

## Serene and beautiful this art is not!

If you like your art to be serene and beautiful, then Magic Realism: Art of Weimar Germany 1919-33 at Tate Modern is definitely not for you! This is art that revels in the depraved, the carnal and the misogynistic.

The Weimar Republic was a turbulent period. Germany was still reeling from the traumas of the First World War. The economy was crippled by hyperinflation, unemployment was rife, and society fretted about a collapse in moral standards. But alongside this chaos and suffering, a sense of freedom sprung up to balance the death and decay. Bourgeois values were ridiculed and rejected. People began to find ersatz pleasure in sexual experimentation and other earthly delights to displace their anxieties.

The art of this period reflects these contradictions; it mixes pleasure and rage, allure and repulsion, the real world with fantasies and nightmares. Traditionalists hated it. They thought it decadent, frivolous and pointless, and when the Weimar Republic gave way to Hitler and the Nazis in 1933, the art was labelled degenerate, the artists banned, and their works pilloried and burned.

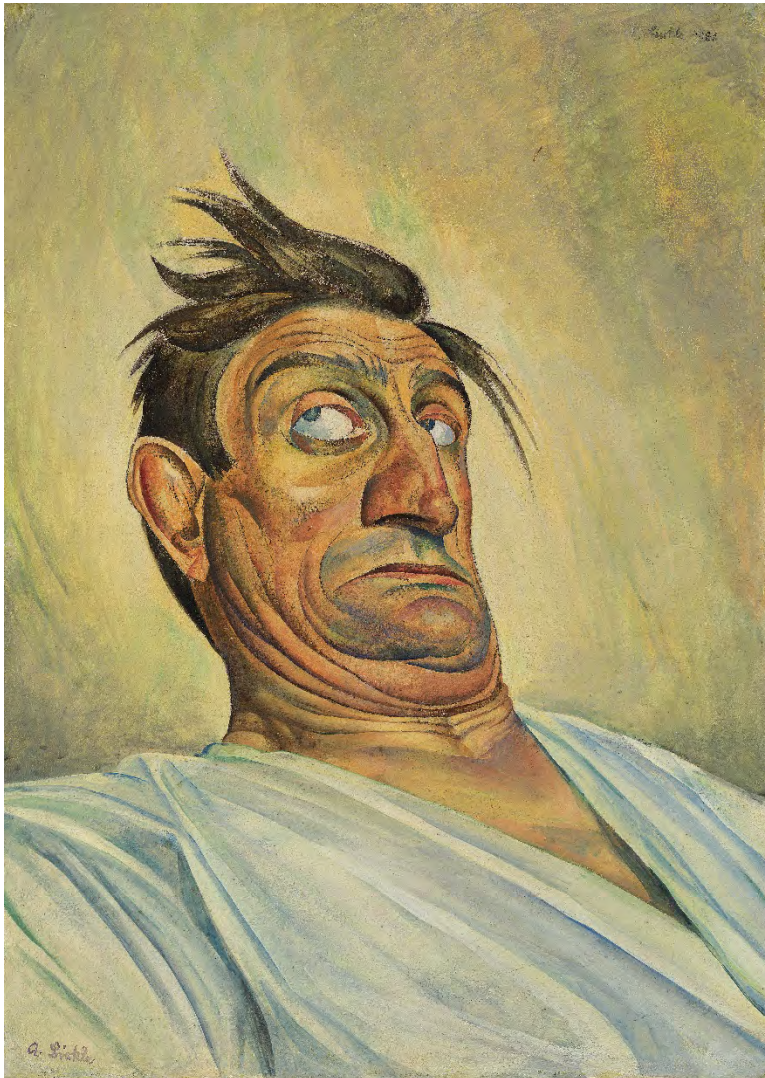
George Grosz and Otto Dix are the best-known artists in the show, and there is lots of both. Grosz brings a self-aware humour to his satirization of the bourgeoisie. In *Married Couple* (1930), a pair of stolid burghers are well-fed, buttoned up and smug, oblivious to the chaos around them, while *Self-Portrait with Model in the Studio* (1930-1937) is a dirty old man's fantasy. Grosz leers towards us, squeezing a tube of paint lasciviously, while behind him a model dressed in only a slip does her hair, readying herself to pose and perhaps more.



George Grosz (1893 – 1959) *Self-Portrait with Model in the Studio* (1930-1937) © Estate of George Grosz, Princeton, N.J. 2018.

Grosz had a dark side too, as other works in the show make clear, but the art of Otto Dix is unremittingly savage. A machine gunner, Dix served at the front line for almost the whole of WWI. Haunted by his experiences, he suffered recurrent nightmares and depicted the desolation and hopelessness of soldiers, veterans and civilians alike through twisted bodies, decaying corpses, and chaotic compositions. Viewed objectively, this is ill-disciplined art that comes close to cartoon making, but it is also art born out of PTSD and demands respect.

Together Grosz and Dix introduce the show's major themes. One theme is the circus. Resurgent in the 1920s, the circus was a form of public fantasy that mixed struggle and danger with glamour and gaiety to mirror the times, and provided a subject Weimar artists revisited again and again. The show features Dix's extensive series of etchings originally designed to reflect a complete circus performance. Most eye catching though is Albert Birkle's *The Acrobat Schultz V* (1921). Birkle focuses on the tumbler's face as he grimaces and staggers backwards. His eyes roll into their sockets. He's off balance, reflecting times that are out of kilter themselves perhaps.



Albert Birkle (1900 – 1986) *The Acrobat Schulz V* (1921) The George Economou Collection © DACS, London 2018

Another theme is misogyny, even sexual violence towards women. Grosz depicts himself as the perpetrator in several works of extraordinary brutality, while Dix returns to *lustmord* (sex murder) repeatedly. In his *Lustmord* (1922), the battered body of a woman lies in the background, legs askew and buttocks bloody and exposed, while a bowler hatted man, tongue lolling out of his mouth, surveys the scene. Rudolph Schlichter's *The Artist with Two Hanged Woman* (1924), which needs no description from me, even hangs in a separate room, outside of which is a warning that 'the room contains works some visitors may find upsetting'. Not surprisingly, no press images are available for these works.

To offset these unsettling depictions of women by men, the show also features strong and liberated women painted by women. As the traumatic legacy of WWI and the twin scourges of unemployment and poverty caused male dominance to wane, so women began to enjoy greater independence. Jeanne Mammen's works were new to me and offer glimpses of the increased freedoms of the Weimar Republic. In *Boring Dolls* (1929), two nonchalant women, feline and self-contained, hair cut short, pointedly ignore the viewer, while *Free Room* (1930) features three prostitutes. Prostitution was so commonplace in Weimar Germany, often as a means of economic survival, that it became a symbol of the debased times. But these are not degenerates – they're strong, knowing women, who stare brazenly back at us while waiting for their next customers.



Jeanne Mammen (1890-1976) *Brüderstrasse (Free Room)* (1930) The George Economou Collection © DACS, 2018

In truth though, this is an uneven show, as it has been largely drawn from one source, the collection of George Economou, and not all the pieces are strong. The religious paintings seem out of place and connected to the rest of the show only by an insistence on showing biblical characters as if they were battlefield casualties. And the middle of the show is packed with dull portraits, the sitters stiff with anxiety, their faces masks of self-protection to hide their private angst. In his *Self Portrait with Mask* (1926), Sergius Pauser even lifts the literal mask of a carnival costume to reveal himself tight-lipped and watchful.



Sergius Pauser (1896 – 1970) *Self – Portrait with Mask* (1926) The George Economou Collection © Angela Pauser and Wolfgang Pauser

Many of the works on display are deliberately ugly and I'm not sure of their artistic merit. Perhaps being banned by the Nazis has given these artists an unmerited aura. But unlike most of the context-free collection in Tate Modern, these works function collectively as a record of their times and show us what a troubled and contradictory period Weimar Germany was. This show might not delight then but it's thought-provoking and compelling (and free!)

Magic Realism: The Art of Weimar Germany is on at Tate Modern, Bankside SE1 9TG from 30th July 2018 to 14<sup>th</sup> July 2019

Published: Magic Realism at Tate Modern review, London Student

Date published: 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019

URL: <http://londonstudent.coop/magic-realism-at-tate-modern/>