

Object in Focus: Otto Dix, *Match Seller*, 1920 and Leicester's German Expressionist Collection.

Focusing on Otto Dix's etching *Match Seller* (1920) in the German Expressionist Collection of Leicester's New Walk Gallery, University of Birmingham postgraduate student April-Lina Waine discusses Dix's searing social critique of the difficulties faced by disabled veterans in inter-war Germany.

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Produced less than two years after artist Otto Dix (1891-1969) returned from fighting in the First World War, the etching *Match Seller* (1920, Leicester Arts and Museums Service) shows a quadruple amputee veteran symbolically and literally left in the gutter.¹ Seated on the pavement, the man is identifiable as a veteran of war by his old uniform cap. His dark glasses suggest that he has lost his vision. While attempting to sell matches to the public, the veteran is ignored by those who walk hurriedly past; the artist has elongated the legs of the passers-by, emphasising their able-bodied status. As a further indignity, a dog can be seen urinating on the veteran's prosthetic limb, emblematic of the Weimar Republic society that has forgotten this soldier's contribution and sacrifice. In this essay, I will analyse the complex imagery of the etching, considering how it represents the experience of disabled war veterans in Weimar Germany, before briefly exploring the history of Leicester's German Expressionist Collection and works therein that represent physical and mental health disabilities. I will then conclude by examining the artwork from a personal perspective: as an Art Historian living with disabilities, it is important to consider how Dix's imagery resonates with the disabled experience, even in contemporary society.

The etching *Match Seller* was part of a series called *5 Radierungen* (5 etchings), each of which portray disabled ex-servicemen who have suffered devastating physical and psychological damage.² Dix was a veteran himself, having fought in the First World War: he willingly volunteered in 1914 and served as a non-commissioned officer in a machine gun

unit on the Western Front. His service earned him the Iron Cross (2nd Class).³ He experienced the brutality of war and was deeply affected by the experience.⁴ By 1920, Dix was living in Dresden. During this year his art was dominated by military imagery, with particular focus on 'the savage realism of the war cripple'.⁵ This included his oil painting [*The Match Seller*](#) (1920, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart) which the etching, now based in Leicester's collection, derives from. In *Match Seller*, Dix purposefully presents the lower-ranking soldier, denoted by his cap, as vulnerable, and literally and symbolically left in the gutter.

During this period, Dix had close links to the Dresden and Berlin Dada groups.⁶ Dada formed as part of a 'negative reaction to the horrors and folly of the war'.⁷ As Sarah Twohig notes, by 1919 Dix was already using the 'grotesque humour of Dada, to attack the hypocrisy of a society, that ignored the realities of post-war and post-revolutionary Germany'.⁸ Dada artists directly engaged with politics, mainly associating with radical left wing parties such as The Communist Party of Germany (KPD), who tended towards antimilitarism. Dix never committed to a political party and maintained in later life that his artworks were never intended to be political. As Dix has stated himself, 'artists are not there to reform and convert' instead 'they must testify'.⁹ However, during the 20s he regularly contributed to the anti-militarist, left-wing periodical *Die Pleite*, producing artworks that critiqued right-wing ideals.¹⁰ Also, Dix often participated in left-wing art exhibitions, co-exhibiting at the 'First International Dada Fair' of 1920 in Berlin.¹¹ Therefore, in the immediate post-war period it appears that Dix was prepared to engage and associate with typically left-wing imagery. The *Match Seller* is evidence of this.

The Disabled Veteran in Society and Art in Weimar Germany

The millions of veterans returning home physically and psychologically scarred from World War One posed a significant challenge to governments across Europe. Around 2.7 million returned permanently disabled from the battlefield.¹² In Weimar Germany, the central concern of the welfare programs established around 1919 for disabled veterans was to ensure as full a rehabilitation as possible.¹³ In the same year as Dix created *Match Seller* two

key laws were introduced: the Law for the Employment of the Severely Disabled, and the National Pension Law (1920).¹⁴ Both laws prioritised return to employment as the key remedy to aid rehabilitation while keeping pension claims low.¹⁵ The Law for the Employment of the Severely Disabled made it compulsory for companies with more than twenty-five staff to ensure that two percent of their workforce consisted of employees who were severely disabled.¹⁶ The National Pension Law gave disabled people a pension, with the amount awarded dependant on the severity of disability. This also entitled the receiver to occupational retraining courses aimed to increase their income. Thus, in terms of legislation, Weimar Germany was concerned at this time with the economic welfare of disabled veterans and their rehabilitation into working life.

Conversely, social reintegration is the subject of Dix's *Match Seller*. Seemingly situated outside a shop, the veteran is trying to sell matches to the public. However, given his appearance and lack of interaction with the passers-by, Dix is emphasising his woeful socio-economic state, left on the street and ignored by his fellow citizens. As Anne Marno explains, the attempt at reintegration into post-war society failed in many cases for disabled veterans.¹⁷ Often disabled veterans, who were previously in skilled employment, became dissatisfied with the more basic tasks with which they now had to contend.¹⁸ Moreover, rather than being valued for their self-sacrificial acts on the battlefield, their impairments made 'the defeat of the country visible' and led to these veterans feeling socially excluded.¹⁹ As Marno explains, during this time 'disabled veterans complained repeatedly about being viewed by other citizens and treated by the bureaucracy as welfare cases, that is, as inferior people on the same level as the civilian disabled'.²⁰ This, combined with dissatisfaction at the government's own initiatives, caused growing unease and frustration with the disabled veterans themselves.²¹ Consequently, Dix's work perhaps aims to draw attention to the social plight of the disabled veteran by showing the disabled veteran as degraded and overlooked.

In contrast to the dismissive attitudes extended towards disabled veterans by the wider public, artists and writers who held left-wing views made the disabled veteran a key figure

in their discourses and artistic imagery.²² Generally displayed as explicitly disfigured with amputated limbs and horrific facial wounds, the disabled veteran's body was widely employed as a symbolic means of attacking the militarist powers that had initiated war.²³ Consequently, the disabled body plays an important role as the marker for a bitter social critique in Dix's work.

Leicester's German Expressionist Art Collection

The origins of the German Expressionist Collection at Leicester City Arts and Museum Service dates to the late 1930s and implementation of a progressive art collecting policy by the museum's second Art Assistant, Arthur C. Sewter.²⁴ In 1936, Sewter had curated an exhibition of 'Contemporary Art' at the museum that included artworks by Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and Max Ernst.²⁵ This exhibition marked a significant reorientation of the museum's collections policy towards contemporary art. In 1944 the museum experienced a further shift in emphasis with the arrival of curator Trevor Thomas, who subsequently became director of the museum. Thomas had a connection to the Hess family, who had amassed an extraordinary collection of over 4,000 contemporary artworks. Alfred Hess, a wealthy Jewish manufacturer, was well known in 1920s Germany for having one of the largest collections of Expressionist art.²⁶ Following his death in 1931 and during the subsequent rise of Nazism, his widow Thekla managed to flee Germany whilst attempting to smuggle some of the collection out of the country. Works were hidden in furniture vans or sent through the post office.²⁷ In February 1944 Thomas organised an exhibition, 'Mid-European Art', in which some of the Hess family's artworks were displayed.²⁸ From this exhibition the museum made key acquisitions, including [Red Woman](#) by Franz Marc (1912), which it purchased for £350.²⁹ It was at this point that Leicester's German Expressionist Collection was initiated.

Match Seller entered the collection of the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester in 2014, aided by Art Fund and V&A grants. The collection has since grown to a total of three artworks by Dix, including an etching titled [Stormtroopers Advancing Under Gas](#) (1924) and

a lithograph called [Blind Man](#) (1923). Other artists represented in the collection include Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Hannah Höch and Ernst Neuschul. With around five hundred artworks, Leicester's German Expressionist Collection is the leading public collection of German art of its kind in the UK and is internationally acclaimed.³⁰ It is also significant for the representation of physical and mental health disabilities that can be found in many of the artworks in the collection. Examples include Dix's *Blind Man*, as well as work by Ernst Barlach (1870-1938), Heinrich Campendonk (1889-1957), Conrad Felixmüller (1897-1977), and Fritz Heinsheimer (1897 - 1958).³¹ Leicester's collection not only addresses the importance of many of these artists, but also the visibility of disability as a key issue and prominent reoccurring subject for many artists operating in the Weimar Republic.

The Visibility of Disabled Experience

This article has explored one of Dix's etchings, held at the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester, and created at a time of social uncertainty and political turbulence. In *Match Seller*, the disabled veteran is depicted as a social outcast, left vulnerable, ignored and neglected. While this may have resonated with disabled veterans' own feelings at the time, the purpose was less to evoke sympathy for those individuals than to use the disabled veteran's body as a symbolic vehicle for anti-militarist critique. For me personally, as an individual currently living with disabilities, I reflect more generally on this etching as a representation of social exclusion. It highlights a fear that for many, myself included, the perception of being 'different' constitutes a lack of understanding by those who do not have personal experience. However, the way Dix draws attention in such an emotive manner to what he appears to deem an injustice, also raises another fear: being pitied for to the challenges disabilities often present. In this sense, while Dix appears to engage with the difficulties faced by disabled veterans in Weimar Germany, *Match Seller* does so with an ulterior agenda: using the vulnerable disabled body as a means to critique the socio-political state of Weimar Germany after the horrors of the First World War.

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¹ Keith Hartley, 'Dresden 1919-1922', Keith Hartley (ed.), *Otto Dix 1891-1969*, (Cambridgeshire, 1992), 89-115

² Leicester's German Expressionist Collection, 'Match Seller by Otto Dix', <http://www.germanexpressionismleicester.org/leicesters-collection/artists-and-artworks/otto-dix/match-seller/>, [accessed 1st July 2019].

³ Keith Harley, 'Dresden', 89-115

The Online Otto Dix Project, 'Biography', <https://www.ottodix.org/biography/>, [accessed 29th July 2019].

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The creation of prints from oil paintings for the print market did provide greater source of income than oil paintings, especially of left-wing subject matter from controversial artists, for likeminded collectors whom shared Dix's experiences of war and life in post-war Germany. Dennis Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924*, Pennsylvania, 1999, 28; Keith Harley, 'Dresden', 89-115.

⁶ Keith Harley, 'Dresden', 89-115

⁷ Tate, 'Art Terms-Dada', <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/dada>, [accessed 1 July 2019].

⁸ Sarah Twohig, 'Dix and Nietzsche', Keith Hartley (ed.), *Otto Dix 1891-1969*, (Cambridgeshire, 1992), 40-48

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Keith Harley, 'Dresden', 89-115

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Anne Marno, 'The disabled veteran of World War I in the mirror of contemporary art: The reception of Otto Dix's painting *The Cripples* (1920) in Yael Bartana's film *Degenerate Art Lives* (2010)', Ann Millett-Gallant, Elizabeth Howie (eds.), *Disability and Art History*, (Abingdon, 2016), 119-131

¹³ Deborah Cohen, 'Will to Work: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany after the First World War', David Gerber (ed.), *Discourses of Disability: Disabled Veterans in History*, (Michigan, 2012), 295-321

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Marno, 'The disabled veteran', 119-131

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* See: Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, (Michigan, 2007), 2-7.

²⁰ Marno, 'The disabled veteran', 119-131.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, (Michigan, 2007), 2-7

²³ *Ibid.* Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany 1918-1919*, (Chicago, 1990), 240-1. Joan Weinstein explains the imagery of *Match Seller* maybe partially in response to the Kapp Putsch of March 1920. This was a military coup in Berlin which, although it failed, had threatened to unseat the left-wing democratic government. Dix appears to be critiquing the persistence of militarist values in Weimar Germany.

²⁴ New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, 'unpublished article on the history of Leicester's collection', New Walk Museum and Art Gallery archive file.

²⁵ Leicester's German Expressionist Collection, 'The origins of Leicester's Expressionist Collection', <http://www.germanexpressionismleicester.org/leicesters-collection/the-origins-of-leicesters-expressionist-collection/>, [Accessed 1 June 2019].

²⁶ New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, 'Unpublished article on the history of Leicester's collection', New Walk Museum and Art Gallery archive file.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Leicester's German Expressionist Collection, 'The origins of Leicester's Expressionist Collection', <http://www.germanexpressionismleicester.org/leicesters-collection/the-origins-of-leicesters-expressionist-collection/>, [Accessed 1 June 2019].