**James A. van Dyke**

**Dix, Otto** (Untermhaus bei Gera, 1891-Hemmenhofen, 1969)

Otto Dix was a painter who emerged as a leading figure in the German avant-garde after the First World War. His Expressionist caprices, Dadaist collages, and Verist grotesques challenged prevalent norms of taste and propriety by mixing high art with mass culture, by testing the limits of obscenity, and by transgressing traditionally heroic images of war. These tactics, coupled with the energetic promotion of his work in the modern dealer-critic system, laid the foundation for the painter’s rapid professional ascent, which culminated in an academic appointment in 1926. At the same time, conservative, nationalist, and Nazi artists, critics, and activists frequently attacked Dix’s work, which was prominently displayed in anti-modernist exhibitions such as *Degenerate Art* between 1933 and 1938. During the Third Reich, Dix was marginalised; he adapted by producing ideologically equivocal, marketable landscapes and religious scenes. After 1945, Dix abandoned the techniques and themes of his earlier, best-known work and sought to position himself in West and East Germany while maintaining his independence from both abstraction and Socialist Realism. His work of the 1920s is now canonical, although the character of his political ideology and the causes and implications of his depictions of the female body and sexual violence continue to be debated.

**Life and Career**

Born and raised in a relatively prosperous working-class family active in Social Democratic politics, from 1910 to 1914 Dix trained at the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts in Dresden and encountered dissident intellectual culture and forms of artistic modernism. While in the army from 1914 to 1918, he produced hundreds of works on paper in a range of styles, several of which were displayed in 1916 in his first public exhibition. From 1919 to 1924, Dix was active in avant-garde circles in Dresden, Berlin, and Düsseldorf, moving from Expressionism to Dada to Verism. Dix moved to the richer markets of Düsseldorf, found the support of art dealers, and drew national critical attention with scandalous depictions of prostitutes and the provocative rendering of trench warfare. In 1925, he moved to Berlin, by then the centre of German contemporary artistic culture and made and exhibited many of his most important portraits. In 1926, he was appointed professor of painting at the state art academy in Dresden and taught there until dismissed by Nazi authorities in 1933. Freed from market constraints between 1927 and 1933, Dix reprised his most controversial and distinctive themes in monumental form and traditional techniques, corresponding to the post-avant-gardist position of ‘The Object is Primary’ (1927). Following dismissal, Dix moved with family to the villages of Randegg and Hemmenhofen in southwestern Germany. He painted occasional allegories and in 1937 began several series on religious subjects, some sexual in nature. Largely excluded from public artistic life, Dix survived primarily with portrait and other commissions, landscape sales, and with private resources. After 1945, he employed a more painterly style and abandoned the socio-critical themes of his best-known, earlier pictures while negotiating Cold War art politics in both East and West Germany.

**Critical Issues**

Since 1980, two questions have generated more debate than any others. Despite a reported aversion to politics and the Communist Party’s loss of confidence in his work by 1926, many critics and art historians have seen in Dix an unequivocally left-wing artist. Since 1983, however, this view has been challenged by those who emphasise the impact of Nietzschean ideas on Dix’s thinking and painting. At the same time, Dix’s work has been subjected to critical scrutiny by feminist art historians, who have examined his grotesque renderings of the female body, his gendered vision of the city and fixation on the prostitute, and his contributions to the avant-garde fashion for images of sexual violence and sex crime in the early 1920s. Recently, the emphasis on the representation of the female body has been supplemented by attention to Dix’s construction and performance of masculinity.

**Selected Further Reading**

Rainer Beck, *Otto Dix:* *Die kosmischen Bilder. Zwischen* Sehnsucht *und* Schwangerem Weib (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 2003).

Otto Conzelmann, *Der andere Dix: Sein Bild vom Menschen und vom Krieg* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983).

Eva Karcher, *Eros und Tod im Werk von Otto Dix. Studien zur Geschichte des Körpers in den zwanziger Jahren* (Münster: Lit, 1984).

Ulrike Lorenz, ed., *Dix avant Dix: Das Jugend- und Frühwerk 1903-1914*, exh. cat. Kunstsammlung Gera (Jena: Glaux, 2000).

Olaf Peters, ed., *Otto Dix*, exh. cat. Neue Galerie, New York (Munich: Prestel, 2010).

Birgit Schwarz, *Otto Dix*, Großstadt*. Eine Kunst-Monographie* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1993).

Änne Söll, “‘An die Schönheit’ – Selbst, Männlichkeit und Moderne in Otto Dix Selbstbildnis von 1922,” in *Der schöne Körper. Mode und Kosmetik in Kunst und Gesellschaft*, ed. Annette Geiger (Köln: Böhlau, 2008), 149-66.

Andreas Strobl, *Otto Dix: Eine Malerkarriere der zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Reimer, 1996).