

## Horrors of War

That war is invariably brutal goes without saying, but how it should be remembered or represented has always proved much more controversial. Does the public have the right to expect to be shielded from the worst scenes of carnage? Do relatives of the dead have the right to have the deaths represented in terms framed by, if not by political ideals, then at least consoling civic values? Or does truth, and the need to remember and perhaps to learn, count ultimately for more?

Otto Dix certainly believed in the need to remember. As a young man in 1914 he had willingly joined the German army and fought for four years in the trenches, mainly as a machine-gunner. Like many of his generation, he believed that war was not unnatural or evil but rather an expression of something fundamental in the human condition. He also did not wish to miss the excitement of an event that would sweep away what were widely regarded as outmoded ways of thinking and of seeing the world. Later in life he remembered being terrified when approaching the front line through trenches filled with corpses, mud and filth, but yet felt compelled, in his words, to experience ‘the phenemona of war’.

*I ... had to see how someone next to me suddenly fell, and was gone, the bullet hitting him right in the middle. I had to experience all of that very precisely. I wanted to. In other words, I'm not a pacifist at all. Or maybe I was a curious 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 confirm that that's the way it is.*

During the war years Dix made many drawings of life in the trenches (a friend sent him drawing materials along with extra rations). His works were expressionist in style, and show him trying to capture the violent energy of war in rather generalised terms through anonymous figures. It was only a couple of years after the conflict that he felt the desire to tackle the subject of the war experience, already fading within post-war society, and to do so in terms of the experience of recognisable individuals and telling, gruesome details. This may have been in part to exorcise his memories or even to reconnect with the thrill of war (almost fifty years later he wrote, ‘The war was a horrible thing, but there was something tremendous about it, too.’) He visited mortuaries and dissecting rooms to refresh his war-time memories, and brought a disconcerting sense of immediacy to the scene of smashed skulls, entrails and dismembered bodies mired in mud and agitated by the action of worms and maggots that filled *The Trench*, a monumental canvas over two metres tall and wide that took him three years to complete.

The imagery hit home. Responding to the work's unveiling in a museum in Cologne, a local critic described the painting in shocked detail:

*In the cold, sallow, ghostly light of dawn ... a trench appears into which has just fallen a devastating bombardment ... the trench is filled up with hideously mutilated bodies and human fragments. From open skulls brains gush like thick red groats [hulled grain]; torn-up limbs, intestines, shreds of uniforms, 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 the stakes.*

Although the painting drew on some famous medieval works of art, many critics struggled to see any redeeming feature in this catalogue of pain and physical degradation. The same critic who had recognised the power of the imagery in his description concluded that the painting offered nothing in terms of moral or artistic uplift; worse, in its anti-war message, it might weaken the people's 'inner war-readiness'. More decisively, a prominent Berlin-based critic pronounced that the German people did not want this gruesome reminder of the horrors of war, and claimed the painting made him want to 'throw up'. He campaigned for it to be withdrawn from public view.

Significantly, no critic doubted the veracity of the experience of the trenches represented in *The Trench*. Dix had drawn not only upon his own memories but also the documentary photographs of trench warfare that circulated freely – somehow immune from the controversy that surrounded artworks – in the post-war years, and these, in turn, had prepared his audience to accept the imagery as truthful. At the same time, writers had already begun to describe the conditions of the trenches in ways that closely echoed Dix's painting. English reporter Philip Gibbs wrote in his 1920 book *Realities: of War*

*Bodies and bits of bodies and clots of blood and green metallic-looking slime made by explosive gases were floating on the surface of the water. Our men lived there and died there ... Lice crawled over them in legions. Human flesh, rotting and stinking, mere pulp, was pasted into the mudbanks. If they dug ... their shovels went into the softness of dead bodies who had been their comrades. Scraps of flesh, bloated legs, blackened hands, eyeless heads, came falling over them when the enemy trench-mortared their position.*

But many found the immediacy and detail expected in documentary photography and reportage shocking and unacceptable when combined with the emotional force and cultural status of an oil painting. Although Dix was far from alone among artists of his generation in attempting to express the horrors of war artistically, he had done so in a way that appeared stripped of the visual civilities expected of art. The director of the Cologne museum who had bravely purchased the work was forced to resign and, despite letters of protest from leading artists in Germany, the canvas was returned to the artist in 1924.

Now an important symbol of the anti-war movement, Dix's dealer Karl Nierendorf arranged for the canvas to join the exhibition *Nie wieder Krieg!* (No More War!), which travelled to several cities in Germany. ('You are now a famous man and known all over Germany', Nierendorf wrote to the artist in August 1924.) Painted on cheap hessian with the bad quality paints available immediately after the war, the painting became damaged during the extensive tour but it was not forgotten. In 1927 a writer in the journal *Das Kunstblatt* published an article on *The Trench* in which he insightfully commented that the painting owed some of its 'uncanny greatness' to Dix's unusual ambivalence towards war:

*The painter's obsession with the ideas of the horrors of war shifts them to a realm of monumentality in which it is completely unimportant whether one protests the monstrous event or merely, with shuddering, rapt devotion, allows it to wash over one. Dix's The Trench could just as easily be the object of supreme adoration of a fanatic worshipper of the god of war as it could be pacifist propaganda.*

In 1931 Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, described *The Trench* as

*perhaps the most famous picture painted in post-war Europe ... It is a masterpiece of unspeakable horror ... The very pigment seems to fester horridly, iridescently. Painted with the uncanny verisimilitude of wax works this staggering vision of decay in death lives even more through the spiny wriggling character of its design and the terrific loathing which Dix has concentrated in it. Looking back over the history of painting we cannot find its equal except in that other dreadful masterpiece, the Altarpiece of Isenheim [1506–15, by Matthias Grünewald].*

By this point, however, *The Trench* was no longer to be seen. The canvas had been purchased by the Dresden art museum in 1928 and it promptly disappeared into storage. Officially, the museum needed to restore the painting, but it was later admitted that the administration had not dared exhibit the work. During the Nazi era the museum staff claimed they had only bought the work in order to take it out of circulation.

Aware that *The Trench* was proving too controversial to show, and perhaps conscious that it was in a poor condition, Dix tackled the subject again in 1929–32 but this time echoing the style and format of medieval religious paintings. Employing fine glazes of tempera on smooth-as-glass gessoed wooden panels, Dix, now a full member of the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin, painted a massive memorial to the First World War in the form of a triptych, reworking the composition of *The Trench* in the central section. He later said that he returned to the theme because, already, people had seemingly forgotten the horror:

*many books in the Weimar Republic once more blatantly propagated a form of heroism and a concept of the hero that had long been taken to the point of absurdity in the trenches of the*

*First World War. The people were already beginning to forget what unspeakable suffering the war had brought with it. It was this situation that led to the triptych.*

He had hoped that the massive work would be installed in some form of a bunker – perhaps a military equivalent of a chapel – in the middle of a city so that people could take a moment in their busy lives to enter and remember, if only for a few moments, the experience of war. Employing a conventional landscape setting, and offering a logical narrative that could be read across the three panels (armies go to war; war creates a terrible aftermath; a few survive), the triptych was a masterful allegory but lacked the visceral immediacy of the earlier canvas. Purchased by a museum in Dresden it, too, went into storage where it survived the purges of the Nazi era.

The Nazis came to power early in 1933 and quickly removed individuals identified as opponents of the regime and its values from government positions. Dix was sacked from his post as Professor at the Dresden Academy and for a period was banned from exhibiting work. He was informed:

*Apart from the fact that among your paintings there are those that grossly violate moral sense and thus endanger all moral reconstruction, you have painted pictures that are likely to detract from the will of the German people to defend itself. Accordingly you afford no assurances that you will always unreservedly stand up for the state.*

The Nazis included Dix's *The Trench* as an example of the art they found repellent and unworthy in an exhibition called *Reflections on Decadence in Art* that opened in Dresden in late 1933 and toured German cities until 1936. A photograph of the event shows crowds of people in front of *The Trench*, exhibited as an example of contemptible 'art'.

Later *The Trench* was one of eight paintings by Dix taken from public collections and included in the *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art)* exhibition that opened in Munich in 1937. The works in the show were reviled as expressions of those who were mentally ill, perverse or unpatriotic. The catalogue text next to the illustrations of *The Trench* and another major work by Dix, *War Cripples*, appeared to have Dix as the intended subject of its slander and abuse:

*Here, 'art' enters the service of Marxist draft-dodging propaganda ... That not just Jews but 'artists' of German blood could produce such botched and contemptible works, in which they gratuitously reaffirmed our enemies war atrocity propaganda – already unmasked at the time as a tissue of lies – will forever remain a blot on the history of German culture.*

The implication was clear: the sooner the blot was removed the better.

It was long thought that *The Trench* was one of the many hundreds of paintings that were burned in the grounds of the fire station in Berlin in 1939. This art-burning echoed the episodes of mass book-burning that took place in 1933, but unlike the latter there were no records or visual documents, and it is impossible to know for sure

what works were destroyed. However, it seems that *The Trench* somehow escaped this fate and survived, at least for a little while longer. The Nazi authorities traded in some proscribed and confiscated art, selling them to a small number of trusted art dealers who in turn sold the works abroad. A bill of sale for \$200, dated 22 January 1940, found in the records of one such dealer, Bernhard Boehmer, shows that *The Trench* was sold under the title *The War* (it had gained this alternative title sometime in the 1920s). What happened to the large canvas thereafter is not clear. It is presumed to have been destroyed.

*The Trench* is now known through less than a handful of not particularly good black and white photographs, but these show it to have been a major work, and its chequered history in the Weimar and Nazi eras is vivid testimony to the dangerous fractures within German society and culture that coalesced, in part, around interpretations of the experience of the First World War. For his part, Dix stayed in Germany but lived a life of ‘inner emigration’ on Lake Constance near the Swiss border. Eschewing imagery that risked getting him into trouble with the authorities, he painted ‘safe’ landscapes and works with Christian and allegorical themes. However, following an attempt on the life of the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler in 1939, Dix was rounded up and interrogated by the SS for two weeks: his name had been on an SS document listing 553 ‘leading men’ of the Weimar period. But Dix’s war record apparently counted in his favour and he was released. Ironically, his war experiences had propelled him along a path that led to his public vilification and the destruction of many of his works, but may also have helped save him.

However, fate dictated that he return to war. In the last months of the Second World War he was drafted, aged fifty-four, into the German militia and sent to the western front. Again, he survived, and, after a year spent in a French prisoner of war camp, he returned to Germany in 1946 where he set about rebuilding his career, painting religious allegories or scenes of post-war suffering, until his death in 1969.

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Jennifer Mundy