

# DARK PLEASURES

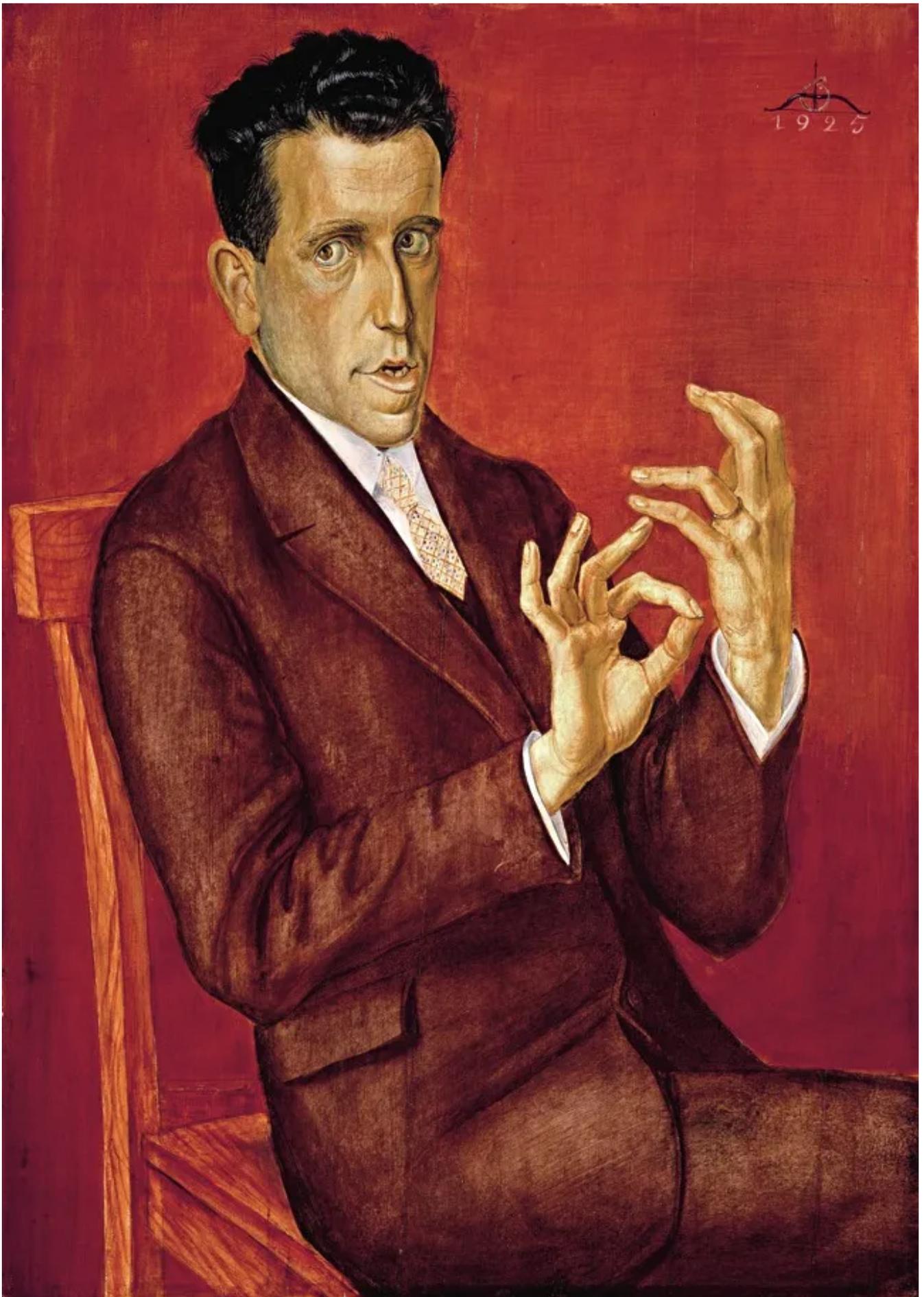
*An Otto Dix retrospective.*

**By Peter Schjeldahl**

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Dix's "Portrait of the Lawyer Hugo Simons" (1925). Courtesy Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Purchase / © 2010 Ars, NY / Vg Bild-Kunst, Bonn

To truly appreciate Otto Dix (1891-1969), the most shocking major artist, against stiff competition, of Weimar Germany, it may help to loathe him a little. That worked for me at the Neue Galerie's explosive show, the first American retrospective of Dix, an artist who is exalted and cherished in Germany. (Late in life, he travelled freely, to accolades, in both halves of the Cold War-riven nation.) "Dix comes along like a natural disaster," a Dresden critic wrote, in 1926, of the artist, a veteran of the First World War who funnelled his intimacy with horror into paintings and prints that lace Old Master technique with Dadaist nihilism. In the past, I've ducked into a psychic storm cellar when assailed by his distressingly avid images of war, *Lustmord* (sex murder), and all-around depravity; compared with his universe of derision and disgust, "Cabaret" is a kohl-smudged "Sesame Street." But finally letting Dix get to me pays off in aesthetic and moral fascination. I recommend an approach of cordial enmity. By disliking Dix, you may balance a sense that he dislikes you, too, along with just about everybody else—except himself.

Most artists who address social ills either protest them, as did Dix's contemporary George Grosz, or evince personal anguish, as did, years later, Francis Bacon. Not Dix. "Don't bother me with your idiotic politics," he told the Dresden Secession artists' group, in 1920. "I'd rather go to the whorehouse." An American-styled dandy with slicked-back hair, whose night-life sobriquet was Jimmy, Dix danced the Charleston amid the cascading chaos of Düsseldorf and Berlin in the nineteen-twenties. The retrospective centers on the blazingly amoral "Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber" (1925)—"without a doubt *the* icon of the Weimar Republic," according to Olaf Peters, the show's superbly adept curator. Looking more than twice her age of twenty-six, the slinky erotic dancer, prostitute, and notorious bisexual preens in a skintight scarlet dress against a blood-red ground—a one-woman general-alarm fire. She died, of tuberculosis, three years later. The picture was reproduced on a German postage stamp in 1991.

Dix was born near Gera in 1891, to an ironworker and a seamstress with artistic inclinations. After apprenticing to a housepainter, he became an independent professional by the age of sixteen. Inspired by a painter cousin, he studied art in Dresden, where he was enthused by reading Nietzsche (whom he portrayed in an

energetic sculpture) and by discovering Renaissance masters and avant-garde crazes of the time, notably Futurism. He enlisted in the Army when the war began, writing later, “The war was a horrible thing, though it was something powerful all the same. I certainly didn’t want to miss it.” Dix headed a machine-gun squad from 1915 until the Armistice, despite being wounded several times, and in 1916 he fought in the unimaginable abattoir of the Somme, which left more than a million wounded or dead. He appalled a friend, Peters writes, with a “detailed description of the pleasurable sensation to be had when bayoneting an enemy to death.”

His career was launched with visions of the carnage. A room at the Neue Galerie is a catacomb of grotesquerie, presenting watercolors of a man with nearly half his face gouged out and of operating-room debris (discarded organs, including a brain) and a series of fifty etchings, “The War” (published in 1924), which is like nothing else in art since Goya’s “Disasters of War.” Quick with intimations of sounds and smells, they feature fields of shell craters, heaped corpses, a mustached skull swarming with worms, and an insanely grinning woman with a maimed, dead baby. Unlike Goya’s harrowing humor, Dix’s emotional stance is neither detached nor compassionate. The question of whether the work qualifies as antiwar seems debatable, given that its rage is blended with relish, though no doubts troubled the Nazi regime when it drove Dix into internal exile, in 1933, after finding that his pictures were “likely to detract from the will of the German people to defend itself.” Ambitious to stun the world, Dix had at hand a wealth of witnessed atrocity, and he flung it like a grenade.

In photographs and self-portraits, the young Dix has a quality of oddly superfluous conventional handsomeness, like that of the pre-Sergio Leone Clint Eastwood. He had no use for beauty; he called a house on Lake Constance, in the Alps—now a museum—where he lived after 1936, “so beautiful that you have to vomit.” His colors run to stimulating awfulness. He liked fattening or emaciating even subjects who had commissioned their portraits. (It took guts to sit for Dix.) Most of the women in his work are either victims or monsters, though they are perhaps granted winks of complicity in the resilient glee with which he beheld them. Hard to take, though, are Dix’s lyrical imaginings of

women ripped open by psychopaths. In a big, lost painting of 1920, he pictured himself, blood-spattered in a natty suit, gaily strewing female body parts around his studio. *Lustmord* was a theme rife in popular culture then (as it is today, come to think of it), exploited by artists (Grosz, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Bellmer) and writers (Alfred Döblin, Robert Musil) to outrage a bourgeoisie whose predilections Dix termed “puke—kitsch—noise—shit.” His use of *Lustmord* expressed his competitive drive. But was he a misogynist? Oh, boy. He refused to emigrate to America because he was wary of “the revolution of daughters” that, in his view, pertained here. In 1921, he lured away Martha Koch, the wife of a doctor who was a portrait subject and a friend; they married in 1923 and had three children. (The doctor then wedded Martha’s sister, and remained lifelong friends with Dix.) A Brueghelesque self-portrait *en famille*, from 1927, finds Dix displaying bad teeth in a ferocious rictus, as he contemplates a distinctly unappealing baby son on Martha’s lap. A winsome little girl appears, too. That’s Nelly, whose likeness recurred, when she was eighteen, in a painting by her father on the theme of Death and the Maiden.

Dix claimed to have invented the definitive Weimar art movement, Neue Sachlichkeit (the term, dubbed by a *Kunsthalle* director, in 1923, is usually translated as New Objectivity, but with connotations of sobriety and banality). It rejected the soulfulness of Expressionism for a harsh focus on external realities; it didn’t eschew emotion, but it trashed empathy. Certainly, Dix tops the Neue Sachlichkeit field, which includes the antic Grosz and the icily obscene Christian Schad. Dix gained his edge with a fluent mastery of varied styles, from steely realism to poetic (though hardly dreamy) fantasy. His great 1926 portrait of Dr. Mayer-Hermann, made with an archaic method of oil glaze over tempera on wood, is Neue Sachlichkeit for the ages. Dix had a thing for doctors, such as the fashionable psychiatrist who stares from a canvas of 1920 with demented eyes worthy of a midnight-movie maniac. The artist could be formally inventive: witness a startlingly gorgeous, Cubism-inflected painting, from 1920, of a jolly, red-faced officer disporting with a prostitute, in which parts of the image are reflected in mirrors. (With primitivist touches, it suggests a dirty-minded Chagall.) But Dix would readily uglify any image rather than let it escape his pugnacious temperament into merely aesthetic avenues. A general exception sets

in, sadly, with sugary landscapes from the nineteen-thirties. Dix painted them in order to scratch out a living while he was denied a public career under the Nazis, who paraded his work in the scurrilous “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937. Peters detects esoteric protest in certain paintings of Christian allegory, including a marvellously kitschy “Saint Christopher IV” (1939): the brawny saint labors across a mountain river with a tyrannically posturing baby Jesus on his shoulder.

Dix lay low through the Second World War. Dragooned into the last-ditch Volkssturm militia, in 1945, he surrendered to French troops and spent nearly a year in a prison camp, where he painted portraits of his captors. His reputation dimmed during the postwar vogue of abstract painting, but it resurged in the sixties, when young Germans began to identify with art that Nazism had sought to obliterate—a recuperation that helped to fuel the German preëminence in painting of the past forty years. ♦

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