

Education resource material: beauty, truth and goodness in Dix's *War*



Photograph of Otto Dix
c. 1920 Written on the
wall behind Otto Dix is:
RADIO – DADA DIX whose
monumental painting
Barricade (now lost) created
such a sensation in Dresden

1. Truth

Otto Dix seems to cry out through his images: 'Trust me. This is what really happened. I was there'. As an eyewitness to some of the most horrific events of the First World War, he is putting them on the record. These soldiers were actually buried alive; this is what dying from poison gas was like; this is what a dead horse looks like; these were the expressions on the faces of the wounded; this was how people were raped and killed.

How can we doubt him? His drawings are so vivid, the details are so horrible, and he was in fact there. After volunteering for the German army at the outbreak of war in 1914, he was sent to the Western Front and fought as a lance corporal in a field artillery regiment in Champagne, Artois and the Somme. The suffering in Dix's *War* is mostly undergone by German soldiers, and it was indeed horrible. As he noted in his war diary in 1915–16:

Lice, rats, barbed wire, fleas, shells, bombs, underground caves, corpses, blood, liquor, mice, cats, gas, artillery, filth, bullets, mortars, fire, steel: that is what war is! It is all the work of the Devil!¹

But of course it wasn't. Rather, it was the work of people like himself. He had volunteered to serve in an army of aggressive national expansion. He had fought to kill French defenders of France on French soil, and was also in Russia and Belgium. Did he feel that he had a right to be there? Had he cared about the whole truth he would have reported on his own motives, and on his moral doubts if any, but he couldn't or didn't. Instead, he later recalled of his endless hours in the trenches that it had been fun 'to be able to draw in the midst of boredom and misery'.²

Further, it was not 'the Devil' who first used poison gas, or even the defenders of their homelands around Germany, but his own German army, who used it to inflict eight times the casualties than did all the allies put together. Yet he doesn't question any of that. Nor does he criticise the politicians and generals who had promised that war would be gloriously different from lice and rats.

Despite being wounded several times, Dix appears to have thrived on the war, unlike his fellow artists George Grosz and Max Beckmann who both suffered breakdowns. Some thought his interest after the war in crippled veterans and blood and guts showed a morbid delight in suffering, violence and death. As he himself recalled:

I had to experience how someone beside me suddenly falls over and is dead and the bullet has hit him squarely. I had to experience that quite directly. I wanted it. I'm therefore not a pacifist at all – or am I? Perhaps I was an inquisitive person. I had to see all that for myself. I'm such a realist, you know, that I have to see everything with my own eyes in order to confirm that it's like that. I have to experience all the ghastly, bottomless depths of life for myself; it's for that reason that I went to war, and for that reason I volunteered.³

Was looking at the physical conditions on the ground for Dix a diversion from examining his own behaviour and that of his nation? The underlying horror of war is in the ideas, thinking, arguments, fears, and greed that drive people into war in the first place; the things that are not visible and are harder to visualise. Emphasising the merely visual can be a diversion from more basic facts that do not so immediately impinge on the retina. That this could be true of an un-embedded artist such as Dix should make us even more wary of official war artists.

2. Ugliness

Otto Dix recalled, 'I had the feeling that there was a dimension of reality that had not been dealt with in art: the dimension of ugliness'.⁴ Many people still believe that art should deal only with what is beautiful. Using the word 'aesthetic' to mean 'beautiful' (even though its root meaning relates to sense perception in general), they naturally ask how art can be 'unaesthetic'—isn't that a contradiction in terms?

A human appetite for the repulsive was noted by Plato when he has Socrates in *The Republic* cite 'a story I once heard about Leontius, son of Aglaion':

On his way up from the Piraeus outside the north wall, he noticed the bodies of some criminals lying on the ground, with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, but at the same time he was disgusted and tried to turn away. He struggled for some time and covered his eyes, but at last the desire was too much for him. Opening his eyes wide, he ran up to the bodies and cried, 'There you are, curse you; feast yourselves on this lovely sight!'⁵

Dix was inspired in that direction by the writings of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900), marking several passages in *The will to power* and *Twilight of the idols*.⁶ Nietzsche taught that art should intensify the animal side of human life:

How can even ugliness possess this power? In so far as it still communicates something of the artist's victorious energy which has become master of this ugliness and awfulness; or in so far as it mildly excites in us the pleasure of cruelty (under certain conditions even a desire to harm ourselves, self-violation – and the feeling of power over ourselves).⁷

To represent terrible and questionable things is in itself an instinct for power and magnificence in an artist: he does not fear them – There is no such thing as pessimistic art – Art affirms.⁸

... broadly speaking, a preference for questionable and terrifying things is a symptom of strength; while a taste for the pretty and dainty belongs to the weak and delicate.⁹

Even those who concede that Dix had cruel and tragic, perhaps even 'ugly', events to report may still protest at the ugliness of his art, pointing to earlier paintings of battles and murders that are superbly composed, delicately shaded, lusciously coloured, and immaculately finished.

Dix could well reply that he aimed for immediate impact rather than for perfect art. Not only did he choose the starker black and white of the etching medium, but he also used many different techniques to make the hollows in the metal etching plates that would hold the printing ink. He thereby exploited the enormous potential of etching to produce messy, disintegrating, apparently haphazard and quite dirty effects; creating an impression that the plates themselves have been attacked, bayoneted, shot at and muddied with the mud of Flanders. What people denounce as ugliness is a visual equivalent of the acidic corrosiveness of his war experiences.

3. Beauty

Shortly before he died Otto Dix qualified his earlier statements: 'I was not really seeking to depict ugliness. Everything I saw was beautiful'.¹⁰ Others have agreed. John Constable said, 'There is nothing ugly; I never saw an ugly thing in my life: for let the form of an object be what it may, – light, shade, and perspective will always make it beautiful'.¹¹ Max Beerbohm made the comment, 'To the aesthetic temperament nothing seems ugly. There are degrees of beauty – that is all'.¹² Also, Mario Vargas Llosa said, 'Contemporary aesthetics has established the beauty of ugliness, reclaiming for art everything in human experience that artistic representation had previously rejected'.¹³

We could quibble that one couldn't recognise beauty without a knowledge of its opposite, but one way out is to separate content and form. We might then be able to say that the content may be ugly, but that art gives it *form*. Dix certainly thought so:

After Herberholz had shown me all sorts of techniques, I suddenly got very interested in etching. I had a lot to say, I had a subject. Wash off the acid, put on the aquatint: a wonderful technique that you can use to get as many different shades and tones as you want. The 'doing' aspect of art becomes tremendously interesting when you start doing etchings; you get to be a real alchemist.¹⁴

All lines, textures, tones, shapes and compositions are in some sense beautiful, and when they are not we seem to have an irresistible impulse to read beauty into them. So a deliberately jagged scrawl may be found to have left an eye-catching graininess in the fibrous texture of the paper, and a vicious series of jabs may impress with its sincerity. Perhaps – what an irony! Perhaps it is easier to see this beauty when the content is repulsive, when the pushing away of the content is in tension with the pulling in of form.

Yet what are we doing? Are we not allowing the aesthetic to interfere with the moral? Given our inbuilt assumption that anything that is beautiful must also be good, by seeing beauty even in Dix's horrific prints, are we not falling into the trap of glamorising war? Is an aesthetic response of any kind, least of all a positive one, appropriate to pictures such as Dix's when the subject is the First World War? How can suffering be beautiful?

4. Effects

We see what we want to see. Because Dix's *War* prints are so awful, most people see them as expressions of a pacifist sensibility: therefore he must have been a pacifist, therefore they are propaganda for pacifism. Yet, as we have seen, Dix said of his volunteering for the war, 'I wanted it. I'm therefore not a pacifist at all – or am I?'

Others are attracted to their violence, seeing in them a glorification of war, or an incitement to violence, much as some researchers now believe that Stone Age Cave paintings were incitements for humans to kill Neanderthals. As Dix himself said, 'The war was a dreadful thing, but there was something awe-inspiring about it. There was no question of me missing out on that! You have to have seen people out of control in that way to know anything about man'.¹⁵

Unlike George Grosz and Max Beckmann, who resemble him in so many ways, Dix was not very interested in politics. Although some of his war works, including the *War* portfolio, were financially supported by pacifist groups, and were attacked by right-wing nationalists for being anti-military,¹⁶ it is almost certain that he himself did not intend his works to be taken as propaganda for any kind of political position at all.

Dix's *War* was not a statement against war, any more than his prostitutes were a statement against sex: it was a demonstration of how war could serve his art. As a dedicated artist he subordinated everything else to being an artist first and foremost, regardless of the interpretations that other viewers might derive from or impose on his work.

Roy Forward

Endnotes

- 1 Otto Dix, *War Diary 1915–1916*, Städtische Gallery, Albstadt, p. 25, cited in Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1987, p. 14.
- 2 Dix, cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 14.
- 3 Dix in 1963, cited in *Otto Dix 1891–1969*, exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Gallery, 1992, pp. 17–18; cf. pp. 27–28.
- 4 Dix, cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 16; cf. p. 41.
- 5 *The Republic of Plato IV*. 439, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941, p. 134. Susan Sontag used this episode as suggesting an appetite for sights of pain, and supported the idea with further quotations from Edmund Burke, William Hazlitt and Georges Bataille, (Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003, pp. 86–88).
- 6 Sarah O'Brien Twohig, 'Dix and Nietzsche' in *Otto Dix 1891–1969*, exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Gallery, 1992, pp. 40–48, and Keith Hartley, Sarah O'Brien Twohig, 'Dix and Nietzsche', pp. 110–11. The passages included Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the idols*, trans. RJ Hollingdale, London: Penguin, 1968 (1st pub. in German 1889), pp. 39 and 82, and *The will to power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1968 (1st pub. in German 1901, pp. 423–24 (aphorism 804), 428–29 (aphorism 811), and 434–35 (aphorism 821).
- 7 Nietzsche, *The will to power*, 1968, p. 422 (aphorism 802).
- 8 Nietzsche, pp. 434–35 (aphorism 821).
- 9 Nietzsche, p. 450 (aphorism 852).
- 10 Dix, cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 41.
- 11 CR Leslie, *Memoirs of the life of John Constable*, London: Phaidon, first published 1843, 3rd revised edition, 1995 ch. 17.
- 12 Max Beerbohm, in Wayne C Booth, *The company we keep: an ethics of fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. xiv.
- 13 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Making waves*, ed. & trans. John King, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996, p. 264.
- 14 Dix, cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 22.
- 15 Dix, cited in Karcher, 1987, p. 16.
- 16 On both counts see Reinhold Heller, 'Otto Dix', in Jane Turner, (ed) *The dictionary of art*, 34 vol, New York: Grove Dictionaries, London: Macmillan, 1996, vol. 9, p. 42.