

Martin Schmidt An Iconic Work of New Objectivity: Hans Grundig's Masterful "Schüler mit roter Mütze"

The artistic ethos of the painter Hans Grundig is reflected in his attempt to conjoin the sometimes one-dimensional worldview of politically informed art with a more universal human outlook. This is to say that in addition to his overriding preoccupation with the social conditions that prevailed during his turbulent times – particularly class conflicts –, he was nonetheless able to paint with a deeply felt lyricism. Without this aspect, his art would probably have come across as passionless and merely declamatory. And so we always find the human being as the key point of reference for his care and concern, not just abstract principles.

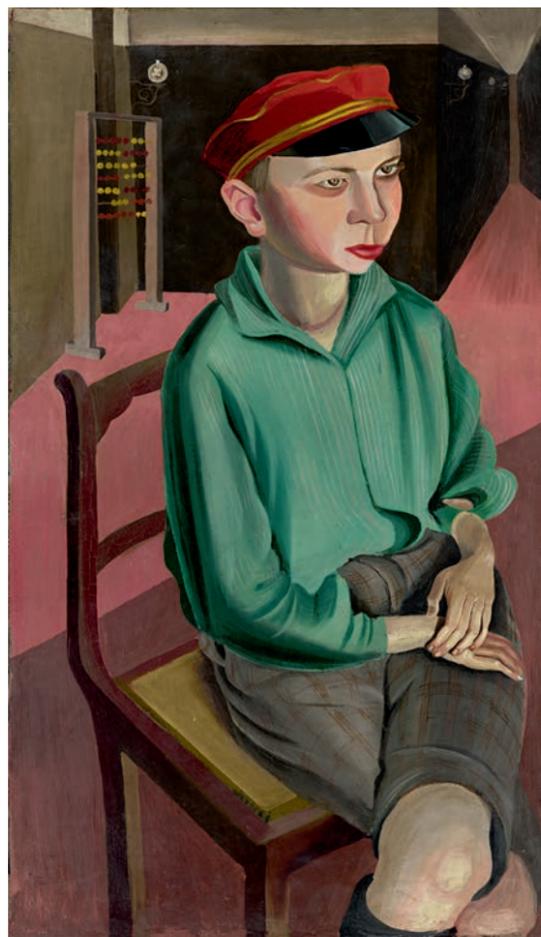
A highly idiosyncratic way of looking at things shines through Grundig's work, one that mixes naïveté with artifice, proclamation with lyricism, and that supercharges non-descript details with a deeply felt, magical poetry. Lea, the school friend who later became his wife and life's companion, and whom he fondly referred to as his "silver one" in his memoirs, described him as "a dreamer and warrior rolled into one." He wanted his art to have a social impact, of course. Yet he was also well aware that choosing the right side in class warfare, as demanded by the German Communist Party (KPD) and later by its East German successor (SED), was an artistic dead end that usually produced less than satisfying results. Pledging allegiance to an ideal but refusing to surrender to it blindly was a compromise that many of his more thoughtful contemporaries had to make in those days, and so the artist was in good company in this regard.

The Dresden art critics of the 1920s tended to pigeonhole Grundig and his colleagues Fritz Skade, Wilhelm Lachnit, and Otto Griebel as "Dixist epigones," but this hardly did justice to their individual personalities. In Grundig's case, one does perhaps recognize a closer kinship to the true-to-life verismo of Otto Dix than to the high-minded peinture of Otto Gussmann, the teacher he so admired. Grundig wanted to pack real life into his images; a refined painting style for the sake of aesthetics was not what he was after. So it is only logical that he played an important role when the Dresden branch of the Assoziation Revolutionärer Bildender Künstler Deutschlands (Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists of Germany) in 1929/30 was established. Its members made it their mission to present unvarnished depictions of the class conditions that prevailed at the time. Also affectionately known as the "ASSO," the Dresden group was one of the largest

and most productive of its kind during the latter phase of the Weimar Republic.

Yet despite his avowed goal of holding a mirror up to "life itself," Grundig chose to veil his early human models in a unique air of introspective detachment, as if they were mere embodiments of shadowy apparitions in a lucid dream that interposes itself as a diaphanous curtain between body and mind. The faces are usually angled in a three-quarter view, with expressions that seem earnest and slightly distant.

So it is with the "Schüler mit roter Mütze" (pupil in a red cap), who is shown seated on a chair in a school hallway. The corridor has been radically foreshortened into an absurdly narrow crevice that would be impossible for anyone to pass through. Just as jarring is the abacus positioned in the left background, which



Lot 12



Karl Hubbuch. The schoolroom. 1925. Oil/cardboard and wood. Private Collection

seems designed for titanic hands, assuming spatial logic is applied. Grundig evidently is unconcerned about the plausibility of his center-line perspective. Nor is his model one of the proletarian urchins typically portrayed by Otto Dix und Curt Querner. This particular pupil is dressed extremely properly; his composed posture almost makes him look supercilious and precocious. There is also no apparent reason why he happens to be seated in the school hallway, except perhaps the obvious one: to serve as a model for a budding artist.

It is of course no accident that the image's spatial arrangement exudes the spirit of *pittura metafisica*. We know that the young artists in Dresden had been mightily impressed by the works of Giorgio de Chirico, which had been exhibited along with their own at an international art exhibit in Dresden in 1926. For Grundig, "de Chirico's subjective conception of space and his depiction of steeply ascending floor planes that dominate the picture, often reaching up to the horizon line, were an important visual revelation." (B. Dalbajewa and A. Matthias: *Raumkompositionen des kritischen Realismus. Das Auge des Arbeiters. Arbeiterfotografie und Kunst um 1930.* exh. cat. Zwickau, Cologne, Dresden and Leipzig, 2014, p. 149–162, here p. 151).

"Schüler mit roter Mütze" is, without a doubt, a masterwork in which the young Hans Grundig was able to celebrate his unique and lyrical flair for magical realism. Once the Nazis came to power, the artist was forced to spend four agonizing years in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp for his political convictions. His only way out was to volunteer as a soldier in a penal battalion. In late 1944, he managed to desert and cross over to the Red Army.

Grundig probably never imagined in his wildest dreams that the ideas championed before the war by ASSO would become ideologically untenable after 1945, when they were rejected as "formalism" incompatible with the task of building the German Democratic Republic. This had impacts on Grundig's art, which lost much of its affective power. He tried his best to deliver the positive motivational images that were called for but tragically never really acclimated himself to this new world which he himself had so fervently hoped for. By the time of his death from severe tuberculosis and the long-term effects of his wartime incarceration, his status was that of a celebrated artist, but only officially. In reality, he had merely been tolerated as a relic from the long-gone past.



Otto Dix: Working-class boy. 1920. Oil/canvas. Löffler 1920/19. Stuttgart, Kunstmuseum

12 Hans Grundig

1901 – Dresden – 1958

"Schüler mit roter Mütze". Circa 1925/28

Oil on canvas. Relined. 100 × 58 cm (39 3/8 × 22 7/8 in.). A label from the Berlin 1977 exhibition on the decorative frame on the reverse, labels from the exhibitions in Berlin 1979/80 and Stuttgart 2007/08 on the stretcher (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Bernhardt G 17. [3429] Framed.

Provenance

Private Collection, Berlin (acquired from Lea Grundig, the artist's widow, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 150,000–200,000

USD 161,000–215,000

Exhibition

Hans Grundig. Ausstellung zum 70. Geburtstag. Berlin, Ladengalerie, 1971, cat. no. 5, ill. on the cover / Tendenzen der Zwanziger Jahre. 15. Europäische Kunstausstellung. Berlin, Große Orangerie im Schloß Charlottenburg, 1977, cat. no. 4/68, ill. p. 4/119 / Die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit der Kinder in der bildenden Kunst. Berlin, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst und Staatliche Kunsthalle, 1979/80 / Getroffen. Otto Dix und die Kunst des Porträts. Stuttgart, Kunstmuseum, 2007/08 / Neue Sachlichkeit in Dresden. Malerei der Zwanziger Jahre von Dix bis Querner. Dresden, Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, 2011/12, p. 221, ill. p. 222 / New Objectivity. Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic 1919–1933. Venedig, Museo Correr; Los Angeles, County Museum of Art, 2015/16, ill. p. 300 and 313 / Glanz und Elend in der Weimarer Republik. Frankfurt a.M., Kunsthalle Schirn, 2017/18, ill. p. 65

Literature and illustration

Stephan Weber und Erhard Frommhold: Hans Grundig. Schaffen im Verborgenen. Dresden, Hochschule für Bildende Künste und Verlag der Kunst [= Phantasos III], 2001, p. 26, ill. p. 27 / Birgit Dalbajewa and Agnes Matthias: Die „aperspektivische“ Welt der Moderne und die Enge der Arbeiterstube. Raumkompositionen des Kritischen Realismus. In: Wolfgang Hesse (ed.): Das Auge des Arbeiters. Arbeiterfotografie und Kunst um 1930, exhibition cat. Zwickau, Cologne, Dresden, Leipzig, 2014/15, ill. p. 153

- Icon of Dresdener New Objectivity
- One of the artist's masterpieces
- Impressive exhibition history

