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The New Woman in Weimar Art

The changes wrought by World War I empowered and enabled German women to challenge their subordinate positions in society domestically, intellectually, and sexually. Dada artists took advantage of this volatile climate to highlight the changing gender roles through their collages and paintings.

Before World War I, a woman's duty lay in the domestic sphere caring for the family, even as debates towards an expanding role for women in society began to gain visibility. Victorian attitudes towards women's roles granted women limited power in their governance of the home and assigned women the duty of creating an oasis to which their husbands could return after a long day of work (Utell). This ideology of "separate spheres" is ironic, seemingly awarding women power while confining them to a role defined by the needs of their husband. In the latter half of the 19th century, "the woman question" (or *frauenfrage* in German) challenged these harshly defined roles and raised a debate on how women fit into politics, academia, religion, and more (Utell). While religious doctrines sometimes were used to support gender equality, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* stated that the "opposition expressed by many" towards women's suffrage is the true "voice of common sense" (Fanning). Indeed, the general answer of society to the *frauenfrage* was that "direct participation of woman in the political...life" and "[a woman's] predominate duty as a mother" could not feasibly be reconciled. This all changed

when WWI began, as the concept of total war forced the country to mobilize women for the war effort in previously unthinkable ways.

The Great War necessitated the involvement of women in wartime Germany as nurses, creating a group of newly educated women as a result. As Germany began drafting men to fill their military ranks, it became necessary for the war bound country to establish a nursing corps to care for their fallen soldiers. Although many capable women volunteered, only a small portion of these were sufficiently trained to be nurses on the Western Front (McDill). In Erich Maria Remarque's Lost Generation novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul, the main character, describes the "red-cross voluntary aid sisters" as "pleasant, but often rather unskilled" (Remarque 256). To address this issue, the Red Cross Association Central Committee developed a textbook as well a training program lasting from four months to a year including "practical and theoretical" courses; this decision raised nursing training to the standard of other Germany sanitary forces. This sufficiently equipped women to aid the war effort, but more importantly, empowered women through education to which they might not otherwise have had access. Education provided social mobility and independence as women found themselves useful outside of the household.

The war also allowed women to receive training as laborers in traditionally male dominated fields which expanded their role in society. From 1914 to 1918, the number of women working in metal and electric industries increased by eight times, and in machine-building 35 times (Bessel). Some historians argue that much of this mobilization of women laborers was temporary—a mere replacement for the 11 million German men who left to fight the Great War or a trend that might have occurred without the catalyst of war. However, World War I "undoubtedly proved" on a global scale "that women could do a much wider range of work

than previously believed" and opened male-dominated industries to the female work force ("Women and Work").

The repercussions of World War I also allowed German women to finally achieve suffrage in 1919. Almost two million men died on the front, with another four million wounded soldiers returning home "so physically and psychologically wounded" that many were no longer capable laborers or politically active members of German society (Germany). Many women argued that their contribution to the war merited involvement in the post-war democracy; this campaign was certainly aided by the lack of a sizeable chunk of male voters ("Women and Work"). After winning the vote, these victorious suffragettes quickly made their voices heard, for less than a year after the end of the Great War, women not only were a substantial 36% of the German work force, but also held 10% of the seats in the Reichstag. If not every German mind was softened to the idea of these women serving their country as more than just mothers, artists in post-war Germany certainly drew upon this significant shift in gender roles to inspire their depictions of German women.

Weimar artists reflected the ways in which women challenged gender expectations within the domestic sphere. Hannah Höch criticizes the gender roles of post-war Germany in her collage, *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, created the year that German women gained the right to vote (Höch). In using the "photomontage" technique, Höch could convey social critiques which censorship would not allow to be put into words, as stated by George Grosz ("Cut") ("Weltrevolution"). For example, the connotations of "kitchen" and "beer belly" make this piece a subtle commentary on the changing gender climate of the Weimar Republic; Höch chooses the kitchen knife, an item associated with female domesticity, as the tool to destroy the "bloated, beer-fueled" Weimar

(Jacques). However, Höch's overall message is not as explicit. The juxtaposition of the heads of controversial political leaders such as Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor blamed for the crisis of World War I; Paul von Hindenburg, the President of Germany who signed off on the Enabling Act of 1933; and Karl Radek, the leader of the German Communist Party with the bodies of female dancers emasculates these well-known figures and presented a confusing message to an already unstable social environment ("Cut") (Pyta). It is also worth noting that Höch was one of the female minority among Dada artists. In examining gender roles in post-war art, the oppression of female voices lends Höch's commentary further weight. Höch's work speaks for women who lacked outlets to speak for themselves and posthumously challenges the art community to champion brave female artists like herself for the irreplaceable points of view into gender politics that they possess.

The rejection of passive expectations of feminine domesticity was one of the tenants of the New Woman of the Weimar Republic, championed by those such as Elsa Herrmann and Otto Dix. Elsa Herrmann, woman's rights activist in Berlin, described an emerging role for women known as the New Woman (or *neue frau* in German), a woman who "refuses to lead a life of a lady and a housewife", instead choosing to chart her own path without tether to tradition (Herrmann). This New Woman is depicted in Otto Dix's *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* ("Portrait"). Dix attaches a novel modifier to his subject's name—journalist. Surely, the public was unaccustomed to portraits of educated, working woman; this rare persona is further emphasized by the monocle over von Harden's right eye. Commonly a masculine appendage helping the owner focus their vision, Dix's choice of accessory could characterize von Harden as focused on her journalism career instead of domestic duties. She is almost unrecognizable as a woman, with her harsh haircut and shapeless dress. Dix places her hands over her breasts and her

pelvic region, purposefully “emancipat[ing von Harden] from the physical limitations of being female” (“Portrait”) (“Women in Weimar”). Dix embraces Herrmann’s declaration that “a woman is not feminine because she wields a cooking spoon”. In fact, Dix invents an independent insurgent, glorifying this New Woman as powerful against inveterate gender roles.

The decay of Weimar Germany is crucial to the understanding of the social criticisms of Dada artists such as Otto Dix and George Grosz. The Great War had devastated Germany’s economy; The Treaty of Versailles shackled the country with \$33 billion dollars in war reparations (equivalent to \$442 billion in 2016) in addition to rebuilding their own country and repaying extensive war loans (Allied Powers). The Treaty also “deprived Germany of natural resources...and even...factory equipment” which targeted Germany’s industrial sector and furthered already high unemployment rates (“Primary”). One can imagine that female workers who had earned jobs in factories were some of the first to forfeit their jobs, either fired in favor of the more numerous male workers or quitting to care for their children on what little they could find. Lower class women could be seen trudging to the grocery store with wheelbarrows of reichsmarks to buy sub-standard meat or posted at street corners with signs touting their many skills yet begging for any household job (*Women Waiting*) (*Unemployed*). This led to instability and pervasive desperation among German citizens and was certainly evident in the art of the era.

Women were often depicted as defying gender roles sexually despite the Weimar depression. For example, a further consequence of the paltry economy was the dissolving of the middle class, dividing German society into the “extremely wealthy and the extremely poor” (“Metropolis”). This is showcased in Otto Dix’s *Metropolis*, in which he depicts three disparate classes of women on the three panels of his triptych (*Metropolis*). Luxurious and carefree upper class women dancing on the arms of their husbands in the center panel emphasize the rampant

inequality between classes of which Dix is unafraid to remind his audience (“Metropolis”). On the right panel, high class prostitutes drip with female sexuality. A breast dispassionately escapes from a gown. The dress and scarf of the woman in the foreground are even suggestive of a vagina. The material and style of these women’s clothing more closely parallel the crowd in the center panel, though the restrictions of society relegate these reprobate workers to the same standing as the worn women of the left panel. These lower class prostitutes wander bleak cobblestone streets, appearing malnourished and desensitized to the lustful faces of the crippled veterans to their left. Both sets of women must resort to selling their own bodies to survive the devastation wreaked by Germany’s post-war economy. Dix’s women of the street provided visibility to the struggles of women in the broader picture of the tumultuous Weimar Republic.

Unfortunately, World War II saw a return to tradition with women required to contribute to the war effort as soldiers' wives and mothers of a future Aryan race. The National-Socialist Movement proclaimed the now infamous slogan “Children, Kitchen, Church” (or “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” in German), emphasizing that a woman’s duty is to care for her children, to work in the kitchen, and to be devoted to the church (“Nazis”). The Nazi regime “targeted” lower class female workers by enticing them with so-called “carrots”, cash rewards for quitting their jobs to get married and have children. Furthermore, “fecund mothers could win medals for [having] large families”. The increased popularity of female-controlled over-the-counter contraceptives led to legislature restricting access to contraception and abortion which were seen as enemies to the creation of the next Aryan generation. Female sexuality became a means to an end instead of raw and empowering as in Weimar Germany. Earlier explorations of sexuality such as Dix’s *Portrait* were condemned as violating women’s “natural and divine destiny” in a “barren desire to adopt masculine traits” (Müller-Zadow). In a harsh departure from the progress towards equal

rights during the Weimar Republic, Heinrich Himmler, a leading member of the Nazi Party, went so far as to declare that it would be a “catastrophe” to treat women as “instrument[s] of logical thought” (Longerich). Just as the needs of their husbands dictated women’s roles before WWI, now during the war women were again seen as a resource to be mobilized without thought to female “social or sexual liberation” (Utell).

In conclusion, WWI pulled women out of their domestic confinements ingrained in the previous centuries of German history to serve on the Western Front as trained nurses. Their contribution also included filling the work force that manufactured the supplies to sustain a country at war which helped German women to earn the vote in 1919. Artists in Weimar Germany began to respond to the changed status of women after the war. Hannah Höch utilized the photomontage technique to challenge standards of female domesticity that had begun to shift after the Great War. The unique challenges of post-war Germany allowed women such as Sylvia von Harden as depicted by Dada painter Otto Dix to refine their intellectual identity and embrace a “New Woman” who had emerged from the war not unscathed, yet still empowered. Upon the beginning of the next World War, German women were forced to adjust to a reversion to pre-war gender roles, as the Nazis placed new importance on motherhood as a woman’s sole duty. Examining gender roles too often depends on how men perceive women as most useful to society. The art community has the responsibility of showcasing women not only through society’s eyes, but also through the eyes of women themselves. Höch’s powerful political statements earn even more weight for their first person point of view. As times and roles change, women have begun to speak for themselves of their oppression and triumphs; it is these bold voices who will join Dada artists in the pantheon of art that has the power to herald change even decades into the future.

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