

Otto Dix (1891-1969), *Prague Street (Devoted to my Contemporaries)*, 1920



Key Facts

Date: 1920

Size: 101 x 81 cm

Materials: Oil and collage on canvas

Location: Gallery of the City of Stuttgart

Otto Dix, *Prague Street (Devoted to my Contemporaries)*, 1920, oil and collage on canvas, 101 x 81 cm. Collection Gallery of the City of Stuttgart (Inv. O-1657). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Prague Street (Devoted to my Contemporaries), produced in 1920, is painted in contrasting greens, browns, blues, greys, pinks and whites, and depicts a figure who has given up and seems on the verge of losing his life. Here a solitary and abject disabled war veteran with a straw boater and yellowed beard (from a gas attack, or nicotine?) begs for money on the crowded 'Prager Strasse', Dresden's main shopping street, identified as such by fragmented postcards depicting a few of the famous thoroughfare's landmark buildings in the window on the left.

The two heavily collaged windows occupy the top half of the picture, one which possibly belongs to a wig shop, and the other to a prosthetics shop. As this is Dresden's richest shopping district, this prosthetics shop sells only the finest models. But directly below the window sits the seated figure whose only remaining limb, his right hand, is outstretched in supplication. A hopelessly inadequate wooden prosthesis substitutes for his left arm while two wooden stumps replace his lower legs. Another disabled man pulls himself along on a trolley as he has no legs. The gloved hand of a jacketed man gives the seated figure

a stamp. Another man with a false hand and a dog walk into the scene bottom left. A woman and another dog are cropped as they leave the scene, on the right. A little girl behind the seated figure chalks pictures and scribbles onto the wall.

Within a compositionally and materially jumbled environment of dogs, commodities, street children, fleeing passers-by, and political propaganda, the seated figure lies broken on the pavement, while well-dressed passers-by in green and pink outfits ignore this abject and pitiful spectacle. As suggested by the yellowish-brown skeletal hand holding a dark brown cane in the bottom left-hand corner and the red-faced figure with a blue suit and a green bowler hat who pulls himself along on a brown wooden cart immediately below his poorer “brother”, even other wounded war veterans, seemingly better off than the seated man, cannot bear to look in his direction. Although he is the only figure in the painting to gaze directly at the spectator, he is represented as having the least visual appeal.

Fired with movement, Dix’s image places the viewer as passer-by through the application of a fluid perspective which imitates the action of the human eye. The shifting gaze of the viewer is directed primarily towards the seated man by implied orthogonals. They lead from this figure to beyond the picture space, and also direct the eye from the left to the right-hand side of the image. We see the foreshortened supplicant in a normal perspective, and compositionally Dix places him a third of the way down the canvas and centrally, as if a portrait, which makes us look at him. Then we ‘look down’ onto the wheeled man who is shown in a steeper perspective suggesting our eye movement and his leftwards movement along the pavement too.

The vibrant colours and decorative elements seem at odds with the subject matter of this genre scene and the light is non-naturalistic.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The consequences of the traumatic events of World War I (1914-1918) led to the Treaty of Versailles which forced Germany to accept blame for the war and then pay reparations; the consequent political, social and economic challenges were:

- Angry returning *healthy* soldiers who found it hard to adjust to the fact they had lost, and who returned to a broken, starving and financially ruined Germany.
- *Wounded* soldiers who had to exist in society.
- The conversion to democracy and the rise of extreme right- and left-wing groups.
- The shame of losing the war and the search for people to blame for it.

The search for scapegoats often centred on the Jewish industrialists who were perceived to have made money out of the war, and on the wounded working-class veterans of this first industrialised mass conflict. *Prague Street* records one of the major challenges faced by defeated soldiers, that of their perceived failure to emulate the German ideal of physical (especially masculine) perfection, which would have life changing consequences for many ex-soldiers.

Gender

As an ex-soldier, Dix was deeply aware that attitudes toward veterans were in part influenced by the ideal of the tough, resilient warrior for whom combat presented a welcome test of manliness. This model was synonymous with a militant masculinity, defined as a physical, moral and indeed aesthetic ideal: a muscular, well-proportioned body, combined with steely mental resilience and a chivalrous disposition. Was losing the same as not being ‘man enough’?

The awkward positioning of the seated figure's head suggests that he suffers from bodily convulsions, the evidence of 'traumatic neuroses' and now generally referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder. Visible symptoms include debilitating shakes, stammering, tics and affected gait, as well as disorders of sight, hearing and speech.

In post-war Germany, however, this condition had a moveable meaning: traumatised soldiers were either diagnosed with the listed illness of war trauma (and given a pension), or stigmatised as '*hysterical*', a label traditionally attached to women, and which in the case of veterans described a pre-existing feebleness, *a lack of masculinity*, that happened to be revealed through warfare.

More often than not, it was the working-class soldier who was branded hysterical and thus work-shy. The use of the term 'hysteria' was also financially motivated. As 'hysteria' was not an 'official illness', it assisted officials and doctors in minimising the amount of pension awarded by finding veterans 'guilty' of cowardice, which, as a misdemeanour of military conduct, would not result in the granting of a pension. Military and state-employed psychiatrists blamed the mental breakdown of working-class 'hysterical' soldiers:

- for losing the war, claiming that soldiers who suffered mental breakdown lacked courage;
- being influenced by leftist organisations, they betrayed steely-willed, loyal soldiers by losing their nerve to fight at the point of victory;
- in failing to emulate the traditional model of masculinity, traumatised soldiers were shamed not only through the inability of their bodies to withstand warfare, but through the label of hysteria, which further aggravated their sense of emasculation.

This emasculation of the seated veteran is indicated by what surrounds him – a sexless corseted mannequin in the window emphasises that he is physically not all human and is reduced to appearing like a broken puppet; it also suggests he too is sexless. The beautiful nude woman above his head, the adverts for condoms, and the flesh-coloured buxom-bottomed female ignoring him as she wobbles away all point to this man being 'un-manned', sexless, emasculated by his experience; this is a sexuality which is not accessible to the emasculated, severely disabled veterans. Dix uses images of female indifference to male suffering and their flaunting of an unavailable sexuality as shorthand for the decadence, cruelty and uncaring nature of post-war society.

Class and Ethnicity

A later interpreter read the amputee on the trolley as embodying conservative and monarchist convictions because of his Kaiser Wilhelm moustache (and, one could add, the Prussian blue colour of his suit). Similarly, the well-formed artificial hand of the veteran entering from the lower left as well as the silver ring on his walking stick suggested an affluent status and outlook, while the gold glove and elaborately textured green and yellow (tweed?) suit of the passer-by fleeing the scene on the left implied wealth as well.

The aged appearance of the impoverished veteran, the hollow eyes and prominent chin were stereotypical characteristics ascribed to Jewish people which prevailed in Germany from the late 1800s onward. Defiantly unrepentant military leaders such as Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg implicated Jews in the 'Stab in the Back Myth': the *Dolchstoßlegende*, largely propagated by the military officer class; and Ann Murray regards him as 'the Jewish veteran who came to be vilified through racial tensions that emerged during the post-war years'. Another commentator, however, found the appearance of this begging Jewish man to be suggestive of a lower- or working-class soldier, and that of the amputee below him, a middle-upper class officer.

However we read it, *Prague Street* describes the class divisions that led to better treatment for officers than working-class soldiers. The destitute seated veteran doomed to appealing to passers-by on the pavement is

contrasted with the standing veteran who can afford the more luxurious prosthesis for his damaged but 'superior' body. His German hound-dog does not hold the piece of newspaper in his mouth, as some writers have mistakenly remarked, but bares its teeth, suggesting public scorn, despite incalculable sacrifices. It seems to bark out the often-heard "Juden Raus!" (Jews Out!) which in itself sounds like a bark. Dix mixes real text into this image with confidence, and shows how right-wing veterans like the superior standing figure could turn on such scapegoats as this destitute man.

The smartly-dressed, bowler-hatted veteran on the trolley wears a military medal on his lapel and like the standing veteran, has no need to beg. This figure possibly represents the military officer class who, as Peter Gay remarks

'...had led Germany into disaster, lying to themselves as much as to the world, wasting uncounted lives... and burdened the Republic with the legend of an undefeated German Army stabbed in the back at home by Jews and Communists.'

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The work incorporates multiple styles and media including paint, photographs, and various forms of printed material (stamps, money, postcards, woodcuts, political pamphlet, bits of newspaper advertising condoms and underwear and so on). Photographs of a nude classical statue and a corseted woman appear as symbols of bodily perfection and contrast the dominant dismembered mannequin. The exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, the contrasting colours, and the occasional passages of gestural painting: many of the picture's original viewers would have recognised the confusion of all these materials as being like the confusion of political extremism that resulted in street fighting in Dresden.

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.'

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

Prague Street is indicative of Dix's embittered response to the fallout of the war in 1920s Germany in which he angrily rejects on every level this culture of masculine and racial stereotyping. While Dix himself was not disfigured, his status as veteran is clear in *Prague Street*, in which he closely identifies with the struggles endured by disabled people. 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 passer-by, Dix cannily positions his own image at eye-level as if reflected in the shop window: a tiny, collaged photograph of the artist who, as the only figure who returns the gaze of the viewer, challenges one to consider the war veteran's predicament.

In effect, Dix brought the presence of maimed people into art galleries and public consciousness. Through a complex narrative of signs and motifs, *Prague Street* communicates a profound empathy and allegiance with disabled veterans, analysing the post-war conditions to which they were exposed. It encapsulates the challenges to German masculinity incurred by the war itself and to the attitudes and expectations of both the government and the health profession, whose conduct determined the post-war experience of disabled veterans. The images are, in sum, a declaration of brotherhood and allegiance with those who had little or no voice in the wake of governmental tyranny.

In 1964, Dix explained his purpose for the painting: "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."

In his autobiography, *A small yes and a big no*, George Grosz describes the peculiar behaviour of disabled veterans on the streets of Berlin circa 1919:

'War cripples, real or sham, hung around every street corner. Some would doze away until a passer-by came, when they would start to twist their heads and jerk their bodies. They were known as "shakers," and children would jeer at them: "Look, Mummy, there's another funny man!" People quickly get used to dreadful and disgusting sights.'

NB: The term 'cripples' is used in this resource only within quotes. Whilst the term was used historically, it is no longer acceptable.

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

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- <https://www.moma.org/artists/1559-otto-dix> - Heidi Hirschl Orley intro on Otto Dix