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Otto Dix

War and Representation

MATTHEW BIRO

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE GERMAN ARTIST OTTO DIX (1891–1969) SEEMS A PARADIGMATIC CASE of a painter radically influenced by twentieth-century warfare. He sketched and painted throughout the four years he fought in World War I, and many of his most famous works of the 1920s and 1930s—his massive canvas *The Trench* (1920–23), the even larger triptych *The War* (1932), and his epic series of etchings, also titled *The War* (1924)—were controversial commemorations of that most recent and devastating European calamity. Despite the impact that the war had on him, however, many of Dix's artistic ideas and tendencies were initially set before the conflagration; the armed conflict—as unprecedented and powerful as it was—was only one important influence among many. War, one could say, changed Dix, but only by confirming and supporting some of his most deeply rooted visual and intellectual affinities.

Long associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), the naturalistic mode of depiction characteristic of advanced art and literature produced during the Weimar Republic, Dix has generally been praised as both a realist and a social critic.[1] Closer attention to his art, however, discerns a great deal of eclecticism, in terms of both form and technique, at nearly every stage of his career. Dix undertook a critical exploration of artistic practices, including those drawn from the painterly tradition and modern and avant-garde art, without making a firm commitment to any one mode or strategy. From the very beginning, Dix refused to identify with a fixed style or movement; and, over his career, he avoided committing to extremes such as pure abstraction or photographic realism. Instead, he balanced acute observation with metaphoric allegory, demonstrating a commitment to the external world that nevertheless recognized the constructive and radically interpretive nature of vision and visual representation in general.[2]

Self-Portrait with Carnation (fig. 1) depicts the twenty-one-year-old Dix, then an art student in Dresden, two years before the hostilities commenced. On the one hand, the painting seems typical of the objectivity for which Dix later became known. The self-portrait is carefully observed and realized; its forms are clearly delineated; and its style accords with traditional modes of realistic representation from the Renaissance onward. On the other hand, the blankness of some of the forms (most notably, the blue background) and overall linearity of the image makes the representation appear iconic and invested with symbolism, something that is heightened by Dix's depiction of the carnation, a symbol of betrothal, held between his fingers. This motif emphasizes the artist's manual dexterity; and the way the flower is grasped evokes a graphic or painterly instrument; the gesture furthermore connects Dix's painting with those of Northern Renaissance masters such as Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung, whose works Dix studied in the nearby Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

FIGURE 1. OTTO DIX (GERMAN, 1891–1969). *Self-Portrait with Carnation*, 1912, oil and tempera on panel, 73.6 x 49.5 cm (29 x 19½ in.). Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts.

in Dresden. In this early self-portrait, Dix seems to be concerned with both optical veracity and meaning beyond the visible.

At the same time as he supported realistic representation and forms of dry objectivity, Dix also embraced an active type of gestural painting, one that was indebted to both impressionism and expressionism. Between 1911 and 1913, he created landscapes in nature using the *alla prima* (direct painting) technique; and, in the studio, he quickly and emotively rendered still lifes and self-portraits in oil. These latter strategies suggest a more expressionist and subjective side to his art, a counterpoint to Dix's realist tendencies. His engagement with the work of Vincent van Gogh and Die Brücke artists before the war only intensified this expressionist side of Dix's painting, as did his reading of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose bust the artist sculpted in 1912.[3] Like many artists and intellectuals at the time, Dix embraced Nietzsche's view of modern man as living in a time of decline and nihilism and the philosopher's conviction that the arts could reimagine the world and provide a will to go on.[4] In Dix's prewar still lifes and landscapes, nature and everyday life are revitalized by self-referential form, color, and facture. If, as Nietzsche argued, the development of science and rationality had destroyed the plausibility of a transcendental realm of spiritual values, a realm of meaning not created by human beings, then artists had to reenchant the world and develop new icons and values.[5] Dix's prewar gestural works, which employ direct painting as part of an effort to restore aura to the world, suggest this Nietzschean outlook.

Like many of his generation, Dix enlisted voluntarily in August 1914. That fall, at the age of twenty-three, he received artillery training as part of a machine-gun squad and subsequently fought for almost four years in the trenches along the western and eastern fronts, during which time he was both wounded and promoted, eventually to the rank of master sergeant.[6] In 1918, when the war was coming to an end, Dix reenlisted in the German air force and began training as an aerial observer. He was both repelled by and attracted to armed conflict: "The war was a hideous thing, but there was something tremendous about it, too. I couldn't afford to miss it. You have to see human beings in this unchained condition in order to know something about them."[7] Reflecting Nietzsche's fascination with the "blond beast" and his romantic valorization of the "will to power" of creative individuals who recognized that they were "beyond good and evil,"[8] Dix's romanticization of war was quickly tempered by a clear recognition of its senseless destructiveness and the psychic trauma that it inflicted upon him: "For years, at least ten years, I kept having these dreams in which I would have to crawl through demolished houses, through doorways that barely permitted me to pass. The ruins were incessant in my dreams."[9]

A double-sided oil-on-paper work from 1914, comprising *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* on one side and *Self-Portrait with Artillery Helmet* on the other, shows the intense scrutiny of self that characterized the art of Dix's wartime years (fig. 2). Appropriating an expressionist style suggestive of the work of Emil Nolde or Max Pechstein, these representations seem both closely observed and allegorizing. On the one hand, specific details, such as Dix's shaved head or his new military uniform, appear plucked from life. On the other hand, the paintings' expressive aspects—the slashing painterly brush strokes and vibrant chromatics—in conjunction with the

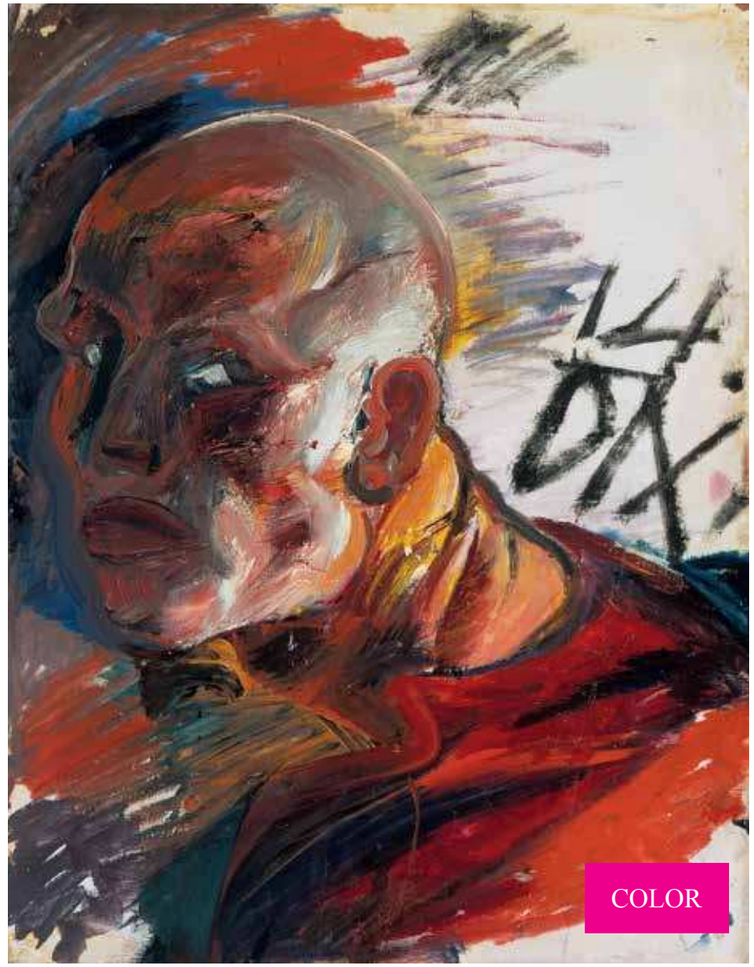

FIGURE 2. OTTO DIX (GERMAN, 1891–1969). *Self-Portrait as a Soldier,* 1914, oil on paper, 68 x 53.5 cm (26⅞ x 21⅛ in.). Stuttgart, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

idealizing nature of the depictions (the fact that Dix represents himself as powerful and physically whole) imply a sense of himself as a Nietzschean "new man," someone who would not only survive but also develop and evolve through war.

Dix believed that armed conflict, like art, was radically transformative; if he was not killed or maimed, he would be forged into a higher state of being. This was a belief about war that transcended political ideologies at the time, uniting the bohemian but apolitical Dix with right-wing revolutionaries such as Ernst Jünger.[10] As he gained war experience, Dix used strategies of abstraction drawn from cubism and futurism—the interpenetration of solid and void, for example, or the practice of evoking movement or force through repeated lines that parallel one another—to represent himself in his

portraits as a new and unprecedented type of man. Thereby, his practice suggests an intense focus on selfhood that was perhaps designed to assuage his fears of his body's limits and integrity in the face of extreme danger.[11] Dix was always a realist, however, and in his wartime portraiture, the myth of armed conflict could not withstand the experience of its reality. In images of soldiers painted later in the war, human bodies are torn open, spilling organs and blood; and although Dix continued to represent himself as whole, the warrior's body became a site of trauma and emasculation.

In addition to painting the visages and bodies of soldiers, Dix created landscapes and views of military life, sometimes in realist and sometimes in modernist modes. During the conflict, Dix drew and sketched constantly in a variety of graphic media. A collection of fifty-three field postcards sent from the trenches to his close friend Helene Jakob between 1915 and 1918 show the observational side of Dix's practice. Direct, expressive, and linear, these black-and-white works depict army life—a field hospital, the troops' quarters in a captured civilian attic, and a machine-gun stand, for example—as well as fragmentary views of nature and architecture torn apart by bombs and then reconstructed to meet the instrumental mandates of total mobilization. Like the more imaginative scenes in oil, gouache, and watercolor that Dix also produced during the war, the field postcards seem "citational"; that is, they represent Dix's contemporary experience through different expressionist, cubist, and futurist strategies, appropriating past motifs and styles, not simply for their forms but also for their historical and contextual meanings. Although Dix's wartime art played between the poles of realism and allegory, no work was completely devoid of its antithesis.

After the war, Dix resumed his life as an artist, determined, according to his friend and fellow painter Conrad Felixmüller, to be either "famous" or "reviled."[12] In the turbulent early years of the Weimar Republic, he sought controversy, creating a gallery of contemporary urban types and scenes designed to provoke outrage and debate. Surviving first as an art student in Dresden, where he was also a founding member of the short-lived but influential Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919,[13] Dix soon received attention as one of Germany's most significant "postexpressionist" artists, a "verist" who critically described the social and political problems of his time. He moved to Düsseldorf in 1922 and then Berlin in 1925; in each city, he developed connections with different individuals and groups who helped to support his career, such as artists George Grosz, Max Liebermann, and Gert Wollheim; dealers Johanna Ey and Karl Nierendorf; and museum directors Gustav Hartlaub and Hans F. Secker. Important critics also quickly took notice, among them Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim. Einstein, in particular, found Dix to be an important but problematic artist, a social realist particularly suited to represent a contemporary German moment that was more brutal, derivative, and suffused with kitsch than ever before.[14]

In 1920, Dix showed with the Berlin Dadaists.[15] Among the works he displayed at the Erste Internationale Dada-Messe (First international Dada fair) was the later-destroyed *The War Cripples* (1920), a large oil canvas also known as *Forty-Five Percent Fit for Work* (fig. 3). Here, four prosthetically augmented former soldiers stroll down a shopping street, while consumer goods in store windows behind them mock their physically diminished conditions. The realism of the canvas—its references

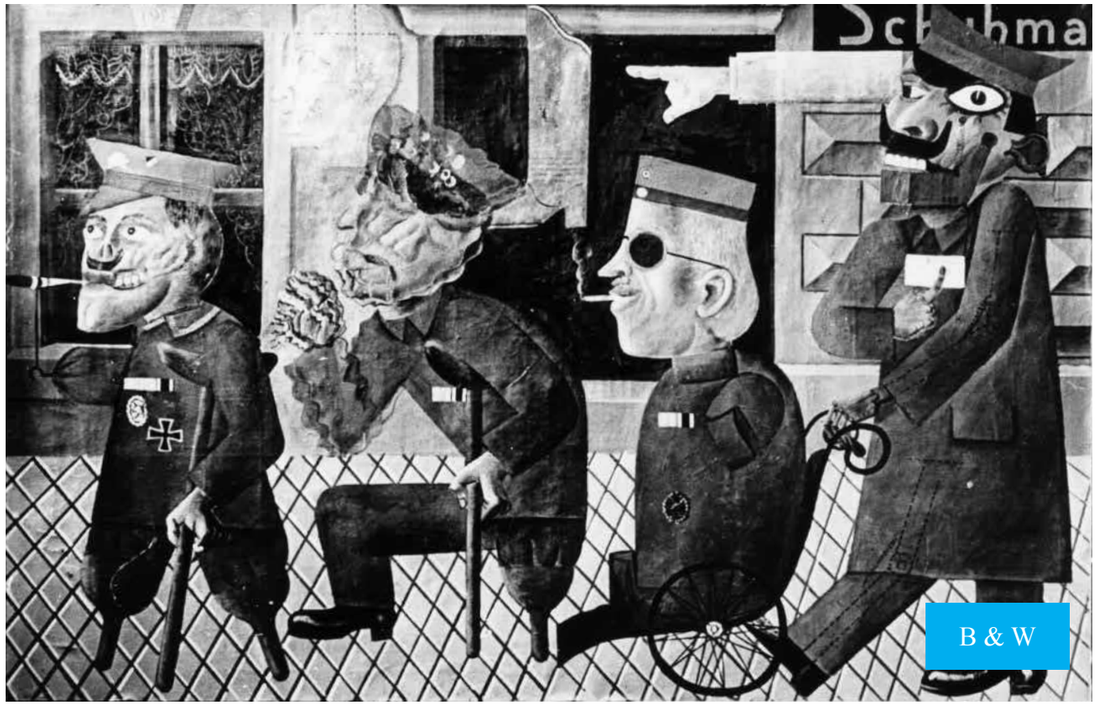

FIGURE 3. OTTO DIX (GERMAN, 1891–1969). *The War Cripples (Forty-Five Percent Fit for Work),* 1920, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm (59⅛ x 78¾ in.). Location unknown, believed destroyed in 1942.

to actual places and events—is beyond dispute: at that time in Germany, there were parades by disabled war veterans protesting inadequate pensions. At the same time, the work is anything but realistic; it is grotesque, ruptured, and cartoonlike and thus seemingly critical of its subjects. Dix simultaneously skewers the government for its callousness and the veterans for their persistent militarism. The freakish and vernacular qualities of *The War Cripples,* moreover, question the efficacy of both traditional and modern forms of art in the postwar world. Dix implies that the tradition of painting historical events in a realistic way is dead; and with its demise comes the termination of the role of the nineteenth-century German painter as a propagandist for the state, an official figure who promotes the idea of sacrifice for the good of the nation. Instead, the painter has become an independent contractor, a social and moral critic, who is thrown upon the capitalist market and forced to survive through a combination of realism, provocation, and historically informed caricature.

In 1920, Dix worked productively on a number of large canvases, employing the motif of the mutilated soldier festooned with prosthetics to question the practices of military sacrifice and memorialization. In these works, the trauma of war was

exchanged for the violence of photomontage; and the canvases' realism was the product of artificial and highly interpretive strategies such as caricature, formal and material heterogeneity, dialectical juxtapositions of conflicting elements, and references to current events. Although Dix abandoned photomontage almost as quickly as he took it up under the influence of Dadaism, he continued to be influenced by the Dadaists' use of the grotesque and their focus on contemporary historical occurrences, the body, and everyday life. Indeed, he began to employ other (very nonmodern) formal means to create his art, but his distinctive combination of allegory with different forms of realism continued to play an important role in all of his great work created during the Weimar Republic.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Walter Benjamin used the term *allegory* to signify the mournful, modern, and secular modes of representation most commensurate with the experience of modern life. Dix's war-cripple canvases, as well as his work that followed in the 1920s, fit this model of allegorical representation by providing violent, historical, and weakly redemptive descriptions of the contemporary moment.

In addition to serving as a descriptive model for important contemporary art and literature, allegory, for Benjamin, explained the principal characteristics of the German *Trauerspiel,* or royal "mourning play," a baroque dramatic genre that presented courtly life as a metaphor for a battle between good and evil.[16] Formally, the plays relied on strategies of appropriation, the representation of general types, and the static rendering of narrative action. Interludes were used to introduce foreign figures from outside the narrative who would comment upon and interpret the main action, thereby multiplying the systems of meaning in which the story and characters were to be understood. At numerous points in the drama, the narrative's action was brought to a standstill; its parts were dissected and reassembled to form static tableaus that suggested both literal and underlying significance.[17]

Confirming Benjamin's linkage of modernity and the baroque, Dix's paintings of the 1920s depict human types frozen in symbolic actions and embedded in fragmented settings imbued with both history and violence. Likewise, Dix's paintings of the Weimar Republic seem to emphasize their sitter's fleshly and instinctual sides. This is apparent in Dix's paintings of prostitutes and scenes of sexual murder (*Lustmord*) from the early 1920s—for example, *The Salon I* (1921; fig. 4) or *Sex Murder* (1922). In these and other works, the body and its drives appear to dominate Weimar society. The war, these paintings suggest, continues during peacetime. It is easy to read Dix's depictions of corpulent sex workers and female bodies destroyed by violence as exploring an emasculated German male ego that seeks to overcome its psychic wounds by attacking and demeaning women who resist patriarchal norms or who appear too powerful.[18] According to Benjamin, both the violence and the weakly redemptive power of the German mourning plays were connected to the fact that these allegories represented human beings as "creatures," a dialectical term that signified both God's creation and a living being that was instinctive, base, and passionate.[19] Through the extreme emotion and violence suffered by its "instinctive" or "material" side, the human subject was destroyed and then redeemed.[20] In Dix's representations of prostitutes and sexual murder, however, the only form of redemption to emerge is the radical critique of Weimar society.[21]

FIGURE 4. OTTO DIX (GERMAN, 1891–1969). *Salon I,* 1921, oil on canvas, 86 x 120.5 cm (33⅞ x 47½ in.). Stuttgart, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

Throughout the 1920s, Dix consistently mixed allegory with realism while employing a variety of different styles and methods of painting. Generally, the human figure and the setting were articulated with such attention and profusion of detail that they seemed charged with heightened meaning or aura. No matter how bestial or grotesque Dix's subjects became, they were always redeemed through technique, something that became particularly apparent in the mid-1920s, when Dix began to paint on wood and emulate aspects of the techniques of the Northern Renaissance masters—for example, layers of tempera and oil paints separated by overlays of transparent glaze.[22] In the great mixed-media paintings of the second half of the 1920s, such as *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia Von Harden* (1926) or *Portrait of the Art Dealer Alfred Flechtheim* (1926), Weimar personalities appear in their particularity while simultaneously embodying social stereotypes. Through their linearity, abstraction, gloss, and close focus on material surfaces, they transcend their documentary

aspects, tying their subjects to what Dix and his audience perceived to be larger cultural forms circulating in the Weimar Republic.

In addition to being violent and weakly redemptive, allegories, according to Benjamin's model, were historical because they sought to represent the newness of their contemporary moment—the direction in which the world was evolving. *The Trench* (1920–23), a monumental canvas, was the painting that made Dix famous. It depicts the aftermath of an artillery assault on a German trench on the western front, something that Dix had experienced firsthand only a few years before. An impaled soldier hangs suspended above an earthen channel containing corpses in various states of dismemberment and decomposition. Because of its detail, Dix's depiction of the figures and ground seems accurate, and in fact disgustingly realistic. At the same time, the rendering of the corpses is simplified and exaggerated, and thus they seem slightly caricatured. In addition, there is an interplay between careful depiction and blur created by the atmospheric perspective that combines with the work's overall scale and composition to create a sense of vague allegory. The impaled soldier, crucified by mechanized warfare, seems Christlike; and there is a Nietzschean sense of the world and the subject as comprised of a play of forces (something that Dix emphasizes by depicting the breakdown of the soldiers' bodies in a way that suggests that they are fast becoming a biological matrix for new life). Dix insinuates that empathy for the Other was radically diminished by the events of 1914–18 and that, in the future, human beings will treat each other more and more as mere objects.

This massive canvas made Dix famous when it became the centerpiece of one of the most important obscenity trials of the early years of the Weimar Republic.[23] Later, *The Trench* reemerged as one of the best-known works in the Nazis' infamous *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art) exhibition in 1937, after which it disappeared and was presumably destroyed. Like his other artworks commemorating the First World War, a theme to which Dix repeatedly returned over the course of the Weimar Republic, *The Trench* attempts to reenvision sacrifice and memorialization. Blending documentation with allegory, it compels its audiences to remember the past while simultaneously attacking their sense of security and propriety. To commemorate the war, Dix asserted in this canvas, one had to continue it at the level of representation. These were the insights gained during the conflict and through Dix's assimilation of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century German culture.

– NOTES –

1 The term *Neue Sachlichkeit* was first coined by the museum director Gustav Hartlaub in 1923 in preparation for his exhibition of the same name at the Kunsthalle Mannheim in 1925. Within Hartlaub's typology of German realism, Dix was a "verist," a left-wing, critical, and cynical social realist. On the Mannheim exhibition, see *Ausstellung Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925). On the developing concept of German realism in the 1920s, see Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925); Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland, 1918–1933* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag, 1969); and Fritz Schmalenbach, *Die Malerei der "Neuen Sachlichkeit"* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1973).

2 Dix's stylistic eclecticism has been noted by many scholars. See Dietrich Schubert, *Otto Dix* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rohwohlt, 1980), 18; and Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix,* trans. Doris Linda Jones and Jeremy Gaines (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1992), 20. Andreas Strobl treats this issue at length; see Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix: Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996), 180–83, 200–201, and 204–15.

3 On the utopian collectivism of Die Brücke artists, their embrace of modernity, and their relationship to Nietzschean thought, see Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

4 On the impact of Nietzsche on Dix, see Otto Conzelmann, *Der Andere Dix: Sein Bild vom Menschen und vom Krieg* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983).

5 As the philosopher famously wrote in *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872/1886], his monumental analysis of Greek art and philosophy, "It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1967), 52.

6 Schubert, *Otto Dix,* 22–26.

7 Schubert, *Otto Dix,* 24–25.

8 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals [1887] and Ecce Homo [1888/1908]*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967).

9 Schubert, *Otto Dix,* 25.

10 See, for example, Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel* [1920], trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Penguin, 2003).

11 On soldiers' attempts to psychically reinforce their bodily limits, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies,* trans. Stephan Conway et al., 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

12 Conrad Felixmüller, *Legenden 1912–1976* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1977), 54.

13 On the Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919, see Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 107–60.

14 See Carl Einstein, "Otto Dix," *Das Kunstblatt* 7, no. 4 (1923), 97–102; and Carl Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20: Jahrhunderts,* Propyläen-Kunstgeschichte 16, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1928), 147–53, 173–75.

15 On Dix's association with the Berlin Dada artists, see Otto Dix et al., *Dix,* exh. cat. (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1991), 85–91, 95–100.

16 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1925/1928], trans. Josh Osborne, (New York: Verso, 1990), 225.

17 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* 192–95.

18 On Dix's images of prostitutes and sexual murder, see Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Dora Apel, "'Heroes' and 'Whores': The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imagery," *Art Bulletin* 79, no. 3 (1997), 366–84.

19 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* 85, 89. See also Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), esp. 103–7 and 150–62.

20 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* 216–17.

21 On Dix's critical intent vis-à-vis his pictures of prostitutes, see Sabine Rewald et. al., *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), 66.

22 On Dix's technique, see Bruce F. Miller, "Otto Dix and His Oil-Tempera Technique," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 74 (October 1987), 332–55.

23 See Dennis Crockett, "The Most Famous Painting of the 'Golden Twenties'? Otto Dix and the *Trench* Affair," *Art Journal* 51, no. 1 (1992), 72–80.