

Monday June 22nd 2009

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## Books & Arts

### German art

# Expressionists at war

Jan 3rd 2008 | PARIS

From *The Economist* print edition

## German images of the first world war continue to surprise

AN EXHIBITION at the Musée Maillol in Paris about the brutal and brutalising effects of the first world war, as recorded by a handful of German Expressionist artists, has been drawing crowds of French visitors, many of whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought on the other side of the same conflict.

The subject of "Allemagne, les Années Noires"\* might be everyday fare in Berlin or Dresden, but in Paris it still has the capacity to shock. This is in part because of the contrast between the stark monochrome vision of this show and the Musée Maillol's colourful permanent collection, which is dedicated to the plump healthy women sculpted by a French contemporary of the German Expressionists, Aristide Maillol.

Fondation Otto Dix



### Diet of worms

depicting the excesses of the Weimar Republic also include a series called "The Robbers", a world of sleek black-marketeers and industrialists, war cripples and plump prostitutes, as well as militarists who have learned nothing from their experiences. Most impressive are Dix's etchings and the sketches on postcards which he sent from the front.

For Grosz and Dix the post-war years offered no respite, only another kind of nastiness—a world of wretchedness, debauchery and profiteers. Dix was the eyewitness, often the protagonist, following a whore into a bedroom, recording gruesome deaths and suicides; Grosz was the


But the exhibition's strongest message is about the extent to which the first world war, known for a long time as the "great war", was a wholly new kind of conflict. Gone were the grand Napoleonic set-pieces of the 19th century. Here instead were long, dismal years of attrition symbolised by unknown men in gas masks, fumbling night patrols, the horror of a shell bursting overhead and a horizon limited to bits of no man's land. In one image by Otto Dix (pictured left), a skull sprouts worms from every orifice; in another a sentry—long dead—sits to attention. The mad and the shell-shocked stare out of every wall.

Ludwig Meidner's "Krieg", a sequence of drawings published in 1914, before he went to war, offer a grotesque early taste of the ghastliness to come. George Grosz never got to the front—he was invalided out early on—but he saw enough of the destruction to produce vivid, spidery battlescapes strewn with corpses. Grosz's exquisite drawings

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cartoonist, depicting piggy capitalists, drunken orgies and the social injustice of the Weimar Republic. There is also an early caricature of Hitler as Siegfried, the Wagnerian hero, heralding the next appalling era in German history. No wonder the


Expressionists found it hard to rise above the gloom. Ninety years after the conflict ended, their bleak images, as the Maillol's visitors have found, still make as deep an impression as they ever did.

"Allemagne, les Années Noires" is at the Musée Maillol, Paris, until February 4th

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