





First International Dada Fair, Berlin, Kunsthandlung Dr. Otto Burchard, 1920. On the wall, left-hand side, is Otto Dix' painting "Die Kriegskrüppel (mit Selbstbildnis)". Formerly Stadtmuseum Dresden, confiscated in 1937 as "degenerate", lost

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Birgit Schwarz Glitter, shine and silver light – Otto Dix' "Katzen" as Dadaistic masterpiece

The painting *Katzen*, which Dix created in early 1920 at the height of his Dada phase, defies all of the clichés associated with the artist. It certainly does not fit in with his other creative output of the period, which was characterized by socially satirical works composed of collaged elements, such as *Die Skatspieler* (Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin), *Prager Strasse* (Kunstmuseum Stuttgart) or *Streichholz-händler* (Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart). Nor does it fit in with the artist's stylistic evolution towards realism that art historians have traced. *Katzen* is neither realistic nor does it convey any recognizable message of social criticism. On the contrary, the painting comes across as humorous and seemingly innocuous. In an experimental, provocatively naive formal language, it depicts cats perched on the rooftops of a big city. Dix completely dispenses with the perspective technique of foreshortening: all the pictorial elements are flat, as if they were paper cut-outs; the houses and windows are reduced to geometric high rectangles; and the individual colour surfaces are stacked atop one other like modular building blocks.

As if they were ascending a staircase, two huge cats climb up over the roofline, which rises left to right, making for the large round full moon, which the animal taking the lead greets with an open-mouthed meow and a raised paw. A third cat appears to hover against the silvery night sky, but a closer look reveals that it is balancing on top of electrical power lines. Dix has moved the cables' white porcelain insulators to the centre of the picture, stringing them one on top of the other like beads on a pearl necklace. The cats are wildly over-dimensioned compared to the background architecture. The motifs and design are reminiscent of some of Paul Klee's self-consciously childlike images, especially his watercolours from before the war.

On its back, this painting features a prominent personal inscription to the writer Theodor Däubler. Indeed, it was under the title *Theodor Däubler gewidmet* ("Dedicated to Theodor Däubler") that Dix first exhibited the work at the Berlin Art Exhibition of 1920. Only later did this main title become a secondary one. Thus, in his catalogue raisonné of Otto Dix's paintings published in 1981, Fritz Löffler lists the work as *Katzen (Theodor Däubler gewidmet)*.

What are the ties connecting this image with the celebrated poet, who was best known for *Das Nordlicht*, a 30,000-verse opus the critic Thomas Steinfeld described as "a general mobilization of the motifs of Romantic poetry?" In 1927, Dix even was to feature the author in one of his major portraits: *Bildnis des Dichters Theodor Däubler* (Museum Ludwig, Cologne). Could it be possible to gain a better understanding of *Katzen* by regarding the person of the dedicatee?

Däubler first met Dix in Dresden in early 1919, probably in the context of the artistic circle centered around Erwin Schulhoff, a pianist and composer. At the time, Dix was romantically involved with Schulhoff's sister Viola, who was studying at the Dresden *Kunstgewerbeschule*. The elegantly rented flat of the wealthy Schulhoff siblings, scions of a Jewish merchant family from Prague, had become a meeting place for artists during what was a bitterly cold winter of widespread hunger and hardship. Besides Viola's friends from the School of Arts and Crafts,



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the habitués of this salon included members of the newly founded *Dresdner Sezession "Gruppe 1919,"* among them Otto Dix, as well as luminaries of the city's cultural scene, such as Hermann Kutzschbach, conductor of the Dresden Opera, Hans Poelzig, the Councilor for Urban Planning of the city of Dresden, and the art historian Will Grohmann, who at the time was teaching at the secondary school König Georg-Gymnasium. And of course Theodor Däubler, who spent several months in the Saxon capital during the first half of 1919.

It was a time when a general spirit of optimism was beginning to emerge in the wake of the end of World War I, the overthrow of the monarchy, and the founding of the Weimar Republic. In April/May of that year, the *Dresdener Sezession Gruppe 1919* made its public debut at the showrooms of the *Kunstsalon Emil Richter* on Prager Strasse. On May 15th, 1919, Däubler read from his own writings as part of the program accompanying the exhibition. Since the poet also was active as an art critic during these years, he paid a visit to Dix's studio that May by way of preparing for an essay about the artist. This was to appear in the *Kunstblatt*, an art journal to which Däubler contributed regularly and which played a key role in showcasing Germany's emerging modern art scene.

This exposure would serve as a major door opener for Dix, who was still mostly unknown. Däubler had been the one to bring Paul Klee and George Grosz to public attention and thus was reputed as having a keen eye for spotting unknown talent.

The composer Erwin Schulhof, meanwhile, was planning to hold a series of concerts featuring "music of the future" in collaboration with the concertmaster Hermann Kutzschbach in the second half of 1919. The event was announced in a text entitled *Werkstatt der Zeit*, a sort of artistic manifesto on the "workshop of the times" that several members of the Schulhoff circle approved by their signatures: Schulhoff and Kutzschbach representing music, the painter Lasar Segall and the architect Hans Poelzig on behalf of the fine arts, Will Grohmann and Theodor Däubler for literature. *Werkstatt der Zeit* summed up its underlying artistic agenda in a bold declaration: "Art itself is the expression of heightened human longing; the work of art itself is an explosion of heightened sensitivity."

Thus, the concept of "longing" was central to the thinking of the Schulhoff circle. It is manifested especially in the work of Dix, who even used the term (*Sehnsucht*) as the title of the first self-portrait he made upon returning home from the World War I (Dresden State Art Collections, New Masters Gallery). Moreover, Dix portrayed himself as the moon in a painting that is now lost. In his essay, Däubler described the painting as follows: "Otto Dix is viewing himself phase-by-phase in a self-portrait: in profile, in semi-profile, and as dead. Hence the silver. It goes with the sickle. This image, too, once again features flowers and a great deal of joyfulness: in the choice of the emblems of earthly cheer, all expressed through the brightest colours, in contrast to the pale silver of the more abstract, actual portrait."

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Mond, Sterne, which he published in the magazine *Menschen* on March 20th, 1919. He also was a member of the Dresden Secession and was portrayed by Dix in 1922 (*Städtische Kunstsammlung*, Freital). The moon also serves as the central motif in Theodor Däubler's *Mit Silberner Sichel*, a volume of his prose published by Hellerauer Verlag in 1916 prefaced by his poem *Geheiliger Mond*.

In February of 1919, Schulhoff set five of Däubler's poems to music under the title *Menschheit*. The symphony for orchestra and alto voice was a manifestly Romantic work "dominated by melancholy and longing, expressed using techniques of the late Romantic period," according to the Schulhoff biographer Joseph Bek. The poems selected – *Der Dudelsack, Flügellahmer Versuch, Oft, Dämmerung and Einblick* – all had appeared in the collection of poems *Das Sternenkind*, a volume likewise published by Hellerauer Verlag in 1916, which centered around the bodies of the night sky, especially the moon. The first stanza of *Flügellahmer Versuch* can be translated as follows:

The moon roams through deserted streets,
Through pale panes falls its light, for sure,
In this lane I'd rather not linger,
I cannot suffer seeing houses growing bleak and dumb.

These lines are filled with the essential elements found in Dix's painting: the moon and its glow, windowpanes, houses. And the very next poem in the collection – one which Schulhoff did not set to music – in fact is called *Katzen*. It begins with the following image:

Moon-flakes silver down through the window.
On the pale carpet, white cats romp at play,
With eyes of silver-blue and silken paws,
Their limbs so fine and almost brittle.

There are further examples: The poem *Geheimnis* begins with the wonderful metaphor of the full moon rising over steep copper steps. In Dix's painting, it is the cats who climb up the rooves along steep patina-coloured steps. The artist pictorially has implemented Däubler's motifs, re-combining them and freely selecting his forms. But Dix wouldn't be Dix if he didn't go one resolute and decisive step further: He visualized Däubler's efforts to translate the phenomena of light into language. Many poets have poeticized the glow of the moon as "silver light," but Däubler probably surpasses them all in his creative use of the word "silver." In the poem *Der Jüngste Mond*, for example, he turns the adjective silver into a verb by describing a moon as the "silvering desire of the sun" – a break with linguistic rules that achieves an astonishing poetic effect. This inspires Dix to render the turn of phrase in visual terms by painting on silver foil (aluminium sheets) or by using metal foil to represent the night sky. And wherever he wants to indicate reflected light – as on the window panes of the houses or on the cats' fur gleaming in the moonlight – he uses glitter, i.e. small glass or metal particles that bounce



Theodor Däubler. 1923



Otto Dix. 1919

Dada premiere for Otto Dix: The paintings "Matrose Fritz Müller aus Pieschen", "Die Elektrische" and "Katzen (Theodor Däubler gewidmet)" all were shown at the 1920 Berlin Art Exhibition in the *Novembergruppe* spaces (cat. no.1116-1118) – the first exhibition ever to feature Dadaist works by the artist.



Otto Dix. "Die Elektrische". 1919. Oil/collage/cardboard. Sold at Sotheby's, London, on 8/2/2012 for 2,950 000 GBP

back the light. These items were available to him as products of the newly emerging Christmas card and greeting card industry, kitschy elements that also allowed him to subvert his own picture's artistic pretensions in an ironic, typically Dadaist manner.

Dix already had been extremely interested in the phenomena of light in his oeuvre dating to before and during the war. He would go about depicting them in a furiously intense, albeit artistically conventional manner that relied on brushwork and oil paints. In this image, however, he radically broke with pictorial convention by bringing light phenomena directly into the image, applying light-reflecting materials and using the actual lighting conditions as artistic tools. By making the light phenomena he was depicting a reality within his images, Dix had found a way to "realize" art, just as Erwin Schulhoff had called for in his manifesto "Revolution und Musik". Theodor Däubler's article on Dix eventually appeared after considerable delay in the April 1920 issue of *Kunstblatt*. The postponement by publisher Paul Westheim meant that the essay was totally out of date by the time it appeared, since the works discussed by Däubler were no longer representative of the latest Dada creations. This may be the reason why the text was published without any illustrations of the works discussed. Instead, Dix's work was exemplified by two more recent woodcuts, among them the woodcut *Katzen*, which essentially is a transposition of the painting by the same name.

As a consequence of its publication date, the article was a companion piece to the *Novembergruppe* special exhibition at the Berlin Kunstausstellung of 1920, where Dix first presented the painting *Katzen* under the dedicating title "Theodor Däubler gewidmet." This special showing by *Novembergruppe* proved to be far more important in terms of fostering the public impact of Dada – and of Dix as a Dadaist – than the First International Dada Fair, which also was held in Berlin in the summer of 1920. Although the latter generally is considered the single most important Dadaist event ever held in the German capital, it was only sparsely attended. Not only was the show confined to a private gallery comprising only two



Otto Dix. "Matrose Fritz Müller aus Pieschen". 1919. Oil/collage/canvas. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin

rooms, the *Kunstsalon Dr. Otto Burchard* – the admission fee was exorbitantly high. By contrast, the *Kunstausstellung Berlin* art exhibition was altogether different: a grand showcase of current art held annually at the Glaspalast, the glassed-in state-run exhibition space near the Lehrter Bahnhof train station. It was a highly prestigious official event during the Weimar Republic and boasted throngs of visitors. The *Verein Berliner Künstler*, the *Berliner Secession*, the *Freie Secession* and the *Novembergruppe* all were shown here, each being assigned their own jury and their own spaces. During this particular summer, visitors to the *Novembergruppe* section were confronted, without preparation and most for the first time, with Dada collages and assemblages made from or with scavenged, non-art materials. In addition to small works by Kurt Schwitters, which the artist described using the self-invented nonsense word "Merz," there were also large material collages by purported imitators of his "Merz" style. Since the *Kunstausstellung Berlin* was an official, publicly funded event, the artistic scandal that ensued quickly escalated into a political issue in the press.

Three paintings with collage elements by Dix also had their public debut at this particular exhibition: *Katzen* as well as *Matrose Fritz Müller aus Pieschen* and *Die Elektrische* (ill.). In all three paintings, Dix used metal glitter or metal leaf. *Die Elektrische* is probably the first work in which Dix resorted to glued-on collage elements – again, shiny and light-reflecting objects such as mother-of-pearl buttons and sequins. He also applied some of these glitter elements onto the tiny glitter balls protruding from the image surface.

In effect, this selection of works was an exuberant thank-you from Dix for Däubler's essay, which finally had been published, and the painting *Katzen* a Dadaistic paean of praise to the poet's work and to his committed efforts on behalf of contemporary art.

Birgit Schwarz is the author of "Maldadadix. Otto Dix und die Dada-Malerei 1919 bis 1922." to be published in early December of 2022 by Vienna, Böhlau Verlag.



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13^N Otto Dix

Gera-Untermhaus 1891 – 1969 Singen

“Katzen (Theodor Däubler gewidmet)”. 1920

Oil and glitter on aluminium leaf on wood. 47 × 37 cm (18 ½ × 14 ⅝ in.). Signed and dated lower right:

DIX 1920. Signed in chalk on the reverse and inscribed:

DIX. / theodor[!] Däubler / gewidmet / P[reis] 1800.

Catalogue raisonné: Löffler 1920/3. [3030] Framed.

Provenance

Estate of the artist

EUR 800,000–1,200,000

USD 777,000–1,170,000



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Exhibition

Kunstaussstellung Berlin 1920. Berlin, Landesausstellungsgebäude, 1920, cat. no. 1118 (“Theodor Däubler gewidmet”) / Otto Dix. Berlin, Galerie Meta Nierendorf, 1961, cat. no. 8, ill. / Otto Dix. Peintures, aquarelles, gouaches, dessins et gravures du cycle de “La guerre”. Paris, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1971, cat. no. 24 / Dix. Otto Dix zum 80. Geburtstag. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Gouachen, Zeichnungen und Radierfolge “Der Krieg”. Stuttgart, Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, 1971, cat. no. 33 / Otto Dix. Paris, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1972, cat. no. 24 / Otto Dix. Dokumente zu Leben and Werk des Malers Otto Dix, 1891–1969. Mit Werken aus den verschiedenen Schaffensperioden. Im Anhang Goldschmiedearbeiten des Sohnes Jan Dix. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 1977 (= 2. Sonderausstellung des Archivs für Bildende Kunst), cat. no. 10 / Otto Dix Kunstaussstellung. Passau, St. Anna Kapelle, 1983, cat. no. 8 / XXIXe Salon de Montrouge. Art contemporain. Peinture, sculpture, dessin. Montrouge 1984, cat. no. 15 / Otto Dix 1891–1969. Munich, Museum Villa Stuck, 1985, cat. no. 358, ill. p. 215 / Otto Dix 1891–1969. Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1985, cat. no. 27 / Otto Dix. L’Isle-sur-la Sorgue, Association Campredon art et culture, 1987, ill. p. 24 / Otto Dix. Metropolis. Saint-Paul de Vence, Fondation Maeght, 1998, ill. 24 / Otto Dix. Zwischen Paradies and Untergang. Krems, Kunsthalle, 2009, ill. p. 37 / Otto Dix. Der böse Blick / Otto Dix. The Evil Eye. Düsseldorf, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, and Liverpool, Tate, 2017, ill. p. 88

Literature and illustration

Exh. cat.: Dresdner Sezession 1919 · 1923. München, Galleria del Levante, 1977, p. (23) (not exhibited) / Brigid S. Barton: Otto Dix and Die neue Sachlichkeit 1918–1925. Michigan, University Microfilms Inc., 1981, cat. no. III.1920 A.16 (appendix: Catalog Of Works, 1918–1925) / Eva Karcher and Ingo F. Walther: Otto Dix 1891–1969, Leben und Werk. Cologne, Taschen Verlag, 1988, ill. p. 70 / Roland März and Rosemarie Radeke: Von der Dada-Messe zum Bildersturm. DIX + Berlin. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Neue Nationalgalerie, 1991, unpaginated (under “1927. Theodor Däubler”) / Eva Karcher: Dix. Cologne, Taschen Verlag, 1992, 2002 and 2010, ill. p. 58 / Rainer Beck: Otto Dix. Die kosmischen Bilder. Zwischen Sehnsucht und Schwangerem Weib. Dresden, Verlag der Kunst, 2003, p. 140, p. 247 and p. 141, ill. 123 / Birgit Schwarz: Maldadadix. Otto Dix und die Dada-Malerei. 1919 bis 1922. Wien, Böhlau Verlag, 2022, p. 167–169, ill. 49



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