

## Art in psychiatry

### Otto Dix: Appearance and the Unconscious\*

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Otto Dix (1891–1969) was a leading German Impressionist painter whose major work was associated with the Weimar Republic period, although his art extended from before to after both world wars.

Using a masterly technique based on the German Old Masters, such as Cranach and Baldung Grien, Dix shockingly painted the horrors of war, the social and economic iniquities of a disintegrating society, and the baser and violent aspects of sexuality. His 1992 Tate Gallery retrospective exhibition showed that his work retained all its forcefulness and capacity to shock.

The artistic aim for Dix was not originality but to make personal statements. His portraits, although brilliant, bordered on caricature, where proportions and facial features were used to make social comments. Francis Bacon, with whom I once discussed art, commented that all painting was portraiture. The difference between these two artists who both lived through and expressed the suffering of their age, was that Bacon's inspiration drew on his unconscious images, while Dix painted the reality he had observed.

Descriptions of Dix's personality varied greatly. His son Ursus described him as a loving father, distant, but very observant. In his artistic milieu, he was regarded contradictorily as "reactionary and revolutionary in one, a symbol of the time", and as "an essentially reactionary painter of left-wing subject-matter". When the Nazis came to power, his art was exhibited and destroyed as degenerate, while the German Democratic Republic used his work to illustrate the degeneracy of capitalism and invited him to East Germany. Dix refused and followed his own vision.

The psycho-analytical approach to art appreciation investigates the effect of the artist's emotional development, life history and especially any unconscious influences upon the style and content of the work.

With Dix this was extremely difficult. His childhood emotional development appeared to be totally repressed, as Dix claimed to have no early recollections. As far as unconscious conflicts were concerned, his work was already an explicit illustration

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Figure 1 *Self-Portrait with Carnation, 1912.*

of the most painful themes usually dealt with only indirectly or symbolically in art.

Based on the principle that art is simultaneously expressive of the urges and defences of unconscious conflicts, I sought evidence of unconscious motivation by examining the fine details and their connections in his whole series of paintings. What emerged was speculative but enlightening and considerably enhanced one's appreciation of how Dix struggled successfully with the cataclysmic forces of his lifetime, by means of his art.

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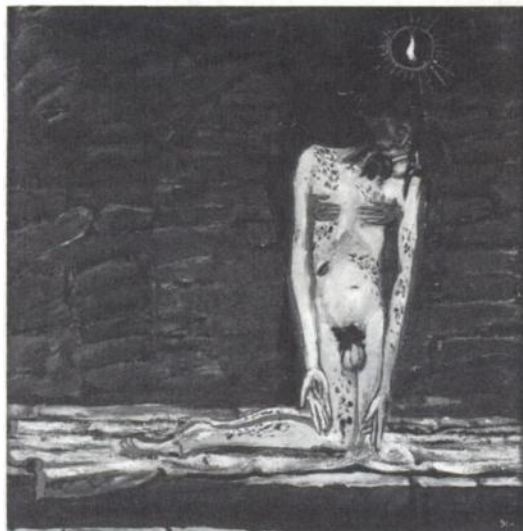


Figure 2 *Pieta*, 1912.

### *The paintings*

An early self-portrait shows a rather callow youth, brought up in the country of working-class parents, his father being a foreman in an iron-foundry. The talent for painting was discovered at school with water-colours and gouache. There were artists in his mother's family, and while sitting for his portrait by a relative, he was taken by the colour and especially the smell of oils.

Dix was initially trained, not as an artist, but as an artisan-decorator and house-painter. A scholarship by the local prince upgraded his studies as a painter-artisan. It was only after the First World War that he attended a proper art school in Dresden.

Another pre-war self-portrait [Fig. 1] clearly illustrates his fierce gaze and talent for observation. The pose of him holding a carnation reveals his growing attachment to classical tradition. Everything is idealised, the sitter and the style of painting. This is an idealised portrait of a young man who regards everything in an idealised way; an idealisation based on Nietzschean ideas greatly prevalent among the youth of that time. We come to realise later that even the ugliness of life is presented in the same idealised way. When volunteering for war service, he said, "War was a dreadful thing, but something great, and in no circumstances to miss it. One must have seen man in an unshackled state. Everything I had to see: to experience the depths myself. Therefore I went to war." These negative ideals, based on Nietzsche, were espoused by Dix who longed to see 'the swine-man', the crown of creation. Unconsciously, however, his artistic-self and painting remained the centre of his interest in life.



Figure 3 *The Nun*, 1914.

Photographs of Dix in uniform early in the war reveal a confident figure in the centre of the group, the man of action; apparently the leader, but closer observation gives the impression of someone being on his own. This loner, observer attitude was still evident in a television film taken in his old age. Contradictorily, according to Ursus, he loved groups, loved socialising and loved all traditional family activities.

The effect of war on artists leads to interesting differences of response when one compares Dix with his immediate contemporaries and colleagues, Gross and Beckman. Both the latter succumbed to nervous breakdowns, while Nietzsche, Dix's hero, broke down early as a German medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian War, although he was a Swiss resident at the time.

Dix suffered no such thing. As a heavy machine-gunner in the artillery he was in the thick of things, commenting to a friend in 1915 that, 'Bayonetting is an experience like having sexual intercourse, it's pleasurable'. Thus sexualisation, or hyper-libidinalisation of his aggression, was one of the attributes which protected against personality breakdown. Another was sublimation; he produced art whenever possible, mastering the traumas by this means.

Adequate self-valuation and unconscious omnipotence leads those in danger to believe that nothing



**Figure 4** *Memories of the Mirrored Rooms in Brussels, 1920.*

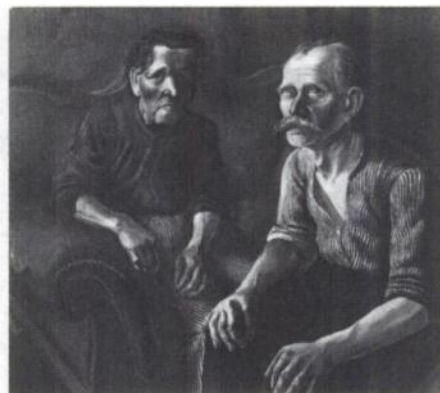
will happen to them; qualities reinforced by battle training and experience. Dix exhibited these in full measure.

Warfare, as illustrated later by Dix, was in truth a mutilating, degrading experience. From a theoretical standpoint, a man's capacity to face such actualities depended on his strength of ego, and unconsciously on the degree to which castration-anxiety has been mastered, relative to the resolution of pre-oedipal and oedipal conflicts of early childhood. As Freud has remarked, all infantile conflicts pass through the prism of the oedipus complex. In some artists, the oedipal conflicts are resolved in an indirect way.

Examining Dix's life and works, I formulated the hypothesis that Dix resorted to the following mechanisms of oedipal resolution. Idealisation, identification with both parents, de-sexualisation of the mother and the hyper-sexualisation of the female genitalia and breasts as part-objects. There is also an accentuation of the partial-drives of looking and touching and a curiosity bordering on the perverse. Dix was charged with being pornographic, but the case didn't succeed, for his scopophilic preoccupation with sex and violence was not perverse as a defensive pathological mechanism.



**Figure 5** *Self-Portrait with Muse, 1924.*



**Figure 6** *Parents, 1921.*

Dix claimed that all wars were fought about, and for, the sake of the vulva. This unusual idea, basically Nietzschean, expressed his unconscious defences where the vulva was, as it were, split off from the whole woman as someone to be loved, and hyper-libidinised. It also betrayed its maternal origins in a war fought for the Motherland, with which he was loyally identified. His preoccupation with and the significant positioning of the vulva centrally in his early work, exemplifies his use of sexualisation as a means of countering aggression and violence.

Sexualisation of aggression antedates his becoming a soldier. In 'Pieta' (1912) [Fig. 2] the wounds in Christ's palms and chest are painted as symbolic vaginas, vulval in shape with surrounding hairs. A grieving Madonna-like 'Nun' of the same year, is flanked on one side by a female nude and on the other by a similar symbolic vulva, [Fig. 3] while above is a small painting of a Christ drenched in blood.

On a deeper level, the vulval symbol, being eye-shaped with eye-lashes, symbolises looking, and





**Figure 7** *Metropolis*.

equates looking, in the earliest oral-phase, with feeding. In the paintings, therefore, the vulva also becomes symbolic of sadistic greed and destructive incorporation. Bayonetting as a sexual act, reproduces and overcomes the imperative vulva of war for which men must die.

The centrality of the unconscious fantasy of the vulva is confirmed by the vulva occupying the central position in his post-war compositions. 'Memories of Mirrored Rooms' [Fig. 4] illustrates a First World War brothel scene in Belgium. Soldiers were required to queue up outside the brothels, while officers had luxurious accommodation, of which this painting is an accurate example. The floor, walls and ceilings were mirrored, giving imaginative scope for perverse sexuality. In the painting, an irate German general with a whore on his lap is drinking champagne, while avidly compressing her breast as if to extract some imaginary satisfaction. The vulva and the breast share pride of place in the centre of the composition.

Dix appears to have matured in his relationship with women. In a more loving, expansive mood post-war, he painted 'Moon Woman' with vulval eye-shaped symbols and stars to express a more tender sexuality. 'Portrait with Muse' (1924) [Fig. 5] is the only painting on exhibition where two people actually look at each other, as in all the other portraits and groups they face the observer in isolation. In this painting, the artist and his beautiful sexy model are shown mutually aroused: although her breasts are bountiful and her pubes are apparent, she appears as a whole person, desirable and desiring. With an attitude of constraint Dix touches her with his smallest paint brush. Touching is sublimated into the act of painting. Even the painting-stick, an obvious phallic symbol in the painting, is used to separate the would-be lovers, which was just as well, because the

model was the intended wife of a painter-colleague who was sitting in the room next door, as Dix was not to be trusted.

The psycho-analytical theory of perversion demonstrates that partial instincts, such as looking or showing, serve as defences against other more dangerous drives. Given the explicit observations and displays of sex and violence in Dix's paintings, one wonders what deeper desires there could be to defend against. At one level, Dix defended himself against the loving and hating aspects of the oedipus complex.

To test those views, we must turn to Dix's two double portraits of his parents. The 1921 painting [Fig. 6] is an idealised portrait of his parents as workers, both of whom appear somewhat worn with toil. His father is of strong character and an object of ambivalent identification, raised and idealised into patriotism. Dix's working-class attitudes and hatred for the bourgeoisie conflicted with his love of dancing, jazz and a dandified appearance. This ambivalence and the resulting contrasts are exemplified in his masterpiece 'Metropolis' [Fig. 7] where amputee-beggar ex-servicemen and whores clash against a jazz-loving Weimarian upper-class. Dix identified himself with both classes.

In the first portrait of his mother, this tired-out lady is de-sexualised. Her breasts are not delineated, but eliminated by the vertical folds of her blouse on a flattened chest. In the later parental portrait of 1927, one breast is realistically painted, while on the other, the device of the folds in the cloth is used once again to camouflage the shape of the breast. Viewed anatomically, the composition is impossible, so that it has to be regarded as the symbolical expression of ambivalence towards the breast, the organ which is both giving and withholding, an ambivalence Dix evinces towards the vulva as well. The heightened



**Figure 8** *Portrait of Mrs Martha Dix, 1923.*

ambivalence in the oral phase would be linked with an increase in oral sadism which could have provided the critical and sadistic edge to his paintings.

We must pause for a moment to consider the story of Dix's marriage to Martha. Dix became friendly with a client, the urologist called Hans Koch, who also was a gallery owner and became a visitor to the Koch home. A complicated situation with strong oedipal overtones developed. Dix was 21 and a wonderful dancer and he fell for Koch's wife Martha, daughter of an insurance company director. They shared a love of dancing and drinking at that time. Koch was in liaison with her sister, having previously resisted marrying the latter although her parents were keen on the match. Koch obtained a divorce and married the sister, while Dix took Martha from a life of luxury to a one-room flat in Dresden where she was forced to do the housework and found it very exciting to discover how the other half lived.

Dix built up a clientele on his portraiture which was uncompromisingly critical and analytical. His portrait of Martha, [Fig. 8] however, had none of these qualities. Martha appears as a beautiful woman, sensitively painted. Her right hand lies over her breast with the fingers playing sensuously in the hair of a fur. Her left hand is gloved, a symbol of the high-born. With close observation, one finds that the glove has three folds in the cloth covering the hand, folds with the same design as those eliminating his mother's breast. The giving sensuous breast and the gloved withholding breast repeat the early oral-sadistic conflicts, but in a new enriched setting.



**Figure 9** *Sex Murder, 1922.*

Here the folds are not a symbol of defensive desexualisation, but rather of love. The repressed sexual love for his mother was now permissible with his wife. The breast and sexuality are no longer experienced as part-objects, but as a fulsome regard for his wife as a whole person, the object of his love. Further evidence shows that this is mutual.

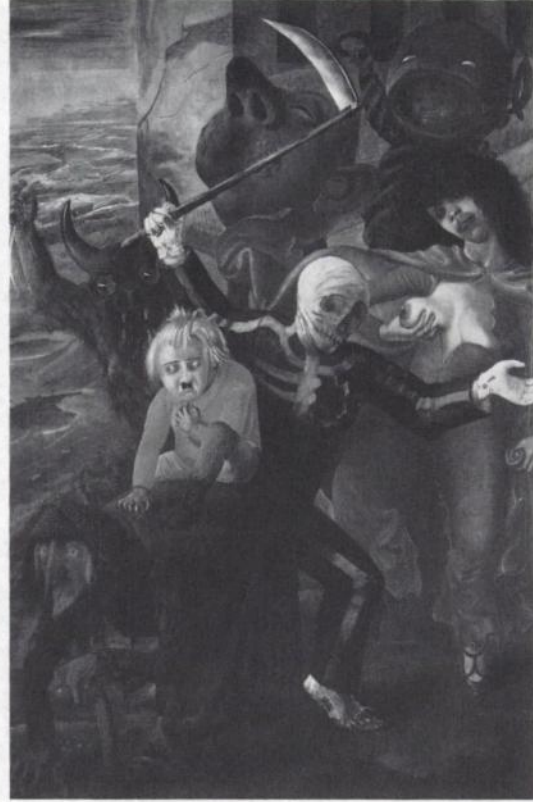
In Frankfurt there is a painting of Martha breast-feeding Ursus with Otto against the other breast. The cycle of the breast as part-object to the expression of family fulfilment was completed.

Hands in his portraits are painted as an important aspect of character, but they are always hands for display; only in the portrait of Martha and one of his later self-portraits do the hands face the viewer to interact directly. Both Otto and Martha can relate directly with each other and the world around them.

An aspect of openness between them was revealed when, for her birthday, Dix gave her a small painting of sexual murder [Fig. 9] in which he had a strong interest. Such subjects were popular and easy to sell. The painting also has the vulva as central to the composition, but in a very violent, messy portrayal, where sexualisation of the violence does not hide its pre-genital, sadistic anal-level origins. The painting's emotional relevance for Dix was significant, "If I didn't paint this, I would have to do it. Painting is exorcism", he declared. Dix exorcised his traumatic war experiences during his time in the trenches and later, in a further process of 'working-through',



**Figure 10** *Old Age.*



**Figure 11** *Seven Deadly Sins.*

produced a series of war paintings and etchings as graphically illustrative of the disasters and futility of war as those of Goya.

In his sex paintings, Dix appears to still be working-through the unconscious conflicts associated with the oedipus-complex. Three themes predominate. The degraded, ageing whore, i.e. the unfaithful mother degraded by social circumstance, curiosity about the *vuiva* with the primal scene, qualities of sex as violence, stemming from some awareness of parental intercourse, together with the denial of such an event. The latter denial is paramount in the large painting of sex in the aged, where naked elderly couples are shown as impotent rather than lustful, and where the shadows of death and decay, so prevalent in much of his work, predominate [Fig. 10].

With the arrival of his children, Dix took on a new lease of life, painting them from birth into childhood in evocative settings.

When the Nazis came into power, Dix did not submit, but bravely painted Hitler disguisedly in the *Seven Deadly Sins*. [Fig. 11] His work was officially exhibited as degenerate and destroyed, as it failed to glorify militarism. Dix retired to the Koch estate at Lake Constance where he painted landscapes and pro-

vided relative security for his family. He continued to produce art, but never again with the inspiration of his Weimar period. His art deteriorated in power for several reasons. It was no longer possible to be artistically forthright and openly critical of a society which had turned murderous. His idealisations of German art and life were out of place and misinterpreted. As a result his art became derivative and less authentic when he converted to abstract expressionism. Perhaps his happy family life and his devotion to his children mollified his critical edge, while he may have more successfully worked through his unconscious infantile conflicts and war time experiences.

After the war, the East Germans set him up as an example of socialist realistic art illustrating the degeneracy of capitalism, but both he and his wife, having not succumbed to Hitler, resisted the invitations and blandishments of Communism. He remained faithful to his art, his family and to more traditional German moral values.

Dix accurately chronicled the most profound human experiences of his life and era, while simultaneously working through both their traumatic effects and his unconscious conflicts, in processes which dictated the nature and appearance of his art.