



Otto Dix and the Memorialization of World War I in German Visual Culture, 1914–1936

by Ann Murray. London: Bloomsbury, 2024, 218 pp., + illustrations, ISBN 9781350354623.

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BOOK REVIEW

Otto Dix and the Memorialization of World War I in German Visual Culture, 1914–1936, by Ann Murray. London: Bloomsbury, 2024, 218 pp., + illustrations, ISBN 9781350354623.

The First World War was a defining experience for the German painter Otto Dix (1891–1969), as it was for many artists of his generation. The years he spent on the front uniquely qualified him to show the public the war as he – and many of his fellow veterans – experienced and remembered it. Throughout the years of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), the memorialisation of the war was, however, highly contested in both visual culture and written discourse. Dix produced artworks that were among the most controversial and celebrated contributions to the public debate about the truth and the meaning of the war. In her tightly focused study, Ann Murray investigates Dix's most confrontational representations of the war and their reception in Germany: his Dadaist depictions of war amputees of the early 1920s, the lost work *The Trench* (1923), the large print portfolio *The War* (1924), the triptych *Metropolis* (1928), and his monumental multi-panel composition *War* (1929–1932) – works that challenged dominant heroic narratives and offered stark visual testimony to the war's trauma.

Drawing on Pierre Nora's discussion of 'sites of memory' alongside Aleida Assmann's conception of 'actively effective and affective pictures' as memory-making objects, Murray's study situates Dix's war pictures within the broader context of the visual and textual production of cultural memory. It analyses the reception of these artworks in local newspapers, culture magazines, and art historical journals from across the political spectrum, emphasising how political ideologies, but also aesthetic values, shaped responses. A selection of works by other soldier-artists, as well as photographs and postcards, is considered to position Dix's paintings and prints within the visual culture of the time. Ultimately, the book argues that the artist's war pictures responded to and shaped debates about how the war should be remembered and that they reveal the social and political conditions under which audiences engaged with his work at the time of their first exhibition.

The book offers a nuanced and richly contextualised account of the contentious media reception of these artworks and aligns itself (albeit implicitly) with art historians who have resisted the interpretation of Dix's provocative realism as anti-militarist and of Dix as an anti-war artist to draw a more nuanced picture. Organised in chapters that follow a chronological order, the book begins with a short examination of Dix's wartime self-portraits and drawings before moving on to his more programmatic post-war works. While the heated discourse surrounding the painting *The Trench* in particular has been extensively covered in both German- and English-language literature (e.g. Dennis Crockett, Michael Mackenzie, Andreas Strobl, Dietrich Schubert, Kira van Lil), the book introduces a wider array of contemporary commentary to English-speaking readers. In the chapter on the triptych *Metropolis*, readers are introduced to the writings of Bettina Feistel-Rohmeder, a figure from the extreme-right in the artistic community in Dresden.

Murray's book contributes to Dix scholarship by repositioning the interpretation of his war-related art, notably distancing it from attempts to reconstruct the artist's intentions at the time of creation. Murray critiques the 'fruitlessness' (p. 6) of such efforts, particularly due to the scarcity of contemporary statements made by the artist himself. While there are problems with understanding artistic production through the

lens of experience and personality, a wider range of the statements Dix made many years after the war, in interviews and audio recordings, might have been valuable to readers interested in the subject.

The study effectively maps the aesthetics and reception of Dix's war pictures as contested contributions to the memorialisation of the First World War and does this in an engaging manner accessible to non-specialists. Some readers may find the limited references to the artist's correspondence with his dealer Karl Nierendorf somewhat reductive in understanding both the artist's approach and the role these pictures played for his critical and commercial success. The book concedes, however, that Dix may have sought attention and career advancement with the highly controversial work *The Trench*.

The claim that the book provides 'substantial new research' is undermined by its limited engagement with recent scholarship, weakening the book's historiographical grounding. It overlooks publications by leading Dix researchers such as Olaf Peters and James van Dyke who have worked to develop a more nuanced picture of the artist within his historical context. Most importantly, it should have acknowledged and positioned itself in relation to Michael Mackenzie's comprehensive study *Otto Dix and the First World War: Grotesque Humor, Camaraderie and Remembrance* (2019), which works to interpret Dix's work in relation to the production of public memory, and Linda McGreevy's *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War* (2001) – even if these books pursue the aim of establishing the intentions behind Dix's war paintings and prints. While Murray's book is informative for readers seeking insight into the reception of Dix's work in contemporary visual culture and journalism, it may therefore fall short for art historians seeking an introduction to an up-to-date scholarly framework. Colour reproductions of artworks such as the Dada pictures, and the triptychs *Metropolis* and *War* would have been desirable.

Murray's key contribution lies in the extensive use of primary sources to contextualise the reception of Dix's works in public discourse. This approach offers valuable insight into how his images intervened in the memorialisation of the First World War and jarred with the resurgence of reactionary 'völkisch' nationalism. The book rewards readers by placing visual material into dialogue with multivocal accounts from reviewers who encountered Dix's pictures shortly after their creation – highly subjective sources that together build an engaging picture of how the artist's work was received and framed by these intermediaries for their readers.

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