

Otto Dix (1891-1969) War Triptych, 1929-32



Key facts:

Date: 1929-32

Size: Middle panel: 204 x 204 cm; Left and right wing each 204 x 102 cm; Predella: 60 x 204 cm

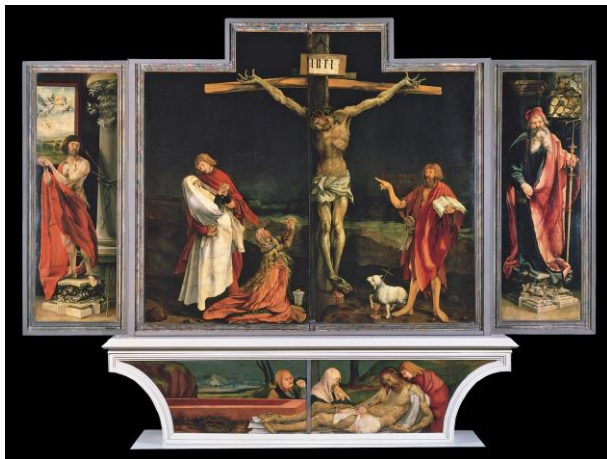
Materials: Mixed media (egg tempera and oil) on wood

Location: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: The Great War is a history painting within a landscape set out over four panels, a triptych with a predella panel below. The narrative begins in the left panel, the soldiers in their steel helmets depart for war through a thick haze, already doomed in Dix's view. In the right panel, a wounded soldier is carried from the battlefield, while the destructive results of battle are starkly depicted in the central panel. This is a bleak and desolate landscape, filled with death and ruin, presided over by a corpse. Trees are charred, bodies are battered and torn and lifeless. War has impacted every part of the landscape. (This panel was a reworking on an earlier painting Dix had done entitled *The Trench*, 1920-3. David Crocket wrote: "many, if not most, of those who saw this painting in Cologne and Berlin during 1923-24 knew nothing about this aspect of the war." The predella scene shows several soldiers lying next to one another. Perhaps they are sleeping in the

trenches, about to go back into the cycle of battle when they awake, or perhaps they have already fallen and will never wake again. Dix repeatedly depicted World War I and its consequences after having fought in it himself as a young man. This piece can be seen as the culmination of this exploration. He depicted himself in the right hand panel of this work as the figure carrying the wounded soldier. He looks traumatised. This painting shows the horror of war, experienced first-hand, and is a call for it to never be repeated. According to Dix's friend Fritz Löffler, Dix wanted the panels to be exhibited in a bunker in a large city, 'which would permit the viewer to stand silent for a moment and would exhort and admonish those who had forgotten.'



Dix incorporates quotations from religious iconography in this work and references religious triptychs of the Northern Renaissance, most clearly Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-16. The left panel becomes an echo of Christ carrying the cross, with soldiers carrying their weapons. Christ on the cross in

the central panel becomes the suspended skeleton pointing at the destruction. The punctured legs of Christ are echoed on the rotated body of a corpse from the battle. The crucifixion, the descent from the cross and the pieta, are all echoed in different sections of Dix's composition. The predella also references Hans Holbein the Younger's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1520-22. The referencing of religious art shows Dix's complex relationship to his faith and Christianity, and questioning of the heroism and salvation of war. The *Isenheim Altarpiece* was displayed in Munich during the war and was a rallying point for the German nation during the war, an image that urged the nation to steadfastness in a time of suffering and sacrifice.

Formal Qualities:

Composition: The narrative can be understood as a circle and we first see a cartwheel, then the diagonal of the soldiers going off to war (left panel, morning); then fighting on the battlefield and the curve of the skeletal arm (centre, noon); wounded and shellshocked soldiers returning with descending diagonals (right, night); sleeping under the curved canvas, which takes us back to the start (predella) and doing this all again, an infinite number of times. Even if the horizontal men at the base of the painting are understood to already be dead, the circle still functions as other soldiers take their place and still go out to battle. The war does not stop with death.

Space: The soldiers fade into the distance on receding planes in the panel on the left, no longer individuals, and are repeated and repeated until we cannot see where they lead. The landscape they find themselves in in the middle panel stretches on to a bleak, empty high horizon with a diminishing line of blasted trees, while the foreground is packed with stacked-up bodies and carnage close to the viewer. The linear perspective from a lower viewpoint in the predella scene is painted with skill and a precision which links it to the Renaissance tradition.

Colour and light: There is a limited palette of dark, earthy colours; greens, greys and browns, muddy and natural, whilst the white is ghost-like, sickly and deathly. The red of the sky foreshadows the red of blood from wounds and death.

The chilling white light of flares in this piece comes from multiple sources which are cold and unnatural reminders of death. The explosions in the sky are apocalyptic and the earth is dark.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Marla Tatar has written about *War Triptych* in relation to Dix's *Metropolis*, 1927-8: the two together being a "remarkable study in contrasts between the nobility of fallen men and the corruption of fallen women."

Metropolis depicts nightlife scenes from the Weimar Republic



and can be used to show some of the social and cultural context within which Dix lived and worked. In *Metropolis*, the central panel is full of life and movement and music as the upper classes party and dance. This is the jazz-age, the roaring '20s. But this was not the reality for all, and the hardship of the post-war times is depicted in the scenes flanking the central panel; scenes of crippled war veterans and prostitutes.

In 1914 Dix volunteered, trained as a machine gunner, and fought in the trenches of both the Western and Eastern Fronts. During that time he made hundreds of sketches and drawings of the barbarism that he witnessed. After the German defeat he realised that the public mood was turning against the defeated soldiers. Dix painted many images of crippled soldiers as in *Metropolis* as if to keep reminding the public of the sacrifices that had been made – no 'Help for Heroes' in this age for defeated men.

In the 1920s Dix created a series of etchings known as "Der Krieg", echoing those of Goya a hundred years earlier. MoMA's website describes their collection of these etchings as "based largely on Dix's grisly memories, [and] are an unflinching account of the horror and perversity of war. Many picture the aftermath of battle: dying, dead, or decomposing bodies, shell-shocked soldiers, and bombed-out landscapes. The artist exploited the corrosive nature of etching and aquatint—mediums in which acid etches a metal printing



plate—to heighten the sense of decay." This image: "Flare lights up Monacu Farm" shows elements that appear in the Triptych – the ruined buildings, cartwheels, corpses. The central panel of the Triptych is the same Monacu Farm, which must have been a very personal place to Dix therefore, the scene of many of his most gruesome memories and nightmares. The near-decapitated machine

gunner, with his belt of ammunition, at the bottom left of the panel, serve as a grisly reminder of his own mortality.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

In *War Triptych* Dix portrays the catastrophe of war, but also demonstrates his skill as an oil painter. Dix was a key artist associated with Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) and a stylized realism but also with German Expressionism in some of his works, and this is evident here. Dix deliberately returned to a traditional medium, not engaging with collage as in some of his earlier post-war works, nor printmaking as he did for other war-themed pieces. Egg tempera used alongside oil directly ties the work to his Renaissance inspiration, to the history of altarpieces and triptychs made in earlier times. From the early 1920s, Dix persistently studied the painting techniques of the old masters, fascinated by the detail and realism that could be achieved through layering effects with egg tempera and then oil. (George Grosz gave him the nickname 'Otto Hans Baldung Dix' in reference to this, as a play on the name of the German old master Hans Baldung Grien). *War Triptych*, however, displays a range of expressive marks and applications of paint, from areas of thick impasto, frequently reworked, to more controlled, intricate details.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

This work was painted at a time when 'idealization of war and patriotism was the order of the day.' It was also completed in the year before the Nazi's rose to power in 1933. Dix was appointed a professor at the Dresden Academy in 1927 but lost this with the Nazi rise and Dix was labelled a 'degenerate artist' and considered a threat. 260 of his paintings were confiscated from public collections and eventually sold or destroyed. Some of his works were exhibited in the Degenerate Art Exhibition in 1937 and destroyed. This triptych survived as separate panels, each hidden in different locations. Dresden's State Art Collection acquired the work directly from Dix in 1968 and it sits today in the New Masters Gallery.

Dix: "All art is exorcism... I painted many things, war too, nightmares too, horrible things... Painting is the effort to produce order; order in yourself. There is much chaos in me."

In his war diary, Otto Dix wrote, "Lice, rats, barbed wire, fleas, grenades, bombs, holes, bodies, blood, Schnapps, rats, cats, gas, guns, dirt, bullets, mortars, fire, steel: that's what war is. The Devil's work. Nothing but the work of the Devil!"

Mark Vallen: "Based upon his own war time experiences in the trenches of the First World War, it was art like this that got Dix in so much trouble with Germany's right-wing. The central panel of the triptych shows the devastation and appalling misery of the battlefield as the artist remembered it. Dix painted this work using egg tempera and oil on wood. The painting shows a village shattered and smouldering, trees blasted into splinters, and everywhere soldiers, and parts of soldiers, decomposing in the mud.

"A soldier's bare white legs can be seen sticking out of the putrid morass in the upper right corner, and a desiccated corpse impaled on twisted steel bars hovers above the scene of carnage and despair. Dix created many such artworks based on his wartime memories, and rarely has the world seen such brutally honest statements concerning the reality of war.

"At the time Dix painted The War Triptych, the ruling elites of Germany were attempting to popularize militarism. Fascists were promising to rebuild Germany with "Blood and Iron", it was not a time for [what they saw to be] pacifist images. A year after Dix created this painting Adolf Hitler came to power. Dix was accused by the Nazis of creating art that sapped "the will of the German

people to defend themselves." The artist was immediately fired from his teaching position at the Dresden Academy of Art and he was prohibited from exhibiting his works.

"Instead, the Nazis included the works of Dix (and other Expressionist artists) in propaganda exhibits designed to denigrate modern art. Dix was ridiculed in no less than three such exhibits, the Reflections of Degeneracy show (Dresden 1933), Art in the Service of Demoralization (Stuttgart 1933), and the infamous Entartete Kunst ("Degenerate Art") exhibit of Munich 1937."

David Olusoga, 'Civilisations' Episode 8, "The Cult of Progress", BBC (TV and book) 2018

"Otto Dix and his generation had borne witness to these horrors, but they'd also been witness to the death of the 19th century faith in inevitable, unstoppable progress. What they'd learned in the trenches was that savagery and barbarism weren't external, to be found only in the colonies, but inside all of us. They had seen that industry and progress and the supposed triumph of Enlightenment rationalism did not guarantee the survival of civilisation.

And it was them, the poets and the artists and the painters of the trenches, who best understood what Europe had been through and who best foresaw the horrors that lay ahead."

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix*, Taschen, 1987
- Olaf Peters, *Otto Dix*, Prestel, 2010
- Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair*, Manchester University Press, 2000
- Paul Fox, 'Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2006), 247-267
- Maria Tatar, 'Fighting for Life: Figurations of War, Women, and the City in the Work of Otto Dix,' *German Politics and Society* (Summer 1994), 28-57
- Mark Vallen, <http://www.art-for-a-change.com/Express/ex11.htm>
- [Otto Dix. Flare Illuminates the Monacu-ferme \(Leuchtkugel erhellt die Monacu-ferme\) from The War \(Der Krieg\). 1924 | MoMA](#) – MoMA page on Der Krieg Plate 7.
- <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/173961> - Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden page on *War Triptych*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PXVzul0GtK> - Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden video on *War Triptych*
- <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/portraying-nation-germany-1919-1933> - Tate Liverpool's 2017 exhibition 'Portraying a Nation: Germany 1919-1933'