

## **The Aesthetics of Loss: German Women's Art of the First World War**

**Review Number:** 1615

**Publish date:** Thursday, 3 July, 2014

**Author:** Claudia Siebrecht

**ISBN:** 9780199656684

**Date of Publication:** 2013

**Price:** £65.00

**Pages:** 208pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199656684.do>

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

**Reviewer:** Ann Murray

While there has been sustained focus on modern women's relationship to their culture and society, and, with the upcoming centennial commemorations of the First World War a surge of renewed interest in the art generated by the conflict, war-related imagery produced by women artists remains largely overlooked. With regard to early 20th-century Germany, it was not until Marsha Meskimmon's *We Weren't Modern Enough* that work by a number of German women artists was considered together in a single volume. Meskimmon challenged the persistent marginalization of women artists, then and since, in histories of Weimar Germany (1) and in her 'recovery of 'lost' women's history', she questioned the structures by which these artists have come to be excluded from the German modernist canon. (2) More recently, in recalling Linda Nochlin's landmark essay, Ruth Hemus asked, 'why have there been no great women Dadaists?', posing the question of why work by women artists of the period has been so long overlooked and undermined. (3) Whether or not as a result of such scholarship, the major exhibition of Dresdener Neue Sachlichkeit [New Sobriety] art and the catalogue that accompanied it was one that finally included a significant number of women artists alongside the usual names of Otto Dix, George Grosz and Otto Griebel, among others. (4) These are positive developments; notwithstanding, existing scholarship on the art of the First World War would almost lead us to believe that women's art of the period had few voices worth preserving. One would be hard pressed, with the exception of Käthe Kollwitz, to find work by women artists included in any publication on the art of the years 1914–18.

*Aesthetics of Loss* is, for these reasons alone, a welcome and timely addition to scholarship on the visual legacy not only of the First World War but also of the early 20th century. It is a pioneering study of German women's art of the war years, examining the manner and extent to which the war experience shaped women's art and reveals its highly distinct role within the visual culture of the home front. Apart from Kollwitz, many of the artists included in Siebrecht's study will be unfamiliar to those acquainted with the German sources, much less an English language readership. Indeed, some could almost be treated as newly-discovered artists. Yet, as Siebrecht underlines, during (and after) the war years many of these women worked as professional artists, earned at least part of their living from art and regularly exhibited their work or had it reproduced and disseminated in the print media, in the form of illustrations, posters and postcards. Margarethe Goetz, Sella Hasse and Dora Hitz, as much as more familiar names such as Grosz, Conrad

Felixmüller or then well-known printmaker-illustrator Otto Hettner, for example, published their work in politically volatile illustrated periodicals such as *Die Aktion* and *Die Kriegszeit*. Siebrecht recalls that while many of these artists were known only regionally, a significant number were still sufficiently prominent by the 1930s to garner the attention of the National Socialists, be labelled 'degenerate' and suffer the confiscation of their work (Sella Hasse and Martha Schrag, both central to Siebrecht's book, lost 38 and 23 works respectively).<sup>(5)</sup> Furthermore, in imagery that often married a modernist approach to media with traditional subject matter, their work gradually contested the widespread idealization of the war experience in the popular press and significantly, only within women's art was filial loss given prominence as a subject.

Siebrecht's research – it is not an exaggeration to state it – has unearthed works by 38 women (with 41 referenced in total). The author contextualizes the works through consultation of diaries (by artists and non-artists), correspondence and other means (e.g. poetry), as well as careful analysis of the works in relation to the cultural environment. While the total output of war imagery by women artists was but a small percentage of all work produced by women during the war, this study reveals a rich, complex, yet highly cohesive body of work that permits closer understanding of female civilian experience and reflects Meskimmon's argument that 'women articulated their unique situations in diverse voices which can neither be overlooked nor explained with reference only to masculine-normative histories'.<sup>(6)</sup>

The book is divided into five thematic chapters: 'Female artists and the cultural mobilization for war', 'The toll of the long war', 'Art and grief', 'Mourning mothers' and 'Resurrection, rebirth and the limits of sacrificial ideology' respectively, together with an introduction and conclusion. There is also a statistical overview of the artists included in the study (for example if an artist experienced familial war loss, was denounced under Nazi rule, or was a member of the Female Artists' Organisation), short biographies and an extensive bibliography. *Aesthetics of Loss* is not an exhaustive study of German women's art of the First World War (as Siebrecht underlines); for example it does not refer to Hannah Höch's or Emmy Henning's Dadaist output. Rather, Siebrecht restricts her study to art that responded to and projected the most ubiquitous and shared element of the home front experience, that of bereavement and loss. This foregrounding of a specific aspect of German women's war art, based on close analysis of primary visual material thus far largely overlooked by historians, allows Siebrecht to avoid replication of material that has already received a degree of attention (such as that by Höch) and instead complicate discourse on the visual narrative of the First World War. In addition, the contextualization of Käthe Kollwitz's famous sculptures and prints within the body of work produced by other German women artists exposes the narrowness of existing research while revealing that Kollwitz's work was but one component within a much more wide-ranging response to war by women artists.

Drawing heavily from a rich and varied body of visual material, the book reveals that German women's art was redolent of the artists' personal experiences of bereavement and as the war progressed, more accurately reflected the situation of women more generally. This work was also an affective reaction to the persistent militarization of wartime loss, particularly with regard to how it portrayed the soldier's body: the presentation of the soldier as broken and vulnerable contested the myth of endurance attached to the almost mythical imagery of soldierhood that permeated popular print media.

In her introduction, Siebrecht establishes a framework for her succeeding analyses by recalling Kollwitz's personal suffering (reflected in the content of her diary) as she sought to honour her son's sacrifice through the creation of a war memorial but also how such work embodies the suffering of the bereaved. While it is well-established that the death of a son shaped Kollwitz as a woman and an artist, we learn *how* rather than simply *why* a distinctly female voice emerged in narratives of the war experience. Kollwitz's resulting memorial sculpture *Die trauernden Eltern* [The Grieving Parents] (1932), is one of many instances in which German women artists used art as a narrative tool that helped them cope with the traumatic impact of the war while also documenting more closely their changing wartime identities.

Siebrecht's opening chapter considers the patriotic, propagandistic imagery produced by women during the earlier years of the war; wartime art was expected to be patriotic in spirit and evocative of Germany's proud

cultural (and military) heritage and as homefront *kameradinnen*, women artists were compelled to embody the cherished ideal of heroic and loyal wife or mother and support the war effort through 'suitable' art. Propagandist posters such as Anni Meyer's *Opfertag in Bayern* [Day of Sacrifice in Bavaria] (1916) and Katharina Heise's *Tod dem russischen Bären* [Death to the Russian Bear] (1916), in common with work produced by male counterparts, helped shape civilian perceptions of soldierhood with idealizing imagery which was calculated to promote German military might, or ultimately, to justify the continuation of war.

With regard to the subject of mourning, German women were to embody the traditional ideal of the bereaved woman as a stoic, dignified and proud mourner despite suffering insoluble loss and women artists were expected to uphold and project these values as effectively as possible. Yet, we learn from Siebrecht that even from the end of 1914, as it became evident that the war was far from over and that Germany had already suffered huge casualties, the transformative effect of war on female identity was already evident in women's art. Though still quite sanitised, this art sought to acknowledge the role of women in the war and the nature of their own suffering while honouring the soldiers' sacrifices. Martha Schrag's lithograph *Die Pflegerin* [The Nurse] (1915) for example shows a wounded soldier being cared for by a nurse who tenderly supports his head and holds his hand. Such imagery was nonetheless heroizing and idealized (the fate of the soldier on the battlefield was rarely as clean as Schrag's portrayal) but as an alternative to the bombast of propagandist imagery, it acted as a means to comfort and help overcome the fear of death. Moreover, it identified women as witnesses to tragedy and suffering while asserting their important contribution to the war effort.

Shared anxiety was also expressed by recourse to traditional (Christian) religious motifs of female suffering and loss such as the *mater dolorosa* and the *pietà*. Sella Hasse's linocut *Kriegsweihnacht 1914* [War Christmas 1914], is a nativity scene transformed into a vision of sorrow. A mournful Mary with the baby Jesus at its centre, a medieval, armour-clad knight on her left with head bowed and sorrowful and naked male corpses ascending to Heaven in the background are among the motifs in this powerful image. A similar sentiment is expressed in Dora Brandenburg-Polster's *Frauenopfer* [Women's Sacrifice] (lithograph, 1915) and Hasse's *Mater Dolorosa auf den Schlachtfeldern* [Mater Dolorosa on the Battlefields] (linocut, 1916) as well as Hannah Höch's *Pieta* (ink, 1918), created in the closing months of the war. Höch's simple yet emotive drawing will be unexpected for those accustomed to her complex photomontages or reading about her more widely documented activity within Berlin Dada, but to learn of Höch's experiences as a nurse in military hospitals and of her poetry (of which *War* (1916) is reproduced here alongside the drawing), enlivens our understanding of her postwar work. Religious imagery would endure in women's art into the postwar period though the motifs would change; for example, the Passion of Christ and the Resurrection were employed to symbolize the soldier's sacrifice and an end to worldly suffering. Secular imagery had a very different charge, however: Käte Lassen's *Kriegsinvaliden, Unter den Linden, Berlin* [War Invalid, Unter den Linden, Berlin] (drawing, 1919) shows an impoverished war veteran with one leg supported by his pregnant wife. Unter den Linden, one of Berlin's main thoroughfares, was a street that in 1914 had been filled with soldiers, singing as they marched to war.

The course of women's wartime art, as demonstrated by Siebrecht's examples, reveals a gradual assertion of agency, reflective of the more prominent societal role of women as a result of the war. One of the most satisfying discoveries in Siebrecht's book is that by 1918, Hasse had published a pamphlet titled *Zur sozialen Verwertung der weiblichen Fortpflanzungsorgane* [The Social Importance of Women's Reproductive Organs] in which she argued for the importance of creating a new generation to restore a universal respect for life. In using one of her own linocuts on the front cover, which depicts a woman giving birth, Hasse emphasized the central role of motherhood, openly expressed her views on gynaecological care including abortion and new medical developments.

My criticism of the book is mainly restricted to a short section titled 'Male artists and mourning mothers' (pp. 126–9), in which Siebrecht selects two works by soldier-artists for comparison with work produced by women. The argument that Otto Dix's *Mater Dolorosa* (ink and chalk, 1918) has an accusatory tone, and that Dix appears to be subjecting Mary to violence is not convincing; to say that the wounded body of Mary, with her heart cut out of her chest is not symbolic of her emotional pain does not seem to hold much water.

While Siebrecht acknowledges that soldiers were likely to be less sympathetic to civilian suffering because of their experience as combatants, the use of the image seems out of context in a book that focuses on the wholly different experience of the homefront. As a participant in warfare (and one who carried the psychological burden of such experience), it would not be unusual that Dix or other soldier-artists would express anger or frustration in face of such a destructive, protracted war, as is more evident in the other work described, Hans Richter's *An die Mütter Europa* (drawing, 1915/16). It would be more accurate to state that they *could not*, rather than *did not*, express sympathy for bereaved women. Dix would in any case create *Schwangeschaft* [Pregnancy] (1922) which shows a destitute pregnant woman standing over the body of her dead soldier husband. Mention of Kollwitz's series of woodcuts, *Krieg* [War] (1923), in the final chapter also brings to mind the fact that Kollwitz exhibited her series alongside Dix's *Der Krieg* [The War] (1924) in Ernst Friedrich's anti-war museum in Berlin in 1924. Dix's series included a heartrending image of a starving mother with her dead child.

In addition, a number of the works discussed are not illustrated and no amount of description can really make up for this; it is disappointing not to be able to see these works, considering how difficult it is to view them otherwise.

However, I emphasize that these are small criticisms in a work that constitutes not only the first substantial attempt to bring these artists to light but also the first to deal with the unique language of German women's art of the First World War in a sustained manner. *Aesthetics of Loss* reveals how German women artists sought to bridge the chasm between their prescribed societal role as stoic mourner with private anguish, which was fundamentally changed by the confrontation with unprecedented death and loss. German women's art not only foregrounded the shared experience of loss and made it a central subject but also articulated the private pain and distress of mourning women. Ultimately, *Aesthetics of Loss* identifies and underscores the vital importance of women's art to our greater understanding of the First World War, not least with regard to the manner and extent to which it established and asserted female agency, and how it developed a singular art that documented other experiences of war.

## Notes

1. Martha Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough. Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid., p. 7.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women* (London, 2009), p. 1. Linda Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (1971) in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power* (New York, 1988), pp. 145–78.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Neue Sachlichkeit in Dresden*, ed. Birgit Dalbajewa (Dresden, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Moderne Am Pranger: Die Ns Aktion 'Entartete Kunst' Vor 75 Jahren. Werke aus der Sammlung Gerhard Schneider* (Bönen, Westphalia, 2012), pp. 249–68.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Meskimmon, *We Weren't Modern Enough*, p. 4.[Back to \(6\)](#)

---

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1615>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/71523>