Visions of World War I: Through the Eyes of Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix

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VISIONS OF WORLD WAR I:

THROUGH THE EYES OF KÄTHE KOLLWITZ AND OTTO DIX

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Humanities

By

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Visions of World War I: Through the Eyes of Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix focuses on the war related work produced by Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix from 1914 to the early 1930s. Kollwitz depicted the heartache experienced by those who lost loved ones in the Great War, while Dix illustrated the death and destruction encountered by soldiers in the trenches. This essay examines the reception of both artist’s work during the 1920s, as well as the motivation behind the works, including the therapeutic qualities associated with the creative process.
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Visions of World War I: Through the Eyes of Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix

Early in the movie The Da Vinci Code, a Harvard University Professor, Robert Langdon, is speaking at a French University. “Symbols are a language. They can help us understand our past. As the saying goes, ‘A picture says a thousand words.’ But which words?” The professor goes on to display several seemingly familiar images. He asks his audience to interpret them. An image of individuals wearing white robes and cone shaped hats represents hatred and the Ku Klux Klan to a contemporary audience, while they are actually images of priests in Spain. A second image of a three-pronged weapon brings to mind Satan and his pitchfork to this audience, but on closer examination, it is Poseidon’s trident. Professor Langdon goes on to say, “Understanding our past determines actively our ability to understand the present. So, how do we sift truth from belief? How do we write our own histories, personally or culturally and thereby define ourselves? How do penetrate years, centuries of historical distortion to find original truth? Tonight this will be our quest.”¹

From the first cave drawings to contemporary electronically generated images, art aids in historical comprehension. Art reflects culture. It illustrates historical events. Artistic mediums demonstrate financial prosperity, mechanical ability, and technology. Art articulates the very thoughts of man and entire societies. The historic clues left behind by artists are invaluable to scholars, but potentially incomplete. Without the

ability to communicate with the creator of each artistic invention, from cave drawings to digital images, complete comprehension is impossible. With this in mind, the subjective nature of artistic imagining adds another dilemma for historians. Artistic interpretation differs from viewer to viewer since each person interprets the images they see based on their own previous experiences.2

Art historians, educators, and students alike take into account the culture and world events surrounding the artist, the mediums, and techniques used by each artist, as well as the influences of earlier artists. This guides in the placement of artists and their works in artistic movements. Since art historians play an important role in this labeling, artists do not always agree with their connection to certain movements. The most valuable tool, however, in understanding the motivation behind a work of art is the preserved words of the artist.

Art historians have placed the work of Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and Otto Dix (1891-1969) in the German Expressionist movement and later in the New Objectivity. This thesis will posit that both artists considered themselves to be realists. A major motivation behind the outpouring of drawings, prints, sculptures, and paintings for both artists was psychological. Art became a means of therapy -- and of candid reporting -- of the world they saw falling apart around them. During the 1920s, people who viewed

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2 I conducted an experiment to demonstrate this phenomenon during a graduate school class presentation of my thesis prospectus. I exhibited the war images created by Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix in close succession and without any written or oral comment. I asked my classmates and professor to write down their first impressions. In 2011 most of my classmates, who had not experienced war, did not associate these images with war. They considered them dark or moody, but not war. One person thought the children were “needy” (or “brats”), but not crying because the children had true physical needs, such as hunger. Audiences in the first half of the twentieth century, however, would have immediately recognized the same images as war, grief, devastation, and starving children.
Dix’s artistic reporting responded with polarization, while Kollwitz’s reputation, which was already established, continued to progress favorably. Nevertheless, both artists produced work that was therapeutic for themselves and their society.

The nineteenth century’s political and scientific innovations led the nations of Europe to a false sense of security in the early twentieth-century. From 1792 to 1815, France pursued war that involved most of Europe. In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, the great powers of Europe established The Concert of Europe in an effort to avoid large scale wars. The nations that participated in the Concert of Europe agreed to meet regularly to avoid another large scale European war.3 The Franco-Prussian War ended in 1871 and the balance of power that had been established was continuing to endure. Large scale war seemed implausible, despite military buildup and imperialistic contention. “It was unthinkable that an assassination in the Balkan city of Sarajevo could lead to the outbreak of a war unprecedented in scale, intensity, and casualties, which would change the lives of all those countries that fought in it and would have repercussions around the world.”4

The political stability of the first decade of the twentieth-century was precarious, at best. As early as 1905, the German military began planning an invasion of Belgium, determined to subdue France. At that time, alliances existed between France and Russia and similarly between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Great Britain was obligated to defend the neutrality it had established in Belgium. By 1914 two successive

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wars, in 1912 and 1913, were fought over regions of the Balkans. Austria-Hungary considered the potential expansion by Balkan nations a threat to its interests. “Vienna had not intervened in either Balkan war... [appearing that] the Balkan states had been rewarded rather than penalized for discounting international agreements.” On June 28, 1914 the assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, was seen as Serbian (Balkan) aggression against Austria-Hungary and the catalyst that gave Austria-Hungary an excuse to start a defensive war. Germany backed its ally, Austria-Hungary, in this action and the Third Balkan War evolved into a general European war when Russia came to the defense of its ally, the Serbs. This unintentionally plunged Europe into a war that eventually engulfed the world.

Neither side thought this would be a long conflict. Both sides assumed their victory would be quick. Nevertheless, the First World War consumed Europe from 1914 – 1918 and introduced the world to wartime atrocities never before experienced. World War I, through the developing industrialization, introduced troops to rapidly evolving mechanized weaponry. The continuous assaults on entrenched troops resulted in overwhelming injuries to the face and head. Introduced in 1915, poison gas ravaged troops who encountered it. Advances in transportation, as well as, mass conscription contributed to the prolonged nature of the war leading to millions of casualties. There

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5 Strachan, 7.
6 Strachan, 10.
7 Strachan, 12 and 13.
8 Sheldon, 2.
were five hundred thousand casualties in a single battle, the battle of the Somme. Those who survived to tell the story of the Great War became known as a “lost generation.”

The 1920s were tumultuous for Germany and her citizens. The Treaty of Versailles assigned war crimes and guilt to the German nation. The value of the German mark fell 80 percent in 1921 after the government sold marks on foreign exchanges in order to pay the reparation debt of 132 billion marks imposed by the Allies after the Treaty of Versailles, or endure Allied occupation. By 1923, the German mark declined so greatly in value that a newspaper cost two hundred billion marks. According to Gordon: “A woman who accidentally left a basketful of banknotes outside a shop returned to find that the notes were still there. But the basket was stolen.”

Dennis Crocket sums up the situation: “The years 1918-1923 were marked by social, political, and economic chaos, as well as constant hostility with the Entente nations; there was absolutely no ‘illusion of a new stabilization’ in Germany before the autumn of 1924.”

Artists were not immune from the crushing inflation during the early part of the decade after the Great War. Paint and canvas were too expensive so paper and ink became the dominant medium. It was less expensive to make graphics and simpler to market them. Some artists, like Otto Dix, exclusively sold his works for United States currency. Käthe Kollwitz, whose preferred method was printmaking, made concessions for the rising cost of supplies. She recorded her thoughts about changing from lithography to the less expensive woodcut technique of printmaking: “... 

10 Sheldon, 2.
13 Crockett, 28.
Nowadays lithographic stones can only be got to the studio by begging and pleading, and cost a lot of money. . . . Ought I . . . make a fresh start with woodcuts? When I considered that up to now, I always told myself that lithography was the right method for me . . . . Will woodcutting do it?"  

Between 1922 and 1924, both Dix and Kollwitz completed print cycles based on the War. These artists were not able to come to terms with their experiences for many years. The German economy began to recover from the unrestrained inflation in 1924; it was then that both artists published their War print cycles. The scenes of injury, death, destruction, grief, and starvation depicted in these artists’ works seem impossible to those who have never experienced or witnessed war. These works of visual historic recording, were a continuing reminder to the population of Europe the catastrophic consequences of war.

Medical advances and experimentation, including plastic surgery, also meant that previously fatal wounds were now survivable. The novel, Johnny Got His Gun, by American author Dalton Trumbo, tells the story of a soldier who survives his injuries. His wounds, however, are so grievous that his visage is irreparably destroyed. Trumbo relates the nightmarish experience of becoming a human “vegetable” capable of feeling and thinking, but, unable to communicate or move while suffering through medical experimentation. The first attempts at plastic surgery included facial prosthetics that

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15 Sheldon, 5.
16 Gordon, 168.
were clumsy and uneven. With the assistance of artists, including American Anna
Coleman Ladd, Army doctors constructed masks of enameled galvanized copper and tin
in colors similar to the wounded soldier’s features.18 Doctors all over Europe
experimented with such devices. Ward Muir, an attendant at the Third London General
Hospital referred to them as “tin faces.”19 (See Figure 1)

Pacifists in Germany and Russia incorporated artist generated images of veterans
with these types of devastating injuries in their anti-war propaganda. Although German
and Russian physicians made considerable progress in skin grafting, their efforts failed
to keep up with the devastating technical military advancements. These initial efforts to
restore form and function fell short of this goal. The static emotionless tin faces did not
restore the wounded soldier’s ability to see, chew, or swallow; they merely hid the
disfigured face.20 (See Figure 2)

Otto Dix and other German artists documented the devastation of these
injuries, while Käthe Kollwitz recorded the grief and misery at home, thus presenting an
artistic record of the war from two different points of view. World War I devastated the
lives of both artists. Humanity’s greatest works of artistic expression and affirmations of
life are often inspired by difficult or tragic circumstances.21 Therefore, the way societies
and cultures cope with times of extreme upheaval is directly influenced by the artistic

18 H. H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture,
19 Graf, 296.
20 Caroline Alexander, “Faces of War” Smithsonian Magazine (February 2007) accessed November 17,
21 Shaun McNiff, “Foreword.” In Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd, ed., Art Therapy and Political
practices of that era. With this in mind, examination of the cathartic aspects of the work of Kollwitz and Dix as it served the traumatized European population brings into focus a more complete vision of the Great War and its consequences.

Käthe Kollwitz (July 8, 1867 – April 22, 1945)

Käthe Kollwitz documented the loss and grief felt by those whose fathers, sons, and husbands perished in the Great War. Born in 1867, she was the fifth child of Karl and Katherina Schmidt. Their home was in Konigsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia), where her father was a master mason. Her grandfather, Julius Rupp, a Lutheran pastor, founded the first Protestant Free Religious congregation after his expulsion from the Evangelical State Church in Prussia. Recognizing her artistic ability, Käthe’s father did what he could to obtain artistic training for his daughter even when gender-segregated education and higher tuition made it difficult. He sent her to the School for Women Artists in Berlin, where she studied from 1885 – 1886. Käthe married Dr. Karl Kollwitz on June 13, 1891. The Kollwitzs made their home in a large apartment above the doctor’s clinic, where he treated the proletariat of Berlin. Karl’s patients gave Käthe an unlimited amount of subject matter. She documented the struggles and grief faced by mothers and children in a variety of situations throughout her long career. The couple had two sons, Hans, born in 1892, and Peter in 1896. (See Figure 3)

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22 Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd, 5.
26 Slatkin, 37.
27 Prelinger, 173.
28 The proletariat is defined as the poor working class.
29 Prelinger, 178.
As early as August 27, 1914, she was recording her concerns for mothers who will lose their children in the war in her Diary: “A piece by Gabriele Reuter in the Tag on the tasks of women today. She spoke of the joy of sacrificing—a phrase that struck me hard. Where do all the women who have watched so carefully over the lives of their beloved ones get the heroism to send them to face the cannon? I am afraid that this soaring of the spirit will be followed by the blackest despair and dejection.”30 Their sons volunteered to serve in WWI and Peter died in Flanders on October 22, 1914.31 (See Figure 4) Käthe never recovered from the loss of her son. Two years later, on October 11, 1916, the artist and mother made an heart-wrenching entry in her Diary:

Everything remains as obscure as ever for me. . . It’s not only our youth who go willingly and joyfully into the war; it’s the same in all nations. People who would be friends under other conditions now hurl themselves at one another as enemies. Are the young really without judgment? . . . Do the young want war? . . .

This frightful insanity—the youth of Europe hurling themselves at one another.

. . . . It will always be true that life must be subordinated to the service of an ideal. . . . Where has that principle led us? Peter, Erich. Richard, all have subordinated their lives to the idea of patriotism. The English, Russian and French young men have done the same. The consequence has been this terrible killing, and the impoverishment of Europe. . . Has their capacity for sacrifice been exploited in order to bring on the war? Where are the guilty? Are there any? . . . Has it been a case of mass madness? . . .

I shall never fully understand it all. But it is clear that our boys, our Peter, went into the war two years ago with pure hearts, and that they were ready to die for Germany. They died—almost all of them. Died . . . by the millions . . .

It is a breach of faith with you, Peter, if I can now see only madness in the war? Peter, you died believing. Was that also true of Erich, Walter, Meier, Gottfried, Richard, Noll? Or had they come to their

30 Kollwitz, 62.
31 Kollwitz, 63.
senses and were they nevertheless forced to leap into the abyss? Was force involved? . . .

Kollwitz wrote this two years after her son died in the Great War, while no end to the conflict was in sight. She recognized the connection between individuals that creates a larger collective.

This produces a responsibility for individuals to act in respect to the needs of others. Her nurturing responsibilities as a mother were in conflict with the notion of sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. She also wondered why these young men would willingly go to war, unless they were insane. Kollwitz pondered if asking these questions was a betrayal to her own son who had given his life in the war. One of the most recognizable prints in Kollwitz’s War cycle, the Volunteers, is an illustration of her October 11, 1916 Diary entry. It depicts a group of unified young men in a trance like state following death into battle. (See Figure 5)

Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix (December 2, 1891 – July 25, 1969)

Otto Dix, the younger artist, documented his experiences in World War I from the viewpoint of a soldier who witnessed the death and destruction first hand. He was one of those young men who gladly took part in World War I. He volunteered for service in the German Army and spent four years fighting in the trenches. His experiences as a soldier were different from those of Kollwitz, who experienced the war at home in her community through the eyes of a grieving mother.

Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix was one year older than Käthe Kollwitz’s son, Hans. He was born December 2, 1891. His parents were Louise Amann-Dix (1863-1953) and

32 Kollwitz, 73 -75.
Franz Dix (1862-1942). Franz Dix was a poor foundry worker in Gera-Untermhaus, Germany.\textsuperscript{33} This family was similar to those treated by Dr. Karl Kollwitz in his clinic that served the working poor of Berlin. Otto Dix began his artistic training at the age of fourteen as an apprentice to an interior decorator. He continued his education at the Royal School of Arts and Crafts in Dresden in 1910 and volunteered for military service in the summer of 1914 when World War I broke out.\textsuperscript{34} (See Figure 6)

The artist’s early works exhibit influence by Cubism and Futurism, but his mature style displays the “more important and lasting influence [of] Otto Dix’s experience as a soldier in the First World War.”\textsuperscript{35} The drawings, paintings, and prints focusing on the war are an effort by Otto Dix to exorcise the demons that occupied his mind after witnessing the nightmare of trench warfare. His works present the viewer with an excruciating image of the horrors of war.\textsuperscript{36} When asked about his motivation for producing the works related to the war, Dix replied: “I wanted to get it out of my system!”\textsuperscript{37} Dix never recovered from the nightmare of war. In an interview with Maria Wetzel he spoke about the visual demons that recurred in his dreams for at least ten years:

Well, it is like this—you do not notice, as a young man you do not notice it at all, that it is getting to you, inside. For years, for a good ten years, I had these dreams, in which I had to crawl through ruined houses with passageways I could hardly squeeze through. I dreamt continually

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{34} Roland Mars, ed., \textit{Arcadia and Metropolis: Masterworks of German Expressionism from the NationalGalerie Berlin} (New York: Prestel, 2004) 146 and 147.
\textsuperscript{35} Karcher, 8.
\textsuperscript{36} Karcher, 22.
\end{flushright}
about rubble and ruins. Not that painting provided any sort of release, mind you!\(^{38}\)

Dix recognized the potential for emotional release during the creation of art. Dix intended to create scandal by challenging aesthetic preconceptions with his art during the 1920s. Otto Dix studied the work of philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and according to Renée Price, this was reflected in Dix’s descriptions of the Great War. Dix’s artistic descriptions of the Great War reflect a Nietzschean interpretation of the war as a “happening of nature,” which necessitated the need to work through the traumatic experience artistically.\(^{39}\) According to art therapist R. M. Simon, the effects of traumatic experiences can be alleviated through the compulsion to create art based on those experiences.\(^{40}\)

Historians and scholars become creative in their search for information when dealing with vague resources about people and societies. They integrate music, literature, art, beliefs, and customs to gain a more exhaustive view of past events and cultures.\(^{41}\) David E. Kyvig and Myron R. Marty discuss historic research practices in their text, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. According to Kyvig and Marty, societies leave behind four types of “traces”: immaterial, material, written, and representational. Material “traces,” such as tools, architecture, and art are valuable

\(^{38}\) Karcher, 21 and 22.

\(^{39}\) Renee Price, ed., with the assistance of Pamela Kort and Leslie Topp, *New Worlds: German and Austrian Art 1890—1940* (New York: Neue Galerie Museum for German and Austrian Art, 2001), 314.


tools for historians. Effective historians must “become conversant in social history, the history of art and architecture, and possibly even psychology.” When participants in historic events are no longer available to inquire about the events they were part of, the most reliable resource are the participants’ own words. Correspondingly, when artists are no longer available to answer questions about their work, the most reliable evidences are the artists’ own words.

Kollwitz’s son, Hans Kollwitz recognized the value of preserving his family’s history for generations to come. He had a basic belief “that everyone past fifty would be doing a service to himself and others if he clarified the more or less satisfactory results of his life”. This prompted him to ask his mother, Käthe Kollwitz, to create a written account of her life. Käthe’s initial response was resistance. She believed her ability to write inadequate for the task and her personal life dull and private. Years passed before Käthe gave Hans the birthday gift of a handwritten account of her life; appropriately filling the pages of a sketchpad.

The Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art is the repository of an oral interview of Hudson D. Walker (1907 – 1976). The interview, conducted on August 21, 1965, records the recollections of Walker’s experience as an Arts Administrator and collector who owned the Hudson D. Walker Gallery in Provincetown, Massachusetts during the 1930s and 1940s. Walker’s gallery hosted an exhibit of Käthe Kollwitz’s work in 1937 that coincided with the artist’s seventieth birthday. Walker recalled the

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42 Kyvig and Marty, 46 and 50.
43 Kyvig and Marty, 55.
44 Kollwitz, 1 and 2.
favorable review of the exhibit written by Edward Alden Jewell for a local newspaper that brought a hundred patrons per day into his small gallery. Kollwitz’s work created a curiosity in Walker. He recorded his desire to understand Käethe Kollwitz, the artist and the woman in the foreword he authored for the English translation of The Diary and Letters of Käethe Kollwitz, edited by the artist’s son, Hans. Walker recognized the importance of this volume as an historic “trace” left behind by this “powerful, intense artist, [who] during her lifetime, wished to keep her personal life private.” The destruction of most of her personal papers during the Berlin Blitz makes these “traces” even more valuable as historic sources. The bombing of Berlin reduced the home she shared with her husband and children for fifty-two years to rubble on November 23, 1943.

Edward Lucie-Smith describes the motivation behind Otto Dix’s early post war work: “He emerged from the conflict [WWI] with a declared ambition to create what he described as ‘anti-painting’, something which would be ‘objective, neutral, impassive’.

The trauma of four years in the trench provoked Dix to begin work on one of his now lost paintings, Der Schützengraben (The Trench). He began during the politically tumultuous early 1920s. Dix described how he began making studies for the piece in his typically blunt fashion: “One day I went to the dissection room and said ‘I want to paint corpses!’ I was taken to two female cadavers which had just been dissected and sewn up again in a hurry. I sat down and started to paint. . . . I came back again and asked for

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46 Hudson D. Walker, “Foreword” in Kollwitz, v and vi.
47 Kollwitz, 9.
48 Price, 314.
some entrails and a brain. I was given a brain sitting in a dish and made a watercolour of it."  

Otto Dix, with the help of Karl Nierendorf, sold *The Trench* to the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne in 1924. He began *The Trench* at a time when the rising cost of materials and inflation deterred other artists from large uncommissioned works. Dr. Walter Schmits, art critic for the *Kölnische Zeitung*, provided one of the best descriptions of the painting, which depicted a German trench on the western front after an attack by artillery:

In the cold, sallow, ghostly light of dawn, . . . a trench appears into which a devastating bombardment has just descended. A poisonous, sulfur yellow pool glistens in the depths like a smirk from hell. Otherwise the trench is filled up with hideously mutilated bodies and human fragments. From open skulls brains gush like rote Grütze; torn-up limbs, intestines, shreds of uniforms, [and] artillery shells form a vile heap. . . . Half-decayed remains of the fallen, which were probably buried in the walls of the trench out of necessity and were exposed by the exploding shells, mix with the fresh, blood-covered corpses. One soldier has been hurled out of the trench and lies above it, impaled on stakes.

The Trench offended several viewers, including Schmits, who demanded the painting be removed from public view and returned to the artist. According to art historian Dennis Crockett, these images insulted families and veterans who had sacrificed life and limb in the trenches. The purchase of the piece by a major museum in a city under Allied occupation added insult to injury. According to the January 29, 1924

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50 Crocket, 92.  
53 Crockett, 94.
edition of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the large amount of negative publicity encouraged the public’s curiosity, which brought people into the museum to see the artistic atrocity.\(^{54}\)

The President of the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin, Max Lieberman, borrowed *The Trench* from the Wallraf-Richartz Museum for his spring exhibition. The exhibit closed in June 1924 without controversy. Newspapers as well as other publications became a battleground both in favor of and against *The Trench*. The conservative anti-republican *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* printed a review of the exhibition after its close. The review, written by Julius Meier-Graefe which referred to the painting as “the horror” that was “enough to make one puke.” More importantly to Meier-Graefe, he believed that once exhibited, the painting became “a German cultural document.” To him, displaying the painting in occupied territory was an embarrassment to the nation.\(^{55}\) Six days after Meier-Graefe’s condemnation of *The Trench*, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* published a letter in defense of the painting. A statement by Paul Fetcher, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*’s regular art critic, accompanied the letter, written by Paul Westheim. Fetcher’s statement praised Meier-Graefe’s wisdom in seeking to remove the painting from public view in occupied territory, citing that permanent display in Berlin would be preferable. Returning the painting to the lending institution would put the work on permanent display in occupied territory. Fetcher also


admired Dix’s “honesty” in expression.\textsuperscript{56} The October 9, 1924 edition of the \textit{Kölner Tageblatt} printed a letter from Max Liebermann to Hans Secker. Liebermann, like Fetcher, expressed regret that a work of this importance was not permanently placed in the National Gallery in Berlin.\textsuperscript{57}

Forward thinking critics, including Willi Wolfradt, Alfred Salmony, Paul F. Schmidt, and Alfred H. Barr defended Dix’s work by appreciating his aesthetics or lack thereof. Wolfradt published a monograph on Dix in the fall of 1924. He wrote: “Surely \textit{[The Trench]} was painted to make one puke, not to comfort, . . . It is simply unaesthetic!—and, of course, that is just what Dix is.”\textsuperscript{58} Wolfradt was responding to Meier-Graefe’s attack of Dix’s work by using the same terminology, but as a good thing. Wolfradt appreciated Dix’s pictorial honesty, even if the image was not aesthetically pleasing to the viewer. Salmony, Schmidt, and Barr all praised Dix for the unyielding and horrible reality expressed in the painting.\textsuperscript{59} In light of the controversy, people lined up to see \textit{The Trench} when it returned to Cologne in late 1924 for inclusion in the Great Düsseldorf Art Exhibition.\textsuperscript{60}

The controversy caused by \textit{The Trench} continued as it became the centerpiece for Dix’s \textit{War} triptych. (See Figure 7) Dix expressed frustration about the distortion emerging about fighting in the trenches during World War I in a 1964 interview about his painting, \textit{War} triptych painted between 1929 & 1932:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Paul Fetcher, “Der Kölner Dix,” \textit{Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung}, July 8, 1924. In Crockett, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{57} “Max Liebermann über das Schützengrabenbild von Otto Dix,” \textit{Kölner Tageblatt}, October 9, 1924. The letter also ran in the \textit{Mannheimer Tageblatt}, October 10, 1924. Crockett, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Willi Wolfradt, \textit{Otto Dix} (Leipzig, 1924) 13 -14. In Crockett, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Crockett, 96.
\end{itemize}
I did the picture ten years after the First World War. In the meantime, I had done a lot of preliminary studies, looking at ways of dealing with the war in my paintings. In 1928, after I had been working on the subject for several years, I finally felt ready to tackle it properly. At that point, incidentally, there were a lot of books circulating in the Weimar Republic, promoting a notion of heroism which, in the trenches, had long since been rejected as an absurdity. People were already beginning to forget the terrible suffering that the war had caused. That was the situation in which I painted the triptych. . . . I simply wanted to summarize objectively, almost like reportage, my own experiences from 1914 to 1918 and to demonstrate that genuine human heroism lies in overcoming senseless death.  

This statement by Dix illustrates his frustration what he felt was historical distortion that began before the war. Nationalism and moderate militarism were a part of the curricula used by the German education system used prior to the Great War. At the onset of the war, schools continued this trend by relating all curricula to current events. Students were given topics such as, “How I Play War, Our Volunteers in the Army, and Why Do We Hate England?” This, along with training with wooden guns, knitting socks and mittens for soldiers, and raising funds for the war effort helped to foster the “cult of the hero.” After the war literature and veteran’s organizations in conjunction with the “cult of the hero,” began shaping Germany’s collective memory.

According to, Olaf Peters, Dix’s War triptych gains its aesthetic inspiration from his earlier work, The Trench. The circle of historical events portrayed interlocks with

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61 Interview by Karl Heinz Hagen, Neues Deutschland, December 1964. Quoted in Karcher, 23.
63 Donson, 78.
64 Donson, 109 and Crockett, 94.
65 Crockett, 94 and 95.
circle of natural events through the circular composition. Peters believes this is a representation of Nietzsche’s philosophy of “eternal recurrence.”

Art historians and critics often group certain artists together based on similarities of style, thought, place, and time. Germany’s art historians and critics outnumbered those in other countries after the Great War. They busily systemized and labeled new artistic trends, which launched the careers of many young German artists during the 1920s. Frequently, artists categorized like this are indeed attempting to belong to a larger group, but this is not always the case.

In 1923, Gustav F. Hartlaub, the director of the Mannheim Kunsthalle, coined the term, the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) which refers to German works of art, music, architecture, and literature that grew out of and opposed Expressionism after World War One. In New Objectivity, sometimes a distorted representation of perceived reality communicates each artist’s inner vision. Neue Sachlichkeit included many artists. However, traditionally, George Grosz and Otto Dix are considered the movement’s primary artists. One tremendous difference between Dix and some artists considered part of Neue Sachlichkeit is Dix’s assertion of his lack of interest in politics. According to art historian Eva Karcher, this circle of artists proclaimed their support of revolutionary political and social change. When asked about joining the German Communist party in 1919, Dix responded: “Do not bother me with your silly politics. I

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67 Crockett, 24.
68 Crockett, 1.
would rather go to a whorehouse.” In 1965, Dix explained his political position: “No, I never got involved with any sort of political program, probably because I could not stand all the jargon. When they came along and started making speeches, I switched off at once. I did not want to get roped in.”

Controversy was not a phenomenon that began with Dix’s painting, *The Trench*. Otto Dix’s artistic career began after World War I with division and controversy. Dix was the subject of two separate articles in a 1919 publication that focused on new art and poetry (*Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*). Will Grohmann focused on the emotional quality of Dix’s work: “Otto Dix is pure instinct. He loathes deliberation, he does not think about himself, he experiences himself.” Likewise, critic Hugo Zehder equated Otto Dix to an uncivilized savage: “He is an Indian, a Sioux chief. Always on the warpath. He swings his brush like an axe, and every stroke is scream of color. His unrestrained fury thirsts for the passionate thunder of pure bursting color. . . . This whirling dervish is a truly possessed individual.”

The controversy caused by some of Dix’s paintings of prostitutes and brothels in the 1920s is understandable in light of the 1871 German law that banned the “publication” of “obscene and immoral literature and illustrations.” The language in this

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71 Maria Wetzel, “Professor Otto Dix, Ein harter Mann, dieser Maler,” in *Diplomatscher Kurier*, XIV (1965), 18 and 746. Quoted in Karcher, 29.
The law was vague in its definition of obscenity and immorality.\textsuperscript{74} In spite of the 1871 obscenity law, Germans possessed an attraction to tales of violent sexual murders and murderers. The Jack-the-Ripper murders gained the attention of the German public during the 1880s. When the war broke out in 1914, documentation of sadistic mayhem, including the rape of civilian women by soldiers, by the German press satisfied the public’s attraction to brutal drama.\textsuperscript{75}

On October 30, 1922 Dix’s painting, \textit{Girl at the Mirror (Mäden vor dem Spiegel)} was confiscated from the Jury Free exhibition in Berlin. Authorities confiscated the painting and charged Dix with violating the 1871 obscenity law. Dix’s \textit{Girl at the Mirror} was a mockery of the traditional vanitas imagery. The female primping in the mirror is not a beautiful young woman, but a worn out old prostitute. Instead of a classical nude figure, an aged woman with sagging breasts and a sexually provocative undergarment is reflected in the full length mirror. (See Figure 8) The publicity from the March 23, 1923 trial contributed to Dix’s growing reputation as a controversial artist throughout Germany. The prosecution sought to ban the display of the painting, as well as a fifty thousand mark fine. Dix, the defendant, presented his work as a warning against prostitution. With this in mind, a shockingly realistic image was necessary for his purpose. The judge found in favor of Dix. He agreed with the artist about the essentiality of the candid content.\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Girl at the Mirror} was not the only painting by Dix seized by authorities. \textit{Salon II}(now lost), seized from the Exhibition of German Art in Darmstadt in

\textsuperscript{74} Crockett, 69.  
\textsuperscript{75} Mangus Hirshchfield, \textit{The Sexual History of the World War} (New York, 1941) 282. In Crockett, 72.  
\textsuperscript{76} Crockett, 91.
the summer of 1923 brought the artist to trial that October. Dix once again argued the necessity of portraying the brothel prostitutes in a “grotesque” manner. He was once again acquitted of the charges, but not before newspaper coverage of the trial drew attention to his work.\(^\text{77}\) Dix’s consequential arrest and prosecution for producing indecent images of women appealed to the public’s desire for sensationalism. Ironically, this made his work popular.\(^\text{78}\)

Otto Dix’s claims of political neutrality and desire to visually report the reality of war separates him from the goals associated with the New Objectivity. Similarly, Käthe Kollwitz distinguishes herself from the Expressionists.

Author Paul Vogt, in his book, *Expressionism: German Painting 1905—1920*, exposes the difficulty he sees in the simple definition of Expressionism as a movement focused on emotional expression with sociopolitical motivations. He states: “All attempts to define Expressionism as a style must ultimately face the fact that it cannot be so termed simply because any definition of its specific nature is bound to be fragmentary.”\(^\text{79}\) While making an effort to redefine this movement by pointing out what he sees as contradictions, he still includes Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix in the group traditionally considered Expressionists.

In fact, Kollwitz criticized the work of others associated with German Expressionism. She believed the emotion they exhibited in their art to be without a connection to reality. Based on a diary entry from 1908, art historian Whitney Chadwick

\(^{77}\) Crockett, 91.
\(^{78}\) Peters, 20.
believes that Kollwitz saw Expressionism as a form of studio art unconcerned with the reality of society.\textsuperscript{80}

Kollwitz’s concerned with art that moves beyond the studio and into the heart of society is still evident in a 1916 *Diary* entry which records Käthe Kollwitz’s desire to reach the public by meeting their needs through her art. Her goal was to establish a beneficial link between herself and those who viewed her art. She felt the only way to establish this link was through images that reflected reality experienced by those who viewed her art. Kollwitz wrote:

Read an article by E. von Keyserling on the future of art. He opposes expressionism and says that after the war the German people will need eccentric studio art less than ever before. What they need is realistic art.

I quite agree—if by realistic art Keyserling means the same thing I do. . . .

It is true that my sculptural work is rejected by the public. Why? It is not at all popular. The average spectator does not understand it. Art for the average spectator need not be shallow. . . . I thoroughly agree that there must be understanding between the artist and the people. In the best ages of art that has always been the case.

. . . A pure studio art is unfruitful and frail . . .

The fact that I am getting too far away from the average spectator is a danger to me. . . . I am groping in my art, and who knows, I may find what I seek. When I thought about my work at New Year’s 1914, I vowed to myself and to Peter that I would be more scrupulous than ever in “giving the honor to God, that is, in being wholly genuine and sincere.” Not that I felt myself drifting away from sincerity. But in groping for the precious truth one falls easily into artistic oversubtleties and ingenuities—into preciosity. . . . Perhaps the work on the memorial will bring me back to simplicity. \textsuperscript{81}

This passage from Kollwitz’s diary written mid-way through the Great War reflects her conviction that the purpose of her art was to serve the viewer. She felt it

\textsuperscript{81} Kollwitz, 68 and 69.
necessary to portray simple reality as a method of connecting with her audience. Otto Dix also expressed the need for art that reflects reality, including the “ugly” reality.

As early as December 1, 1914 Käthe Kollwitz conceived a plan for a memorial to her son, Peter:

Conceived the plan for a memorial for Peter tonight, but abandoned it again because it seemed to me impossible of execution. In the morning I suddenly thought of having Reike ask the city to give me a place for the memorial. There would have to be a collection taken for it. It must stand on the heights of Schildhorn, looking out over the Havel. To be finished and dedicated on a glorious summer day. Schoolchildren of the community singing. “On the way to pray.” The monument would have Peter’s form, lying stretched out, the father at the head, the mother at the feet. It would be to commemorate the sacrifice of all the young volunteers.

It is a wonderful goal, and no one has more right than I to make this memorial.82

Her diary records her struggles with design and the emotions that accompany the creation of a work of art so close to her emotions. Kollwitz reiterates the necessity of art that is uncomplicated in its form to allow connection with those who see it. In November of 1917 she pondered how to achieve this in the memorial she was planning for her son:

Peter’s sculpture should be significant and simple. But the word new does not come into consideration for it. That which I always said previously: the content could be the form—where I have succeeded at that? Where is the new form for the new content of these last years? . . . I worked further on the sketch [for Peter’s sculpture]. I should only execute it when I genuinely succeed in finding a form that coincides with the content. I does not have to be realistic and [yet] it cannot be other than a human form recognizable to us. To find a form like Krausopf does is impossible for me, I am not an expressionist in that sense. Therefore there remains only the human form that is known to me,

82 Kollwitz, 63.
which must be completely distilled . . . not entirely like Barlach, but closer to him.  

Kollwitz recognized the implications of creating a memorial in honor of her son. It was a memorial highlighting the sacrifice of lives in World War I. Placed in a public place; this sculpture would reach beyond her immediately family. Thus, therapeutic healing through art was extended to all those who lost loved ones during the war. The ability of the viewer to identify with the image was important to the artist. This memorial was a way for Käthe Kollwitz, the mother, to find solace and share her memories, which connected to others who shared similar grief during the war. She wrote of her hope for healing, not just for herself, but for Germany on June 25, 1919: “If I live to see Peter’s work [the memorial sculpture] completed and good, commemorating him and his friends in a beautiful site, then perhaps Germany is past the worst.”

Later scholarship, such as Angela Moorjani’s article “Käthe Kollwitz on Sacrifice, Mourning, and Reparation: An essay on Psychoaesthetics” addresses the contradictory situation faced by mothers whose country is at war. It is the basic role and instinct of mothers to nurture, provide for, and protect their children. In a country at war, the role of mothers is stretched to the limit because women are encouraged to also prepare their sons to go off to fight in a war, where they are in mortal danger. Moorjani discusses the struggle Kollwitz faced when her sons asked permission to volunteer for

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83 Prelinger, 79.
service in the German Army. The purpose of the author’s paper was to trace the artist’s conversion to pacifism by focusing on what she referred to as the inseparable personal and political aspects of Kollwitz’s life. Moorjani cites Kollwitz’s early works that dealt with violent revolutions by workers. This introduces the artist as a lifelong socialist in favor of violent social revolution, whose goal was to “protest the conditions of proletarian life.” Kollwitz herself addresses her labeling as a “socialist artist” in her memoirs.

Käthe Kollwitz penned her memoirs in 1941 at the urging of her son, Hans. One particularly insightful passage directly addresses her artistic and therapeutic motivations, including the label of “socialist artist.” At the age of seventy-four Käthe wrote:

I should like to say something about my reputation for being a “socialist” artist, which clung to me from then on. Unquestionably my work at this time, as a result of the attitudes of my father and brother and the whole literature of the period, was in the direction of socialism. But my real motive for choosing my subjects almost exclusively from the life of the workers was that only such subjects gave me a simple and unqualified way what I felt to be beautiful. For me the Koenigsberg longshoremen had beauty; the Polish jimkes on their grain ships had beauty. . . The proletariat . . . had a grandness of manner, a breadth to their lives. Much later on, when I became acquainted with the difficulties and tragedies underlying proletarian life, when I met the women who came to my husband for help and so, incidentally, came to me, I was gripped by the full force of the proletarian’s fate. Unsolved problems such as prostitution and unemployment grieved and tormented me, and contributed to my feeling that I must keep on with my studies of the lower classes. And portraying them again and again opened a safety-valve for me; it made life bearable.

86 Moorjani, 1113.
87 Moorjani, 1111.
Then, too, my temperamental resemblance to my father strengthened this inclination in me. Occasionally even my parents said to me, ‘After all there are happy things in life too. Why do you show only the dark side?’ I could not answer this. The joyous side simply did not appeal to me. But I want to emphasize once more that in the beginning my impulse to represent proletarian life had little to do with pity of sympathy. I simply felt that the life of the workers was beautiful. 89

Kollwitz instinctively practiced what art therapists refer to today as “self-healing.” Therapist R. M. Simon states: “Creativity is an instinct common to all, as a method of self-preservation.” 90

Hudson D. Walker summarized Kollwitz’s purpose in documenting the condition of proletarian workers as “neither sentimental nor abstract,” but factual based on her first-hand observations. 91 Hans Kollwitz recalled the way his parents expressed sympathy for the “common people” they encountered. He wrote about the way his mother saw into the local population and found pleasure in their simple straightforwardness that she communicated through her artist creations. 92 In her memoirs, Käthe Kollwitz reminisced about the influence of her childhood walks around Koenigsberg with her sister, Lise. These walks introduced her to the “workman type” and her attraction turned into a lifelong artistic interest. 93

Germany was plunged into political turmoil after World War I. During the struggle for power in the developing Weimar Republic, the Spartacist leader, Karl Liebknecht, was assassinated on January 15, 1919. The slain leader’s family asked Kollwitz to make drawings of the corpse in the morgue. On January 25, 1919, the artist

89 Käthe Kollwitz, “In Retrospect, 1941” in Kollwitz, 43 and 44.  
90 R. M. Simon, 73.  
91 Hudson D. Walker, “Foreword” in Kollwitz, vi.  
93 Käthe Kollwitz, “The Early Years, 1922” in Kollwitz, 28 and 29.
recorded what she saw “the shot-up forehead decked with red flowers, a proud face
with the mouth slightly open and painfully distorted. . . . I then went back to the house
with the drawings and tried to make a better, more comprehensive drawing.” In the
final version of the work, Kollwitz focused past Liebknecht on the procession of
mourners in this print. This is understandable since she desired to engage the common
person with her work. (See Figure 10) In October of 1920 she documented her
emotional empathy for her subjects, which became part of her artistic process. She felt
she had “portray the working class’s farewell to Liebknecht, and even dedicate it to the
workers, without following Liebknecht politically.” In regards to this and similar Diary
entries, Elizabeth Prelinger asserted: “The artist who began by finding themes from the
working class beautiful and whose orientation was broadly humanitarian became
tangled in the political realities of a complex historical moment.” The artist wished to
keep her political indecision private, as well as avoid forced political entanglement.

As the political situation in Germany became increasingly volatile, Käthe Kollwitz
feared being assigned political beliefs at a time when she wished to remain reserved
about the situation. In October 1920 she addresses the apprehension about being
labeled a “revolutionary” with the violent implications that go with such a label:

I am ashamed that I am still not taking a stand and surmise that
when I declare that I don’t belong to a party, the actual reason is
cowardice. Actually, I am in fact not a revolutionary, but rather
evolutionary, but since one praises me as an artist of the proletariat and
of the revolution and shoves me ever tighter into that role [mich immer

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94 Prelinger, 51.
95 Prelinger, 55.
96 Kollwitz, 98.
97 Prelinger, 80 and 81.
fester in die Rolle schiebt], so I shy away from not continuing to play that role. I was revolutionary, my childhood and youthful dream was revolution and barricades, were I still young I would surely be a communist, even now something yanks me over to that side, but I’m in my fifties, I have lived through the war and seen Peter die and the thousand other young men. I am horrified and shaken by all the hatred in the world, I long for the kind of socialism that lets people live, and find that the earth has seen enough of murder, lies, misery, distortion. In short, of all these devilish things. The communist state that builds on that cannot be God’s work.98

In 1921, Kollwitz discussed with her son, Hans, her motivation for accepting commissions from political and social groups. Her humanitarianism inspired her to “work with the communists against the horrible hunger in Russia.” But, she resented “[being] dragged into politics again completely against my will!”99

As a chronicler of the human condition, Kollwitz acknowledged the emotional aspect in this process. The artist’s son, Hans, recognized the emotional link that was established between Käthe Kollwitz and the people she encountered. He wrote: “Mother would see anyone who wanted to call on her, although these visits often sapped her strength. People would bring their griefs and problems to her and usually left feeling relieved. But then she would have one more burden to bear."100 She identified and felt the emotions of those she depicted. In this way, the process of creating a completed work of art served as an outlet for the emotions that she had taken on; thus, recognizing the therapeutic quality of her artistic process. She also

100 Hans Kollwitz, “Introduction” in Kollwitz, 4.
recognized that identifying emotionally with her subjects was not equal to identifying with or endorsing their political beliefs.

On October 23, 1922, Käthe Kollwitz penned a letter to the novelist Romain Rolland. She informed him of the completion of a series of prints. She also indicated her motivation behind the works in this letter. Kollwitz’s motivation was similar to Dix’s, in that she wished to communicate “how it was” in Germany during and in the wake of the war:

I have repeatedly attempted to give form to the war. I could never grasp it. Now finally I have finished a series of woodcuts, which in some measure say what I wanted to say. There are seven sheets, entitled: the Sacrifice—the Volunteers—the Parents—the Mothers—the Widows—the People. These sheets should travel throughout the entire world and should tell all human beings comprehensively: that is how it was—we have all endured that throughout these unspeakably difficult years.101

These works, like the Memorial Sheet to Karl Liebknecht are wood block prints. The stark black and white images communicate effectively the grief being portrayed. The images symbolize the war experiences of those who sacrificed loved ones to the war. (See Figure 11)

Käthe Kollwitz penned a letter to Erna Krüger on December 29, 1922. This letter discussed the pleasure felt by Kollwitz that she had accepted a commission from the International Trade Union Congress to create an anti-war poster. From this commission she produced a work of pure art with a greater purpose, Never Again War!102 According to Prelinger, the poster is “[her] most nakedly political work, where she sought to arouse emotions and, more important, to exhort action, she called upon the simplest

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101 Käthe Kollwitz, Käthe Kollwitz to Romain Rolland, October 23, 1922. In Prelinger, 57.
102 Prelinger, 65 and 66.
and quickest means of exercising her brilliant draftsmanship: lithography.”

Even though, it is not clear if she intended her Diary for any purpose other than an emotional outlet of her personal experiences. Kollwitz’s Diary gives researchers and historians clear insight into the thoughts and artistic processes of the very private artist. We know through her testimony as well as the witness of her son, Hans that she absorbed the emotions of those she drew. Her January 4, 1920 Diary entry is an illustration of the way Kollwitz internalized the grief and sorrow she witnessed, even to the point of tears. She also recognized the potential for emotional healing through the physical process of making art. She found peace in the making of the memorial for Peter because his situation was resolved. The artist and humanitarian found it more difficult the find the same inner peace while making posters in support of causes, like feeding the hungry that were still taking place. (See Figure 13)

Kollwitz’s artistic and therapeutic process involved internalizing and then portraying the sorrow of those she was portraying. On the other hand, Dix did not want any emotional connection to those he was portraying. “Thus, Dix did not experience the special qualities of individual human beings but rather primarily the collective being killed.” Dix described his artistic process as several stages: “Origin—Experience—

103 Prelinger, 65.
104 Kollwitz, 96.
Idea—Process—Form—Meaning.” The artist’s wartime field notebook indicated that the “origin” for his war related art was originally his inquisitiveness about the war.106

Young Otto Dix spent most of his four years of service in the Great War on the front in the trenches. This allowed him to become artistically involved in the war, something that Nietzsche believed necessary to survive pain and tragedy.107 He chronicled his wartime experiences in the form of drawings on postcards that he sent back home.108

As part of his creative process Dix felt it imperative to, “...to be able to identify with what you depict.”109 Art historian Eva Karcher refers to Otto Dix’s early war work as a portrayal of destruction caused by the war as a whole, instead of individual events.110 Dix considered himself a realist who felt it necessary to witness what he depicted. He spoke of his prewar works in an interview in 1961:

War is horrible: hunger, lice, mud, terrifying noises. It is all completely different. You see, before the early paintings, I had a feeling that there was a dimension of reality that had not been dealt with in art: the dimension of ugliness. 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.111

Otto Dix reaffirmed his desire to reflect the brutal reality of the world he lived in on several occasions, including a November 1966 interview in the *Thüringer*
Nachrichten in Gera, East Germany. Dix stated: “I have studied war carefully. One has to show it realistically, so that its nature can be understood. The artist wants to work so that others can see what things were like. . . . I believe no one else saw the reality of this war the way I did, the deprivation and gruesomeness. I chose to report war factually: the destroyed earth, the sorrows, the wounds.”  

Similarly, Kollwitz wished to represent the war in a simple realistic fashion understandable to the public.

Both Kollwitz and Dix experienced political labeling as a result of the images they produced. At first glimpse, the following excerpt from Otto Dix’s 1915-1916 War Diary appears to be either glorifying war or condemning it: “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!” In reality, however, Dix’s Diary, drawings, and forty-six postcards completed during the war are a straightforward documentation of his experiences. Dix commented years later about the benefits provided by the diversion provided by drawing during the extended waits while entrenched on the front. Similarly, in a 1963 conversation with friends on religion, war, and art he explained the importance of his war experience:

These were all things that I simply had to experience. The experience of somebody falling down next to me, dead, with a bullet straight through him. I needed that experience, I wanted it. So I am not a pacifist at all. Or perhaps I was an inquisitive person. I had to see it all for myself. I am such a realist, you know, that I have to see everything with my own eyes, in order to make sure that it is really like that.

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112 Price, 217.
114 Karcher, 14.
Although the artist felt it necessary to participate in the war for himself, the experience introduced murder, prostitution, and physical deformity into his oeuvre after 1914.116 A recurrent theme in Dix’s work focuses on the connection between Eros and death, which allowed him to depict every aspect of humanity, procreation, birth, suffering, and death.117 Depictions of decaying flesh being consumed by worms in Dix’s print cycle, *Der Krieg (The War)* illustrated Nietzsche’s statement, “Die and Become!”118

Dix speculated about his inclusion in the Expressionist movement and the New Objective camp. He stated: “Perhaps the reason why my work was regarded at the time as ‘objective’ was its strong emphasis on content, on subject matter.”119 Eva Karcher believes the artist’s sense of humor and concentration on the physical appearance of his human subjects distinguishes his art from Neue Sachlichkeit.120 These factors, coupled with Dix’s own words evidence the artist’s differences from Neue Sachlichkeit. In an evening edition of a Berlin newspaper in 1927, Otto Dix stated:

> Over the last few years, the rallying cry of the current generation of artists has been the slogan “Discover new forms!” I am not at all sure that this is really possible. If you look at and immerse yourself in the paintings of the old masters, you always find something there which fits in with your work. For me, innovation in painting means widening the range of its subject matter and refining the forms already used by the old masters.121

Dix, who recognized the influence of the Masters of the German Renaissance in his own work, was stating that his work was more than a repetition of the Old Masters. His art

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116 Karcher, 13.
117 Karcher, 8.
118 Peters, 22.
119 Interview by Maria Wetzel, “Professor Otto Dix, Ein harter Mann, dieser Maler,” in *Diplomatscher Kurier*, XIV (1965), 18 and 739. In Karcher, 6.
120 Karcher, 6.
121 *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, (December 3, 1927) in Karcher, 6.
dealt with the contemporary artistic challenges while simultaneously engaging with tradition.122

German Expressionism: Art and Society, edited by Stephanie Barron and Wolf-Dieter Dube, is a large volume published in conjunction with the exhibition by the same title in Palazzo Grassi, Venice from September 1997 to January 1998. Its contents include an exhibition catalog and thirteen essays on various aspects of German Expressionism written by experts in art history. The opening essay, “Themes of the Exhibition,” written by Stephanie Barron, directly states that Otto Dix’s graphic cycle Der Krieg (War) is a condemnation of war.123 These fifty etchings document Dix’s experience in the trenches during WWI. Their graphic nature brings the viewer directly into the horror of war. (See Figure 14) Dix’s own words, however, indicated that he did not condemn the war, but believed it something that he needed to experience in order to understand it for himself, so he could translate the experience into his art.124 According to art historian, Ida Katherine Rigby, the reality expressed in Dix’s Der Krieg is “self-indicting.”125 Although Dix does not openly oppose war, the Berliner Zeitung am Nillage indicated that those who view these prints without becoming opposed to the war is without human compassion.”126

Established prior to the Great War, since she began exhibiting in 1893 and continued nearly annually until 1936, when the Third Reich forbade her to exhibit,
Kollwitz’s reception was positive.\textsuperscript{127} Käthe Kollwitz, like Otto Dix, impressed an important patron of the arts who collected and promoted her work. Kollwitz’s professional relationship with Max Lehrs, director of the Dresden Kupferstich-Kabinett, the print room of the Königliche Gemälde-galerie, began in 1898 because of an exhibition. This relationship continued until 1923, when Lehrs retired from his position. Before his retirement, however, he acquired 177 of Kollwitz’s prints and twenty-two for her drawings. He authored several scholarly articles about the artist. Lehrs nevertheless avoided images he felt were too political for fear of offending the German cultural elite. Instead he focused on the superior aesthetic value of her work.\textsuperscript{128}

Käthe Kollwitz’s son, Hans, recorded the subject matter of a conversation that he had with his mother in mid-1920 in his diary. They were discussing a review written in reference to an exhibition for workers that the artist had participated in. The review, in the Communist party newspaper, \textit{Die Rote Fahne} divided her works into two distinct periods. Her early work was categorized as revolutionary, while the later period depicted the oppression and hopelessness of the proletariat. The review criticized the focus on persecution and destitution in her art. She felt these statements were only “half true.” The political and social conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries magnified the response in viewers to her work and she now included

\textsuperscript{128} Hildegard Bachert, “Collecting the Art of Käthe Kollwitz: A Survey of Collections, Collectors, and Public Response in Germany and the United States.” In Prelinger, 117 and 119.
“essential human concerns such as death as well.” Kollwitz reiterated that she was representing life itself, which included suffering and social misery. By the 1920s, Germans from all walks of life were familiar with the work of Käthe Kollwitz. The public sought her work because it was accessible, inexpensive reproductions of her prints made it affordable. The subject matter was easily comprehensible to the average German, thus adding to the accessibility of Kollwitz’s work. The years between 1914 and 1933 were “a time of great professional recognition in her homeland.” She was honored in celebration of her fiftieth birthday in 1917 with a major retrospective exhibition. In 1919, Kollwitz was the first woman to be a member and professor in the Prussian Academy of Art, an indication of professional approval by her male peers. She and her husband traveled to the Soviet Union in 1927 as special guests at the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Her talents and accomplishments were recognized by the Berlin Academy in 1928 when she was appointed director of the Master Class for Graphic Arts.

The art of Käthe Kollwitz continues to maintain popularity, both in Germany and internationally. Her images have endured and been assigned purpose and popularity based on changing social and political climates through the years. The social content

129 Paraphrased from Hans Kollwitz, Diary, October 12, 1920. In Prelinger, 81.
130 Rigby, 62.
132 Owens Schafer, 29.
133 Owens Schafer, 29.
of her imagery made her work recognizable and popular which often overshadows her outstanding technical skills.\textsuperscript{134}

Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix, along with several of their contemporary German artists participated in the First German Art Exhibition in Soviet Russia. The exhibit opened in Moscow in 1924 and in Leningrad the following year. One Russian critic, Fedorov-Davydov, voiced concerns that were representative of the Soviet art critics. At the top of the list was the socially disturbing subject matter that only illustrated depravity, death, and misery. Fedorov-Davydov mentioned both Dix and Kollwitz in his review:

\begin{quote}
Is this truly the art of the revolutionary proletariat? . . . How torn the social psyche must be. . . . when artists . . . proletarian in their class consciousness come across as plain nihilists. . . . Who . . . presents a positive ideal? What can Otto Dix offer against the decay of the bourgeois and mass population? . . . In the exhibition are many anti-military paintings, but what do we find in them but representations of the horrors of war? . . . Kaethe Kollwitz. . . [offers] only a heap of crying and shuddering women.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

The people of Germany were still hurting from the trauma of battle and personal losses from the war. But, according to Kalmanowitz and Lloyd, reliving these wounds through the creative process instigates the healing process by exposing the hurt.\textsuperscript{136} The art that is central to cultural healing through times of turmoil becomes an integral part of spiritual, customary, social, and civil aspects of most communities.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134} Hildegard Bachert, “Collecting the Art of Käthe Kollwitz: A Survey of Collections, Collectors, and Public Response in Germany and the United States.” In Prelinger, 117.
\textsuperscript{135} Rigby, 65.
\textsuperscript{136} Kalmanowitz and Lloyd, xv.
\textsuperscript{137} Kalmanowitz and Lloyd, 6 and 8.
Karl Nierendorf, an art dealer from Cologne, and Otto Dix met in the winter of 1921 and entered into a contract in June 1922. Nierendorf traveled extensively in the role of Dix’s publicist as well as artistic advisor. The Galerie von Garvens in Hannover hosted Dix’s first solo exhibition. This exhibition, coordinated by Nierendorf, was financially successful. Correspondingly, the art dealer published a pamphlet on Dix featuring an essay by the director of Dresden’s municipal collections, Paul F. Schmidt. Furthermore, Paul Westheim, a friend of Nierendorf’s, contributed to the publication of essays on Dix in an April 1923 issue of Das Kunstblatt and an October 1923 issue of the Frankfurter Zeitung. One 1923 essay by Schmidt praised Dix as: “. . . the most artless of this revolutionary circle. He takes the object by the throat: he says ugly things with ugly words; he makes not the least concession for what is commonly understood as art. . . We are not talking about a return to the outworn ideals of our fathers. Nor the empty materialism of mimesis: the creative spirit of a god rules here.”

Art critic, Curt Glaser was not impressed with Dix’s portrayal of the reality of society. In 1921 Glaser composed a scathing article which referred to Dix as someone who: “. . . speculates . . . directly with the lowest instincts for horror of a sensation-seeking public.” Glazer continued his condemnation with: “But the real place for his ‘works of art’ is rather the Friedrichstraße arcades, next to the panopticon and the ‘anatomical museum.’” The Friedrichstraße was a busy marketplace in Berlin, but the

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139 Essay included in a pamphlet published to coincide with the Spring 1923 Exhibit of Dix’s work at J. B. Neumann’s Gallery in Berlin. Crockett, 91.
panopticon was a prison in which the prisoners are continually under observation.

Similarly, in the 1800s, the Anatomical Museum exhibited mutants, specimens in jars, and wax models, which catered to the curious masses.

Nierendorf was pleased with all the attention, good and bad, and wrote to Dix on August 8, 1924: “You are now a famous man and known all over Germany.”

Dix began an artistic endeavor in the fall of 1923 that presented every possible aspect of war, Der Krieg (The War), his series of fifty etchings. When speaking of these prints, Dix recalled: “I wanted no ecstatic extravagances. I depicted states of affairs produced by the war, and the consequences of war, simply as states of affairs.” Dix depicted the events he witnessed; shattered cities, civilian sufferers, aerial assaults, the brothels in Belgium, the exhaustion, the injured, the corpses, and the trenches on the western front. Dix’s motivation behind these works was documentation. Exhibition of the etchings took place in two venues; the Autumn Art Exhibition at the Prussian Academy of Arts, which was organized by Max Lieberman, as well as an exhibit that took place in conjunction with the Twenty-third World Peace Congress in 1924 that was arranged by the International Women’s League for Peace and Liberty at the Künstlerhaus in Berlin. Karl Nierendorf persuaded Dix not to include one of the fifty prints for exhibition in Berlin. He feared the print portraying a soldier raping a nun would prompt the authorities in Berlin to confiscate the entire print series. Nierendorf

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141 Postcard from Nierendorf to Dix, August 8, 1924, Otto Dix Archive, AbK, Nuremberg. Crockett, 95.
142 Crockett, 96 and 97.
143 Crockett, 97.
wrote to Dix: “[A]s it is, your representation of the war in itself is a slap in the face of everyone who is celebrating our ‘heroes’ this anniversary week.”

Dix’s fifty etching series, *The War*, did not sell well despite excellent reviews and aggressive marketing by Karl Nierendorf. French pacifist and Marxist Henri Barbusse wrote a foreword for two inexpensive bound editions, which sold better than the full series. The foreword read: “It cannot be said that he exaggerated. The war absolutely cannot be exaggerated.” Barbusse labeled the set of prints “The apocalyptic hell of reality!”

The 1920s were politically charged volatile years in Germany. Because of the nature of Otto Dix’s his images of war and prostitutes, the label “anti-war” was attached to them which was not the artist’s intention. Conversely, art critic, Ernst Kallai, interpreted Dix’s intention differently. He recognized an ambivalent attitude in Dix’s realistic interpretation of war and its consequences. Kallai discussed this aspect of the artist in his 1927 essay, “Dämonie der Satire.” (The Demonic Element in Satire). He commented: “The recoil from the horrors of war is demonstrated with a ceremonial pathos in the conjuring of precisely those horrors that in the end leaves a question fully open, namely as to whether we are concerned here with a rejection or fetishization.” Kallai is asking if Dix is condemning or promoting war. He is bringing to light the possibility that Dix may be simply reporting the events of the war.

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144 Postcard from Nierendorf to Dix, July 17, 1924, Otto Dix Archive, AbK, Nuremberg. Crockett, 97.
145 Crockett, 32.
146 Henry Barbusse, foreword to Otto Dix’s *Der Krieg* (Berlin, 1924). In Crockett, 97.
Otto Dix’s work gained fame in the United States by the mid-1920s. However, an exhibition including five of his works in 1926 at New York’s Museum of Modern Art focused on the influence the German Renaissance on Dix. Realizing the potential for disturbing an American audience, Alfred H. Barr exercised deference in selecting five of Dix’s figurative works for the exhibit instead of images of war or prostitutes.\textsuperscript{148}

Dix’s work was exhibited cautiously on a small scale in the United States in 1926. However, in Berlin, the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf hosted a large retrospective to the artist’s work during the same year. Director of the Städtisches Museum in Dresden, Paul Ferdinand Schmidt remarked about Dix: “[he] arrives on the scene like an elemental event, monstrous, inexplicable, dreadful, just like a volcanic eruption. One never knows what to expect from this wild lad. Again and again he suddenly changes course and heads off for new shores, transforms his subjects, his points of view, and the techniques he employs.”\textsuperscript{149}

Willi Wolfradt’s essay “Otto Dix” which was originally published in 1924 as a volume from \textit{Junge Kunst} reminds students and historians that art is subjective. Wolfradt poses a question about Dix’s art. He questions whether or not the artist’s work is tendentious.\textsuperscript{150} Wolfradt believes that “all art is tendentious. . . . conceived to cause a certain recognition, to set people free and point them in a certain direction. All art protests against the usual, . . . regardless of whether the artist intends this himself or

\textsuperscript{148} Price, 311.
\textsuperscript{150} Tendentious is an adjective used to describe writing or any creative process that can be presented in a calculated manner for the promotion of a particular cause of viewpoint; or has an underlying purpose.
achieves it only inadvertently." The viewer will interpret the work of art based on his or her own life experiences. This interpretation may not match the intended message of the artist. Therefore, Wolfradt believes the artist’s intention is less significant than the interpretation of the viewer and the resulting manifestation of emotion or physical actions. The conclusion to Wolfradt’s essay praised the work of Dix for the impact it was having on those who saw it and the bluntness of the artist’s images. Regardless of the purpose communicated by Dix, his paintings and prints were “shaping history” in the first two decades of the twentieth-century. While Wolfradt praised Dix for being tendentious in his work, Dix consciously attempted to remain indifferent in his attitude. This is documented in a curriculum vitae the artist composed in 1924. He wrote: “Today, I live in Dusseldorf, am married and have a daughter named Nelly. I merely add that I am neither political nor tendentious nor pacifistic not moralizing nor anything else.”

In conclusion, when World War I began, Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix were at different stations in life, as well as in their artistic careers. The reception of each artist’s work varied throughout their lives influenced by the political and social conditions at that time. The work of each artist was controversial at some point during his or her career. Otto Dix’s unflattering depiction of prostitutes created a large amount of controversy, court cases, and publicity. The controversy and publicity was good for his career, since it drew crowds to his exhibits. Käthe Kollwitz’s superb technical and artistic skills are often subordinated to aspects that made her work controversial. Her work

153 Ibid., 117.
154 Otto Dix, curriculum vitae (ca. 1924). In Peters, 18.
focused on ordinary women and children left at home during the Great War. During the early years of the twentieth-century, when it was fashionable to work abstractly, her work remained figurative. Just as importantly, she was a successful woman working and educating in a field almost exclusively male. Her comprehensible style, as well as subject matter led to her early and enduring popularity.

Both Dix and Kollwitz desired to document the human condition produced by war through their art. Author, Dietrich Schubert, equates the illustration of basic human emotions with figurative art. In other words, it is impossible to document the “inner psychological aspect of a human being” unless the figurative image is naturalistic or realistic. Both artists incorporated naturalistic or realistic properties in the subjects they chronicled.

Kollwitz’s seven print cycle, War (1924), “trace[d] the home front experience from patriotic exhilaration in sacrifice to disillusionment, despair, and finally resilience and renewal.” The woodcut technique, which she experimented with because of the inflation affecting the cost of artistic media, proved to amplify the emotional content of each image. This amplification of emotional content enabled the artist and viewer greater emotional release, increasing the potential for psychological healing.

Art historians must take great care to evaluate each work of art based on individual writing or statements by artists. Olaf Peters, however, points out that the passing of time affects the way people remember the past. He recognizes implications

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when determining Dix’s feelings about the war, since he only spoke about it years later. Artists go through changes in their lives and styles which affect their artistic motivation. Kollwitz and Dix both denied agreeing with the Expressionists and New Objectivity. Both claimed to be realists who wished to communicate objectively, “how it was.” The disturbing images of war and social ills are difficult for people in the twenty-first century to comprehend without bias. Finally, reliving hurtful experiences, through artistic creativity opens the mind to healing, both individually and collectively.

157 Karcher, 5 and 6.
Image Gallery

**Figure 1** Photographs taken at the Third London General Hospital. Similar wards were common throughout Europe. Images from “Faces of War” [http://www.Smithsonian.com](http://www.Smithsonian.com) (February 2007)

Photograph of Wounded Soldier
Image from [http://www.gwpda.org](http://www.gwpda.org)

Otto Dix, *Wounded Veteran* (1922)
Image from [http://www.ottodix.org](http://www.ottodix.org)

**Figure 2**
The Volunteers

Woodcut Print

From Elizabeth Prelinger, Käthe Kollwitz (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992)
Figure 6 Otto Dix (1917)

Figure 7 Otto Dix,
War triptych (1929-1932)
From http://www.home.wlu.edu

Figure 8 Otto Dix, Girl at the Mirror (1922)
From http://www.forbes.com
**figure 9** Käthe Kollwitz, *Mourning Parents* (1932)
From Elizabeth Prelinger,
*Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992)

**figure 10** Käthe Kollwitz, *Memorial Sheet for Karl Liebknecht* (1919)
From Elizabeth Prelinger, *Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992)
figure 11
Käthe Kollwitz, War
From Elizabeth Prelinger, Käthe Kollwitz (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992)
Figure 12 Käthe Kollwitz, *Never Again War!* (1924)
From Elizabeth Prelinger, *Käthe Kollwitz* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992)

Figure 13 Käthe Kollwitz, *Vienna is Dying! Save the Children!* (1920)
from Hans Kollwitz, ed., *The Diary and Letters of Käethe Kollwitz*
**Figure 14** Images from Otto Dix’s *Der Krieg* (1924)
From The University of California, San Diego
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- Wounded Soldier (Etching)
- Shock Troops Advance Under Gas (Etching and Drypoint)
- Wounded Soldier Autumn 1916 (Etching and Aquatint)
Bombing of Lens (Etching, Aquatint, Drypoint)

Ruined Trench (Etching, Aquatint, Drypoint)

Nighttime Encounter with a Madman
(Etching, Aquatint, Drypoint)
At Night the Troops in the Trenches Have to Keep Firing (Etching, Aquatint, Drypoint)

Dead Soldier (Drypoint)

Corpse in Barbed Wire (Belgium) (Etching, Aquatint)
Mealtime in the Trench
(Etching, Drypoint)

Gassed to Death
(Etching, Drypoint, Aquatint)

At Langemarck, February 1918
(Etching, Drypoint)
Corpses from the Trenches at Tahure
(Etching, Drypoint, Aquatint)
Bibliography


