backbone of Dix's art, and today he is considered one of the finest draftsmen of the twentieth century. He always drew, whether in pencil, charcoal, wash, red chalk, ink, watercolor, or gouache.

The two drawings that the Museum acquired in 1994 display Dix's virtuosic draftsmanship in different ways. The 1923 pencil sketch of a seated nude (Figure 1) is free and bold, and the 1923 silverpoint Female Nude (Figure 2) is controlled and precise. In the earlier sheet the plump young model is naked except for a large bow in her hair and shoes on her feet. Dix indicated the outlines of her full body with a few strong lines and added delicate shading to her shoulders and torso. The artist's female nudes usually shock by their skeletal boniness or crude fatness, but here Dix depicted his young model with surprising tact.

In the 1933 Female Nude Dix combines eroticism with psychological insight. The identity of the sitter is unknown. The great expressiveness of the model's strong-boned, mannish face distracts from her nudity. Neither young nor attractive, the sitter projects a powerful personality. She gazes away pensively with eyes that have seen much. Although the pliant body

Figure 6. Otto Dix. Skat Players, 1920. Pencil and ink on paper, 28 x 21.6 cm. Private collection

Figure 7. Max Roesberg in the early 1920s, Dresden (photo: courtesy Herrmann Roesberg, New York)

Figure 8. Max Roesberg in the 1950s, Santiago, Chile (photo: courtesy Herrmann Roesberg, New York)
appears near and available, the woman herself seems distant and cold. She seems to express all the weariness of the Weimar Republic that was drawing to an end.

In emulation of the Old Masters, especially Hans Baldung Grien whom he greatly admired, Dix adopted the difficult medium of silverpoint in 1931. The hard point of the metal on a gesso-treated ground requires steady pressure and a sure hand.

Dix was a professor of painting at the Dresden Academy of Art from 1927 until 1933. The ready availability of models inspired him to paint and draw a series of nudes. The often provocative nature of his nudes from the 1920s is absent in his later works, replaced by exquisite technique and a greater humaneness.

In 1933 Dix was dismissed from his post by the National Socialists, a fate shared by all avant-garde artists. He would take refuge in neutral subjects such as landscape and allegory. This drawing is the last work in what is regarded as Dix’s characteristic style.

NOTES

1. Like many artists of his generation, Dix fell under the spell of Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1911, at the age of twenty, he made his only known sculpture, a lifesize plaster bust of the philosopher (location unknown). Nietzsche’s endorsement of instinct over intellect proved very seductive for the generation that had grown up under the restrictions of the late 19th century. In his writings he urged that the most intense emotions, both positive and negative, be sought out and experienced through music, lovemaking, dance, hatred, or warfare. Dix had some of Nietzsche’s writings with him during the war, but it is not certain if the text was The Gay Science or Thus Spake Zarathustra. See Sarah O’Brien Twohig, “Dix and Nietzsche,” in K. Hartley and S. O’Brien Twohig, Otto Dix 1891–1969, exh. cat., Tate Gallery (London, 1992) pp. 40–48.

2. Three of four antiwar paintings survive: Match Vendor, 1920 (Staatssgalerie Stuttgart), Prager Strasse, 1920 (Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart), and Skat Players. The fourth, and most notorious, The War Cripples (with Self-Portrait), 1920, was exhibited at the Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920 to much controversy. Confiscated in 1937 by the National Socialists because it mocked German soldiers, it was included in the 1937 exhibition “Degenerate Art,” which traveled throughout Germany. The National Socialists probably destroyed the work.

3. The painting hung for many years on extended loan at the Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, until the heirs of the owner sold it to the Nationalgalerie, Berlin, in late 1995. The Verein der Freunde der Nationalgalerie, which supports the museum, was the driving force behind the purchase of the painting (for $7.5 million German marks, or about $5.5 million). The Freunde organized an advertising campaign to solicit donations for the acquisition, and posters of the Skat Players covered the entire city.


5. This was confirmed by one of Dix’s surviving sitters from the 1920s. Professor Volkmar Glaser, who is depicted as an adolescent in the 1925 Family Portrait of the Lawyer Fritz Glaser (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Galerie Neuer Meister, Dresden), told me about this experience in a letter of Feb. 26, 1994. (I discuss Dix’s working method and his “artificial aging” of male sitters in the Dresden painting and in the MMA painting in my article “Tales of Two Sitters: Notes on Two Dix Portraits,” Burlington Magazine [April 1996] no. 1117, vol. 88, pp. 249–252.)

6. The MMA bought the painting at auction at Sotheby’s, Berlin, May 29, 1991, lot 32. The work had been consigned to Sotheby’s, New York, by one of Roesberg’s descendants, who was advised by the auction house, however, to put the picture up for sale in an auction devoted solely to German art in Berlin. The picture was virtually unknown; it had never been lent to an exhibition, and in the vast literature on Dix it had been reproduced only once—faintly—and its location described as unknown (F. Löffler, Otto Dix 1891–1969: Oeuvre der Gemälde [Recklinghausen, 1981] p. 20, pl. 9).

7. To my knowledge, the American painter Morton Livingston Schamberg (1881–1918) was the first artist to represent the telephone in his Cubist painting Telephone, 1916 (Columbus Museum of Art). It may also have inspired a later work by Schamberg’s friend Charles Sheeler, Self-Portrait, 1923 (Museum of Modern Art, New York), in which Sheeler uses the telephone as an alter ego. In Germany the telephone was first depicted by H. M. Darvinausen in his painting The Profiteer, 1921 (Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf). There the sitter is seen with a box of cigars, a cocktail glass, a liquor bottle, and, visible through the window, brightly lit Manhattanesque skyscrapers.


9. Carol Vogel, “The Art Market: Portrait’s Round Trip,” The New York Times, June 12, 1992. No biographical information on Roesberg was given in Sotheby’s auction catalogue. The consigner insisted on anonymity and has not replied to written requests for information passed on to Sotheby’s. In response to Vogel’s note in the Times, a cousin of Roesberg’s asked to see the painting and put me in contact with other members of the extended Roesberg family. I discuss this episode in greater detail in “Tales of Two Sitters.”


11. Letter of Oct. 12, 1992, from Werner Simonson, who kindly consulted the files of the Jewish Center in Santiago, Chile.
