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Althea Ruoppo
Providence College

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Paradigmatic Portraits from Weimar Germany: Martha Dix, Sylvia von Harden, and Anita Berber According to Otto Dix

Althea Ruoppo

The modernization of everyday life in Weimar Germany (1919-1933) provided women with a radical transformation of social roles and opened up many possibilities for them. The *Neue Frau*, or "New Woman," was granted the right to vote, stand for office, and receive equal pay for equal work. Despite her increasing responsibilities as a member of the workforce, the New Woman was still expected to perform her duties as wife and mother. If unable or unwilling to fulfill either of these roles completely, she posed a major threat to the stability of family and state. She was either perceived as having a self-interested orientation toward career advancement or as an egocentric woman who looked to her own desires at the expense of men and was likely to participate in acts of sexual depravity.[1] Otto Dix, a German painter and printmaker working in the early twentieth century, rendered this new icon of changing social norms in addition to other female types from the 1920s. In an era of the dominance of landscape, he was fascinated by women, including those from the streets, cafés, and night clubs of Dresden, Düsseldorf, and Berlin. Typical subjects in his work were pregnant women, widows, nuns, journalists, exotic dancers, and prostitutes, among others. While it is undeniable that Dix was an acerbic critic of several aspects of Weimar society, his female portraits suggest that he was not overtly judgmental of the women he depicted and did not hold them accountable for their own debauchery.

Throughout the 1920s, Dix conceived of women as helpless, vulnerable, and passive outcasts of modern metropolitan life. Perhaps he associated them with other victims of World War I: the crippled veterans and beggars on the streets. World War I took its toll on civilian

women. Many were worn down and malnourished, struck by madness, raped, murdered, and mutilated. One may assume that Dix recognized that Germany's demoralization following its defeat in the War led to women's desperate longing to escape their harsh reality. Some of Dix's images reveal pity and compassion, and thus he may have been concerned with their fate. However, morally and socially decadent women disgusted him, but he also accepted them. He, himself, was a frequenter of brothels and "found pleasure in his whores,"[2] while he condemned these women's lifestyles and exposed their worst traits in his art. Many Weimar women were transfixed by jazz and cabaret culture, promiscuous sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, and the like. Women seem to have been sources of commiseration, desire, and fear for Dix. Did Dix sympathize with women or was he a misogynist? Did he consider women victims or contributing factors to the Weimar atmosphere of frivolity and decadence? Because Dix's portrayal of the female represents a comprehensive exploration of the individualities and roles of women in Weimar society, these questions have left some to conclude that his attitude towards women is ambiguous. However, I propose that Dix felt Weimar women were blamed for conditions beyond their control. As an artist concerned with factual observation, Dix endeavored to prove that the violence, poverty, and excess of the chaotic interwar period was responsible for the New Woman's atypical behavior.

There are three portraits of women, in particular, that are paradigmatic of Dix's perception of women: *Portrait of Mrs. Martha Dix* (1923; fig. 1), *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926; fig. 2), and *Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber* (1925; fig. 3). They represent the disparate range of identities of women in Weimar Germany: wife, career woman, and whore. These women inhabit different worlds which intriguingly and unexpectedly collide. All three women challenged the still-existing notions of the proper female social role as

housewife. How do the figures in Dix's three paintings reflect the changes to women's status during the Weimar Republic? Moreover, is Dix alluding to his society's anxiety about these changes, or are they personal reflections? Ultimately, Dix's concern is the fate of the individual, and it is in the individual woman that he sees the universal woman. By presenting Martha, von Harden, and Berber similarly, he shows that many women during this time were susceptible to Weimar decadence and had a tendency toward the extremes of society.

Dix painted the three portraits in a radically changing time. Post-World War I Germany evolved into a new parliamentary Republic on November 9th, 1918.[3] Its democratic constitution allowed for an upper and lower house of government, and included adult suffrage, proportional representation, protection of the family, and decent housing for all Germans. It also guaranteed equal rights and social welfare for both sexes.[4] However, the new stability of Germany was, in fact, an illusion. Eric Maria Remarque, author of the 1929 controversial war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, revealed that war trauma lingered after the War. When the conflict ended, two million Germans and ten million people worldwide had been killed, yet peace was not restored.[5] Remarque told the story of "a generation destroyed by war, even though it may have escaped its shells."[6] He described this "lost generation" as "restless, aimless, sometimes enthusiastic, sometimes indifferent, but fundamentally joyless."[7]

The required World War I reparations specified in the "shameful diktat of Versailles" produced great economic and political tensions. Germany lost "ten percent of its prewar population, fifteen percent of its arable land, most of its colonies, foreign investments, fleet, and railroad stock." It was forced to reduce its army to one-hundred-thousand men, and the Allies could inspect and disarm them when they saw fit. Rightist campaigns against the "un-German" leaders of the Republic, who signed the treaty, emerged.[8] They scorned the government for

Germany's difficulties and staged street violence and political assassinations.[9] The international stock market crash in 1929 added to the desperate economic situation, triggering runaway inflation and substantial unemployment.[10] The economy's dependence on foreign governments and banks (approximately half the gross domestic product was spent in order to cover short-term loans), the decreased demand for German exports, and the concentration of capital in a few hands, added to Germany's problems.[11]

The majority of the Weimar Republic's promises of women's liberation were broken. Nonetheless, it appeared as though women made incredible gains. Women joined political parties, worked on factory assembly lines, in offices, in department stores, as railway guards, postal deliverers, and steamroller drivers. They also took positions in government ministries, bureaucracies, and social work occupations.[12] However, the failing economy put a damper on their ability to exercise their newly-gained rights. Their privileges were not fully enjoyed because they concerned themselves with making ends meet amidst tough economic times.[13] Only an elite few were employed in professions. Female workers were blamed for job competition and the high unemployment that followed Germany's demobilization. In reality, "of the 1.5 million new jobs that were created in Germany between 1925 and 1933, seventy-seven percent went to men."[14] Thousands of women were displaced from their wartime jobs in industry and manufacturing and were put into lower-paying "female" areas. Most participated in traditional tasks serving as domestic servants, unpaid workers in the household, or family business. The new government preserved a great portion of Imperial law that denied women important sexual freedoms. The criminal code of 1871 outlawed abortion and restricted access to birth control, while the criminal code of 1900 limited women's rights in marriage and divorce.[15]

Women were held accountable for massive unemployment and blamed for Germany's defeat in World War I. The "stab in the back" legend insisted that the War was lost not because of the army's deficiencies, but because of the destabilization of Jews, Communists, Social Democrats, and women.[16] The female gender was seen as a detriment to the German lifestyle. After the fall of the Empire, the lifting of censorship enabled the Russian Revolution and "Yankee" culture to penetrate German society. Sexual taboos were loosened and a *Verwilderung der Sitten*, or "degeneration of morals" followed. Weimar experienced an upsurge of co-ed and youth groups, premarital teenage sexuality, and an eroticization of media: sexually explicit films, literature, cabaret, and other forms of entertainment.[17]

The media, which acknowledged the new opportunities available to women, created the notion of the "New Woman" as an attempt to make sense of her.[18] An international development, the New Woman was a "pop culture phenomenon"; she was subsequently featured in films, magazines, and novels as an economically, socially, and sexually emancipated woman. The notion of the New Woman was blown out of proportion, however, since this image was "not financially feasible to most women of the time."[19]

New Women were largely scorned, mostly because they seemed to reject their traditional female social role and their responsibilities as wives and mothers. They refused to restore morality, stabilize the family in a turbulent time, soothe the tensions of unemployment, mediate the conflicts caused by increasing competition for jobs between men and women, and replenish the decimated population.[20] New Women's use of contraception and illegal abortions, which led to the declining birthrate, added to public and government concern about the labor and military capacities of coming generations.[21] Sex reformers took it upon themselves to alleviate the situation. The Sex Reform Movement's one-hundred-fifty-thousand members, consisting of

doctors, social workers, and others, promoted the legalization of contraception, abortion, sex education, eugenic health, and women's right to sexual satisfaction. They celebrated the New Woman's recent achievements and pursued more, but like conservatives, they sought to discipline and regulate her activities.

Reformers gave tips on sexual technique and satisfaction because they felt it would reconcile the New Woman to marriage and motherhood.[22] They also hoped to rationalize and control the New Woman via scientifically-informed experts who knew what "healthy" socially-responsible behavior entailed.[23] Women were given the right to contraception and abortion but only because reformers knew that female sexuality had explosive and dangerous potential if these sexual freedoms were repressed. Women's participation in sexual activity was still only justified because it was potentially procreative.[24] Therefore, the New Woman's sexual liberation converged with her repression. Alice Ruehle-Gerstel noticed the contradiction in the Sex Reform Movement's program and realized that the New Woman's sexual subjugation was a "reflection of women's very real inferior social position."[25] The New Woman was seen as a major threat to the Weimar Republic's overall stability, and unfortunately, "constitutional equality remained largely on paper."[26] It is very likely that Dix understood Martha, von Harden, and Berber as New Women of Weimar. His portraits of them reveal their connection to this groundbreaking lifestyle and feminist ideal.

The first of the three women Dix painted was the former Martha Lindner, the daughter of insurance executive Bernhard Lindner and Maria Juliane Lindner, née Rottluger. Born in Cologne to an upper middle-class family, Martha grew up with servants and tutors; she learned several foreign languages. As a child, she wanted to become "either a prima ballerina or a

coloratura singer." She also enjoyed studying fashion illustration and was interested in cosmetology.[27] She seemed destined to be a New Woman.

In 1915, Martha married Dr. Hans Koch, a urologist and art collector. The couple owned a Graphisches Kabinett, or print gallery, in Düsseldorf, and in October 1921, Dr. Koch purchased two of Dix's works in addition to commissioning a self-portrait from him.[28] Dix was immediately captivated from the instant he met the twenty-six year old Martha Koch, who inspired the artist's forthcoming studies of her appearance. Dix's attraction to Martha was mutual, and even before her divorce was finalized in 1922, Martha went to Dresden with Dix, leaving her two children behind with their father in Düsseldorf.[29]

In February 1923, Dix and Martha married. For the most part, they enjoyed a happy, close, and passionate relationship with only occasional tension.[30] Both were well-read, enjoyed conversing about art, and shared the same grotesque sense of humor. Dix and his wife were cynics with sober, critical minds, and largely ignored moral convention. In fact, Martha loved the painting, *Scene II Lustmord*, which Dix dedicated "to Mutzli on her birthday"[31] (Otto Dix Stiftung, Vaduz). In a conversation in 1955, Dix referred to one of his own lustmord self-portraits, stating "a young man is always aggressive. The "angry young men" we call them today. We too were passionate. Very passionate."[32] He and Martha participated in this new licentious way of life; they smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and loved dancing, fashion, and music—social aspects associated with the New Woman. Moreover, Dix and his wife both celebrated the cult of appearances and had a weakness for everything chic.[33] Otto and Martha's involvement in urban life is an indication that they were seduced by Weimar's modernity. However, the artist, unlike his wife, recognized that the Republic was both exciting and destabilizing.[34]

Nearly all of Dix's depictions of his Martha allude to their marriage's contentment. The artist painted more than seventy paintings, watercolors, and drawings of his wife during the course of their relationship. Interestingly enough, Dix maintained that an artist should be relatively unacquainted with his subject, stating:

> When you paint someone's portrait, you should know him as little as possible. Whatever you do, better not know him! I don't want to know him at all, I only want to see what is there, the exterior. The interior comes of its own accord. It is reflected in the visible. As soon as you know him too long […] you become irritated. The impartiality of the gaze is lost. The first impression you have of a person, that is the right one. When I am finished with his picture, I can revise my opinion if necessary […], it doesn't matter to me then. I have to capture the first impression in its freshness. If I lose it, I have to find it again.[35]

Thus, one would assume that the *Portrait of Mrs. Martha Dix* from 1923 is Dix's most authentic evaluation of his wife because of its early date. The tender sensuality, closeness, and intimacy of observation found in the painting are especially noticeable. Dix suggests Martha's multifaceted character— she appears "sophisticated, sometimes girlish" and her demeanor "coarse, tender, strong, melancholy, or mask-like."[36] She is presented as a modern woman positioned between new and traditional roles. The 1923 portrait is quite unlike the majority of Dix's representations of Martha, which portray her as the conventional, German bourgeois wife and mother. Martha did not shy from domestic tasks; she renovated their attic apartment, cooked, sewed, and took care of the house and garden. She was conscious of her maternal duty, but she by no means abandoned herself entirely to this role.[37] Dix portrayed the "other side" of his wife.

Portrait of Mrs. Martha Dix is "a study in textures and shades of color" (fig. 1). Her hat gives the right side of her face a pink highlight, the dark brown-black fur dress that she wears reveals a dramatic ivory-colored naked shoulder, and the garment's individual hairs stick out against her light skin. Heavy white foundation, blush, red lipstick, and dark mascara accentuate her image. A white glove covers Martha's left hand, while her natural, bare right hand starkly

contrasts the rest of her body. Dix emphasized this part of the body because he claimed that like the "folds of the clothing, the person's posture, [and] his ears," it "immediately [gives] the painter insight into the emotional side of the model; the latter often more than the eyes and the mouth."[38] Furthermore, Dix did not give the portrait a complex background; only a dark green material hangs behind his wife. Ultimately, Martha is "so immaculate, in fact, that [her portrait] verges on the doll-like."[39] She appears before the viewer as an assertive, cultivated, self-confident, and sophisticated New Woman. Dix communicates this idea by illustrating Martha's imported, expensive fur ensemble that is by no means revealing. Her flawless skin and fashionable, red velvet hat with its smooth, soft surface add to her allure. Dix emphasizes Martha's gentleness and demure personality by depicting her elegance. Using her left hand, she motion towards herself in a graceful manner. *Portrait of Mrs. Martha Dix* illustrates Martha's glamour, yet it should not go unnoticed that her garish red hat symbolizes the degree of her degeneracy. The only strikingly bright feature of the painting, the hat jumps out at the viewer. It was meant to be the conduit that would allow the observer to recognize Dix's discernment of his wife. He depicted Martha's domestic existence but also her scandalous involvement in big-city life, with its dancing and fashion.[40] Just as Martha's hands present two types, there are two distinct sides of Martha.

In the fall of 1925, Otto and Martha Dix arrived in Berlin at the request of the artist's dealer, Karl Nierendorf. There, Dix would spend the next two years, creating some of the most iconic portraits of the Weimar era.[41] In the twenties, Berlin grew to be a *Weltstadt*, or metropolis, an intriguing modern city with likely potential for progress, prosperity, and technological advancement. It also developed into a symbol of "modernity both feared and desired, and it had become embodied in the figure of a sensuous woman."[42]

It was in this world-city that Dix discovered thirty-two year old Sylvia von Harden, a regular patron at the Romanisches Café, in 1926. Writers, artists, and prostitutes frequently visited this coffee shop, which was considered by more respectable citizens to be the "headquarters of the world revolution."[43] Dix spent time there regularly with friends, models, and other intellectuals.[44] Von Harden "wrote articles for the daily Berlin papers and produced a novel, but largely seems to have spent her time smoking over a cocktail in the café."[45]

Von Harden was born in Hamburg to the German accountant Benjamin von Halle and a Dutch mother. In 1915, she "fled for Berlin because of the restrictions imposed on her by her bourgeois Catholic family." She managed to make ends meet by writing leaflets, film and theater reviews, and vignettes and poems for various newspapers and magazines, but most of her works were judged harshly because they revealed a "whore's sentimentality" at odds with contemporary taste.[46]

According to von Harden, who wrote two articles about her first encounter with Dix, the artist was fascinated by her complicated personality, followed her out onto the street, and begged for her permission to paint her portrait. When von Harden questioned his intentions, wondering why he wanted to portray an unattractive woman with "dull eyes, ornately adorned earlobes, long nose, thin mouth, long hands, short legs, and large feet," Dix replied that her portrait would be representative of their era.[47] Regardless of the degree of von Harden's fabrication, Dix was clearly intrigued by her, explaining "when I say to someone, I would like to paint you, then I already have the picture inside me. If someone doesn't interest me, I don't paint him either."[48] The majority of Dix's sitters were only present when he made studies and cartoons of his sitters; he painted the final portraits alone in his studio. Von Harden stated that her portrait was prepared differently:

> For three weeks I sat for a few hours every day. This might be easy for a professional model, but for me it was rather strenuous. When I saw the finished portrait on his easel and had to look at my long face, the somewhat affectedly spread out fingers, and red and black checkered shift, and the short legs, I realized Dix had created a very strange painting, one that gained him much recognition, but also much criticism.[49]

Indeed, Dix's final piece exposes von Harden's imperfections (fig. 2). He emphasizes her masculine or androgynous appearance, paying close attention to grotesque physical details. However, Dix did not assign von Harden a mannish figure to suggest his ambivalence or misogyny, but rather emphasized her characteristics as they appeared in reality.

Von Harden was undoubtedly a New Woman; she sits in the corner of the café at a table, smoking an elegant red-tipped cigarette, drinking a half-empty glass of Spritzer, and exhibiting a state of apathy, as she disregards the viewer."[50] She wears an unflattering, boxy, checkered pattern dress that makes her bust indistinguishable. One of her pink stockings is sloppily rolled down, exposing her varicose veins, yet she is detached, disinterested, and does not pull it back up. The melancholic expression on her narrow face, nervous posture, and awkward, distorted large hands and long fingers add to her bizarre character. Her bobbed hair is very masculine, as is the monocle in her eye, which was almost exclusively worn by men and "like the preface to her last name, classifies her as a member of the old aristocracy, degraded now to more ordinary pursuits." Von Harden is the striking image of decadence; she appears elusive, coarse, and dismal.[51] Dix intended in this portrait to show Weimar society's understanding of von Harden as an "intersexual" type. The intersexual woman, which the German sexologist Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld labeled the "third sex," was considered to possess a sinister character and a predisposition to homosexuality.[52] Von Harden appears to be trapped between masculine and feminine dispositions and challenges accepted definitions of sexuality. Her portrait presents no beauty or charm, only the fascination of ugliness and repulsion.

Whereas in Martha's portrait Dix only used red to emphasize her hat, in von Harden's depiction, the artist increased the extent of this color. Von Harden deviated from the social norm more so than Martha. While the artist's wife had aspirations similar to those of the New Women of her day, she did not fully transform into this icon of changing gender norms. Von Harden, on the other hand, was an androgynous, career-oriented, bohemian intellectual, who met with other journalists and writers to discuss political and intellectual developments.[53] She fit the description of the New Woman more than did Martha. Dix used more red in order to illustrate his society's view that von Harden posed a greater threat to Weimar stability in her degeneracy.

While Dix spent his afternoons in the cafés of Berlin with journalists like von Harden, he set aside his evenings for the cabarets that expanded the concept of Germany's New Woman. It was in the dance hall that he met the infamous performance artist, Anita Berber. Berber came from a bourgeois, musical family. Her father, Felix Berber, was a well-known concert soloist who played violin in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and was later a professor of violin at the Munich Academy of Music. He left Berber and her mother, Lucie Thiem, an actress and singer, immediately after Anita's birth in Dresden.[54] The divorce generated rebuke from her peers at boarding school and stifled her ability to form meaningful or lasting relationships.[55]

In 1915, Berber joined her mother and grandmother in Berlin. She became a model, began dancing at sixteen, and at nineteen, trained as a modern and classical dancer performing Expressionist dances to the music of Lizst, Chopin, Debussy, and Brahms. Despite having these bourgeois interests, which included the study of both cooking and French, Berber picked up other pursuits that did not meet standards of taste.[56] Between 1919 and 1924, Berber had both acting and nude dance roles in twenty-four silent films. Her controversial works presented homosexuality, brothel scenes, absinthe, suicide, rape, and murder.[57] Her roles decreased by

1922, as her heroin, opium, morphine, hashish, and chloral hydrate-ether addictions made her an unreliable actress. But in taking these drugs, she joined many Germans who engaged in similar behavior.[58] Berber appeared in all of the top Berlin cabaret venues—the Wintergarten, the Nelson Theater am Kurfurstendamm, and the Apollo. She was also notorious for her choice of marriage partners, her brief attraction to lesbianism, her innumerable paramours, and her distinctive gender ambiguity. When she was not parading in revealing costumes or in the nude, she was found donning male attire and a monocle.[59] Martha spoke about Berber's alcoholism, recalling that she drank "an entire bottle of cognac before every performance" and took to prostitution to support her drug addictions.[60] Anita Berber indisputably incarnated all the fears and negativity associated with the New Women of her day.

Dix probably met twenty-six year old Berber in the fall of 1925, but most certainly had heard of her prior to this date, as she was the subject of international attention and had earned major Berlin reviews by both critics and devotees. Between 1921 and 1924, just prior to Dix's portrait, Berber's sordid exploits were subjects of tabloid gossip in the Berlin and Viennese press as well as in America's fashion monthlies.[61] But by 1925, it seems as though Berber had been forgotten.[62]

In *The Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber*, her physical appearance conveys an immediate impression of illness and degeneracy (fig. 3). Berber stands staring blankly into space, revealing the "loneliness and desperation behind her customary façade of coquettish arrogance and mockery." Her ghastly white face with its crimson lips, red nostril, signature green eye shadow, dark eyeliner, and false eyebrows above her shaved brow make Berber a horrid presence. Audaciously made-up and garish-looking, she is surrounded by intense, vibrant shades of red. Red pervades the composition; it radiates out beyond the body and enhances the notion of

Berber's *femme fatale* character. This color captures the very essence of the dancer.[63] Berber's "dyed hair, bright lips, tinged hands, and the monochromatic background emphasize a red-hot exaggerated sexuality." The translucent, glowing background may symbolize the red-light district she frequented.[64] The red tones regress into orange, giving Berber the appearance of a flame likely to burn out.[65] Additionally, she wears a tightly-fit, blazing red dress that emphasizes her silhouette. This high-collared garment, which she wore in her performance "Morphine" in the 1922 dance program *The Dances of Depravity, Horror, and Ecstacy*, was originally black.[66] As quoted above, Dix explains that "the essence of every person is expressed in his exterior; the exterior is the expression of the interior, that is, the exterior and the interior are identical."[67] It is very likely that the artist altered the color because he thought it better suited her scandalous behavior and lifestyle.[68] Dressed in this provocative costume that emphasizes her torso and navel, Berber holds a stylized pose. Her snake-like body exudes raw sexuality and stresses her artistic confidence, conveying the impression of a sexual predator that preys on men, women, and the audiences that fall victim to her spell. She points her hands towards her genital area, further proposing her embodiment of sensuality, eroticism, and danger. The heavy use of red in the dancer's portrait suggests that she was the epitome of the degenerate New Woman. She was more dangerous than Martha Dix and Sylvia von Harden to Weimar prosperity because she exuded excesses of forbidden sexuality and licentiousness.

Nonetheless, since Dix painted this famously nude-dancing woman fully dressed, it seems as though he recognized her complexity as a performer. Dix did not consider Berber's nude performances shameless or erotic but rather instances of the "physically and emotionally bared self." Perhaps Dix, like the Czechoslovakian dance historian Joe Jencik who wrote her biography, understood Berber's nude dance performances as expressive routines with fine art

pedigree and context rather than sexual spectacles.[69] Berber danced in order to convey her feelings of loneliness, detachment, and helplessness. She articulated and revealed her human needs and desires through her own provocative movements. As a revolutionary New Woman, Berber was in search of social liberation and expressed this in her stage performances. Like many Germans, she also felt the effects of the devaluation of the mark. Her sexually promiscuous performances were the effects of mass poverty in Berlin.

Did Dix acknowledge that there was more to Berber than met the eye? Did he apprehend that Berber's "eroticism was performed, staged for publicity, fans, shock, and artistry"?[70] Many scholars have noted that Friedrich Nietzsche was a major source of inspiration for Dix and influenced his misogyny, since the artist brought a copy of *The Gay Science* to war with him and made two portrait busts of the nihilist philosopher. However, according to Nietzsche, "any day that precluded dance was a day lost." The philosopher may have impacted Dix's interpretation of Berber, since he considered "joyous dance and the body's wisdom…prerequisites for truth and self-knowledge."[71] Dix probably concurred with European intellectuals like Fred Hildenbrandt, Magnus Hirschfeld, Joe Jencik, Leo Lania, Klaus Mann, Paul Markus, and Werner Suhr, all Berber enthusiasts.[72] Evidence that Dix and his wife visited Berber in the hospital prior to her death, attended the funeral, and treasured this portrait of the dancer further indicates Berber's appeal for the artist. In the 1960s when the portrait was on the art market, Dix invested a great deal of money to acquire it from an art dealer in Munich. The painting found a special place over his fireplace in his and Martha's apartment.[73]

The three portraits of Martha, von Harden, and Berber can be associated with Dix's images of World War I and its aftermath. Dix spent the entire war as a soldier at the front and in

the trenches. In an interview from 1963, he explained why he had volunteered for the German Army in 1914:

> I had to experience how someone beside me suddenly falls over and is dead and the bullet has hit him squarely. I had to experience that quite directly. I wanted it. I'm therefore not a pacifist at all - or am I? - perhaps I was an inquisitive person. I had to see all that for myself. I'm such a realist, you know, that I have to see everything with my own eyes in order to confirm that it's like that. I have to experience all the ghastly, bottomless depths of life for myself; it's for that reason that I went to war, and for that reason I volunteered.[74]

By the end of the war in 1918, Dix was full of personal experience and commentary. He began to depict Weimar figures from the extreme lower classes: beggars on the streets, crippled and horribly disfigured veterans, prostitutes, pimps, and the elderly. But he also included those from the upper classes of culture and society: his fellow artists, intellectuals, wealthy patrons, and those in prominent professions.[75] Several art historians have commented on Dix's harsh critique of Weimar society. They have called Dix an artist who starkly proclaimed his condemnation of depravity.

Linda McGreevy was the first to refer to Dix as a 'Critical Realist,' citing Dix's strong drive toward the depiction of reality and sardonic viewpoint as justification.[76] McGreevy and others believe Dix's portraits are not objective works, but rather subjective images that reveal his sitters' revolting characters. They claim Dix had "little respect for the masks his subjects wore," and so he "stripped them and exposed the core of their beings."[77] Scholars argue that Dix's moral assessment of society stemmed from his upbringing in a proletarian, Lutheran household. His education refined him and influenced his disdain for vulgar cultural influences.[78] Yet, one could also claim that his working-class background was the source of his underlying empathy and humanity.[79] Still, while Dix questioned the immorality of his time, his attitude towards women remains unclear. *Self-Portrait with Muse* from 1924 suggests that Dix was intrigued by, and drew

inspiration from, the female body, which was an important source of his creative energy[80] (Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum, Hagen).

Dix's work from the twenties falls under the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or "New Objectivity," movement that emerged after World War I. Gustav Hartlaub, a director of the Mannheim *Kunsthalle* of modern and contemporary art, first used this term in 1925 to describe the work of artists who had preserved, and remained committed to, the depiction of realities rather than abstractions.[81] In essence, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* rejected Expressionism and promoted accurate representations. It stressed the avoidance of sentimentality and the need for sobriety.[82] Its themes dominated political, academic, and cultural debate and largely considered the War and its repercussions on urban life in Weimar.[83] Hartlaub placed Dix among the adherents of Verism, a leftist sub-division of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in which artists approached their subjects with sharp observation and sought to depict truthful existence along with its goodness or evil, beauty and ugliness. Dix asserted:

> One always envisions the portrait painter as a great psychologist and physiognomist, able to immediately read the most hidden virtues and vices in every face and represent them in his pictures. This is conceived in literary terms, for the painter does not evaluate, he looks. My motto is: "trust your eyes!"[84]

While the majority of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists considered that their works' purpose was to prompt revolutionary political and social change, Dix remained uninterested in politics.[85] Instead, he sought to depict the contradiction of the Weimar Republic. Dix concerned himself with "authentic" reality in order to make sense of his world in the ways he needed to. When the artist depicted individuals, he did not believe himself to be making a subjective statement about them, even if they seem brutal or extreme at first glance. Dix's art intends to expose objective truths and reveal the hidden reality or structure of society itself.[86]

Study of color theory particularly influenced Dix's interpretation of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. He was aware of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's theory and grew interested in the complementary origins of color.[87] Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, or *Theory of Colours* of 1810, is his written disagreement with Newton's theory that color derives merely from the spectrum of light alone.[88] Goethe, unlike Newton, believed color was not just a physiological reaction or a sensation resulting from different wavelengths of light on receptors in one's eyes. Rather, the sensations of color one experiences are also shaped by his or her perception. Goethe's "Announcement of a Thesis on Color" states that he hopes "the artist, that grand species, whose eyes keenly judge each color relationship, and who devotes the better part of his life to the observation and imitation of alluring harmonies, partakes in [his] efforts."[89] Painting portraits that are startlingly unreal, Dix strove to carry out Goethe's wishes.

Additionally, in his discussion of animals and human beings, Goethe asserts that "so much in [the case of man] is in affinity with the internal structure, that the surface can only be sparingly endowed."[90] If Dix truly painted the three women using Goethe's commentary, then he would use red not with respect to the women's appearance but rather their characters. However, Goethe states that colors are associated with the emotions of the mind.[91] Were Dix's depictions of Martha, von Harden, and Berber a reflection of his feelings towards them? Goethe suggests that single colors stimulate sensual and moral effects. The color red "conveys an impression of gravity and dignity, and at the same time of grace and attractiveness."[92] Did Dix use red because he saw these positive qualities in Martha, von Harden, and Berber, or was red meant to express negative feelings about their participation in the decadence of urban life? George Grosz, a fellow supporter of Verism and friend of Dix, was appalled by the horrors of World War I and the economic depression and social dislocation in Germany. Grosz's painting, *Metropolis*, like

Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber, has a monochromatic color scheme—it is overcome with the energizing, aggressive, and bold color red. Is color, then, a cultural construct, or a "contingent, historical occurrence whose meaning, like language, lies in the particular contexts in which it is experienced and interpreted?"[93]

Dix may have been familiar with, and attributed meaning to color because of, the Basel Symbolist, Arnold Böcklin, who studied Goethe's *Farbenlehre* and devised a set of moral associations concerning color. To him, black, green, and white in combination suggested seriousness, and red, yellow, and blue alluded to cheerfulness. Franz von Stuck, Böcklin's younger Symbolist contemporary, also noted color symbolism. Red meant passion, sulphur-yellow danger, green hope, and blue misery, eternity, intellectuality, and poetic worth.[94] It is also likely that Dix was aware of the German philosopher and psychologist Emil Utitz, since both men stressed the over-arching importance of observation and impression. Utitz's essay, *Grundzuge der aesthetischen Farbenlehre*, or *Principles of the Aesthetic Theory of Colours*, claimed that the painter "does not take his habitual colours [i.e. the colours expected in objects, and hence perceived in them] to his subject, but gives himself up naively to the immediate impression."[95] This statement seems very close to Dix's viewpoint.

In the middle to late 1920s, Dix's artistic style transformed, and his "critical realism" mellowed, perhaps as a result of his marriage, the birth of his children, and his professorship at the Dresden Academy.[96] His later works attest to this stylistic change, displaying his focus on formal structure over critical comment. He replaces his emotional intensity with a noticeable concern for surface appearances. Dix's emphasis of colors and textures of objects and materials, as well as the new calculated and calm manner in which he painted with smooth, thin layers of

pain, demonstrate this readjustment. Dix believed everyone had a certain color associated with his or her personality that conveyed the inner qualities of the individual. He explained:

> …not only the form, but color as well is of the greatest importance and serves as a means of expressing the individual. Each person has his own special color that affects the entire picture. Color photography has no emotional expression, but is only a physical record, and a poor one at that.[97]

This color or tone was apparent to the artist at first glance, and Dix utilized this specific color "to preserve the freshness of his first impression."[98]

Dix's interpretation of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* attests to his impartial gaze. Using standards of commitment to realism and color theory, he exposed society's corruption, including his own. *Me in Brussels* from 1922 is a self-portrait of Dix as a World War I soldier pursuing a prostitute (Otto Dix Stiftung, Vaduz). Dix emphasizes his own inexcusable predatory and aggressive nature by presenting himself as a voyeur. He surrounds his eyes with red and places a lustful smile on his face. Dix uncovers the complicity of the male sex, as he appallingly observes the seminude woman from a stealthy vantage point in the dark. The artist wanted to expose the hypocritical ethos of the day and insisted on showing life as it was. In an interview in 1965, Dix expressed that he "was delighted that life is as it is, that not everything is sugary sweet and wonderful. It all depends; you can see mankind as great—but also as really small, even like an animal. It's all part of his natural disposition."[99] Dix recognized the paradox in his society:

> Yes it is wonderful that the world is so grotesque, so dialectical! So contradictory! On the one hand, solemnity, and on the other, comedy. That the two are so closely linked, is a kind of…well, it is not exactly something I discovered single-handedly, but they seemed to me to be connected. No, I always took pleasure in the fact that life was like that. Human nature would not be complete without that. No, I was not at all troubled by realizing all this…After all, there is humor.[100]

It was in the mechanisms and norms of social reality that Dix found ironies. He was aware of the wide-ranging problems associated with rapid urbanization and industrialization—overcrowding,

poverty, crime, prostitution, and sex murder, to name a few.[101] Women in Weimar could join the bourgeoisie in various urban spaces (festivals, fairs, and popular entertainment establishments like cabaret theaters and dance halls), but many were scorned if they appeared in the public realm.[102] Dix recognized the contradictions of his haphazard age; "the gutter and the dance floor, the red-light district and high society, prosthetic leg and the Charleston, bare existence as a cripple and life as colorful excess."[103]

Dix's use of the color red in his portraits of Martha, von Harden, and Berber is a reflection of his alignment with artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. It is also an observation of his sitters' personality traits, careers, and reputations.[104] As a member of the *Neue* Sachlichkeit, Dix was interested in external appearances because they provided the observer with a reflection of the individual's authentic inner being.[105] In respect to Martha, von Harden, and Berber, Dix used color to identify and evaluate the women's true nature. Color demonstrates three different levels of degenerate Weimar women, and the amount of red in the portraits alludes to the extent of each woman's self-destruction.

There are stark distinctions between Martha, von Harden, and Berber. Martha came from a wealthy, cosmopolitan family and became the refined wife and mother of Dix's children; Sylvia was an aristocratic German journalist; Anita Berber was Berlin's most famous cabaret performer, fashion model, Expressionist poet, and silent film actress. Yet, despite their differences, Martha, von Harden, and Berber embody, to some extent, the idea of the New Woman. Dix found their identities comparable, and this explains to a certain degree his use of red in all three portraits, and his use of red was clearly amplified as the sitters became more degenerate. Dix's depictions of Martha, von Harden, and Berber also seem to reiterate his idea that women are victims of their tragic biological fate.[106] These portraits do not illustrate his

abhorrence of women, but rather, the absurdity he found in the new, contrived image of women as emancipated, independent, and ultimately tragic: they were disposed to Weimar decadence because it was a means to escape their oppressed reality.

Ultimately, Otto Dix is one of the most complex and underestimated artists of the twentieth century. His attitude towards women may never be firmly positioned, only estimated. In any case, it is likely that the three portraits of Martha, von Harden, and Berber are both a manifestation of the artist's thoughts, feelings, and concerns and a reflection of Weimar society.[107] One could further argue that he was most interested in their experience as New Women in Weimar and that his depictions of these females transcend individuality to serve as types and representatives of this very specific moment.[108] Many have argued that Dix's exaggeration of his figures alludes to his misogyny, but his work would not contain strong social messages if he had chosen to depict women any differently. Dix rendered the women as such in order to force his society to consider the causes of their destructive nature.

Dix, in conversation with Hans Kinkel, said his early paintings gave him the feeling that "one side of reality has never before been depicted: ugliness."[109] Shortly before his death, Dix explained his previous statement: "I was not really seeking to depict ugliness. Everything I saw was beautiful." This account attests to the artist's general disregard for conventional value judgments, and his attempt to demystify his subjects.[110] Any exaggeration or caricature found in Dix's works "turns out to be the most ruthlessly honest character assessment," symbolic of the façade that hides the decay of society and Dix's attitude toward it.[111] Dix was detached from gender issues, but depicted them as a means to raise specific social, economic, and moral ideas. With good reason, his contentious works continue to cause immense uneasiness, shock, and social guilt. By closely analyzing and contextualizing his works, we gain critical insight into

images of women in the twenties as they defined themselves, as they were defined by Weimar society, and as they were defined by one observer, Otto Dix.

Illustrations

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Figure 1. Dix, Otto (1891-1969). Portrait of Mrs. Martha Dix, 1923. Oil on canvas, 69 x 60.5 cm. Landesbank Baden-Württemberg, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

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Figure 2. Dix, Otto (1891-1969) © ARS, NY. Portrait of the journalist Sylvia von Harden, 1926. Oil on tempera on wood. Inv. AM 3899P. Photo: Jean-Claude Planchet. Musee National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.

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Figure 3. Dix, Otto (1891-1969). Portrait of the Dancer Anita Berber, 1925. Oil and tempera on wood, 120.4 x 64.9 cm. Sammlung Landesbank Baden-Württemberg, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart.

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