

## **SPLENDOR AND MISERY IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC FROM OTTO DIX TO JEANNE MAMMEN**

OCTOBER 27, 2017 – FEBRUARY 25, 2018

### **WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION**

As the first German democracy and a brief “golden” age at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Weimar Republic was a key epoch. It is regarded to this day as the prototype for many of the social and societal achievements which we take for granted today. At the same time it is also a monument to failure, because from the outset the young democracy was violently resisted by strong forces. It was both highly vulnerable and shaken by crises. Many artists reacted to this situation in their works after the First World War with realism, directness, irony, anger, humor, innuendo, restraint, and melancholy.

The exhibition “Splendor and Misery in the Weimar Republic” concentrates on questions of content and focuses on the political and social tensions of those years. The exhibition investigates the all-pervading inherent “unease of the age”: many of the artists turned out to be seismographs of the era and seem to have anticipated the failure of the Weimar Republic long before the catastrophe actually occurred.

### **THE NEW OBJECTIVITY – TOPICS AND SUBJECTS**

After the First World War the abstraction and intellectualization of Expressionism gave way to the desire for a more realistic portrayal of the immediate present, for a new Naturalism. What came to be known as the “New Objectivity” developed as a contemporary style which seemed to represent the modern world with particular clarity: cool, detached, and dispassionate, with sharp outlines and painted in the style of the old masters, and yet at the same time ambiguous and full of innuendo.

The exhibition with 190 works by 62 artists concentrates on the veristic and political wing of New Objectivity. In addition to the splendor and the social and societal achievements, many artists also focused their attention on the dark sides of the period. They wanted to show actively the social wrongs in order not only to depict their crisis-ridden age but also to comment on it trenchantly and change it. Lively centers of art arose not only in Berlin, but also in many cities including Dresden, Rostock, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Munich, Hamburg, and Hannover. The nine rooms dedicated to different topics – Politics, the Entertainment Industry, Prostitution, the New Woman, Paragraphs 218 and 175, Industrial Landscapes, Sport, and Social Topics – create a wide-ranging panorama of art and society in the Weimar Republic.

### **ART AND POLITICS**

The trauma of defeat in the First World War was the tremendous burden which weighed heavily on the Weimar Republic and represented a massive threat to the young democracy. The army was to be reduced within a short space of time to 100,000 soldiers, and this led to enormous political and social problems. In addition German society had to cope with two million dead and some 1.5 million war invalids crowding the cities. Although the government had promised them different treatment, these former soldiers received either a pittance of a pension or no pension at all, and had to beg on the streets. In his graphic works Otto Dix portrayed the *War Cripples* as a

# SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

horrifying succession of figures maimed by gas and with various body parts amputated, a grotesque procession of outcasts.

Through his provocative and politically highly topical art, George Grosz in particular was subjected to hostilities from right-wing nationalist circles. In 1921 he was sentenced to a fine of 5,000 Marks because he had described the military as “whoremongers of death”. His early portraits of Adolf Hitler in the magazine *Die Pleite* from 1923 show Grosz as an artist who recorded the undercurrents of tension and political dislocations of his age.

## THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

After the First World War, in spite of the social chaos, hunger, and inflation a highly stimulating scene of cabarets, dance clubs, and night spots developed in Berlin in particular. Here tourists could find “everything”: those from abroad maintained that Berlin even surpassed Paris with regard to perversions, as Curt Moreck’s *Führer durch das “lasterhafte” Berlin* described. Alcohol and cocaine were both consumed in excessive quantities: the price for a kilogram of cocaine rose from 16 Marks before the war to 17,000 Marks in 1921.

The revues were especially popular: the open display of virtually-naked bodies combined with extravagant costumes and synchronized choreography was a success formula whose popularity extended far beyond Berlin. In 1923 there were 360 revues in 119 German cities. During the years 1926/27 the nine revue theaters in Berlin which put on nightly performances attracted an estimated 11,000 spectators.

The most famous performances were those presented before audiences of 2,000 in the Admiralspalast, where Hermann Haller produced the English Tiller Girls, whose precisely coordinated dance line-ups to contemporary American music echoed not only the army but also the assembly-line work which was becoming more widespread at the time. Klaus Mann wrote: “Dance became a mania, an *idée fixe*, a cult ... it was the dance of hunger and hysteria, fear and greed, panic and horror.”

## PROSTITUTION AS A GROWING SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Between 1913 and 1925 the number of officially registered prostitutes in German cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Frankfurt, and Leipzig doubled. If the illegal prostitutes who had been arrested are also included, it can be assumed that the total number tripled. Many wives of war disabled or war widows were compelled to earn money for their families in this way.

In many grotesque and exaggerated pictures by George Grosz and Otto Dix, prostitution symbolizes the general corruptibility and disintegration of society; it stands for moral decadence on all levels. The women artists see things differently: in a detached manner and without prejudice, the “Flaneur” Jeanne Mammen focuses her attention on the camaraderie among the women. Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler herself lived for a while in St. Pauli in Hamburg and depicted the milieu with sympathy and humorous melancholy.

## THE NEW WOMAN

During the Weimar Republic women took over new professions in large numbers and became telephonists, shorthand typists, and saleswomen. In many cases they formed the army of workers, but thanks to the liberal laws women now also frequently became doctors, academics, and political activists. As producers and consumers they took part in cultural life, wrote, published magazines, painted and illustrated, and discovered the new mass media. The “women’s question”

dominated political debates about abortion and contraception, marital rights, prostitution, and women's wages, as well as fashion and everyday culture.

The figure of the boyish *garçonne* with a masculine haircut became a highly popular image under the visual construct of the new femininity in Germany during the 1920s. The bob reigned supreme, but other masculine accessories such as the monocle, trouser suit, tuxedo, and cigarette were paraded openly not only by film stars like Marlene Dietrich. Ultimately, however, the New Woman remained a figure created by the media and a big-city phenomenon; her heyday was brief and before long she was being oppressed and forced into retreat again by conservative tendencies.

### **PARAGRAPH 175 AND MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD**

From 1896, the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld took a stand against the discrimination and criminalization of homosexuals. He quoted Friedrich Nietzsche: "What is natural cannot be immoral." Hirschfeld believed that the causes of homosexuality were inherent, but compared them with congenital malformations. For many years he and his fellow campaigners attempted unsuccessfully bring about a change in the law with numerous publications and petitions to the Reich government. Hirschfeld was the first to obtain data relating to sexual characteristics and habits by means of anonymous questionnaires.

Hirschfeld also coined the term »transvestite,« and used it as the title of a book in 1910: *Die Transvestiten, eine Untersuchung über den erotischen Verkleidungstrieb (The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress)*. Hirschfeld established contact with Sigmund Freud as early as 1908 and hoped for further explanations about the causes of homosexuality through research into sexual hormones, although this did not occur during his lifetime. In his Institute for Sexual Research, which he established in Berlin in 1919, he offered consultation sessions and therapy which were in some cases free of charge for men, women, and young people. Hirschfeld fled to France in 1933 and died there in 1935.

### **PARAGRAPH 218 IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC**

The prohibition of abortion was added to the Criminal Code of the German Empire in 1871 under Paragraph 218. Not only the pregnant woman undergoing the abortion could now be punished with a prison sentence; so, too, could the person who carried out the termination. As an instrument of power in birth politics the topic became the subject of a public debate shaped by lawyers, doctors, the Churches, and political parties as well as by the women's movement, which was in the process of being formed. During the Weimar Republic the abortion debate became a synonym for social criticism as well as a popular movement which united a wide range of different progressive forces from the middle and working classes. The demand for the "right to one's own body" gained further currency as a result of women's suffrage, which was introduced in 1918. This controversial subject was taken up in countless books and plays as well as in art.

Until the end of inflation in 1924 it was above all the poor working-class woman with numerous children who was the main focus of the protests and who was seen as the victim of social conditions, symbolized by the "compulsion to give birth" prescribed by the state. More than any other work of art, the poster by Käthe Kollwitz serves as an example of this period. The decisive impulses for the mobilization of the population arose under the impression of the world economic crisis and the mass unemployment which accompanied it. But all the attempts at repeal introduced into the Reichstag in subsequent years by the USPD, SPD, and KPD failed. In spite of the broad alliances, countless campaigns, and mass demonstrations they were unable to bring about the abolition of the paragraph.

## **PORTRAITS AS A MIRROR OF SOCIETY**

The New Objectivity led to the creation of many portraits in which important personalities in public life under the Weimar Republic were depicted. They included gallerists, journalists, and writers, as well as industrialists, doctors, and scientists. In addition to actual individuals who at the same time served as representatives of professions and functions, there were also mere “types” such as the new phenomenon of the radio listener. The broadcasting company had begun continuous transmission in 1923 and the number of owners of a radio set increased from one million in 1926 to four million by 1932. Nonetheless the new appliance remained an unusual accessory. It was not yet the medium of mass communication which it would become during the 1930s.

Many portraits by Otto Dix, Christian Schad, Rudolf Schlichter, and others show people with impassive expressions; they look matter-of-fact, unruffled, cool, withdrawn. The artists express symbolically through objects and details who they are or what characterizes them: these items are painted as clearly as the people themselves. The fact that people are shown on the same level as “things” or that, conversely, each “thing” is afforded the same attention as a human individual, is often seen as being a typical characteristic of the New Objectivity.

## **TOWN – COUNTRY – INDUSTRY**

Machinery, factories, works sheds, technical constructions, and smoking chimneys, together with telegraph poles, bridges, and railroad stations are some of the most frequently depicted subjects in the art of the New Objectivity. Machines were portrayed like beings from a distant future, alien and mysterious. An enthusiasm for technology was widespread in the Weimar Republic, but was greeted with great skepticism by broad sections of the population and was violently criticized. The optimism with regard to progress which had been propagated in the Wilhelminian Age was certainly confirmed by the wide range of new inventions – radio, records, and film. And yet the introduction of assembly-line work also clearly revealed the dark side of technological innovation: increased productivity, economic efficiency, and rationalization led to work which was harmful to health and in some cases also contributed to the mass unemployment.

The landscape as portrayed in the artistic works of the age is no longer nature and idyll, but has been made subject to Man with great lack of consideration and even brutality. Although industrialization should actually be linked to hectic bustle, the pictures show scenes devoid of humanity; the cities look curiously clean and tidy, as if they are theatrical backdrops. They are cold, above all profoundly melancholy pictures, full of tension which is being held back only with great difficulty but which one day could result in an apocalypse if released. The nose-diving aircraft in the pictures of Franz Radziwill look like a prophetic anticipation of what was to come.

## **SPORT IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC**

After the defeat of the First World War, sport replaced in many respects the longing for competition and ways to test one’s strength. “Sports reports played a role similar to that played by army reports ten years previously, and what had been the prisoner statistics and records of plunder had now become records and race times,” wrote the historian Sebastian Haffner. The socialist workers’ gymnastics movement, in which the focus initially lay on the medically sound rehabilitation of a workforce that suffered through monotonous factory jobs, gave way from 1919 to the “Workers’ Gymnastics and Sports Federation”, in which the concepts of competition and performance were combined with the new governing values of the Republic, including the overcoming of class and gender barriers.

As in other areas of modern life, the increasing “Americanization” of sport was also the subject of increasing criticism. The Anglo-Saxon sporting culture, which since the nineteenth century had subscribed to the slogan “Faster – higher – further”, and which was characterized by increased performance and competition, clashed with the German tradition of gymnastics and physical training in a group. Strongly antiliberal and militarist associations like the German Gymnastic Federation aimed instead to use sport above all as a means of “Strengthening the German People” once more. Widely different value systems and political worldviews clashed in the field of sport as they did in the other areas.

### **SOCIAL TOPICS**

“Man has created an invidious system – with a top and a bottom,” wrote George Grosz in 1922. “A handful of people earn millions, while countless thousands have barely enough to survive on ... but what does that have to do with ‘art’? The fact that many painters ... still put up with these things without speaking out clearly against them ... My work lies in showing the oppressed the true faces of their masters. Man is not good; he is a beast.”

At the beginning of the 1920s, unemployment increased sharply because of inflation and then rose again even more steeply from 1929 as a result of the Great Depression. Artists like Hannah Nagel and Oskar Nerlinger showed very directly the resulting dramatic rise in the number of suicides.

Other topics included the representation of families and the working world of the lower classes, whereby artists of the ASSO (Association Revolutionary Artists of Germany) like Otto Griebel and Hans and Lea Grundig in particular aimed to influence the political situation actively through their art. As early as 1932 the artist Alice Lex-Nerlinger was arrested for her left-wing political work; she portrayed her time spent in a prison cell in two paintings.