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Sabine Rewald. *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006. 304 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58839-198-8.

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In 1923, art critic Carl Einstein described the work of the painter Otto Dix as follows: "Dix gives this era--which is only the caricature of one--a resolute and technically sound kick in its swollen belly, wrings confessions of vileness from it, and produces an upright depiction of its people, their sly faces grinning an array of stolen mugs."[1] The catalogue accompanying "Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s," the extraordinary show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last winter, includes more than one hundred paintings and drawings of the people of the Weimar Republic by Dix, George Grosz, Max Beckmann, Christian Schad, and a number of lesser-known artists. Many of these artists aimed, as Einstein wrote, to "unmask this era" in their portraits--a violent task, given the devious epoch's love of disguise.[2] The resulting paintings often reveal not the face behind the mask, but the face *as* mask, "grinning an array of stolen mugs." For the turn to portraiture in the 1920s came out of a sense of the crisis of the individual human subject--the crisis of just that inalienable character, that individuality, that portrait painters had long made it their particular business to represent.

In early 1920s Germany, many former Dadaists and Expressionists turned to figurative painting, to old genres (portrait, nude, still life), and imitation Northern Renaissance techniques (panel painting, thin oil glazes). Gustav F. Hartlaub, director of the Mannheim Kunsthalle, organized a survey of this painting in 1925 and dubbed it "Neue Sachlichkeit" for its "emphasis on that which is objective and the technical attention to detail."[3] Among these cool-headed post-Expressionists, Hartlaub distinguished between two tendencies--classicist and Verist. Hartlaub described the Verists, such as Dix and Grosz, as "left-wing" painters of "the world of contemporary facts"; they painted prostitutes, war cripples, workers, businessmen, jazz musicians, welfare officers, art dealers, and doctors as "types"--grotesque and recognizable, bodies marked by the predictable collisions of class plus sex plus history, clothing deployed as armor or lure.[4]

"Glitter and Doom" was the first exhibition to devote itself to the Verist portrait in particular. In many of these paintings, portraiture provides the arena in which the foundational assumption of portraiture as a genre--the ability of a painting to tell something about a person's appearance, character, and self-presentation--is fought over ferociously. Works by the three painters at the top of Hartlaub's list of Verists--Dix, Grosz, and Beckmann--made up more than three quarters of the show.[5] Many works that have been seen as icons of *Neue Sachlichkeit* from the start (like Grosz's portrait of his friend Max Herrmann-Neisse [1925]) were included, as well as some that have acquired that status more recently (like Schad's self-portrait [1927]) and some seldom seen at all (like Dix's "Lady with Mink and Veil" [1920]). The

great emphasis of the exhibit was Dix, with his great portraits of the art dealer Johanna Ey (1924), the dancer Anita Berber (1925), and the journalist Sylvia von Harden (1926). Dix's path through the 1920s--from the four grotesque collaged canvases of war cripples shown at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin (one of which, "Skat Players" (1920), was included) to his development of an aggressive, critical practice of portraiture and later embrace of Old Masterish techniques--charts the possibilities of the Verist portrait.

The catalogue invites us to view the pictures included in Verist terms, so to speak--as indeed giving us a working classification of urban German society as it displayed itself in streets, bordellos, salons, nightclubs, and offices. The paintings in the exhibit were grouped according to the social stratum depicted ("The Professional Classes," "Polite Society," "Nightlife and the Demimonde"); the effect was that of a tour through Weimar society. The same principle orders the catalogue and consequently, the differences between the projects of the artists included recede. So, too, do the difficulties in labeling some of the works included as "Verist portraits." Just how much sense does it make to call Beckmann's paintings "Verist," or "Skat Players" a "portrait"? For the most part, the paintings included do not just return to the same "types," but inspect them as a detective would, dissecting them into discrete areas of information-bearing detail, registering clothing textures, wrinkles, lipstick, and bulging veins as clues. The pictures selected do work extraordinarily well together, inducting the viewer into this forensic way of seeing how people are marked by events, and how they protect and differentiate themselves by means of "specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation."[6] The typological arrangement helps the viewer learn how to read these baffling signs, such as the veil of the prostitute or the scars of the elite fraternity man.

The catalogue includes an introductory essay by curator Sabine Rewald, an overview of the period by journalist Ian Buruma, and an introduction to Verist painting by Matthias Eberle, author of *World War I and the Weimar Artists: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer* (1985). All three texts are very short and provide more orientation and background than new research or interpretation. The brief chronology of the Weimar Republic would be more useful if it included events such as the Dada Fair and the Mannheim exhibit and the bibliography could be fuller. Buruma's essay--also published in the *New York Review of Books* just before the show opened--does a fine job positioning Grosz, Dix, and Beckmann in the aftermath of war and revolution in Berlin, but seems a tad disconnected from the exhibition at hand, taking relatively few of its examples from the works in the show.[7] The color reproductions of the paintings and drawings, however, are excellent.

Most of the original research in the catalogue is contained in catalogue entries for portraits of known sitters. These inform the reader about the cultured and worldly doctors and lawyers who commissioned and bought such devastating caricatures of themselves, such as Dresden psychiatrist Heinrich Stadelmann, who wrote a book on the psychopathology of art, or Düsseldorf urologist Hans Koch, who collected French art and wrote an Expressionist novella. One can imagine, unlikely a topic as it seems, a very interesting patronage study of Neue Sachlichkeit painting. The wealth of information given about certain sitters points to one of the exhibit's fault lines: we can find out more about Stadelmann or Koch, for example, than about the anonymous aged prostitute in Dix's "Lady with Mink and Veil." The different categories organizing the show mark not only differences between the subjects but between the social and economic relations of painter to sitter, the nature of the transaction. The variety of these relations--self-portraits, commissioned portraits, intimate drawings of wives and girlfriends, homages to friends, caricatures of art-world enemies, fascinated studies of outré characters, allegorical figures of social vileness--and the question

of how they play out in the paintings is one of many issues raised by these extravagant and bitter pictures but unmentioned or scanted by the essays.

Notes

[1]. Carl Einstein, "Otto Dix," *Das Kunstblatt* 7, no. 3 (March 1923), translated in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 490.

[2]. Ibid., 490.

[3]. Gustav Hartlaub, "Zum Geleit," in *Ausstellung "Neue Sachlichkeit": Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925), translated in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 492.

[4]. Ibid., 492.

[5]. See Hartlaub's circular letter on his planned exhibition, which he sent out to German curators, art dealers, and writers on May 18, 1923, excerpted in Fritz Schmalenbach, "The Term *Neue Sachlichkeit*," *Art Bulletin* 22, no. 3 (1940): 161.

[6]. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 336.

[7]. Ian Buruma, "Weimar Faces," *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 17 (November 2, 2006).