



Ulrike Lorenz **A testament to the "will to art":
Otto Dix's self-portrait from 1913, the eve of
World War I**

"I shall either become notorious – or famous." Otto Dix ultimately fulfilled this early prophecy (as documented by Diether Schmidt) in more ways than one, leaving behind roughly 500 portraits of himself as part of his prolific oeuvre. Along with Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, and Käthe Kollwitz, he was one of those rare Modernist artists who held up an unsparing mirror to themselves during their entire lifetimes. And so we have self-portraits that document every single phase and style of his creative trajectory, from first attempts in grade school to his stark portrayal of himself with a skull for a face, created after suffering a stroke. There are daring Expressionistic forays, razor-sharp psychograms, allegories after the manner of the Old Masters, and these expeditions of the self range from idea sketches and detail studies to graphic prints and even form part of his sophisticated, major painted works. For Dix, the self-portrait offered a wide stage on which to declare programmatic identification and pursue philosophical speculation – the one single outlet for the man who had no manifests: "I have never made any professions in writing, since my paintings are avowals of the most candid kind [...]. Whoever has eyes to see, let them see!" (cited from: *Hans Kinkel: Die Toten und die Nackten. Beiträge zu Dix*, Berlin 1991, p. 16/17)

Indeed, whoever believes their eyes enough to take a second look will perceive a human being who is willing to bare not just the external traces, but also the most intimate spiritual depths of his journey as an artist through the cataclysmic 20th century, and to reveal ambitions and failures alike.

This said, the painter never looked more open-faced, sensitive, or vulnerable than in this self-portrait he created in 1913, shortly before the outbreak of World War I. It is as if the son of a working-class family from East Thuringia is pausing to take a deep breath in Dresden as he is striking out towards artistic autonomy, midway between the disciplined homage to the early Renaissance of his self-portrait with a carnation (1912) and the Dionysian self-demonization as a smoker (1914). In this work, there is no pretention to style or pose whatsoever. Dix' brightly illuminated countenance emerges from a smooth, dark-green background, framed by brunette bangs and a simple, collared sweater. Youthfully frank, the face seems pressed right up to the picture plane. Turning slightly to the left, the 22-year-old student is highly focused but not tense. A sensitive expression plays over the slightly flared nostrils, the finely chiseled ear, the delicately curved lips. The clarity with which these features shine through the glazed layers of paint, as if from under living skin, bespeaks Dix's stupendous grasp of Old Master techniques. His alert gaze, from the corners of his eyes, does not yet affront the viewer – it rests probingly on us, without challenge. Just one year later, Dix would show himself as a predatory animal, full of flashes behind the smoke, showcasing his fighter nature getting ready to do whatever deed against a backdrop of a Saturnian night in his studio, lit up by a crescent moon and glittering stars. But the ingenuous, candid, and innocent youth shown in the portrait from 1913 – the year being clearly inscribed in bold letters in the picture's left-hand corner – to mark his new self-confidence as a free artist is gone forever after Dix lived through the horrors of World War I.

Otto Dix' career as an artist began in 1910, when he was admitted to the Academy of Applied Arts in Dresden, the *Kunstgewerbeschule* – a welcome step up from his previous apprenticeship as a decorative painter in his hometown of Gera. Like many of the best German artists, he honed his natural talent by enduring "the camel-like toil" (Otto Dix, *Erinnerungen!* in: Exhibition Catalogue Otto



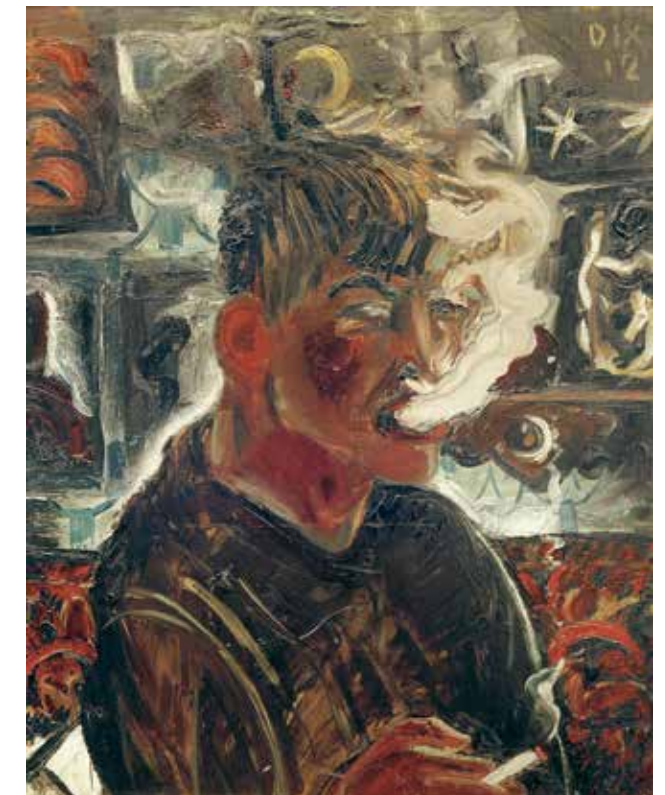
Otto Dix. "Selbstbildnis mit Nelke". 1912. Oil/cardboard. Detroit Institute of Arts Museum



Lot 10



Otto Dix. "Kleines Selbstbildnis". 1913. Oil/canvas. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart



Otto Dix. "Selbstbildnis als Raucher". Circa 1914. Oil/cardboard. Kunstsammlung Gera, Otto-Dix-Haus

Dix, Gera 1966) pursued in the hotbed of progressive pedagogical methods, training in careful observations of nature, and the many powerful impulses obtained from art and life outside the Academy. His studies of the masterworks by Pinturicchio, Cranach, and Dürer that hung in Dresden's *Gemäldegalerie* inspired him to experiment with glaze painting techniques and stylistic adaptations. His exposure to artists who bridged the gap between Symbolism and Art Nouveau, between folkloristic and monumental art like Arnold Böcklin, Max Klinger, and Ferdinand Hodler stoked his passion for visual virtuosity. What Dix saw in Avantgarde galleries animated him to explore new artistic directions. A sensational Van-Gogh exhibition in early 1912 left traces of the *impasto* technique in his subsequent work along with metaphorical exaggerations. Starting in the fall of 1913, his early, eclectic style also began to echo the apocalyptic urban landscapes of Ludwig Meidner, the Orphic dream visions of Robert Delaunay, and the psychological portraits of Edvard Munch. The vitalist philosophy of Nietzsche, the affirmative view of the eternal cycle of birth and death, clearly influenced his wild black and red ink drawings from 1913/14, with their mix of erotic, Christian, and mythical subjects. The vibrant atmosphere of the metropolis on the Elbe River triggered rapid changes of course and breakoffs. The young artist tried his hand at just about every style he encountered, whether contemporary or traditional. But even in this early period, his determination and expressive power already allowed him to outline the broad arc his future work would take, from Hyperrealism to an explosive Expressionism and back again.

It was in the storms of steel of World War I that Dix' self-image would be conclusively forged: "The artist: Someone who has the courage to say yes." (Otto Dix, *Kriegstagebuch*, p. 87). During the Weimar period and its collapse, he achieved his breakthrough in Dresden and Düsseldorf, moved to Berlin further to pursue his career, before eventually returning to Dresden to teach as a professor at the Academy. When the National Socialists vilified him as a "degenerate artist,"

Dix decided to retreat to Lake Constance to live quietly out of the public eye. Although he found the post-war division of Germany difficult to accept on a personal level, he took it as an opportunity for a unique existence as an artist celebrated on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Dix's stylistic syncretism ran the gamut from Cosmic Expressionism and the mocking humor of Dada to the polemical, socially critical Realist movement of the early 1920s. Restlessly exploring, his personal form of Realism then branched off into New Objectivity, Magic Realism, and even Romantic Realism. By 1933, he was practicing a naturalism that harked back to the Old Masters, albeit with subtexts of social commentary. His final creative phase, from 1945 onwards, was marked by late Expressionist tendencies. Otto Dix had been there to witness ubiquitous death in the wars, he had seen his children being born, he had sought to come to terms with the enticements of human existence and its degeneration. As a "man of reality," Dix had always been both: a contemporary witness observing events from the outside, yet also an affected party directly submerged in them. All the while, the most important force driving him was to reveal to the senses his direct experiences: "The key is to show things as they are. You can't paint a feeling of outrage." (Otto Dix in an interview with Fritz Löffler, in: *Neue Zeit*, Berlin, August 16th, 1957). In his ever-changing, often contradictory work, he held up a mirror to the fractures and tectonic shifts of his time like practically no one else.

Today, Dix is acknowledged as one of the most important German artists of the 20th century. His ambivalent realism is more explosive now than ever. Yet even before 1914, he was already staking out his later thematic and stylistic horizons. The self-portrait of 1913 marks a key milestone in this process. For far from being the product of habitual experimentation, it is an act of existential self-affirmation. Otto Dix is centered serenely within himself, manifesting a "will to art" that, to paraphrase Nietzsche, "requires no further proof."

10 Otto Dix

Gera-Untermhaus 1891 – 1969 Singen

“Selbstbildnis”. 1913

Oil on paper on cardboard. 36 × 30 cm
(14 1/8 × 11 3/4 in.). Dated lower left: 1913. Catalogue
raisonné: Löffler 1913/2. [3009] Framed.

Provenance

Private Collection, Rhineland (acquired at the latest
1964, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 200,000–300,000

USD 233,000–349,000

Exhibition

Deutsche Kunst im 20. Jahrhundert. Malerei und
Plastik aus Privatbesitz. Aachen, Museumsverein, im
Suermondt-Museum, 1964, cat. no. 23, ill. 60 / Otto
Dix. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, Graphik. Ham-
burg, Kunstverein, 1966/67, cat. no. 3 / Dix. Otto Dix
zum 80. Geburtstag. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Gouachen,
Zeichnungen und Radierfolge „Der Krieg“. Stuttgart,
Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, 1971, cat. no. 7, and Paris,
Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1972, cat.
no. 5

Literature and illustration

Fritz Löffler: Otto Dix, Leben und Werk. Dresden, Ver-
lag der Kunst, 1960, p. 13; 2nd edition: Dresden, Ver-
lag der Kunst, and Wien, 1967, p. 14; 3rd ed.: Dresden,
Verlag der Kunst, 1972, p. 14 / Fritz Löffler: Kunst als
Sinnegebung unserer Zeit. Otto Dix 75 Jahre alt. In: Die
Kunst und das schöne Heim, 64nd vol., 1966, p. 113–
116, here p. 113, w. ill. / Diether Schmidt: Otto Dix im
Selbstbildnis. Berlin, Henschelverlag Kunst und
Gesellschaft, zweite, ergänzte Aufl. 1981 (1st ed. 1978),
p. 23, p. 26, ill. 10, and p. 284 / Otto Conzelmann: Der
andere Dix. Sein Bild vom Menschen und vom Krieg.
Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1983, p. 58 and p. 59, ill. 76 /
Rainer Beck: Dix und die Tradition. Aspekte zum The-
ma im Œuvre der Gemälde. In: Otto Dix zum 100.
Geburtstag. Symposium. Albstadt, Städtische Galerie,
1./2. Juni 1991, p. 18 and p. 35, ill. 40

- Otto Dix' self-portrait as an act of existential self-affirmation
- Self-portraits by Otto Dix are extremely rare on the art market
- Held as a family heirloom for more than six decades

