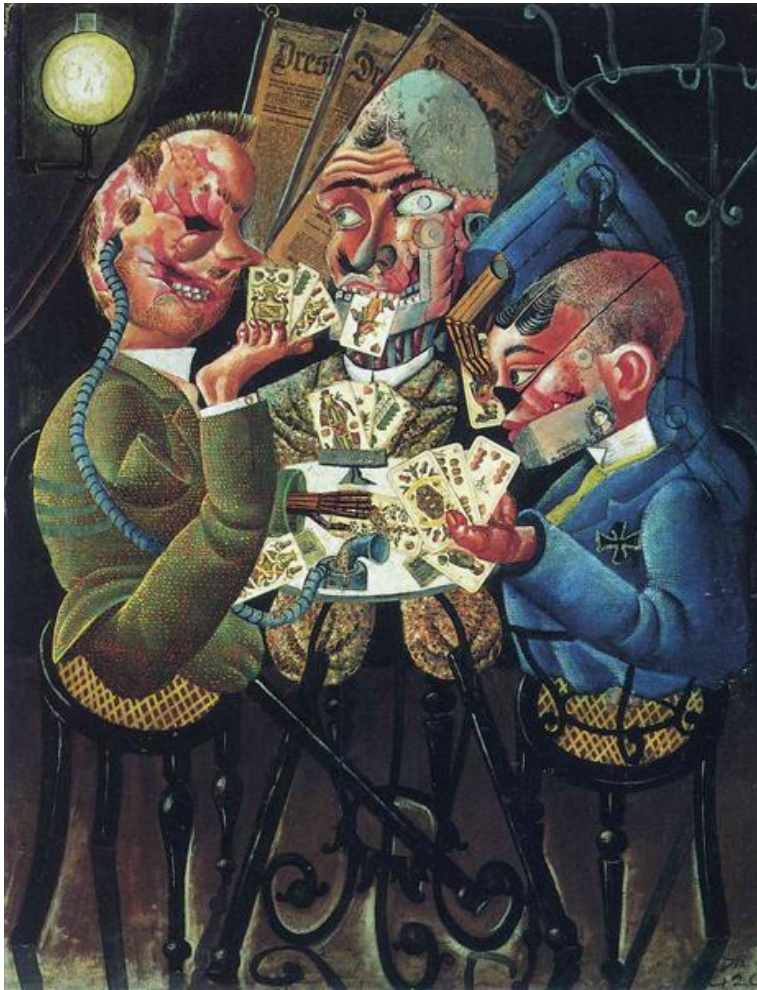


Otto Dix (1891-1969)

ART HISTORY
in schools

Skat Players, 1920



Key facts:

Date: 1920

Size: 110 x 87 cm

Materials: Oil and collage
on canvas

Location: Nationalgalerie,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter: This is a genre scene of three veterans, disfigured by World War I, are depicted playing a popular German card game in a Dresden café. They are surrounded by a single wall light, newspapers on rods with hooks and a coat rack. These bodies are fractured and disjointed, awkward in their poses and deliberately grotesque in their features. The armless figure on the left holds his cards between his toes and the flesh on his face is distorted and damaged by conflict. A telephone cord, an everyday object, acts as a new ear, snaking down the side of his face as though invading his body. The central figure has two spindly prosthetic legs and a patchwork face that is half-man, half-machine. The final figure is reduced to a torso, with a mechanical jaw, one deformed hand, one wooden hand, and an eye patch covering a lost nose. This is an image of broken bodies, representative of a broken nation post-WW1. The figure on the right still wears his uniform and Iron Cross, his hair smartly combed, clinging to the militarism that has led to his and his country's destruction. That they play a card game is significant; the men play out the hand dealt to them by war, and keep playing.

There are three other works in this series, all from 1920: *Prague Street*; *Match Seller*; *War Cripples*.



Formal Qualities:

Composition: The three figures are tightly packed together, occupying most of the space and clustered around a table too small for their game. Limbs protrude at varied angles yet enclose the figures, exaggerated and pained. It is cramped, uncomfortable and unsettling. The prosthetic legs intermingle with the chair and table legs in a flattened, almost decorative arrangement. Where the furniture ends, and a body begins is intentionally confused; the men are part objects themselves now. The legs of the table and chairs significantly outnumber those of the men and a triangle formed by the legs of the central figure point to his upper body on the central axis, emphasising the lack of limbs stemming from it. The way the arm of the figure on the right and leg of the figure on the left echo each other feels akin to a mechanised rhythm in itself, like the body parts are turning and operating in a synchronised, controlled motion.

Light: The background setting is lowly lit and gloomy, seemingly offering little hope. This echoes the solemn post-war mood. There is a skull shape visible in the lamp, the only light source visible, and this highlights the death the war brought, constantly lingering in the background alongside the highlights on the physical destruction bought to those who survived. The multiple cast shadows add to the decorative effect.

Colour: There is a mix of colours, some dull earth tones and some lurid, especially their ruddy flushed and scarred faces. This seems almost decorative at first, making the reality of the shocking imagery even more jarring and potent.

Space: Space is cramped and confused. There are multiple viewpoints, the perspective of the chair seats seen from above does not match that of the figures seen straight on, and this makes the figures appear unstable and as though they could slip off their chairs at any moment, even the figure on the far right who is supported in a cage-like contraption. The newspapers and hat stand fit around them such that despite the overlapping planes the image looks flat. This adds to the fragmentation, unease and distortion of the image overall, and the sense of instability of the bodies and lives of the men depicted, and of Germany itself.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Paul Fox: 'The traumatised casualties of war stood as a metaphor for Germany itself.'

This work was painted in the early Weimar period, when Germany was suffering post-WW1. Dix himself served in the war, initially volunteering enthusiastically and going to the front with his copy of the bible and Nietzsche, but was soon deeply changed by his experiences of the reality of war and a strong opponent of it by 1916. In the years after it ended, a lot of Dix's work was focused on depicting the brutal injuries of war veterans. He used his work to comment on society's indifference

to the effects of militarism, the lies of leaders going into the war, the horrors of technology employed in conflict and highlight the struggles of veterans.

It is interesting to consider this work in relation to other German artists commenting on the war. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915, for example, also shows an injured soldier, with a hand amputated, but there is a key distinction between the two works. Kirchner's painting is about him losing his identity as an artist; it is a metaphorical wound and Kirchner did not experience the trenches first-hand as Dix did. Dix shows us something exaggerated and awful, but based on real, horrific injuries he had seen. Dix's work is about reality, about the destruction of the physical body and its implications, and unflinching in its depiction of flesh and new parts, organic and inorganic.

It was common to see injured veterans in Weimar Germany; 1.5 million German soldiers returned from the war wounded. Some of Dix's other works show disabled veterans selling matches in the street or queuing for prosthetics. Dix also worked from photographs of soldiers with severe deformities. Such images were used in left-wing publications in attempts to deter renewed militaristic sentiment. Fragmentation and invasion of the human body became a key theme in the work of Dix but also many of the Berlin Dadaists too.

Although terribly disfigured, the men have smart clothes. The man on the right wears a military medal on his lapel and wears the Prussian blue jacket of the officer class who, as Peter Gay remarks, "...had led Germany into disaster, lying to themselves as much as to the world, wasting uncounted lives..." While Dix himself was not disfigured, his status as veteran allows him to closely identify with the struggles endured by disabled. As an ex-soldier himself, Dix is able to endure such sights. A participant in a conflict that tested mental and physical endurance, Dix was unflinching in his observation of the wounded veteran, contrary to the horrified and repulsed public who hastily redirected their gaze. With the composition locating the viewer in the role of observer or even potential player (we can see all their cards and join in).

Dix also places his own portrait in the image on the jaw of the blue-jacketed figure, as if his portrait is the logo of a prosthetics manufacturer. As a machine gunner in the war he is likely to have maimed enemy soldiers in this fashion. He also uses his portrait in *Prague Street* where it acts like a reflection in the shop window, placing him as an observer of the crippled beggar.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

There are collaged elements throughout this work: the playing cards are real playing cards, there are newspaper fragments, foil for the mechanical jaw, and even real bits of fabric for the clothing. The use of collage here is very significant. The process of adding material from everyday life to the painting's surface mimics the often crude adding of parts to the veteran's disabled bodies. Just as the work is a mix of parts, so too are these traumatised bodies: part flesh, part metal, part wood. Modern collage techniques are added to traditional old painting as new meets old, again emphasising new body parts being joined to old ones, and, from a bigger viewpoint, a new post-war world being awkwardly fixed onto an old German order, in an often mismatched, imperfect way. Dix met George Grosz around this time and was very influenced by Dada techniques of incorporating collage elements in paintings. Photomontage had been developed a few years earlier and was a key tool of Berlin Dada, as used by Hannah Hoch and John Heartfield, among others. Dix's use of collage therefore inserts this work into a lineage of Dada and French Cubist work and the use of found materials. But while Picasso and Braque's use of collage was about exploring possibilities and perceptions of space and how we represent what we see, Dadaists utilised the potential of collage beyond its formal qualities, including for political critique and activism.

Mia Fineman: 'By integrating collaged elements onto the painted surface, Dix formally thematizes the disintegration and fragmentation of the disabled veteran's body; he fills his canvases with a teeming melange of disembodied limbs, both organic and artificial.'

Dix also created monochrome drypoint versions of this work, which evoke a different (perhaps more immediately sombre) tone.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

It is worth noting that while this work reflects anti-war propaganda circulating at the time, showing severely wounded soldiers following the lifting on the ban of such images post-war, that is not to say these messages were everywhere. Dix's post-war work focused on showing the German people the reality of what the soldiers had been through and the scars that had been left, but the public did not always want to see or be shown this. One of Dix's other painting in this series, *War Cripples*, was owned by the Stadtmuseum, Dresden, but was not put on display. Dix painted the suffering and misery of war, but many other artists did not. Themes of the 'neue frau' (new woman), of technology, and of urban life, were very popular and depictions of the war were in the minority. Dix worked on these themes too, often in an unsavoury way ("I had the feeling that there was a dimension of reality that had not been dealt with in art: the dimension of ugliness") but the war remained a crucial theme for him to explore, be it through the 50 etchings that comprised *The War*, 1924, or his vast triptych of the war, 1932.

Dix brought the presence of the maimed into art galleries and public consciousness. Through a complex narrative of signs and motifs, *Skat Players* communicates a profound empathy and allegiance with disabled veterans, analysing the post-war conditions to which they were exposed. In 1964, Dix explained his purpose for these paintings of disabled soldiers: "At this time there were a lot of books in the Weimar Republic once again peddling the notions of the hero and heroism, which had long been rendered absurd in the trenches of the First World War. People were already beginning to forget, what horrible suffering the war had brought them. I did not want to cause fear and panic, but to let people know how dreadful war is and so to stimulate people's powers of resistance."

As time since the war has increased, and subsequent wars have been waged, *Skat Players* has taken on an evolving meaning and significance. Before the Stadtmuseum purchased it, *War Cripples* was shown at the First International Dada-Messe in 1920 in Berlin; a true part of the anti-war, anti-art avant-garde of the 1920s. This was, however, exactly the kind of art that Hitler's Nazi regime sought to suppress and the work was included in the Degenerate Art Show in Munich in 1937 and subsequently destroyed by them. *Skat Players* could easily have ended up destroyed by the Nazis too, saved only by being in private ownership for many decades and escaping their clutches.

In 1995, Berlin's Nationalgalerie purchased the work when it came up for sale at auction in New York. Peter Raue, the Chairman of Friends of the Nationalgalerie at the time and a key player in the bid to buy it said: "It is very rare that a work of art needs to be displayed in a particular place. *Guernica* belongs in Spain, and *The Skat Players* belongs in Berlin. It is probably the most important antiwar picture ever produced by a German artist. It epitomizes Germany's fate."

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix*, Taschen, 1987
- Olaf Peters, *Otto Dix*, Prestel, 2010
- Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair*, Manchester University Press, 2000
- Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009
- Mia Fineman, 'Ecce Homo Prostheticus,' *New German Critique*, no. 76 (Winter 1999), 85-114
- Paul Fox, 'Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany: Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix,' *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2006), 247-267
- Ann Murray, 'Reformed Masculinity: Trauma, Soldierhood and Society in Otto Dix's War Cripples and Prague Street,' *Journal of the Irish Association of Art Historians*. (2012), 16-31
Available at: <https://ann-murray.com/reformed-masculinity-trauma-soldierhood-and-society-in-otto-dixs-war-cripples-and-prague-street/>
- <https://www.moma.org/artists/1559> - Heidi Hirschl Orley intro on Otto Dix
- <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/198/2632> - Anne Umland on *Skat Players*
- <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/14/arts/berlin-unveils-a-rescued-otto-dix-of-1920.html>