Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany

Michelle L. Vangen
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds
Part of the Modern Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation
Vangen, Michelle L., "Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany" (2017). CUNY Academic Works.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1858

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
LEFT AND RIGHT: POLITICS AND IMAGES OF MOTHERHOOD IN WEIMAR GERMANY

by

MICHELLE VANGEN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
Left and Right: Politics and Images of Motherhood in Weimar Germany

by

Michelle Vangen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

Rose-Carol Washton Long

Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Rachel Kousser

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Rosemarie Haag Bletter

John Maciuika

Diane Radycki

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

LEFT AND RIGHT: POLITICS AND IMAGES OF MOTHERHOOD IN WEIMAR GERMANY

by

MICHELLE VANGEN

Art historians and cultural critics have long debated the aesthetic and political implications of the stylistic shift in Germany from pre-war experimentations with abstraction and expressive distortion to more clear-cut figuration in their paintings during the years following World War I. They have questioned whether this shift represents a regressive return to tradition or a new artistic direction and if it should be associated with a reactionary or progressive political stance. This dissertation broadens our understanding of German interwar realism, commonly referred to as Neue Sachlichkeit, by examining representations of mothers, a popular theme in the realist painting of the Weimar period (1919-1933). Through a series of case studies I explore how artists, as well as art critics and collectors, working from a range of political positions, used the image of the mother, employing various strategies of realism, to engage with the social and political conflicts of the tumultuous Weimar years.

Focusing first on leftist figures I examine how socially-engaged artists, including Käthe Kollwitz and Rudolf Schlichter, produced simplistically realistic images of proletarian mothers as propaganda for the German Communist Party’s campaign to legalize abortion. I then study the veristic realism of representations of working-class mothers by Otto Dix, one of the most (in)famous painters of the Weimar period, in an attempt to resolve the controversy about whether his minute attention to detail and exaggerated color typical of the German Old Masters relates to a need to expose the social evils of the Weimar years. The next chapter focuses on Georg
Schrimpf’s maternal images and how his employment of an idealizing and classicizing naturalism grounded in the Italianate pastoral tradition gives form to his utopian, anarcho-socialist beliefs. In the final chapter I consider how members of the Weimar art world affiliated with the political right also championed artistic realism by examining the posthumous reception of Paula-Modersohn Becker. As I discuss, numerous right-wing art historians, critics and collectors appropriated her motherhood works to support various nationalist and conservative agendas. By demonstrating the political and stylistic complexity of German interwar painting, my dissertation challenges previous attempts to interpret *Neue Sachlichkeit* simplistically as either right/reactionary or left/liberal while also opening up new understandings of some of the movement’s most important members.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the help of numerous institutions and individuals. First and foremost, I want to express my gratitude to my exceptional advisor Professor Rose-Carol Washton Long for her years of guidance, support and encouragement. I wish to thank Professor Diane Radycki of Moravian College as well for fostering my interest in Paula Modersohn-Becker and providing me with the opportunity to present my research in her panel on the artist at the 2009 College Art Association Conference. A revised version of my conference paper was published in the Fall/Winter 2009 issue of Woman’s Art Journal.¹ I would also like to thank my dissertation committee members Professor Rosemarie Haag Bletter and Professor John Maciuika.

My research was greatly facilitated by several grants and fellowships. The Zantop Travel Award from the Coalition of Women in German, the Walter Read Hovey Memorial Fund Fellowship from the Pittsburgh Foundation and a research grant from the Graduate Center’s Doctoral Student Research Program all enabled me to conduct primary research in Germany. I thank these organizations for their support. I also deeply appreciate the many institutions and professionals who aided my research abroad. In Bremen, Dr. Frank Laukötter, Director of the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, placed his extensive collection of books on Modersohn-Becker at my disposal. Uwe Bölts and Christel Rademacker from the Archiv Böttcherstrasse provided invaluable assistance with my research on Ludwig Roselius. Moreover, their kindness and generosity helped me to feel at home both in the archive as well as in Bremen in general. In Berlin, Prof. Dr. Monika Flacke, Collections Manager at the Deutsches Historisches Museum,

alerted me to the recently completed Great German Art Exhibition Research Platform. I thank you all.

I would also like to thank the following libraries and archives: the Archiv der Universität der Künste, Berlin; the Hochschule der Künste Archiv, Berlin; the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Archiv für Bildende Kunst, Otto Dix Nachlass, Nuremberg; and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Additionally, I am grateful to my friends Kasia Masztalska, Karolina Pokorska and Sascha Steindor for encouraging me to enjoy my time in Germany outside of the libraries, archives and museums!

Heartfelt thanks are due as well to my fellow doctoral candidates Emily Ackerman and Karen Barber. Our "dissertation support group" inserted some much needed humor into this challenging process! To my best friend and amazing artist Mary (Richards) Ayling—you’ve been my most enthusiastic cheerleader. To my loving parents—I am deeply grateful for your constant support and unwavering belief in my ability to succeed. And most of all to my fiancé Matt. You stood by me through all of the ups, downs and unexpected turns of my PhD journey. I couldn't have done this without you.
# Table of Contents

Abstract iv  
Acknowledgments vi  
List of Illustrations ix  
Abbreviations Used in Main Text xiv  
Introduction 1  

Chapter One:  
The Image of the Mother as Ideological Weapon: Artists and the Communist Campaign to Legalize Abortion 26  

Chapter Two:  
The Image of the Mother as Tool of Social Critique: Otto Dix and the Verist Attack on Weimar Society 78  

Chapter Three:  
The Image of the Mother as Utopian Symbol: Anarchism and the Ideal in Georg Schrimpf’s Maternal Images 131  

Chapter Four:  
The Image of the Mother as Conservative Icon: The Weimar Reception of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s Motherhood Works 178  

Conclusion 228  
Illustrations 233  
Bibliography 280
List of Illustrations

Chapter One

Figure 1-1 Käthe Kollwitz, *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs*, 1923, lithograph.
Figure 1-2 Alice Lex-Nerlinger, *Paragraph 218*, 1931, spray paint on canvas.
Figure 1-3 Rudolf Schlichter, *Women's Rights in Bourgeois Democracy*, 1922, lithograph.
Figure 1-4 Heinrich Zille, *Into the Water*, 1904, pen and colored chalk on paper.
Figure 1-5 Heinrich Zille, *Into the Water*, 1919, lithograph.
Figure 1-6 Käthe Kollwitz, *Pub* (Portraits of Misery series #2), 1909, lithograph.
Figure 1-7 Käthe Kollwitz, *At the Doctor* (Portraits of Misery series #3), 1909, lithograph.
Figure 1-8 Käthe Kollwitz, *Christmas* (Portraits of Misery series #6), 1909, lithograph.
Figure 1-9 Program for *Paragraph 218: Tortured People*, 1929.
Figure 1-10 A. Paul Weber, Title Page for *Mord an der Zukunft*, 1929.
Figure 1-11 A. Paul Weber, Illustration for *Mord an der Zukunft*, 1929.
Figure 1-12 George Grosz, *Toads of Property*, 1920, pen and ink on paper.
Figure 1-13 John Heartfield, *Forced to Deliver Human Material*, 1930, photomontage.
Figure 1-14 Eva Schulze-Knabe, *Paragraph 218*, 1931, linocut.
Figure 1-15 Alice Lex-Nerlinger, *Paragraph 218* 1931, photomontage.

Chapter Two

Figure 2-1 Otto Dix, *Working-Class Boy*, 1920, oil on canvas.
Figure 2-2 Otto Dix, *The Salon I*, 1921, oil on canvas.
Figure 2-3 Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1919, oil on canvas.
Figure 2-4 Otto Dix, *Woman and Child*, 1921, oil on canvas.
Figure 2-5 Otto Dix, *Awakening*, 1918, gouache on paper.

Figure 2-6 Otto Dix, *Lover’s Grave*, 1917, charcoal on paper.

Figure 2-7 *Woman of Willendorf*, c. 24,000 BCE, limestone.

Figure 2-8 Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1512, oil on canvas.

Figure 2-9 Conrad Felixmüller, *Birth*, 1917, woodcut.

Figure 2-10 Otto Dix, *Birth*, 1919, woodcut.

Figure 2-11 Conrad Felixmüller, *Pregnant Woman in the Autumn Forest*, 1917, woodcut.

Figure 2-12 Otto Dix, *Moon Woman*, 1919, oil on canvas.

Figure 2-13 Otto Dix, *War Cripples (45% Fit for Service)*, 1920, oil on canvas.

Figure 2-14 2-14 Otto Dix, *Pregnancy* (Death and Resurrection series #4), 1922, etching.

Figure 2-15 Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1920, pencil on paper.

Figure 2-16 Matthias Grünewald, *Crucifixion* from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1515, oil on wood.

Figure 2-17 Otto Dix, *Mother and Child*, 1923, oil on wood.

Figure 2-18 Otto Dix, *Vanitas (Youth and Old Age)*, 1932, tempera on panel.

Figure 2-19 Hans Baldung Grien, *Death and the Maiden*, 1518-1520, oil on panel.

Figure 2-20 Otto Dix, *Nursing Mother*, 1932, oil on linen covered wood panel.

Figure 2-21 Otto Dix, *Mother with Child*, 1932, mixed technique on wood.

Figure 2-22 Otto Dix, *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden*, 1926, mixed technique on wood.

Figure 2-23 Otto Dix, *The Artist’s Family*, 1927, oil on wood.

Figure 2-24 Karl Diebitsch, *Mutter*, 1939, oil on canvas.

Figure 2-25 A. Elnain, *Martha Dix*, 1926, photo.

Figure 2-26 August Sander, *Painter Couple (Martha and Otto Dix)*, 1927, photo.
Figure 2-27 Otto Dix, *Woman in Gold (Mutzli)*, 1923, watercolor, ormolu and pencil on paper.

Figure 2-28 Otto Dix, *Portrait of My Wife*, 1924, watercolor and tempera.

Figure 2-29 Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1930, mixed technique on wood.

Figure 2-30 Arno Breker, *Readiness*, 1937, bronze.

Figure 2-31 Adolf Wissel, *Farm Family from Kahlenberg*, 1939, oil on canvas.

Figure 2-32 Friedrich von Amerling, *The Arthäber Family*, 1835, oil on canvas.

**Chapter Three**

Figure 3-1 Georg Schrimpf, *Sleeping Girls*, 1926, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-2 Georg Schrimpf, *Cowherd*, 1923, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-3 Georg Schrimpf, *Midday Rest*, 1922, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-4 Georg Schrimpf, *Comrades*, 1915, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-5 Georg Schrimpf, *Two Women under Trees*, 1915, woodcut.

Figure 3-6 Georg Schrimpf, *Nude IX*, 1915, woodcut.

Figure 3-7 Georg Schrimpf, *Mother and Child*, 1915, woodcut.

Figure 3-8 Georg Schrimpf, *Woman with Child*, 1916, woodcut.

Figure 3-9 Georg Schrimpf, *Maria’s Dream (The Miracle)*, 1917, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-10 Georg Schrimpf, *Visit to the Child*, 1918, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-11 Giotto di Bondone, *Virgin and Child Enthroned*, 1305-1310, tempera on wood.

Figure 3-12 Philipp Otto Runge, *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, 1800, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-13 Joseph Anton Koch, *Landscape by Olevano with Riding Monk*, 1830, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-14 Georg Schrimpf, *Woman and Children with Bird*, 1922, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-15 Georg Schrimpf, *Wild Horses*, 1921, oil on canvas.

Figure 3-16 Georg Schrimpf, *Girl with Sheep*, 1923, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-17  Georg Schrimpf, *Swineherd*, 1923, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-18  Georg Schrimpf, *Woman and Child with Dove*, 1921, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-19  Camille Pissarro, *Peasant Women Planting Pea Sticks*, 1891, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-20  Photograph of Lochhausen, 1939.
Figure 3-21  Photograph of Lochhausen, 1930s.
Figure 3-22  Georg Schrimpf, *Moor Landscape*, 1929, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-23  Georg Schrimpf, *Landscape*, 1931, oil on canvas.
Figure 3-24  Rudolf Schäfler, *Junge Mutter*, 1930, woodcut.
Figure 3-25  Richard Heymann, *Sunny Life*, 1939, oil on canvas.

**Chapter Four**

Figure 4-1  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Old Poorhouse Woman in a Garden, with Garden Ornament and Poppies*, 1907, oil on canvas.
Figure 4-2  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait Nude with Amber Necklace, Half-Length II*, 1906, oil on canvas.
Figure 4-3  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother and Child Nude II*, 1906, oil on canvas.
Figure 4-4  Fritz Mackensen, *Mother and Infant (Worpsweder Madonna)*, 1892, oil on canvas.
Figure 4-5  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Peasant Mother and Child*, 1903, oil on canvas.
Figure 4-6  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude*, 1906, mixed technique on canvas.
Figure 4-7  Photograph of Modersohn-Becker and Daughter Tilly, 1907.
Figure 4-8  Photograph of the Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, view towards the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus and the Roselius Haus, 1930.
Figure 4-9  Bernhard Hoetger, *Summer*, 1913.
Figure 4-10  Photograph of Hoetger’s second home in Worpswede, c. 1925.
Figure 4-11  Photograph of the terrace, Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1930.

Figure 4-12  Photograph of the vestibule of the Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus with Hoetger sculpture, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1930.

Figure 4-13  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, 1906, oil on composite board.

Figure 4-14  Photograph of a niche with overhead lighting, Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1927.

Figure 4-15  Bernhard Hoetger, *Tree of Life*, 1929-31, wood.

**Conclusion**

Figure Conclusion-1  Helen Redman, *Blue Body Pregnant Artist*, 1964, oil pastel on paper.

Figure Conclusion-2  Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art: Rinsing a B.M. Diaper*, 1969, gelatin silver print.

Figure Conclusion-3  Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, “Introduction,” 1973, Perspex units, white card, wool vests, pencil and ink.
Abbreviations Used in Main Text

AIZ          Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (Worker’s Illustrated Newspaper)
ASSO        Assoziation der Revolutionären Bildenden Künstler Deutschlands (Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists in Germany)
BDF          Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women’s Associations)
BfM          Bund für Mutterschutz (League for the Protection of Mothers)
DNVP        Deutsch-Nationale Volkspartei (German National People’s Party)
IAH          Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (International Worker’s Aid)
KPD          Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party)
SPD          Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Social Democratic Party)
USPD        Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Independent Social-Democratic Party)

Translations in Main Text

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
Introduction

1. Focus of the Dissertation

In 1922 Paul Westheim, editor of the influential German art journal \textit{Das Kunstblatt}, conducted a survey of contemporary artists, writers, museum directors and art critics addressing the development of a new trend in the visual arts, what he referred to as “ein neuer Naturalismus” (Neo-naturalism). In his survey, Westheim questioned whether this new naturalism represented an important artistic direction that would eventually supersede Expressionism. He received over thirty responses presenting a wide range of opinions.\footnote{Westheim published the results of the survey in the September issue of \textit{Das Kunstblatt}. See Paul Westheim, “Ein neuer Naturalismus,” \textit{Das Kunstblatt} 6 (Sept., 1922): 369-414. For a recent discussion of the survey see Sabine Eckmann, “A Lack of Empathy: On the Realisms of New Objectivity,” in \textit{New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933}, eds. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), 28-29 and Maria Makela, “Politicizing Painting: The Case of New Objectivity,” in \textit{Legacies of Modernism: Art and Politics in Northern Europe, 1890-1950}, eds. McBride, Patrizia C., Richard W. McCormick and Monika Zagar (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2007), 133-134.} Many respondents celebrated the move toward more naturalistic styles and clear-cut figuration in the art of the period. For instance, both Fritz Weichert, director of the Mannheim Kunsthalle, and the painter Curt Herrmann praised Neo-naturalism for replacing the worn-out and endlessly repeated aesthetic idioms of Expressionism and Cubism.\footnote{Westheim, 393-394 and 371-372.} Others, in contrast, such as the dramatist Curt Kaiser, instead questioned the merit and validity of the new art.\footnote{Ibid., 406.} Some of the respondents, in addition to debating the artistic significance of the new naturalism, also addressed its political implications. The Communist artist George Grosz, for example, stressed the difference between a reactionary return to the classical tradition compared to a politically-engaged \textit{Gegenständlichkeit} or “focus on the concrete world.”\footnote{Ibid., 382-383.} Meanwhile, the leftist critic Adolf Behne...
linked the current emphasis on naturalistic figuration to the commodification of contemporary culture.⁵

Overall, Westheim’s survey and the responses he received raised important questions about the aesthetic and political implications of a return to naturalistic figuration in the aftermath of Expressionism, Cubism and abstraction. Does this stylistic shift in German painting during the 1920s and 30s represent a regressive return to tradition or a new artistic direction? Should it be associated with a reactionary or progressive political stance? This dissertation will address these questions by examining representations of mothers. While motherhood was a popular theme in the nonexpressionist representational art created in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933),⁶ its significance has been largely ignored by art historians. By focusing on motherhood images I will provide a nuanced examination of the politics and aesthetics of “neo-naturalist” figuration in interwar Germany. I will examine the different ways that artists, as well as art critics and collectors, used the image of the mother, employing various strategies of naturalism, to engage with the social and political conflicts of the tumultuous Weimar period. In doing so, I will contribute to current discussions of the artistic and political complexity of German interwar painting. From this point forward, I will use the term “realism” rather than “naturalism” in this dissertation when referring to the emphasis on depicting physical objects and concrete form in the art of this period. While artists and other members of the German art world during the twenties used a variety of different terms including Naturalismus, Gegenständlichkeit and Realismus,⁷ scholars today generally prefer “realism.”⁸

---

⁵ Ibid., 383-384.
⁶ In contrast to its popularity in the representational art of the Weimar period, motherhood was not a prevalent theme in pre-WWI Expressionist art.
⁷ In a 1921 article published in Das Kunstblatt, George Grosz stated that he was intending to give “ein absolut realistisches Weltbild” (an absolutely realistic picture of the world) in his art. George Grosz, “Zu meinen neuen Bildern,” Das Kunstblatt 5 (1921), 14; translated in German Expressionism. Documents from the End of the
Over 90 years after Westheim conducted his survey scholars continue to debate the artistic and political meaning(s) of a return to realism in the interwar period. Along with a book by Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature*, there have been several recent exhibitions in both Germany and the United States dedicated to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the label typically applied to Weimar realist painting (rather than Westheim’s proposed Neo-naturalism). Much of this recent scholarship has focused on the aesthetic diversity of *Neue Sachlichkeit* art, emphasizing the multiple approaches to realism employed by artists affiliated with the movement. As Sabine Eckmann has discussed, Weimar artists did not subscribe to a singular, monolithic definition of “realism.” Rather, the artworks of this period are characterized by a variety of different representational modes that are figurative as opposed to abstract. Some *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings and prints, for instance, appear timeless and classicizing while others render the contemporary world in minute detail. Some are cold, sober and emotionally detached, while others are intense, heated and socially critical.

In addition to discussing the stylistic diversity of *Neue Sachlichkeit* art, art historians have also recently emphasized its political complexity as well. According to James Van Dyke, the artists affiliated with *Neue Sachlichkeit* occupied a variety of ideological and political positions spanning from the extreme left to the far right. As such, he argues that any effort to

---

speak of the politics of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in unequivocal, totalizing terms is “bound to be partial, distorted, or abstract.”¹¹ Scholars, however, have long attempted to do just that. As I will discuss in the next section, art historians and cultural critics since the 1920s have tended to downplay the political diversity of *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists and to define the style homogenously as either right/reactionary or left/liberal.

2. Conflicts over the Interpretation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*

Of all the artists, critics and museum directors who responded to Westheim’s 1922 questionnaire the most important for the subsequent popularization and interpretation of *Neue Sachlichkeit* was Gustav Hartlaub. Hartlaub agreed with Westheim that a “new naturalism” was apparent in the visual arts, later coining the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* to describe the trend. Shortly after participating in Westheim’s survey Hartlaub began organizing an exhibition of the new realist painting at the Mannheim Kunsthalle, where he had recently succeeded Fritz Weichert as director. The show opened on June 14th, 1925 with the title *Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus* (*Neue Sachlichkeit*: German Painting since Expressionism). Over the course of the next year it traveled to cities throughout central Germany,¹² introducing the new art to a wide audience and publicizing *Neue Sachlichkeit* as its official label.¹³

When beginning the initial preparations for the *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition in the summer of 1923, Hartlaub circulated a letter to several influential art critics, curators and dealers

---


¹² The exhibition opened in Mannheim on June 14th, 1925. It subsequently traveled to Dresden (October 18-November 22), Chemnitz (December 12, 1925-January 17, 1926), Erfurt (January 31-February 28, 1926), Dessau (starting March 7, 1926), Halle (starting April 18, 1926) and Jena (May 16-June 13, 1926). In 1927 a smaller exhibition titled *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* was held at the Galerie Neumann-Nierendorf in Berlin.

describing his project. As he stated, “I am interested in bringing together representative works by those artists who in the last ten years have been neither impressionistically relaxed nor expressionistically abstract, neither sensuously superficial nor constructivistically introverted. I want to show those artists who have remained—or who have once more become—avowedly faithful to positive, tangible, reality.”

As his letter makes clear, Hartlaub broadly conceived of *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a realistic, object-oriented artistic style that concentrated on the concrete world (“positive, tangible, reality”). Unlike other art historians and critics, such as Franz Roh, who viewed the new realistic art as a reaction against Expressionism, with its emotive distortion of forms and introspective focus, Hartlaub instead considered *Neue Sachlichkeit* to be an outgrowth of the earlier movement. He discerned some common ground between the two artistic tendencies, most notably a “constructive trend” as well as an “uninhibited intensity” of expression. Hartlaub further distinguished between two main groups within the broad *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement: the left-wing “verists” who tried to depict the true face of the times and the right-wing “classicists” who sought calm after the chaos of World War I. He described the two groups in detail in his introductory essay to the Mannheim exhibition catalog: “The first [group]—one would almost want to speak of a “left-wing”—is tearing actual things out from the world of real events, evoking experience in its actual tempo, its specific heat; the other is searching for the timelessly valid object in order to realize, in art, the eternally valid laws of

---

14 Gustav Hartlaub, circular letter (May 18, 1923); translated in Fritz Schmalenbach, “The Term *Neue Sachlichkeit*,” *Art Bulletin* 22, no. 3 (September 1940), 161.


existence. One has been called “verist”; the other might almost be called “classicist.” The leading proponents of Verism included in the *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition were Otto Dix and George Grosz, while the Classicists were most notably represented by Georg Schrimpf, Carlo Mense and Alexander Kanoldt.18

Hartlaub’s division of *Neue Sachlichkeit* into a left and right wing deeply impacted the reception and interpretation of the movement. As the art historian Maria Makela has discussed at length, subsequent art critics and cultural historians have similarly viewed the style through a political lens.19 Artists are often pigeonholed into either the left or right branch depending on the subjects they represented or their political affiliations. Moreover, many scholars have attempted to interpret *Neue Sachlichkeit* as a whole politically. Some have viewed the movement as right/reactionary, while others have defined it as left/liberal. To date, there is no consensus of opinion.

Part of the difficulty of interpreting the politics of *Neue Sachlichkeit* is the multiple meanings and associations that have been attributed to the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* itself. As numerous art historians have discussed, Hartlaub’s label is highly problematic both in terms of its translation as well as its application and meaning. Although *Neue Sachlichkeit* is typically translated as “New Objectivity,” the word *Sachlichkeit* actually has no single, acceptable English equivalent.20 It can be used both to refer to a sense of objectivity, matter-of-factness and practicality (*sachlich* meaning “factual,” “impartial,” “practical” and “precise”) as well as a

---

17 Ibid.
18 See Appendix A in Dennis Crockett’s *German Post-Expressionism. The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) for a list of the artists included in Hartlaub’s *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition and how many works they had on display.
19 Makela, 133-134.
20 Since the word *Sachlichkeit* has no direct, single English translation I will use the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* rather than New Objectivity in this dissertation.
focus on recognizable objects (the root *Sache* meaning “thing,” “fact,” or “object”). The dual implications of the term *Sachlichkeit* have deeply impacted the historical understanding and assessment of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement.

When Hartlaub first coined the label *Neue Sachlichkeit* in 1923 he intended it to describe a specific trend in painting, a “new tangibility” or focus on recognizable, non-abstract figurative subject matter that had developed during the early years of the Weimar Republic. Shortly after the opening of his exhibition in 1925, however, the term passed into popular usage and began to acquire meanings that Hartlaub had never intended. During the late twenties the label *Neue Sachlichkeit* began to be applied to other modernist cultural products besides painting, including architecture and photography. Contemporary discussions of the radically streamlined, glass and steel structures of the *Neues Bauen* (New Building) increasingly used the word *Sachlichkeit*, in addition to *Zweck* and *Funktion* (purpose and function), to describe the purposeful functionalism of the new architecture. By the end of the decade the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* was also used to describe the emphasis on concreteness, purposefulness and the journalistic reporting of facts typical of *Neues Sehen* (New Vision) photography.

During the mid-twenties the phrase *Neue Sachlichkeit* also came to be identified with a new public attitude that developed in the Weimar Republic during the so-called “stabilization” period (1924-1929), when America was taken as a model for the social, economic and cultural life of Germany. In contrast, the early years of the Weimar Republic were marked by great

---


23 See Bletter, 47-48.
political, social and economic turmoil. Between late 1918 and 1923 Germany experienced military defeat, left-wing revolution and frequent political assassinations along with rampant hyperinflation and economic collapse. By 1924, however, the young Republic had entered a period of relative economic and political stabilization. The enactment of the Dawes Plan in August of that year brought temporary stability to the post-WWI German economy by providing cash, loans and new industrial techniques to stimulate efficiency and production. This German-American business alliance led to the frenzied growth of capitalism, the establishment of a consumer culture and the “Americanization” of Germany during the mid-to-late twenties. As Detlev Peukert has discussed, many Germans at this time viewed America as the ultimate symbol of progress and modernity. As a result, they eagerly embraced everything they believed to be American. They danced to jazz music, bought copies of the German translation of Henry Ford’s autobiography by the thousands24 and sought to emulate the purposeful, matter-of-fact, all-business attitude they perceived as distinctly American.25

The opening of Hartlaub’s *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition in 1925 coincided with this major transformation in Germany’s economy and self-image, thus appearing to link the movement to the values of the stabilization period. As the art critic George Waldemar wrote in 1927, “The *Neue Sachlichkeit* is Americanism, the cult of the objective, the hard fact…”26 This association was reinforced by the fact that many of the paintings displayed in the show gave visual form to the new commodity culture. Given their fascination with the quotidian aspects of everyday life, many of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists painted images of the radios, electrical appliances and other consumer goods now readily available in Germany. Jazz clubs and dance

---

24 The German translation of Ford’s autobiography appeared in 1923 and went on to sell over 200,000 copies.
halls were also a favorite theme. These subjects were often rendered with a cool, detached, machine-like precision and close attention to surface detail.

Due to this perceived link between *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the consolidation of the capitalist order during the stabilization period, many leftist art historians and cultural critics since the late twenties onwards have criticized *Neue Sachlichkeit* as superficial and commercial, a servile form of capitalist art that catered to the tastes of the moneyed classes. In his *Author as Producer* (1934), for instance, Walter Benjamin denounced the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photographer Albert Renger-Patsch for producing photographs that aestheticized the world and obscured the magnitude of problems within the Weimar Republic. By focusing mainly on surface appearances in his images, Benjamin argued, Renger-Patsch divested objects of their real meaning and thus politically neutralized them.27 The Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch similarly accused *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters of leading the public away from a critical awareness of reality. Bloch argued that the idyllic paintings of Georg Schrimpf and Alexander Kanoldt were nothing more than escapist art that attempted to establish a world of noble simplicity and classicist calm for the Weimar capitalists.28 Some fifty years later the cultural historian Jost Hermand concurred with Bloch’s assessment of *Neue Sachlichkeit* as superficial art aimed at the bourgeoisie. In a well-known essay from 1977 (recapitulated in 1995), Hermand described *Neue Sachlichkeit* as nothing more than the “ideological and aesthetic means of expression of a relatively small group from the bourgeois liberal or middling bourgeois sectors between 1923-1929 who, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, let themselves be captivated by the deceptive illusion of a

new stabilization of social conditions, basing itself on technology and a higher standard of living.”

In addition to condemning *Neue Sachlichkeit* as commercial and superficial, numerous leftist scholars since the thirties have also criticized the painters affiliated with the movement for their seemingly “regressive” interest in the art of the Old Masters. Many of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists were fascinated with Late Gothic and Renaissance art. This fascination was stimulated in part by the publication of an important painting manual in 1921, Max Doerner’s *Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde* (The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting). Doerner intended his handbook to guide painters away from the formal distortions and quick, painterly techniques typical of Expressionism toward a return to craft and the notion of the well-made object. As he wrote in the preface, “Craftsmanship must again be made the solid foundation of art.” Towards this end Doerner provided in-depth discussions of all the stages of painting in various media along with detailed instruction on the techniques of the Old Masters, including the van Eycks and old German Masters, Titian and the Venetians as well as Rubens and Rembrandt.

Doerner’s guide proved to be incredibly popular during the Weimar period. Many *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters studied it carefully and sought to emulate the meticulous painting processes of the Old Masters, especially the mixed oil-on-tempera technique. The use of such techniques

---

31 See Crockett, 19-20 for more information on Doerner’s guide.
32 By 1933 the guide had already gone through four editions.
resulted in the slick, smooth surfaces and carefully delineated objects typically identified by art historians as the main characteristics of Neue Sachlichkeit painting.

The interest of the Neue Sachlichkeit painters in the art of the past was not limited to painting techniques only. Many of the artists, including such stylistically divergent figures as Georg Schrimpf and Otto Dix, also drew inspiration from the subject matter, style and format of Old Master painting. Schrimpf, for instance, often employed the compositional devices of Italian Gothic and Renaissance art in his works. Meanwhile Dix’s images frequently abound with quotations of specific gestures, expressions and figures from the paintings of Hans Baldung Grien, Matthias Grünewald and other German Old Masters.

Many left-leaning art historians and critics have interpreted this interest in artistic tradition as not only culturally regressive, but also reflective of an insidious political conservatism. In his well-known article “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting (1981),” for instance, the Marxist critic Benjamin Buchloh criticized the return to traditional modes of representation in European art of the 1920s as artistically and politically reactionary.33 He described the figurative painting of the period as the product of an “ideological backlash” that was characterized by the “idealization of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters…and the demand for respect for the cultural tradition.”34 As the title of his essay makes clear, Buchloh viewed traditional, figural art as inextricably linked to conservative, authoritarian politics. As such, he considered the art of the Neue Sachlichkeit to be little more than a forerunner to the fascist realism of the National Socialists. In his own words, “[T]he attitudes of the Neue Sachlichkeit and Pittura Metafisica

34 Ibid., 43.
cleared the way for a final takeover by such outright authoritarian styles of representation as Fascist painting in Germany and Italy and socialist realism in Stalinist Russia.\textsuperscript{35}

Buchloh’s essay raises the question of whether \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} should be considered a part of a wider, conservative “return to order” that took place in European art during the interwar period. At this time many modernist artists working in not only Germany, but also France and Italy embraced artistic tradition and clear-cut, figural representation after years of experimenting with abstraction and distortion. Many art historians have viewed this so-called “return to order”\textsuperscript{36} in French and Italian art as culturally regressive, a reactionary abandonment of avant-garde experimentalism that was motivated by a longing for calm after the chaos of World War I.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, Kenneth Silver, writing on the revival of classicism in French interwar painting, has further linked the “return to order” to conservative politics. According to Silver, the classicizing rhetoric of this art, with its emphasis on order and harmony, was grounded in the conservative and nationalistic rhetoric adopted by the political right in France during the twenties.\textsuperscript{38} One of the questions this dissertation seeks to answer is whether or not \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} should similarly be viewed as an artistic and political “return to order.”

Despite the numerous scholars such as Hermand and Buchloh who have interpreted \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} as conservative and even proto-fascist, others have instead argued for the leftist origins and implications of the style. The art historian Dennis Crockett, for instance, has demonstrated that many of the first artists to embrace realist figuration and artistic tradition in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 40.
\item \textsuperscript{36} The phrase “return to order” is derived from the title of a book of essays, \textit{Le rappel a l'ordre}, published by the poet and artist Jean Cocteau in 1926.
\item \textsuperscript{37} See for instance Romy Golan, \textit{Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
post-WWI Germany were actually members of the German Communist Party (KPD). During the early, tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic many Communist artists rejected the emotive distortions and subjective abstractions typical of Expressionist art. They criticized such art as being largely incomprehensible to the masses. They also attacked Expressionism for its apolitical narcissism and emphasis on the transcendental and individual. The main goal for many Communist artists at this time was to create art that would appeal to and be easily understood by the masses. They hoped that by producing images that could clearly communicate political messages to the workers their art would assist a Communist revolution in Germany.

This communist commitment to artistic clarity is apparent in an essay titled “Die Gesetze der Malerei” (The Laws of Painting) written in September 1920 by four artists affiliated with the KPD: George Grosz, John Heartfield, Rudolf Schlichter and Raoul Hausmann. In the essay the artists celebrated craft, technique and mimesis as a means of eliminating expressionistic individualism and creating a truly collective art of the people. They insisted that painting should not be based on the “indecisiveness of subjective impressions or spiritual excursions,” but rather on “plasticity and tenacity of perception.” They further argued that painters should use traditional techniques such as linear perspective in order to “raise the optical impressions of the masses toward clarity of meaning.”

---


40 During the 1930s, many Marxist theoreticians, most notably Georg Lukács, similarly argued that Expressionism was focused primarily on subjective feeling and, as such, could not be a revolutionary art form. He instead championed a more naturalistic approach for leftist art. See Georg Lukács, “‘Größe und Verfall’ des Expressionismus,” *Internationale Literatur I* (Moscow, 1934): 153-173; reproduced in translation in *German Expressionism. Documents*, 314-317. For more on the critical reception of Expressionism in Germany see Rose-Carol Washton Long, “National or International? Berlin Critics and the Question of Expressionism,” in *Künstlerischer Austausch/Artistic Exchange: Akten des XXVIII. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 521-34.

Several months later Grosz reiterated these points in an essay titled “Zu Meinen Neuen Bildern” (On My New Pictures) that was published in Das Kunstblatt. Grosz called for the development of a “clear and simple style” that would give an “absolutely realistic picture of the world.” As he resolutely stated, “I want every man to understand me.” As these essays make apparent, many Communist artists embraced realist figuration during the early twenties due to its perceived accessibility to the masses.

By grounding the development of the Neue Sachlichkeit style in the early, tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic, Crockett challenged the long-standing assumption that the movement embodied the superficial values of the stabilization period. He also demonstrated that the post-war turn to realist figuration was motivated in part by leftist concerns. In doing so, he restored to the term Neue Sachlichkeit some of its original meaning. As Gustav Hartlaub explained in a 1929 letter to Alfred J. Barr, when he initially coined the label in 1923 he intended it to be applied primarily to realist art that had a “socialist flavor.”

The majority of the scholarship that has examined the leftist use of realist figuration during the Weimar period has focused primarily on the socio-critical art of the Verists. Many of the leading representatives of the Verist branch of Neue Sachlichkeit were members of the KPD. Since the 1970s numerous art historians have examined how these Communist artists articulated the corruption of bourgeois society in their art. They have analyzed in-depth their numerous representations of crippled war veterans, diseased prostitutes, starving workers and corrupt politicians, concluding from these images that Neue Sachlichkeit was essentially a form of leftist

---

42 Grosz, “Zu meinen neuen bildern” (1921); translated in German Expressionism. Documents, 276.
43 Hartlaub to Barr (1929); reprinted in Barr, 237.
critical realism aimed at exposing the social evils of the Weimar period and radicalizing the
workers.  

None of the conflicting interpretations of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its politics have taken
into consideration representations of mothers. Moreover, maternal images are rarely included in
surveys and exhibitions of the style, let alone discussed. In this dissertation I will argue that this
is a serious scholarly oversight. Motherhood was a favorite theme for many Weimar artists
working in a variety of realist styles from a range of political positions. As I will show, these
artists often used the image of the mother as a tool for political engagement. As such, an
examination of maternal imagery can shed light on the complex politics of realist figuration in
Germany during the interwar period.

By examining representations of motherhood my dissertation will expand the current
understanding of the leftist engagement with realism to consider not only those artists directly
affiliated with the German Communist Party, but also artists working from other leftist positions
as well. In chapter one I will discuss how Communist artists used the image of the mother, in
addition to representations of war cripples, corrupt politicians, etc., as an ideological weapon. To
do so, I will analyze the works of art created as part of the KPD’s campaign during the twenties
and thirties to legalize abortion. Chapters two and three will address two leading representatives
of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting, the verist Otto Dix and the classicist Georg Schrimpf. Given their
admiration for and references to the art of the Old Masters as well as their lack of commitment to
the KPD both painters have often been seen by art historians and critics as artistically regressive

---

44 See Uwe M. Schneede, ed., *Realismus zwischen Revolution und Machtergreifung 1919-1933* (Stuttgart:
Württembergischer Kunstverein, 1971) and Louise Lincoln, ed., *German Realism of the Twenties: The Artist as
Social Critic* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1980) for a discussion of *Neue
Sachlichkeit* as a form of critical realism. See Barbara McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party. Art and
critical images of the bourgeoisie and Sabine T. Kriebel, *Revolutionary Beauty. The Radical Photomontages of John
Heartfield* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: The University of California Press, 2014) for a recent examination of
Heartfield’s damning images of corrupt politicians.
and even politically conservative.\textsuperscript{45} My analysis of their motherhood works will prove differently. I will show how Schrimpf used the image of the mother to embody his utopian anarchist beliefs, while Dix created maternal imagery as a form of leftist social criticism. I will also examine the extent to which these maternal works represent a “return to order.” I will analyze how Schrimpf and Dix reworked traditional realist motifs and styles to support the leftist intentions of their art.

I will consider how the political right made use of the image of the mother as a tool of political engagement as well. In chapter four I examine the reception of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s art during the twenties and thirties. Although Modersohn-Becker worked at the turn of the century and was not directly affiliated with \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit}, my investigation of the reception of her work will shed light on the overall politicization of realism and motherhood imagery during the Weimar period. As I will show, numerous art historians, critics and collectors affiliated with the political right appropriated her motherhood works to support various nationalist and conservative agendas. Overall, my dissertation will both support and expand the current scholarly emphasis on the political and stylistic diversity of realism in interwar Germany. I will demonstrate how \textit{both} the Left \textit{and} Right made use of realist figuration as a political strategy at this time.

3. The Politics of Motherhood and its Representation

The politicization of maternal imagery in the Weimar period is directly linked to the overall politicization of motherhood and reproduction at this time. As numerous feminist historians have discussed at length, the female reproductive body became the focus of much

\textsuperscript{45} Although Schrimpf temporarily joined the KPD in January, 1919 his political beliefs were shaped mainly by anarcho-socialist theory, rather than communist ideology (records indicate he may have left the Party as early as April of that year). Dix never joined a political party.
social and political debate in Germany during the opening decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{46} This increased state and public interest in motherhood was initially motivated by a marked decline in the German birth rate. Thanks in large part to the increasing use of contraception and other forms of birth control, the birth rate in the German Empire fell sharply in the early 1900s. For many, this decline in national fertility was cause for great alarm.\textsuperscript{47} As the feminist historian Cornelie Usborne has discussed in detail, national fertility was the yardstick by which the German authorities measured national health, vitality and progress at this time.\textsuperscript{48} It was feared, then, that a declining fertility would lead to a decline in military and industrial power. As a result, the Wilhelmine state implemented a pronatalist population policy at the turn of the century intended to stimulate births. As part of this plan women were encouraged to develop a “will to motherhood” and were given incentives to bear more children, such as tax breaks for large families. The government relied on coercive measures as well, enforcing strict laws prohibiting abortion and limiting the advertising and sale of contraceptive devices in an attempt to stem the decline in births.

As Usborne has noted, beginning in the Wilhelmine era and continuing into the Weimar period the declining birth rate and female reproduction came to feature in major public and political discussions of topics ranging from social reform to national defense, from moral degeneration to women’s rights. During the 1920s, for instance, leftist parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party based their calls for increased


\textsuperscript{48} Usborne, xi-xiv.
welfare services, particularly for mothers, on the grounds that such services would improve the “quality” of children produced and help ensure the overall health of the nation.\textsuperscript{49} Meanwhile conservative political parties and organizations, including the German National People’s Party (DNVP) and the Evangelical Women’s Aid, viewed the falling birth rate as a symptom of the “moral degeneration” of the times. They sought to combat a perceived increase in sexual immorality by campaigning for the censorship of pornography and information about contraception. They also championed the institution of marriage and motherhood and sought to preserve the traditional values of the patriarchal family.\textsuperscript{50}

The public and political focus on motherhood during the opening decades of the twentieth century was also motivated by women’s changing social roles at this time. Since the late nineteenth century feminists in Germany had been fighting for women’s emancipation. With the ratification of the Weimar Constitution in late 1919 they finally achieved their goal. Along with granting women the right to vote, the constitution also promised the legal equality of the sexes. Men and women were to have equal educational, professional and career opportunities. As a result, during the twenties women moved increasingly into politics, the urban workforce and other areas previously dominated by men.\textsuperscript{51} For example, following the first general elections in the new republic, women comprised nearly 10\% of the seats in the National Assembly. In addition, many women began to challenge conventional morality at this time, calling for greater sexual freedom and autonomy. Overall, the 1920s witnessed the rise of the Neue Frau (New Woman), the emancipated, career-oriented, sexually-liberated modern woman.

\textsuperscript{49} See Usborne, 31-68 for a discussion of the political left’s response to the falling birth rate and population question.
\textsuperscript{50} See Usborne, 69-101 for a discussion of the political right’s response to the falling birth rate and population question.
\textsuperscript{51} Although there was no dramatic statistical change in the number of employed women, the percentage of women in certain economic sectors shifted away from agriculture and the home toward factories and the service economy. Many worked, for instance, as secretaries and shop clerks. See Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, “Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women in Politics and Work,” in \textit{When Biology became Destiny}, 44-54.
With female emancipation came questions about the role of women in modern society. Women’s ever increasing public presence during the twenties challenged the traditional patriarchal order, which restricted women to the private roles of wife and mother. The New Woman was widely viewed as a threat to social harmony, a destabilizing force that sought to undermine traditional gender notions. As a result, the social position and duties of women was a subject of much heated debate at this time. Politicians, feminists, doctors, intellectuals and members of the general public debated the extent to which women’s contribution to society was determined by her biological function as mother. These debates helped to thrust motherhood to the center of state and public interest during the Weimar years.

While feminist historians have examined the politicization of motherhood during the Weimar years in great detail, few scholars have considered how this politicization extended to its representation in the visual arts. Art historians have long been interested in images of women from the Weimar period; they have, however, focused their attention primarily on depictions of Lustmord (sex murder) and the Neue Frau. Since the 1970s many feminist art historians have interpreted sex murder imagery as an expression of male anxiety about the changing social roles of women at this time. Typical of this feminist scholarship is Beth Irwin Lewis’ claim that these images, which portray women ravished and ripped apart by crazed men, expressed the fear that many men felt in the face of women’s increasing social and political equality. According to Lewis, many male artists believed that women’s emancipation threatened societal stability and the established patriarchal order. These fears, she claims, manifested in their misogynistic portrayals of violence against women.52 Similar interpretations have been applied to

representations of the New Woman in Weimar art. Scholars have noted that many male artists portrayed the *Neue Frau* as mannish, unappealing and even grotesque, thus revealing their resistance to women’s emancipation.53

More recently, several feminist scholars have begun to take a more nuanced approach to the issue. Rather than simply labeling artists as misogynists on account of their oftentimes unflattering and even violent representations of women, they instead argue that these images express the ambivalence and uncertainty that many felt in the face of women’s changing social roles. Susan Laiken Funkenstein, for example, has argued that depictions of modern women dancers in Weimar art reflect a combination of blatant misogyny, indifference, bewilderment, and euphoria. As such, she claims, these works reflect the utter confusion that surrounded the New Woman during the twenties.54

My dissertation will expand this discussion to include representations of mothers. I will examine the extent to which the popularity of the mother motif in the realist art of the Weimar era was a response to changing gender roles during the 1920s. To do so, I will analyze how artists expressed their complex and oftentimes contradictory reactions to women’s emancipation and the New Woman in their maternal images.

---


In contrast to the vast scholarship on Lustmord and New Woman imagery, very little has been written about representations of mothers. In the English-language literature only one art historian has discussed motherhood as a significant theme in the art of the Weimar period. In her book *We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism* (1999) the feminist art historian Marsha Meskimmon examined how women artists during the twenties and thirties engaged with stereotypical tropes of womanhood in their art—the trope of the prostitute, the mother, the New Woman, etc.\(^{55}\) In her chapter on maternal imagery she explored how female artists used the image of the mother to challenge traditional assumptions that motherhood was women’s “natural” social role as well as to participate in contemporary debates on politicized issues such as abortion. While Meskimmon’s study highlights the political potential of motherhood imagery, her exclusive focus on the work of women artists is limiting. An examination of the art of both male and female artists is needed in order to reveal fully the extent to which motherhood imagery was politicized during the Weimar years.

In the German literature the feminist scholar Gisela Schirmer is the only art historian to have discussed Weimar maternal imagery at length. In her book *Käthe Kollwitz und die Kunst Ihrer Zeit: Positionen zur Geburtenpolitik* (Käthe Kollwitz and the Art of Her Time: Positions on the Politics of Reproduction) Schirmer discussed how artists during the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras used their art to comment on the contemporary politicization of female reproduction. Schirmer focused on Käthe Kollwitz and fourteen other artists who contributed to the important art exhibition *Frauen in Not* (Women in Need). The exhibition, which opened in Berlin in 1930, was staged in protest of Paragraph 218, the law that outlawed abortion in Germany. Schirmer examined how the artists who participated in the show created works of art that addressed

---

reproductive issues such as abortion and birth control. Many of the works that she discussed are representations of mothers and children. My dissertation will expand on Schirmer’s research. I will demonstrate that Weimar artists used the image of the mother not only to address reproductive issues such as abortion and contraception, but also broader social and political issues as well including class and economic inequality.

4. Methods and Chapter Breakdown

My examination of the politicization of motherhood imagery during the Weimar period will focus on the close analysis of form and content in order to relate the visual to the political. In the chapters that follow I will discuss how certain tropes of motherhood and realist styles acquired specific political associations and meaning at this time. I will also examine the maternal images of the period within their broader socio-historical context, relating them to the overall politicization of motherhood and female reproduction during the opening decades of the twentieth century.

Chapter One will address the most well-known maternal images from the Weimar period—the works of art created for the German Communist Party’s campaign to legalize abortion. Abortion was officially outlawed by Paragraph 218 of the German Penal Code, but during the twenties and early thirties the parties of the political left, most notably the KPD, sought to have the law repealed. Many well-known artists, including John Heartfield, Käthe Kollwitz and Rudolf Schlichter, created art for the KPD’s campaign. While they employed a wide range of realist styles, the majority of these artists addressed the abortion issue with the image of the suffering, pregnant proletarian mother. As I will show, these maternal images were meant not only to demonstrate the need for abortion rights for poverty-stricken women, but also
to function as Communist propaganda by picturing abortion as a class and economic issue. To do so, I will analyze the abortion works in relation to the communist concept of class warfare as well as the Party’s strategic use of art as a tool to radicalize the workers.

In chapter Two I will discuss Otto Dix’s use of maternal imagery as a tool of leftist social critique. While many scholars today present Dix as a cool and objective artist who matter-of-factly recorded the face of the times in his art, I agree with art critics such as Carl Einstein who in 1923 read Dix’s paintings as a form of violent attack upon society. I will argue that his socio-critical intentions are readily apparent in his numerous depictions of proletarian motherhood. As I will show, Dix’s painstakingly detailed, veristic paintings and prints of suffering working-class mothers offer a scathing critique of the social ills of the Weimar period. Dix’s exact relationship to politics is still widely debated today, due to the fact that he never joined a political party. I will demonstrate, however, that his membership in radical artist groups, his participation in politically-motivated exhibitions and his involvement with Socialist and Communist publications reveal his left-wing leanings. A comparison of Dix’s motherhood works to similar images created by left-leaning, socially-committed artists such as Käthe Kollwitz will strengthen my argument that his representations of working-class mothers were intended to criticize the plight of the poor in Weimar society.

In chapter Three I will examine Georg Schrimpf’s use of the image of the mother as a utopian symbol. Although most art historians position Schrimpf as an apolitical and even conservative artist, I will argue that the numerous paintings and prints of idealized mothers that he created between 1915 and 1923 reveal his utopian, anarcho-socialist beliefs. To demonstrate his leftist political leanings I will highlight his political activism and desire for radical social change. Schrimpf strongly opposed what he perceived to be the limitations and failures of

---

modern capitalist society. This led him to explore alternative lifestyles—he spent a year in an anarchist colony in Ascona, Switzerland—as well as to participate in the short-lived Council Republic that was formed in Munich in the spring of 1919. Through these activities the artist became familiar with the writings of the radical leftist theorists Otto Gross and Gustav Landauer. Gross, a psychoanalyst, championed matriarchalism as the ideal social order. Landauer, an influential anarcho-socialist writer, advocated the establishment of rural communalist societies. As I will show, Schrimpf’s motherhood works, particularly his classicizing paintings of peaceful peasant mothers in idyllic rural settings, picture his ideal society, a maternal and agrarian utopia inspired by the theories of Gross and Landauer.

Chapter Four will reveal that the politicization of maternal imagery and realist figuration in Weimar-era Germany involved not just artists, but also art historians, critics and collectors. To do so, I will examine the reception of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood images during the twenties and thirties. Although she died in 1907, Modersohn-Becker and her art first began to receive extensive attention during the Weimar period. Thanks to the publication of her letters and journals as well as the opening of the Paula Becker-Modersohn Museum in 1927 in Bremen, Modersohn-Becker became one of the most well-known female figurative painters in Germany at this time. Drawing on archival and primary source material, I will show in this chapter that the art historians, critics and collectors who promoted her work did so in part to further their own personal political agendas and to engage with the current debates on women’s changing social roles. Many art writers, fixating on her images of mothers, linked Modersohn-Becker to the conservative notion that motherhood was women’s highest purpose. In addition, Ludwig Roselius, the wealthy industrialist who established the Becker-Modersohn Museum, similarly used the painter’s art to support a conservative agenda. Through an examination of his published
writings and speeches I will demonstrate how Roselius, a Nazi sympathizer, appropriated the artist’s motherhood works to support his nationalistic vision of a Germanic cultural revival. As I will show, Roselius was drawn to the “realism” of Modersohn-Becker’s paintings, particularly her ability to capture the “essence” of the German people in her art.

This dissertation is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of motherhood imagery from the Weimar period. Rather, I have chosen to focus on a few key figures on both the Left and Right who used the image of the mother politically. My aim is to demonstrate the complex politics and diverse aesthetics of realist figuration at this time. In doing so, I will challenge past interpretations of Neue Sachlichkeit while also complicating traditional assumptions about some of the movement’s leading artists.
Chapter One

The Image of the Mother as Ideological Weapon: Artists and the Communist Campaign to Legalize Abortion

This chapter will demonstrate that Communist artists during the Weimar period frequently used the image of the mother as an ideological weapon in the direct service of party politics. To do so, I will examine the works of art created as part of the German Communist Party’s (KPD) decade-long campaign to legalize abortion. As I will show, artists affiliated with the KPD, working in a range of realist styles, repeatedly used the image of the suffering proletarian mother to argue for women’s abortion rights by presenting abortion as a class and economic issue.

1. Introduction

The legality of abortion was one of the most highly politicized and hotly debated reproductive issues in Weimar-era Germany. During the 1920s Paragraph 218, the article of the German Penal Code that outlawed abortion, became the target of intense public and political protest. At this time numerous feminists, sex reformers, doctors, leftist politicians and others heatedly called for the abortion law’s repeal.

Among the most vocal and committed opponents of Paragraph 218 was the German Communist Party. The KPD was the only political party during the Weimar period to consistently demand the complete legalization of abortion. The Communist opposition to the abortion law was motivated primarily by the Party’s ideology of class warfare. The KPD argued that Paragraph 218 was a brutal form of gender-specific class oppression, a law that targeted working-class women too poor to afford birth control. As a result, the Party spearheaded an
extensive campaign to abolish the law. Throughout the twenties and thirties the KPD agitated continually both in the Reichstag and on the streets for the decriminalization of abortion.

The visual arts played an important role in the Communist Party’s decade-long battle against Paragraph 218. Numerous politically-engaged artists became involved in the KPD campaign, including such well-known figures as Käthe Kollwitz, John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter. Believing that art can function as an ideological weapon they created anti-218 images that were reproduced in Communist posters, pamphlets and publications and displayed in leftist exhibitions.

Despite the large number of anti-218 works created by leftist artists during the Weimar years most scholars have singled out two main images for discussion—a lithograph by Käthe Kollwitz titled *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs* (1923) and Alice Lex-Nerlinger’s 1931 painting *Paragraph 218*. (figs. 1-1 and 1-2) Both works were created as campaign posters for the KPD. Kollwitz’ print portrays a poverty-stricken, pregnant proletarian mother—the type of woman the KPD claimed was most likely to be affected by the abortion law. The figure of the suffering pregnant woman also appears in Lex-Nerlinger’s painting. Here, however, she is accompanied by a group of women working together to topple a giant cross with the inscription “Paragraph 218.” These two works are among the most well-known and frequently discussed maternal images from the Weimar period.

The feminist historian Atina Grossmann was one of the first scholars to analyze the posters by Kollwitz and Lex-Nerlinger. In a 1978 article on the Weimar abortion debates, Grossmann claimed that the two works reflected the changing nature of women’s participation in the anti-218 campaign between the mid-twenties and early thirties. As she noted, Kollwitz’ poster was created in 1923 before the abortion issue had become the focus of mass agitation on
the part of women. As such, her image, with its focus on the mute suffering mother, presents women mainly as the passive victims of the abortion law. In contrast, the main figures in Lex-Nerlinger’s work are the women collectively pushing against the symbol of Paragraph 218. According to Grossmann, by 1931 women were beginning to envisage themselves as active agents of political change and to take greater part in the efforts to legalize abortion. Lex-Nerlinger’s poster, she claimed, reflects this greater political activism.¹

Several decades after Grossmann’s initial discussion of Weimar anti-218 imagery the feminist art historian Marsha Meskimmon expanded her analysis of Kollwitz and Lex-Nerlinger’s posters. In her 1999 book We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism Meskimmon elaborated on not only the differences in terms of content and historical context between the two works, but also their aesthetic differences.² She argued that Kollwitz, as the older of the two artists, took a more traditional approach in her poster, drawing on academic conventions and canonical iconographies such as the Madonna and Child and using a painterly style. She noted that Lex-Nerlinger, in contrast, was more experimental in terms of her materials and formal strategies, employing a new Spritzblatt (spray paint) technique and making use of a Constructivist style. The main intention of Meskimmon’s analysis was to demonstrate the stylistic and technical diversity of women’s representations of abortion activism. As she stated, “even women artists with very similar political perspectives…produced different aesthetic forms of articulation in relation to the subjects of maternity and abortion in their works.”³

² Marsha Meskimmon, We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1999), 106-112.
³ Ibid., 111.
One of the only art historians to have moved beyond the limited focus on Kollwitz and Lex-Nerlinger and to have provided a more comprehensive examination of the imagery of the Weimar abortion debates is the feminist art historian Gisela Schirmer. In her book *Käthe Kollwitz und die Kunst Ihrer Zeit: Positionen zur Geburtenpolitik* (Käthe Kollwitz and the Art of Her Time: Positions on the Politics of Reproduction) (1998) Schirmer discussed many of the works of art that were displayed in an important Communist anti-218 exhibition titled *Frauen in Not* (Women in Need) that opened in Berlin in 1931. Like Meskimmon, Schirmer noted the different stylistic and formal techniques employed by leftist artists in their anti-218 works. As a feminist art historian she also considered issues of gender difference. Specifically, she discussed the different approaches that male and female artists took to the subject of abortion in their art. Schirmer claimed that most male artists affiliated with the KPD tended to focus mainly on the ideological aspects of the abortion issue, portraying the fight against Paragraph 218 as just one aspect of the larger fight to free the working class from capitalist exploitation. For instance, in his work *The Rights of Women in Bourgeois Society* (1923) Rudolf Schlichter used the example of Paragraph 218 to highlight the state’s oppression of the proletariat. (fig. 1-3) In contrast, Schirmer claimed that women artists such as Lex-Nerlinger chose to emphasize the moral and existential rather than just the political aspects of the abortion question, using their art to demand women’s right to reproductive freedom.

As Schirmer, Meskimmon and Grossmann have made quite clear the works of art created for the KPD’s abortion campaign were diverse in many ways. Despite their formal, technical and conceptual differences, however, it is important to note that these anti-218 works share one key similarity: they all make use of maternal imagery. Throughout the course of the Communist

---

campaign leftist artists, including Kollwitz, Lex-Nerlinger and Schlichter, repeatedly addressed the abortion issue with the image of the downtrodden proletarian mother. While both Meskimmon and Schirmer have noted the use of this maternal trope, neither has fully explained how or why the figure of the suffering mother became the main emblem of the KPD’s fight to legalize abortion.

In this chapter I will expand the existing literature by examining why the figure of the downtrodden mother featured so prominently in Communist anti-218 imagery. I will first trace the development of this maternal trope during the early twentieth century in the art of the German Naturalists. As I will show, many left-leaning naturalist artists, most notably Käthe Kollwitz and Heinrich Zille, established a tradition in German art of using the image of the suffering proletarian mother as a sympathetic icon of the working class. I will then examine how Communist artists adopted this figure type for their anti-218 works. As I will demonstrate, the image of the downtrodden working-class mother was well-suited to the ideological goals of the Communist abortion campaign. KPD artists used this maternal trope to present abortion as a class and economic issue.

In addition to examining the maternal iconography of Communist anti-218 imagery I will also give consideration to issues of style as well. I will analyze the various realist styles that artists affiliated with the KPD employed in order to support the ideological aims of their abortion works. In doing so, I will make it clear that for many Communist artists working in Germany during the Weimar period realism was both an artistic and political strategy.

By focusing on the repeated use of the image of the suffering proletarian mother in Weimar anti-218 imagery, two things will become clear. First, almost all of the artists involved in the KPD’s campaign portrayed women in their works as passive victims without political
agency. Second, most Communist artists, whether male or female, focused mainly on the ideological aspects of the abortion issue in their art. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the maternal images created by these artists reflect the male-bias of KPD politics during the Weimar period.

Like most major Socialist parties in Weimar Germany, the German Communist Party supported in theory women’s full social, economic and political equality. As the historian Eric Weitz has discussed, however, despite the KPD’s commitment to women’s emancipation and social advancement, the Party was largely masculine in character.\(^5\) Its membership was made up predominantly of men, it had a mainly masculine electoral profile, and the Party supported a masculinist definition of labor and politics. Overall, the KPD made the male proletarian the center of its politics. According to Weitz, the Party’s male bias was reflected in its art. While men were typically portrayed in Communist imagery as powerful figures whose political activism led the way to a communist future, women were instead often shown as passive objects of capitalist exploitation and male proletarian sympathy. As he states, “rarely is the viewer offered representations of activist women.”\(^6\) As I will show in this chapter, this is especially true of Communist abortion imagery. The numerous images of downtrodden proletarian mothers created for the KPD’s abortion campaign present women in a passive role, rather than portraying them as active agents of political change. Such works were mainly meant to inspire sympathy, rather than to empower women.

The consistent use of maternal imagery in the KPD’s anti-218 campaign also reflects the Party’s limited interpretation of the abortion question as primarily an ideological issue. As the

---


\(^6\) Ibid., 329.
feminist historians Atina Grossmann and Cornelie Usborne have demonstrated, the German Communist Party’s campaign for abortion reform was fought in the name of party politics.\(^7\) Despite the Party’s progressive goal of legalizing abortion, its main intention was not to promote women’s reproductive freedom or to challenge the traditional view that motherhood was women’s main social role. Rather, the Party sought to end the oppression of the proletariat. The KPD recognized the need for women’s abortion rights only within the context of an exploitative capitalist system. These ideas were visualized with the image of the suffering proletarian mother. As I will show, by using this traditional maternal trope Communist artists, both male and female, supported the KPD’s understanding of abortion as primarily a political issue.

2. Paragraph 218 and the Political Left

The German Penal Code, established in 1871, included several articles intended to regulate sexuality and reproduction. Articles 218-220 of the code addressed abortion. 218 declared abortion a criminal act and spelled out the punishment for offenders. Although the exact terms of punishment were revised multiple times during the opening decades of the twentieth century, 218 initially stipulated that women who illegally terminated their pregnancies could be sentenced to up to five years of penal servitude, as could their accomplices. Additional information pertaining to special circumstances was covered in articles 219 and 220.\(^8\) Article 184.3 of the penal code handled the issue of contraception. Beginning in 1900, this so-called “obscenity clause” prohibited the advertising and display of “objects intended for indecent


\(^8\) Article 219 addressed the penalty for any person helping to procure an abortion for money, while article 220 listed the punishment for those who procured an abortion without the consent of the woman. See Appendix 1 in Usborne, *Politics* for a complete list of the abortion legislation and penal reform.
use,”—i.e. contraceptives. Any person providing information about the use of contraception faced punishment under this law as well.⁹

The abortion laws quickly proved to be highly controversial. Already by the turn of the century many Germans, including prominent feminists such as Dr. Helen Stöcker, founder of the Bund für Mutterschutz (League for the Protection of Mothers), were demanding the repeal of Paragraph 218.¹⁰ These early protests intensified during the Weimar years. In the politically and economically volatile post-war period Paragraph 218 quickly became a source of serious contention. As mass unemployment and inflation caused wide-scale poverty, many women came to view abortion as a survival measure and to demand the reform of the existing legislation. By 1919 a vociferous popular protest movement against Paragraph 218 was beginning to emerge. Women staged rallies protesting the draconian penalties for obtaining an abortion and filed petitions with the Justice Department demanding the right to reproductive freedom.¹¹

The parties of the political left were quick to respond to the developing mass movement against Paragraph 218. By 1920 the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party had both acknowledged that abortion reform was an issue central to working-class politics. Both parties viewed abortion as a social problem caused by deprivation and financial hardship. They believed that working-class women were driven to terminate unwanted pregnancies primarily by their inability to support more children. As the KPD Reichstag deputy Fritz Heydemann stated in 1924:

…but hundreds of thousands lack shelter, clothing and food and [articles 218 and 219] are designed to force, by threat of penal servitude, the low-income population to continue producing children whom they cannot feed. The low-income families demand that this

---

⁹ Punishment ranged from imprisonment for up to one year and/or a fine of up to 1000 marks.
¹⁰ Usborne, Cultures, 4.
¹¹ See Usborne, Politics, 157-158.
sword of Damocles, which always hangs over the poor but never the well-off and wealthy women, should be removed from them.\textsuperscript{12}

Under such circumstances, the Socialist parties recognized the need for abortion rights and called for the reform of the existing legislature. Between 1920 and 1926 they brought no less than fourteen motions and bills before Parliament that aimed to repeal or at the very least reform articles 218-220.\textsuperscript{13}

Of all the major Socialist parties it was the KPD that was the most steadfast and radical in its opposition to Paragraph 218. The German Communist Party was the only party to consistently call for the complete deletion of the article from the penal code. In addition, the Party demanded the abolition of article 183.4, thus advocating for both the legalization of abortion as well as better public access to birth control. The SPD, in contrast, took a less decisive approach to the abortion issue. Although the Party at times supported the legalization of abortion, most often it advocated reforming Paragraph 218, rather than completely repealing it. The SPD believed that keeping an abortion law on the books would protect women from being coerced into terminating a pregnancy against their will.

The KPD’s more radical stance was motivated by the Party’s positioning of abortion at the center of the proletarian struggle. Communists construed Paragraph 218 as a tool of class repression. Arguing that the law affected primarily the working class, since bourgeois women could afford contraception or to travel abroad to receive an abortion, the KPD deemed 218 a “class law aimed at proletarian women.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, the struggle for abortion rights was seen as a struggle against bourgeois oppression. By the mid-twenties Communists openly referred to a \textit{Gebärmwang}—a “tyranny of forced childbearing.” They argued that the state was coercing

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Fritz Heydemann, Reichstag Proceedings (5 March 1924); translated in Ibid., 160.
\item[13] See Usborne, \textit{Politics}, Appendix 2 for a list of parliamentary motions and bills for abortion reform.
\item[14] \textit{Die Internationale} IV (1922), 464.
\end{footnotes}
working-class women into producing cannon fodder for an imperialist war against the Soviet Union.

As the feminist historians Atina Grossmann and Cornelie Usborne have convincingly argued, the KPD’s engagement with the abortion debates was motivated primarily by party ideology, rather than a commitment to women’s reproductive rights. Despite the Party’s slogan “your body belongs to you,” the Communist abortion campaign was mainly intended to radicalize women and engage in class warfare.\textsuperscript{15} The KPD used the fight against Paragraph 218 as a tactical organizing tool to win women for the class struggle. During the early twenties, female membership in the Communist Party remained at a consistently low level. By addressing a “woman’s issue” such as abortion the Party hoped to attract a female audience and to boost its low level of support amongst women. In addition, reproductive freedom was never the issue at stake for the majority of party officials. Revealingly, the KPD insisted that the legalization of abortion was only a short-term measure made necessary by the current uncaring capitalist system. As one Communist pamphlet stated, abortion was acceptable only “in the present circumstances…as a means of individual self-help which has become a mass phenomenon because of the mass hardship…caused by the contradictions within the capitalist system.”\textsuperscript{16} The Party maintained that in an ideal Socialist society abortion would be rendered unnecessary by providing women with the adequate maternal support and welfare that were preconditions for joyous and carefree childbearing. Despite its progressive goal of legalizing abortion, the KPD never intended to challenge the traditional idea that motherhood was women’s natural role. According to Grossmann, “the question was not women’s reproductive freedom or individual right to determine their own lives, but rather the central function of their reproductive work as

\textsuperscript{15} See Usborne, Politics, 156-160.
\textsuperscript{16} Referentenmaterial für die Volksaktion gegen Paragraph 218 (Berlin, 1931); translated in Ibid., 160.
bearers and socializers of children and nurturers of the family unit.” As this chapter will make clear, the Communist Party’s interpretation of abortion as primarily an ideological issue greatly impacted the Party’s anti-218 campaign, particularly the works of art that were created for it.

In its attempt to legalize abortion the German Communist Party engaged in both parliamentary action as well as more public forms of protest. Along with tabling motions in the Reichstag, the Party instigated a series of mass rallies and demonstrations during the Weimar years. Beginning in 1921, the KPD held annual rallies against Paragraph 218 on March 8th, International Women’s Day. Frequent demonstrations took place outside of the Reichstag as well. Additionally, the KPD sponsored special “women’s weeks” which included speakers and typically ended in a resolution for the repeal of article 218 as well as produced anti-218 literature for distribution.

In 1922, in an attempt to lengthen the reach of its public protest movement and strengthen its ideological impact, the KPD began to incorporate the visual arts into its anti-218 campaign. By the early twenties the Party had come to recognize the educational and agitational potential of the visual arts. Acknowledging that images are often more immediately intelligible than words, the KPD used art to convey communist ideology to the workers and to spur them to political action. In addition to playing a role in the political education of the proletariat, the visual arts also functioned as a weapon of class warfare. The KPD used images to expose the exploitation of the working class under capitalism and to attack the bourgeoisie.18

---

For its anti-218 campaign the KPD devised several different strategies to use the visual arts to reach a broad audience. The Party commissioned posters to hang at its demonstrations and rallies as well as produced illustrated pamphlets for distribution. Cartoons, caricatures, photomontages and other works attacking the abortion laws were also published in Communist periodicals, including the newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) and the satirical journal *Der Gegner* (The Opponent). The KPD hoped that such works would strengthen the ideological impact of its anti-218 campaign and win the public for its cause.

Many politically-engaged artists, both famous and lesser known, contributed art to the Communist campaign. Although these artists differed significantly in terms of artistic training and allegiance, most took a similar approach to the abortion issue in their works. With few exceptions most of the artists affiliated with the KPD abortion campaign illustrated abortion activism in their art with the figure of the suffering proletarian mother. Their motivations for using such maternal imagery will be examined next.

3. The Suffering Proletarian Mother as Sympathetic Icon of the Working Class: The Art of the German Naturalists

There are many reasons why the artists affiliated with the KPD’s anti-218 campaign chose to address the abortion issue with the image of the mother. To begin with, the use of maternal imagery as a vehicle for leftist social commentary was an established tradition in German art. Since the turn of the century many socially-engaged artists had used the trope of the suffering proletarian mother to address a variety of social ills and to appeal to public sympathy. This trend had its origins in the work of those artists associated with German Naturalism, most notably Heinrich Zille and Käthe Kollwitz.
During the late nineteenth century, many artists working in Germany—and throughout Europe in general—began to reject the veneer of idealization in their art, choosing instead to champion an artistic approach that strove for authenticity and “truth to nature.” Among the most well-known German proponents of this Naturalist trend were Käthe Kollwitz and Heinrich Zille. Although the two artists never formed an official group, their work focused on many of the same themes. Both of the Berlin-based artists turned a castigating eye on the immediate urban environment in which they lived. They chose to record in their works the dark side of Germany’s recent rapid modernization and industrialization—the dank, dirty and overcrowded conditions of the Berlin tenement barracks, the increasingly greater division that was appearing between the rich and the poor at this time and the resulting growth of an urban underclass. Often working from direct observation, the artists captured in detail the poverty and harsh living conditions of Berlin’s working class. Their drawings, prints and paintings proliferated with images of society’s outcasts, including prostitutes, beggars and poverty-stricken mothers and their children.

Art historians have long associated artistic Naturalism with a revolutionary mentality. The work of Kollwitz and Zille is no exception. Both artists were affiliated with the parties and organizations of the political left. Moreover, the quest for social reform was a major motivating factor in the creation of their art. They shared a desire to use their work to raise awareness of the

---

19 In Germany, Naturalism was never a professed artistic principle with a formal, organized group of supporters. However, many of the artists associated with Naturalism, including Kollwitz and Zille, were inspired by contemporary trends within European literature. The works of Émile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, and Fyodor Dostoevsky were particularly influential. See Karin Rhein, “‘Es gibt mehr als einen Zille.’ Der Kunstler jenseits des Witzblatt-Zeichners,” in Heinrich Zille (1858-1929). Zwischen Rinnstein und Akademie, ed. Sigrid Bertuleit (Schweinfurt: Museum Georg Schäfer, 2010), 15 for a discussion of Zille and Kollwitz’ interest in Naturalist literature.

20 In the introduction to their book Naturalismus (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1973) Richard Hamann and Jost Hermand discuss the revolutionary nature of literary and artistic naturalism, interpreting it as a reaction against social and artistic convention. According to the two scholars, 19th century naturalism can be divided into three main tendencies: mechanically conveyed objectivity; parody; and political action. Hamann and Hermand place Kollwitz and Zille in the third group, stating that “Zille and Kollwitz embody a form of Naturalism that is no longer satisfied with mechanically capturing a snippet of nature, but rather activates the tendencies of the 80s in a socially critical manner and thus rises to the level of a social realism,” 279.
hardships endured by the working class and to give a voice to the poor and oppressed. As Kollwitz stated in her diary in 1920, “It is my duty to voice the sufferings of people.”

In their attempt to use their art as a tool of social reform both Kollwitz and Zille frequently contributed artwork to leftist publications and causes. Their drawings and prints of working-class misery were reproduced in numerous Socialist publications, including the Social Democratic journal Der Wahre Jakob (The Real McCoy) and the Communist periodical Sichel und Hammer (Sickle and Hammer). Later during the twenties both artists were also involved with the Künstlerhilfe der Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (Artists Aid of the International Workers Aid). The International Workers Aid (IAH) was a leftist relief organization founded in 1921 by the political activist and Communist propagandist Willi Münzenberg. The Artists Aid of the IAH regularly held charity events, with proceeds being donated to community kitchens and other charitable organizations, along with publishing portfolios of graphic works by contemporary artists addressing social issues such as hunger and war. Kollwitz and Zille both contributed art to several of these IAH portfolios. The desire for social reform also led Zille to participate in party politics. He was a member of the SPD and later became involved with the KPD as well. Kollwitz, in contrast, never committed herself to a particular political party. While she was decidedly a leftist, she did not fully agree with the tactics of either the SPD or the KPD.

---

21 “Ich soll das Leiden der Menschen aussprechen.” Käthe Kollwitz, Die Tagebücher (Berlin: Sielder Verlag, 1989), 449.
22 Both Kollwitz and Zille contributed works to the IAH portfolios addressing war and hunger. A print by Zille was also included in the portfolio published in conjunction with the campaign to establish an 8-hour workday in Germany.
23 In 1928, together with his friend the Communist artist Otto Nagel, Zille helped found the KPD-oriented illustrated journal Eulenspiegel.
Although Kollwitz ultimately did not join either party, she voted for the SPD and was willing to contribute works of art to the social causes promoted by both parties.\(^{25}\)

Art critics of the day widely acknowledged the leftist implications of Kollwitz and Zille’s art. The reputation of both artists centered mainly on their depictions of the working class. The art writer Adolf Heilborn claimed that Zille was “the draftsman of the people,”\(^{26}\) while a 1913 book on Kollwitz referred to her as a “social democratic agitator.”\(^{27}\) Moreover, many critics emphasized the socio-critical aspects of the artists’ work. Their images of the working class were seen as embodying a sympathetic awareness of the suffering of the urban poor and presenting a powerful appeal for social reform.\(^{28}\)

By the Weimar period Kollwitz and Zille had risen to the front ranks of the German art world. They were the subject of numerous monographs and exhibitions and continued to contribute regularly to the illustrated press.\(^{29}\) In 1919 Kollwitz even became the first female artist to be elected to membership of the Prussian Academy of Art and to receive the title of “professor.” Due to Kollwitz and Zille’s considerable renown by this time, their art proved to be incredibly influential on the next generation of leftist artists working during the years of the Weimar Republic. Their drawings and prints helped determine the artistic representation of class and established an iconography of contemporary urban misfortunes.

\(^{25}\) For instance, in 1923 Kollwitz created a poster for an Anti-War Day event sponsored by the Social Democratic International Federation of Trade Unions.  


\(^{27}\) “sozialdemokratischer Agitatorin.” Käthe Kollwitz *Mappe* (Munich: Callwey Verlag, 1913), np.

\(^{28}\) In his book on Zille, Hans Ostwald included an entire chapter discussing the artist as a social critic. See Hans Ostwald, *Das Zillebuch* (Berlin: Paul Franke Verlag, 1929), 323-341.

Of particular influence was the artists’ use of urban and proletarian tropes. Their works typically portrayed the members of the working class as recognizable stereotypes—the street urchin, the drunk, the work-roughened laborer, etc. Each type was rendered distinguishable by markers of class such as dress, physiognomy and bodily gestures and poses. By the 1920s the works of Kollwitz and Zille had come to epitomize the visual codes for the representation of the urban poor. As I will discuss in section 4, many of the Communist artists active in Weimar-era Germany, including Rudolf Schlichter and George Grosz, adopted the iconography of the working class formulated by these artists.

Included among the typologies of the proletariat established by Kollwitz and Zille was the trope of the suffering proletarian mother. Their work proliferates with images of weary, poverty-stricken working-class mothers with slumped shoulders and defeated eyes. Both artists recognized the power of such imagery, particularly its ability to appeal to public sympathy. It was this image of the proletarian mother as suffering, passive victim that was eventually appropriated by the German Communist Party for its anti-218 campaign.

A drawing created by Zille in 1904 titled *Into the Water* presents the artist’s typical approach to the subject of proletarian motherhood. (fig. 1-4) The drawing depicts a working-class woman driven by poverty to commit suicide. Dressed in worn, patched clothing and clutching a young child in her arms, the heavily pregnant mother strides with great determination towards a river. In the background, several factories pour smoke into a grey and oppressive sky. The title of the work combined with the desperate, yet decisive look on the woman’s face makes her suicidal intentions clear, while the central placement of her swollen belly against the dismal, industrial backdrop reveals the motivation for her decision. As a member of the urban poor she

---

cannot afford to care for another child. Rather than having to endure extreme hardship and misery the mother chooses instead to end her life, taking her child with her.

*Into the Water* was published in 1906 in *Simplicissimus*, a politically-liberal satirical journal that addressed contemporary social issues. Like many of Zille’s works reproduced in this publication, the drawing was meant to bring the suffering of the proletariat to the attention of the German public. By using the trope of the downtrodden mother to address the issue of urban poverty, Zille intended his work to elicit a sympathetic response from the viewer. His inclusion of a young child in the image was further meant to inspire moral outrage at the social conditions that could cause a mother to commit such a tragic act.

Over a decade later, in 1919, Zille created a lithographic version of *Into the Water*, in which he added a second child. (fig. 1-5) The pregnant mother in the lithograph is shown clutching a baby to her chest with one hand while she drags her young daughter behind her with the other. The addition of another child renders the mother’s situation even more desperate. Zille often depicted his proletarian mothers pregnant and with multiple children. According to Gisela Schirmer, the artist represented pregnancy as the “permanent state of affairs” for the women of the working class.\(^{31}\) Unable to afford contraception, many proletarian women were continually pregnant. With each additional child, however, their financial state worsened. With works such as the 1919 version of *Into the Water* Zille pointed to the need for improved welfare services for the poor in order to counteract this vicious cycle of poverty and pregnancy.

Overall, with his drawing and prints Zille established a tradition in German art of using maternal imagery to address a variety of social ills. In works such as *Into the Water* he transformed the figure of the suffering proletarian mother into a sympathetic icon of the working class.

\(^{31}\) “Schwangerschaft als Dauerzustand.” Schirmer, 171.
class. During the twenties the German Communist Party, recognizing the sympathetic appeal of Zille’s maternal images, appropriated many of his works for its anti-218 campaign. The 1904 version of Into the Water, for instance, appeared on the cover of a brochure titled “Down with the Abortion Paragraphs” published by the KPD in 1923. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in section 4, Zille’s motherhood works provided a model for other leftist artists creating art for the Party’s campaign.

Even more so than Zille, however, it was Kollwitz whose art came to play the greatest role in the political left’s abortion campaign. Kollwitz was deeply committed to improving the plight of proletarian women. Throughout the course of her artistic career she repeatedly used her art as a tool to expose the miseries endured by the women of the working class. The artist’s preoccupation with the theme of women’s suffering and sorrow was motivated primarily by her encounters with the female patients in her husband’s medical practice. Kollwitz had married the physician Karl Kollwitz in 1891. Shortly afterwards the newly-married couple moved to Berlin, settling in the working-class district of Prenzlauer Berg. Motivated by his social democratic beliefs and his desire to serve the poor, Karl Kollwitz accepted a position in Berlin as a doctor for a workers’ health insurance fund. It was from her involvement with her husband’s medical practice that Kollwitz first became deeply concerned with the plight of the urban poor, proletarian women in particular. Many of the working-class women that sought her husband’s aid constantly battled the effects of extreme poverty and deprivation. They endured hunger and exploitation, fought to raise families under dire circumstances and suffered at the hands of

32 See the cover to Zille’s 1919 print portfolio Zwanglose Geschichte und Bilder and the print Mother and Three Children created in 1924 for the IAH portfolio Hunger for more examples of his images of suffering proletarian mothers.

33 As she later recalled in a diary entry of 1941, “[it was only when] I became acquainted, especially through my husband, with the difficulty and tragedy of the depths of proletarian life, when I became acquainted with the women, who came to my husband seeking aid…did I truly grasp in all its power, the fate of the proletariat…” Kollwitz, Die Tagebücher, 741.
drunken, abusive husbands. Kollwitz was deeply impacted by these women and wrote often in her diaries about the hardships that they faced.  

Kollwitz’ experiences with her husband’s patients led to a lifelong commitment to improving the living and working conditions of urban, working-class women. Throughout her career she was involved with numerous relief and reform organizations dedicated to helping women. She was affiliated with the revisionist branch of the Socialist women’s movement. She was also involved with the Bund für Mutterschutz (League for the Protection of Mothers, BfM), a non-partisan organization that was committed to advancing the legal, social and economic status of women as mothers, with a focus on improving the conditions for working-class women in particular. Along with establishing maternity homes for unmarried pregnant women, the BfM advocated for increased state-supported maternity insurance coverage as well as improved public access to contraceptive devices and birth control information.

Kollwitz’ commitment to helping women and her awareness of the goals of the League for the Protection of Mothers prompted the artist in 1909 to create a cycle of drawings on the subject of the suffering of proletarian women. Titled the Portraits of Misery, the cycle consisted of six drawings, each of which illustrated a specific hardship faced by the women of the working class. The series depicts in order: an exploited female worker forced to engage in low-paying, at-home wage work in order to support her family (Home Worker), a pregnant woman resignedly waiting outside a tavern for her drunken husband (Pub), an elderly working-class woman,

---

34 For instance, in an entry from September, 1909 Kollwitz discusses a visit from a Frau Pankopf, whose husband had beaten her. Käthe Kollwitz, The Diary and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 51.
35 Kollwitz was familiar with the BfM and its work through her friend Lily Braun. Braun, a writer and feminist advocate, had been one of the founding members of the association and was on its board of directors. Although Kollwitz never became an official member, she supported the BfM and sympathized with its goals. In 1909 she even donated two drawings to the Leipzig branch of the organization.
36 See Rosemary Betterton, An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body (Great Britain, USA, Canada: Routledge, 1996), 38-39 for a discussion of the major goals of the BfM.
pregnant yet again despite her advanced age (At the Doctor), a young mother driven by poverty to kill herself and her children (Into the Water), a battered woman cowering from her abusive husband (Drunken Man), and a destitute and dejected pregnant woman (Christmas). The entire print cycle was published in Simplicissimus between November 1909 and January 1910.

Taken as a whole, the Portraits of Misery reveal the major sources of suffering for the women of the working class. With this series Kollwitz was making a case for social and sexual reform in order to alleviate the plight of these women. Her representations of wives suffering at the hands of their husbands presented a powerful appeal for marriage law reform. Meanwhile, her images of the miseries of proletarian motherhood demonstrated the need for maternal welfare provisions and better access to birth control for proletarian women. These goals are in direct alignment with those of the BfM.37

The feminist art historian Gisela Schirmer has noted that the Portraits of Misery cycle was aimed at a bourgeois audience.38 By publishing the drawings in Simplicissimus, Kollwitz was hoping to reach a wide segment of the general public. Simplicissimus was at this time one of the most popular satirical journals in Germany—in 1903 it had a sales rate of 100,000 issues per week.39 Kollwitz had begun working for the publication in 1908. Although she did not employ satire or humor in her own work, she agreed with the journal’s commitment to using art to prompt social change. The images that she published in Simplicissimus, including the Portraits of Misery, were intended to highlight just how different life was for the proletariat than for the bourgeoisie. As the artist noted in a diary entry from August 1909, “The working class world is

37 Adele Schreiber, one of the founders of the BfM, had issued a similar call for social reform the previous year. In 1908 she published Novels from Life, a collection of true stories of working-class women who sought help from the BfM. Like the figures in the Portraits of Misery, the women in Novels from Life suffered from exploitation, abusive relationships and extreme poverty. Schreiber used these stories of “women in need” to demand the reform of existing marriage laws and to call for greater protection of mothers. The Novels from Life were published in two issues of the BfM’s newspaper in 1909.
38 Schirmer, 90-109.
39 Gee, np.
completely divorced from the bourgeois world.” Kollwitz hoped to drive home the point that proletarian misery could be alleviated only through an understanding of these differences as well as the reform of the existing laws and welfare services.

It is significant that many of the drawings in the *Portraits of Misery* address the issue of proletarian hardship through the figure of the mother. Even more so than with Zille, motherhood was a major theme in Kollwitz’ art. Throughout her career she repeatedly explored this subject, creating works that examined both the deepest miseries and as well as the profoundest joys of motherhood. Among the most effective trope of motherhood that Kollwitz employed in her socially-committed works was the image of the downtrodden, pregnant, proletarian mother. Three of the drawings in the *Portraits of Misery* portray this maternal type. *Pub, At the Doctor* and *Christmas* all depict poverty-stricken, working-class women with huge, swollen bellies and expressions of despair stamped on their features. (figs. 1-6, 1-7 and 1-8) Like Zille, Kollwitz recognized the sympathetic appeal of such imagery. She used this motherhood type in her art in order to arouse emotion and to inspire compassion for the plight of proletarian women.

Kollwitz’ commitment to improving the plight of proletarian women eventually led her to participate actively in the political left’s anti-218 campaign. As the *Portraits of Misery* made clear, the artist had long believed in the necessity of providing the women of the working class with access to birth control measures. By the early twenties she was also in firm support of abolishing the abortion laws. Kollwitz’ engagement with the abortion issue at this time was motivated by both political as well as personal reasons. In May of 1920 her niece received an illegal abortion. Two years later her daughter-in-law opted to terminate her second pregnancy. These events were among the many factors that led the artist to recognize the need for reform of the existing abortion legislation.

---

In 1927 Kollwitz collaborated with the abortion activist Carl Credé on an important anti-218 publication. Credé, a Social Democratic gynecologist and obstetrician, had been jailed in 1926 for illegally performing abortions. While serving his prison sentence, Credé wrote *Volk in Not: Das Unheil des Abtreibungsparagraphen* (People in Need: The Evil of the Abortion Paragraphs), a political tract that called for the reform of the existing abortion legislation. Following the SPD party line, Credé argued that Paragraph 218 was an unjust law that forced the proletariat to produce children they could not afford to support. His booklet proved to be incredibly popular during the later Weimar years. It was even reprinted in 1929 in the Communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* under the title *Women in Need: Paragraph 218*.

*People in Need* was illustrated with several works by Kollwitz, including most of the etchings from the *Portraits of Misery* cycle. The majority of the images included in the booklet focused on the suffering of proletarian mothers. Credé hoped that these representations of “women in need” would inflame the public and incite them to action. Stressing the documentary nature of Kollwitz’ art, Credé urged the people to confront the social reality recorded in her works and to rise up in protest against a harsh, unjust law that condemned the proletariat to a life of misery. As he stated in his introduction:

> Can we simply ignore everything that the motherly artist [Kollwitz] witnessed and recorded in the practice of her husband, a doctor to the poor in East Berlin?... The problem [of abortion and Paragraph 218] is more acute and burning than ever before—it is perhaps the most important social question of the day. This book stirs up fervor and has the power to pave the way for a popular movement.

---

41 Carl Credé, *Volk in Not: Das Unheil des Abtreibungsparagraphen* (Dresden: Carl Reissner Verlag, 1927).
42 All of the drawings from the *Portraits of Misery* were included, with the exception of *Drunken Man*.
43 “Können wir uns dem verschließen, was die mütterliche Künstlerin in der Praxis ihres Gatten, des Armenarztes im Berliner Osten, sah und gestaltete? Das Problem ist heute aktueller und brennender denn je, es ist wohl die wichtigste soziale Frage. Dies Buch reisst mit und hat die Kraft, einer Volksbewegung Bahn zu brechen...” Credé, np.
The work selected by Credé for the title page of *People in Need* was an etching titled *At the Doctor*. (see fig. 1-7) The print portrays a middle-aged, heavily-pregnant proletarian woman knocking quietly on a doctor’s door. As in many of her works, Kollwitz included very little background detail in this image. The meaning of the work is mainly established through the woman’s expressive gestures, rather than through the inclusion of narrative information. Her slumped shoulders, bowed head and lowered eyes reveal that this is a moment of extreme misery and overwhelming despair. The emotional intensity of the print is heightened by Kollwitz's characteristic use of an expressive naturalism. While the woman is convincingly portrayed, her hands are slightly exaggerated, thus becoming the focus of the image. One overly large hand knocks lightly on the door, while the other is clenched tightly into a fist. Clearly, the visit to the doctor has filled the woman with turmoil. Given her heavily pregnant state it is obvious that she is not there to receive an abortion. She has made the decision to keep her child; however, her dejected body language indicates that she views this pregnancy as a burden, rather than a source of joy. In light of her haggard appearance she most likely already has several children to support. The woman appears weighed down by the knowledge that this additional child will increase the poverty and misery of her family. Overall, *At the Doctor* suggests the endless, unrelenting cycle of pregnancy and poverty experienced by many proletarian woman. The selection of this work as the opening image of *People of Need* was calculated by Credé to arouse compassion by picturing the poor, helpless victim of Germany’s repressive abortion and contraception laws.

Kollwitz’ *At the Doctor* was appropriated several more times during the twenties by both the SPD and the KPD for their anti-218 efforts. With its emotionally-arousing portrayal of the hardships of proletarian maternity the work was ideally suited to the left’s abortion rights campaign. In 1929 Credé’s *People in Need* was modified into a play titled §218 Gequälte
*Menschen (Paragraph 218: Tortured People)* that was staged by the leftist theater director Erwin Piscator. When the show opened in Leipzig in November, Kollwitz’ *At the Doctor* was used to illustrate the theater program.\(^{44}\) (Fig. 1-9) In 1928 the print was also reproduced in a KPD pamphlet titled *Abtreibung oder Verhütung?* (Abortion or Contraception?) written by the Communist doctor Martha Ruben-Wolf.\(^{45}\) The pamphlet advocated for the repeal of article 184.3, which banned the display of contraceptive devices, and stressed the need for the women of the working class to have access to birth control information. The same year the drawing also appeared in an article on Paragraph 218 that was published in the KPD woman’s journal *Die Kämpferin* (The Female Fighter). The article argued that abortion was a social issue caused by deprivation and financial hardship. In all cases, Kollwitz’ print was intended to strike a sympathetic chord in the viewers.

Kollwitz’ most well-known contribution to the political left’s anti-218 campaign was a lithographic poster titled *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs!* created in 1923. (See fig. 1-1) The work was commissioned by the Frauenreichssekretariat (Secretariat of Women’s Issues) of the KPD. The poster was intended to be displayed throughout Germany to announce a Communist abortion-rights campaign planned for the autumn of that year. According to an entry in her diary, Kollwitz was finished with the work by August.\(^{46}\) The poster wasn’t published until 1924, however, as the KPD was forced to postpone its campaign for a year due to the worsening economic situation in Germany at this time.

For her anti-218 poster Kollwitz created an emotionally-wrenching image of maternal suffering and despair. *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs!* portrays a poverty-stricken, pregnant proletarian woman and her two young children set against a blank background. The poverty of

\(^{44}\) See Usborne, *Cultures*, 49-50 for more information on §218 Gequälte Menschen.


\(^{46}\) Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, 557.
the figures is indicated by their simple, well-worn clothing and haggard appearance. As in earlier works such as *At the Doctor*, Kollwitz made use of expressive gestures to create an emotionally moving image. The body language of the mother speaks of both her love for her children, yet also of her despair at her current pregnancy. Although she tenderly holds onto her children, her slumped shoulders, vacant, shadowed eyes and downturned head reveals her hopelessness at the thought of another child she cannot support. Overall, Kollwitz presented the proletarian mother in her work as a tragic figure, the victim of an unjust abortion law that forces her to bear children she cannot possibly hope to feed.

As the art historian Elizabeth Prelinger has discussed at length, Kollwitz was incredibly aware of the relationship of style and technique to meaning in a work of art. This is readily apparent with her *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs!* In many of her socially-engaged works, including this poster, Kollwitz used the lithographic technique, believing that it allowed for a gestural quality that could enhance the expressive and emotional immediacy of the image. She also intentionally employed a broad and iconic style in her poster. She illustrated her subject with an economy of means. There are no unnecessary details that could distract the viewer or atmospheric effects to soften the image. In her drawings and prints geared towards social commentary Kollwitz sought to avoid any stylistic or technical affectations that would romanticize or aestheticize her images of proletarian misery and detract from her message. Overall, the simplified, yet expressive naturalism of *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs!* creates a starkly powerful image of maternal suffering.

Kollwitz’ decision to address the abortion issue in her poster with the figure of the suffering proletarian mother was intended not only to appeal to public sympathy, but also to counter the claim that women who sought abortions were selfish and sexually immoral or even

---

47 Prelinger, 49-51.
heartless murderers. As the art historian Marsha Meskimmon has discussed, anti-abortionists frequently linked abortion to the idea of frivolous and promiscuous sexual activity in an attempt to make their case resound with public feeling.\(^{48}\) Another common strategy for pro-218 campaigners was to equate abortion with murder. Works of art made in support of Paragraph 218 often portrayed aborting women in the company of Death or included images of aborted fetuses. For instance, the title page to *Mord an der Zukunft* (Murder of the Future, 1929), a pro-218 book that argued that the legalization of abortion would lead to the “death of the German *Volk,*” included an illustration of a howling embryo with a skull for a head.\(^{49}\) (fig. 1-10) Another illustration from the book portrayed a woman and Death working together to dig a grave. (fig. 1-11) Given these accusations, those who fought to have Paragraph 218 repealed were forced to assert the moral integrity of women who had abortions. They did so by focusing on the image of the “poor mother” who was driven to abortion by economic need. It is significant that in her poster Kollwitz chose to include two children—the mother lovingly cradles her infant in one arm while her young child clings to the other. The resulting image embodies the idea that working-class women had abortions so they could better care for the families that they already had, not because they were selfish and promiscuous or thoughtless murderers.

In addition to the image of the suffering mother, Kollwitz’ poster also prominently featured the KPD campaign motto, “down with the abortion paragraphs.” Kollwitz’ signature and the words “published by the KPD” are included as well, thus emphasizing the solidarity between the artist and the Communist Party. Even though Kollwitz wasn’t a member of the KPD, the Party was eager to secure her participation in their fight to legalize abortion. Kollwitz had long been the celebrated artist of proletarian maternity in Germany and the KPD hoped to capitalize

\(^{48}\) Meskimmon, *We Weren’t Modern Enough*, 109-110.

on her well-known name. The Party believed that Kollwitz’ recruitment to the cause would help generate publicity for the abortion campaign and attract a greater number of people to its rallies and demonstrations. As such, the poster was intended to highlight her support of the Communist crusade against Paragraph 218 along with advertising for the upcoming campaign.

The juxtaposition of text and imagery in Kollwitz’ poster indicates that by the mid-twenties the figure of the suffering proletarian mother had become the main emblem of the KPD’s fight for abortion rights. As I have demonstrated, there were multiple motivations behind the Party’s appropriation of this maternal trope. Naturalist artists such as Zille and Kollwitz had long demonstrated the effectiveness of using motherhood imagery to raise awareness of social problems and to call for reform. They established a tradition in leftist art of using the image of the downtrodden proletarian mother as a sympathetic icon of the working class. Within the context of the Weimar abortion debates this maternal type proved to be effective not only at inspiring public compassion, but also at countering anti-abortion rhetoric. As I will discuss next the trope of the suffering proletarian mother was also ideally suited to the ideological aims of the Communist anti-218 campaign.

4. The Suffering Proletarian Mother as Symbol of Capitalist Exploitation: Communist Anti-218 Imagery

The figure of the suffering proletarian mother functioned in Communist anti-218 imagery not only as a sympathetic icon of the working class, but also as an ideological weapon of class warfare. This is most apparent in the anti-218 works created by artists who were committed members of the Communist Party. Throughout the duration of the KPD’s abortion campaign Communist artists used this maternal trope to embody the Party’s claim that Paragraph 218 was a form of sex-specific class oppression, an unjust law that specifically targeted proletarian women.
The use of such maternal imagery was intended both to arouse compassion as well as to exhort the proletariat to political action.

One of the most important works created for the KPD campaign during the early twenties, in addition to Kollwitz’ *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs!*, was a lithograph titled *Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy* (1922) by the artist Rudolf Schlichter. (see fig. 1-3) In contrast to Kollwitz, Schlichter was an artist firmly committed to Communist politics. A member of the KPD since early 1919, he viewed his art primarily as a political tool. During the early twenties Schlichter was involved with numerous leftist artist groups, including Berlin Dada, with its ties to anarcho-communism, and the KPD-affiliated *Rote Gruppe* (Red Group). At this time he also worked as an illustrator for the Malik Verlag, a radical publishing house owned and operated by his fellow Dada-associate Wieland Herzfelde. The Malik-Verlag published leftist books and magazines that vigorously promoted the communist cause and Schlichter created art for many of its publications. During the early twenties he also contributed political cartoons to numerous Communist publications, including *Die Rote Fahne* (The Red Flag) and *Der Knüppel* (The Nightstick). The majority of these works were biting, acerbic caricatures meant to illustrate the capitalist exploitation of the German proletariat. In addition to his graphic works Schlichter also created paintings, typically portraits of the working class produced in a

50 The majority of the information on Schlichter comes from the dissertation written by Corinne D. Granof, “‘Obstinate Flesh’: The Early Career of Rudolf Schlichter,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1995). Granof’s dissertation is one of the only significant monographic studies of Schlichter written in English.
51 His work appeared frequently in *Die Pleite* and *Der Gegner*. He also created cover illustrations for several books produced by the publishing house. See Karl-Ludwig Hofmann and Christlust Präglaer, “Vorläufiges Verzeichnis der Buchillustrationen,” in *Rudolf Schlichter: 1890-1955* (Berlin: Staatliche Kunsthalle, 1984), 62a for a list of the works he created for the Malik-Verlag.
52 See Granof, 139 n.14 for a complete list of the Communist publications that Schlichter was involved with.
veristic, *Neue Sachlichkeit* style. Overall, during the early Weimar years Schlichter embraced the idea that his art could be used as a weapon in the communist class struggle. 53

Schlichter’s commitment to exposing social injustices in his art led him to contribute a work to the KPD’s anti-218 campaign. His lithograph *Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy* was published in the Malik-publication *Der Gegner* (The Opponent) in 1922. The work illustrates the fates of two pregnant women from different social classes. To the right is pictured the familiar figure of the downtrodden, pregnant proletarian mother. Limply holding onto her malnourished, barefoot children, she stares dejectedly at the ground. Standing behind her, a judge points to the numbers 218 floating above a prison—a clear reminder that for the poor, abortion ends in imprisonment. The desperate poverty of the proletarian mother stands in stark contrast to the obvious wealth of the haughty bourgeois woman pictured in the left of the image. Dressed in furs and clutching a pile of money, the wealthy woman is escorted by her husband to a sanatorium, presumably to receive an abortion.

Schlichter’s lithograph clearly supports the Communist interpretation of abortion as an economic and political issue. By picturing a suffering, impoverished mother and her underfed children he underscored the KPD’s argument that working-class women were driven to abortion mainly by financial hardship. The image is also an indictment of the hypocrisy and class inequality of the abortion laws. By including the bourgeois couple, Schlichter illustrates the idea that wealthy women can afford to go abroad to a sanatorium to receive an abortion, while proletarian women cannot—the law targets only the poor. Overall, Schlichter’s lithograph

---

53 It must be noted, however, that during the late twenties Schlichter shifted from a radical political stance to a more conservative position. He retreated to an extent from leftist political activities and began instead to associate with neo-conservative and nationalist intellectuals, including the author Ernst Jünger. Scholars typically argue that Schlichter’s 1928 marriage to Elfriede Elisabeth Koehler (Speedy), a Swiss actress with a strong dislike of Bolshevism, as well as his recommitment at this time to the Catholicism of his childhood precipitated his move away from radical politics. See Granof, 192-199.
embodied the KPD accusation that Paragraph 218 was an instrument of sex-specific class oppression. The despairing proletarian mother is pictured as the ultimate victim of an exploitative bourgeois system.

As in many of Schlichter’s caricatures, the figures in Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy are reduced to clearly recognizable class types. The proletarian figures are identifiable by their malnourished forms and wretched, submissive posture while the members of the bourgeoisie can be distinguished by their ample, well-fed bodies, arrogant demeanor and luxurious clothing. As the art historian Corinne Granof has explained, Schlichter’s use of human typology can be partly attributed to his admiration for the art of the German Naturalists, most notably Heinrich Zille. Schlichter would have been familiar with the artist due to his popularity in Berlin at this time as well as their mutual affiliation with the International Workers Aid.\(^5^4\) Zille’s work provided Schlichter with a model for the depiction of urban types—the suffering mother in Schlichter’s lithograph, for instance, bears a strong resemblance to Zille’s maternal images. (see fig. 1-4) In addition, Schlichter’s use of class types in his political cartoons was closely aligned with contemporary Communist artistic strategy. Many of the artists affiliated with the Malik-Verlag pictured recognizable class tropes in their works in order to clearly convey ideological messages to the viewer. For instance, in his drawing Toads of Property (1920) (fig. 1-12), George Grosz portrayed three avaricious capitalists counting their profits while a group of unemployed workers, including a pregnant mother, stand dejectedly nearby. In Schlichter’s Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy the contrast between the proletarian victims and their bourgeois oppressors was meant to underscore the KPD’s critique of the injustice of the abortion laws and, by extension, the overall class inequality of the capitalist system.

\(^5^4\) Ibid., 150-167.
The propagandistic and ideological message of Schlichter’s lithograph was further supported by the naturalistic, yet spartan style that he used in this work. Schlichter distilled his image down to the basics. The figures are rendered in a reductive manner, their bodies delineated with stark contour lines that illustrate their essential identifying features without adding any potentially distracting details or expressive shading effects. Like many Communist artists working in the Weimar Republic, Schlichter sought to attain a “clarity of meaning” in his political art. As discussed in detail in the introduction to this dissertation, during the early twenties many of the artists affiliated with the KPD, most notably George Grosz along with Schlichter, adopted a simplistic, yet naturalistic style with the intention of creating art that would be easily comprehensible to the masses. As Grosz stated in his 1921 essay “My New Pictures,” his goal was to create a “realistic picture of the world” using a “clear and simple style” that everyone could understand. Schlichter’s anti-218 cartoon clearly accords with this aim. The simplistic naturalism of the image makes the artist’s critique of the capitalist system perfectly clear.

Overall, Schlichter’s approach to the abortion issue in Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy is clearly dominated by communist politics. This is especially apparent when his lithograph is compared to an anti-218 work by a non-KPD artist, such as Käthe Kollwitz. While Kollwitz focused primarily on the suffering of working-class women under the abortion laws in her 1923 poster, Schlichter instead used the example of Paragraph 218 to expose the social disparity of the bourgeois system. His lithograph was intended not only to condemn the abortion laws, but also to raise the revolutionary consciousness of working-class women. As such, his

55 See the introduction to this dissertation for a discussion of Grosz, Hausmann, Heartfield and Schlichter’s 1920 essay “Die Gesetze der Malerei” in which they discuss how to create a collective art of the people.
56 George Grosz, “Zu meinen neuen Bildern,” Das Kunstblatt 5 (1921): 11-14. See the introduction to this dissertation for a discussion of the article.
work reflects the KPD’s strategy of using the abortion issue to radicalize women and win them for the class struggle. The Communist Party in turn recognized the educational and agitational potential of Schlichter’s lithograph. In 1923 *Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy* was reprinted as the title page to an anti-218 brochure published by the KPD Secretariat of Women’s Issues. The pamphlet, which emphasized the injustice of the abortion laws, was addressed to women and was aimed at inciting them to political action.

Both Schlichter and Kollwitz created their anti-218 works during the early part of the Communist campaign to legalize abortion. As the 1920s drew to a close and the KPD still had not achieved its goal of repealing Paragraph 218, the Party began to increase its agitational efforts. During the late twenties and early thirties Communist artists likewise developed new strategies of using their art to engage the German public in the abortion debates. As I will show, however, most artists at this time continued to address the abortion issue with maternal imagery.

With the onset of economic crisis in 1929, exacerbated by the crash of the US stock market, the Communist opposition to Paragraph 218 intensified. As mass unemployment and wide-scale poverty rendered the plight of the proletariat ever more desperate the KPD’s efforts to legalize abortion grew more urgent. Over the next year and a half several significant events occurred which provided the catalyst for what would soon become a massive and militant KPD-led movement against the abortion laws.

In March, 1930 the Catholic Center politician Heinrich Brüning was appointed Chancellor of the Republic. Referred to by the KPD as the “hunger chancellor,” Brüning instigated a series of draconian cuts to social services, dismantling welfare programs in the name of fiscal responsibility. He also attacked the right of married women to work. As Grossmann has noted, the Brüning regime initiated an era of “parliamentary paralysis and political polarization”
which resulted in the massive politicization of the German public. At this time “questions about women and reproduction moved to the center of a national debate on social priorities and entitlements.”\(^{57}\) Contributing to the growing politicization of the population was an encyclical denouncing abortion and birth control that was issued by Pope Pius XI on New Year’s Eve. In his *On Christian Marriage* (1930) the Pope condemned the idea of the “new woman,” supporting instead traditional gender norms that relegated women to the roles of wife and mother.

The KPD interpreted the actions of the Brüning government and the papal decree as signs of the bourgeois system’s move towards fascism. The Party accused the church and state of attempting to force women to produce “cannon fodder” for an imperialist war against the Soviet Union. The KPD was joined in its opposition to the encyclical by several liberal and feminist associations. On January 28\(^{th}\) of 1931 the Communist Committee of Working Women met with members of the League for the Protection of Mothers and the independent feminist Women’s League for Peace and Freedom in resistance to the encyclical and its assaults on women’s rights. This meeting marked the beginning of a broad coalition movement that sought to legalize abortion and institute sex reform that would develop over the next month.

One final event in early 1931 provided fuel for the anti-218 fire. In February two physicians, Friedrich Wolf (affiliated with the KPD) and Else Kienle (politically unaffiliated) were arrested in Stuttgart and charged with violating Paragraph 218. They were later imprisoned for having performed abortions on over 100 women. Their arrest unleashed a storm of protest throughout Germany. Within a few days a host of liberal, Socialist and Communist organizations, as well as sex reformers and members of the general public banded together to demand their release. Over the course of the following four months the resulting coalition

---

\(^{57}\) Grossmann, “Your Body Belongs to You,” 79.
movement, spearheaded by the KPD, agitated continually for the reform of the abortion legislation.\textsuperscript{58}

The 1931 campaign against Paragraph 218 took many forms of action. In Parliament both the SPD and the KPD continued to push for legal reform of the abortion legislation. Meanwhile, the numerous organizations involved in the struggle held conferences to discuss the abortion issue. In March, the movement moved into the streets. On International Women’s Day over 1,500 rallies and demonstrations took place throughout Germany. Grossmann accounts that approximately 3000 women marched through Berlin chanting, “Down with the Brüning dictatorship; down with Paragraph 218; we want bread and peace!”\textsuperscript{59} The high point of popular agitation came on April 15\textsuperscript{th} when over 15,000 people attended a mass protest rally held in the Berlin Sportpalast.

In addition to the political debates and public protests, the 1931 campaign also involved the massive mobilization of culture and the intelligentsia. Novels, poetry, music and more were used as tools to engage the masses in the abortion debates. As Grossmann notes, “In the winter and spring of 1931 it was virtually impossible...to go to the theater, cinema, or cabaret, listen to popular music, or read newspapers, magazines, or novels without being confronted with the passions surrounding [Paragraph 218].”\textsuperscript{60}

Since the late twenties left-wing poets and writers had produced scores of anti-218 literature, much of it published in the Communist and Socialist press. As in the anti-218 art created during the twenties, these literary works tended to focus on the suffering of the proletarian women that fell victim to the bourgeois abortion law. Perhaps the most famous

\textsuperscript{58} In addition to seeking the reform of the abortion legislation, the movement also agitated for improved maternity benefits and insurance as well as the right of women to work. See Ibid., 78-85 for more information on the foundation of the coalition movement and its demands.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 86.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 85.
example *Ballad to Paragraph 218* (1929), written by the Marxist poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht. In Brecht’s verse a homeless, impoverished woman begs her doctor for help with an unwanted pregnancy, pleading that she and her unemployed husband cannot afford children. In response, the doctor reprimands the woman, reminding that she must do her “duty” to her country:

You’ll make a simply splendid little mummy
Producing cannon-fodder from your tummy
That’s what your body’s for, and you know it,
what’s more
And it’s laid down by law
And now get this straight:
You’ll soon be a mother, just wait.\(^\text{61}\)

Brecht’s message is clear. The capitalist system requires people to serve as “cannon-and-machine fodder.”\(^\text{62}\) As such, working-class women are expected to continue to produce more children, despite the hardships and miseries they face. This message was repeated in many of the anti-218 novels and plays written during the early thirties.\(^\text{63}\)

The visual arts also continued to play an important role in the anti-218 campaign during the late twenties and early thirties. At this time numerous Communist artists created art attacking the abortion laws, most notably the photomontagist John Heartfield. A member of the KPD since 1918, Heartfield was the one of the Party’s most well-known and influential artists. Since the early twenties, when he was involved with numerous radical artist groups such as Berlin Dada, Heartfield had strongly supported the idea that art should address contemporary social and


\(^{62}\) In a later verse of the poem Brecht replaces “cannon-fodder” with “machine-fodder.”

\(^{63}\) A few important examples include Fran Krey’s *Maria und der Paragraph. Ein Roman um §218*, first published as a Red-One-Mark-Novel in 1931 and then serialized in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, Kurt Tucholsky’s poem “Die Liebesfrucht spricht,” written in 1931 and Erich Weinart’s poem “Paragraph 218” published in *Der Mahnruf* in 1929.
political issues. His desire to use his art as a tool in the service of communist politics led him to pioneer the photomontage technique. Asserting that “new political problems demand new means of propaganda,” Heartfield used his innovative photomontages to expose the inconsistencies and injustices of the capitalist system. His photographic images were reproduced in numerous Communist periodicals and publications, including the Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper, AIZ). Published by the Communist propagandist Willi Müzenberg’s *Neuer Deutscher Verlag* (New German Publishing House), the AIZ was the second-largest magazine in Germany and the largest international workers’ journal. Heartfield’s position as one of the chief illustrators for the AIZ during the early thirties helped to establish his reputation as Germany’s leading Communist artist.

On March 8th, 1930 the AIZ published an issue commemorating International Women’s Day, a Socialist holiday established in 1910 as a celebration of women’s economic, political and social achievements. In addition to images illustrating the history of women’s social advancement, the issue included a powerful anti-war and anti-218 photomontage by Heartfield. (fig. 1-13) In the front center of his image Heartfield placed a photograph of a hugely pregnant proletarian woman. With her slumped shoulders and anxious eyes the woman clearly conforms to the stereotypical image of the suffering mother employed in most leftist anti-218 works at this time. Directly behind the woman’s head is a photograph of a fallen soldier. The juxtaposition of the two images reads as a visual representation of the message of Brecht’s poem—proletarian

---

66 Heartfield’s photomontages appeared regularly in the AIZ from around 1930 until 1938, when he was exiled to London by the National Socialists due to his communist sympathies.
women are forced to bear children to serve as “cannonfodder” for the capitalist state. This message is driven home by the inclusion of text at the bottom of the work. The caption cynically states, “Forced supplier of human material take courage! The state needs unemployed workers and soldiers!” The publication of this photomontage on International Women’s Day—a day on which thousands of women across Germany were protesting against the abortion laws under Communist leadership—clearly reveals that Heartfield and the editors of the AIZ viewed the fight for abortion rights as a central issue for working-class women.

The publication of Heartfield’s photomontages in the AIZ coincided with the increasing use of photography in the Communist press. By the mid-1920s the Communist Party had recognized the potential of photography to function as an instrument of political enlightenment. Many publications aimed at the proletariat, the AIZ especially, began to publish photographs at this time documenting the everyday life of the workers—the tenements where they lived, the factories where they worked, the political activities they engaged in, etc. One of the main intentions of these images was to increase the class-consciousness of the proletariat and foster a sense of identify and solidarity among the working class. In this case photographs were preferred to caricatures or other drawings due to their supposed “realism” and authenticity. Photography was seen as the artistic medium most capable of accurately capturing the “truth” of working-class existence.68

The photomontage technique in particular was championed by the Communist press and its affiliated artists as an indispensable propagandistic tool. By combining pictures with text and juxtaposing contrasting photographs photomontages were able to drive home a political meaning more effectively than any single element individually could. According to the photo historian Sabine Kriebel, “photomontage was considered the ideal form of Marxist critique, because a

---

68 See Stumberger, 80-86 for a discussion of photography in the communist press.
juxtaposition of material imprints of ‘the real’ enabled the viewer to understand the relations between things—social relations, political relations, commodity relations…”69 In Heartfield’s *Forced Producer of Human Material*, for instance, the combination of two seemingly unrelated photographs—an image of an expectant mother and a dead soldier—serves to elucidate the role the abortion laws played in the government’s military strategy.

In addition to exposing the realities of the capitalist and bourgeois system, the photomontage technique was also championed for its ability to activate the viewer. As the photo historian Rudolf Strumberger had discussed, by having pictures and words refer to each other, photomontages were able to dilate the viewer’s attention from the particular to the general. His or her fate was depicted as part of a larger political context and thus no longer unchangeable. In *Forced Producer of Human Material* Heartfield sought to activate the viewer through the temporal disjunction of the image. The pregnant woman in the foreground of the work represents the present, while the dead soldier in the background portrays the possible future. Heartfield’s image thus encourages the viewer to take political action in order to alter both the present and future reality.

Many of the leftist artists who created art for the anti-218 campaign during the early thirties, Heartfield included, were members of the *Assoziation der revolutionären Bildenden Künstler Deutschlands* (Association of Revolutionary Visual Artists in Germany, ASSO). Founded in Berlin in March, 1928 the ASSO was the main Communist organization for the visual arts in Germany during the later Weimar years.70 By 1930 it had developed into a national society with branches in major cities throughout the country. The ASSO’s membership consisted mainly of politically radical artists affiliated with the KPD. As the group placed a higher

---

70 See Guttsman, *Art for the Workers*, 153-165 for a discussion of the founding, goals and actions of the ASSO.
premium on political commitment than on artistic talent, the majority of its members are unknown today. Although some famous figures were affiliated with the association, including Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter, nearly half of the members were amateur illustrators.

One of the main aims of the ASSO was the creation of a revolutionary and engaged art. The members of the association believed that their task as revolutionary artists was to fight on the side of the proletariat. As such, they were committed to using their art as a weapon in the class struggle. This objective was included in the group’s founding manifesto which quoted Karl Marx’s dictum “Art is a weapon and the artist a soldier in the fight to free the masses from a bankrupt system.” Towards this goal the ASSO artists created a wide variety of works, ranging from traditional oil paintings celebrating the proletariat to banners and floats used in parades and party demonstrations.

The ASSO did not seek to impose a common group style or prescribe subjects for its members’ art. The association did, however, advocate a constructive approach to the portrayal of the proletariat. Rather than creating Elendsmalerei, works that simply recorded the miseries of working-class life, the members of the ASSO were expected to produce images that depicted the proletariat as strong, confident, active agents of change. This stands in contrast to the more “destructive” approach taken by many Communist artists working during the early twenties. Grosz and Schlichter, for instance, had created works that focused on exposing the evils of bourgeois society and the suffering of the workers. The ASSO artists, on the other hand, were more interested in using their art to develop a proletarian consciousness and to strengthen the will of the workers to fight. This goal also led them to ground their works in contemporary reality. Rather than producing timeless images, their works typically refer to current events.

---

71 See Revolution und Realismus. Revolutionäre Kunst in Deutschland 1917 bis 1933 (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 1978), 21 for the full manifesto of the ASSO.
Many of the members of the ASSO chose to engage with the contemporary abortion debates in their art. The works that they created for the anti-218 campaign reflect the artistic goals and strategies developed by the group. A print by the artist Eva Schulze-Knabe, Paragraph 218, provides a typical example. (fig. 1-14)

Paragraph 218 was published in 1931 in Stoss von Links (Push from the Left), the official journal of the Dresden ASSO. Both Schulze-Knabe and her husband, Fritz Schulze, had joined the Dresden branch of the group in 1929, a year after they became members of the KPD. As committed Communists, the two artists viewed their art primarily as a political tool. They typically made use of anti-academic graphic techniques and styles that they believed were best capable of clearly conveying political messages to the masses. With her Paragraph 218, for instance, Schulze-Knabe employed a hard-edged linoleum print technique that enabled her to create a boldly simplistic, and easily readable image illustrating the Communist critique of the abortion law.

Similar to much of the anti-218 art explored in this chapter, Schulze-Knabe’s print features the familiar figure of the suffering mother. A monumentalized, pregnant, working-class woman dominates the center of her image. As a member of the ASSO, however, Schulze-Knabe did not simply focus on the representation of maternal misery in her work. Instead, she also illustrated the major causes and consequences of abortion in the Weimar Republic.

Surrounding the central figure of the pregnant woman are several scenes illustrating the sources of her suffering. In the bottom portion of the print Schulze-Knabe pictured a working-class family with several children. Beside them she placed cannons, smokestacks, a military

73 Both Schulze-Knabe and her husband frequently used the linoleum print technique for their political prints. See Meskimmon, 133-134.
helmet and a crucifix. The visual juxtaposition of these images embodies the KPD accusation that the church and state were forcing proletarian women to produce cannon- and machine-fodder. Thus the mother is shown as the ultimate victim of an oppressive bourgeois system. Were the woman to refuse this fate and seek an abortion, only two outcomes are likely—imprisonment, represented by the prison in the background, or even death, symbolized by a coffin. Leftist campaigners often asserted that Paragraph 218 forced women to seek the administrations of quack abortionists, which frequently resulted in illness or death. In addition to these images of misery, Schulze-Knabe’s print also presents the solution to end the mother’s suffering—a heroic uprising of the people, which is illustrated in the left of the work.

Schulze-Knabe’s Paragraph 218 differs from earlier anti-218 imagery in many ways. Unlike Kollwitz and Schlichter, who produced timeless images, she framed the abortion issue in its historical context. Her work specifically references the papal encyclical as well as the mass demonstrations that were taking place at this time. Thus, her work both identifies the major enemies of the working class while also illustrating the heroic efforts of the proletariat to fight for their rights. Overall, Paragraph 218 embodies the constructive goals of the ASSO. With its inflammatory images of oppression and uprising, the work was meant to spur the proletariat to political action and strengthen their will to fight.

It is important to note, however, that despite Schulze-Knabe’s desire to use her art to activate and mobilize the proletariat, her print focuses primarily on the political activism of men. The group of protestors depicted in her image appear to be exclusively men, with the exception of a single figure wearing a skirt. Although thousands of women were actively participating in the anti-218 campaign during the early thirties, Schulze-Knabe chose to portray them in her print primarily in a passive role. The main female figure in Paragraph 218 is the pregnant proletarian
mother. By presenting women as the passive victims of the capitalist state Schulze-Knabe’s print reflects the male-bias of much Communist art at this time.

As Eric Weitz has discussed, during the Weimar years men were typically presented in Communist images as powerful agents of political change. In contrast, viewers were rarely offered representations of activist women. As Weitz notes, “Presumably, women’s emancipation from their dire straits would arise from the actions of their male relations and comrades.” Even though Schulze-Knabe was a female member of the KPD actively protesting the abortion laws, she still chose in Paragraph 218 to employ the somewhat conservative gender designations typical of Communist art and portray women solely in a passive role.

As Schulze-Knabe’s print makes clear, during the twenties and thirties Communist artists—regardless of their gender—took a similar approach to the abortion issue in their anti-218 works. Schlichter, Heartfield and Schulze-Knabe all portrayed the abortion problem primarily in terms of the proletariat and the woman as victim. Viewing their art mainly as a propagandistic tool, they sought to embody the KPD’s claim that Paragraph 218 was an oppressive law aimed specifically at the working class. They did so with the image of the “woman in need”—the suffering proletarian mother presented as the ultimate victim of an uncaring capitalist state. As I will show in the next section, the concept of the “woman in need” was the theme not only of much Communist pro-choice art, but also of a major anti-218 exhibition that opened in 1931.

---

74 Weitz, 329.
5. “Women in Need:” An Exhibition and an Enduring Concept in Communist Anti-218 Imagery

The KPD’s efforts to use the visual arts to engage the German public in the abortion debates culminated in the autumn of 1931. On October 9th of that year an important anti-218 art exhibition, Frauen in Not (Women in Need), opened at the Haus der Juryfreien in Berlin. The works of art that were displayed at the show were intended to demonstrate to the Weimar public the need for abortion rights for working-class women—the so-called “women in need”—by illustrating the hardships that they faced. The exhibited works ranged from images of poverty-stricken proletarian mothers to representations of exploited female workers. Many important politically-engaged artists participated in the show. Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Dix, for instance, sat on the exhibition’s honor committee as well as contributed works of art.

Women in Need was intended to be a non-partisan exhibition. The show was, however, organized in close affiliation with the German Communist Party. The initial impetus for the exhibition came from the Communist women’s publication Der Weg der Frau (Women’s Way), a journal published by Willi Müzenberg’s New German Publishing House. Moreover, the main organizer of the show was Otto Nagel, an artist who was strongly committed to the Communist Party. Nagel was a member of the ASSO, the editor-in-chief of the Communist satirical journal Eulenspiegel as well as the secretary of the International Workers Aid. During the mid-twenties he had mounted a series of popular art shows in Berlin that were intended to bring politicized and socially-engaged art to the masses. The Women in Need exhibition was conceived in a similar vein to these earlier exhibitions.

---

75 The exhibition traveled to Frankfurt in early November and closed on February 1st, 1932.
76 The title of the show can be attributed to the popularity of Dr. Carl Credé’s anti-218 writings.
77 There is little discussion of the Women in Need exhibition in English. The most thorough examination of the show can be found in Schirmer, 266-282.
78 See Guttsman, Art for the Workers, 121-126 for more information on the other exhibitions organized by Nagel.
The main goal of the Women in Need exhibition was to use art as a tool to empower the masses and instigate social change. The works of art that were selected for display in the show highlighted the hardships endured by working-class women with the intent of spurring the public to take action against Paragraph 218. As the Communist art critic Fritz Schiff stated in his forward to the exhibition catalog, “The greatest victim of this time is woman. She is weighed down by the duties of her roles as worker, wife and mother. Constrained by prohibitions and prejudices, hounded by the authorities, she and her body are locked in a terrible struggle against the laws and ideas of a declining social order and its outdated morals.” The Women in Need exhibition, Schiff continued, was meant to “educate, raise awareness and strengthen the will [of the masses] to overcome these circumstances…in this case the exhibition has become a weapon.” The exhibition was also intended to directly engage the general public in the abortion debates. Several related events were staged in association with the show. These events included lectures on Paragraph 218 and the government’s attempt to regulate reproduction as well as discussion evenings where members of the public could meet with artists and critics.

In addition to these non-partisan goals, Women in Need also carried an explicitly communist message. The layout and design of the exhibition were intended to expose the evils of the capitalist system while highlighting the virtues of Communism. The first room of the show was devoted solely to the art of Kollwitz. The works that were chosen for display, including her anti-218 poster for the KPD, featured suffering working-class women, thus giving visual form to the concept of “women in need.” Meanwhile, one of the final rooms of the exhibition displayed art from the Soviet Union. In contrast to Kollwitz’s images of misery, the Soviet works primarily

80 Ibid. Translated in Guttsman, Art for the Workers, 126.
portrayed women as strong, happy, healthy members of the new Soviet state. The main message of the exhibition was clear—the miseries endured by working-class women would end only with the overthrow of the capitalist system.

Overall, the Women in Need exhibition is exemplary of the German Communist Party’s ideological interpretation of the abortion issue. As the exhibition makes clear, the KPD approached the fight for women’s abortion rights as just one element of the larger class struggle. The title of the show, the exhibition layout and the works of art that were displayed all make it clear that the Party was concerned only with the fate of working-class women. The main goal was not to advocate for the rights of all women to control their reproductive destinies, but rather to end the oppression of the female proletariat. The exhibition’s limited focus on the political and ideological aspects of the abortion debates was noted by many art critics who attended the show. As one critic stated, the Women in Need exhibition was intended mainly for the “propagation of party politics and class warfare.”

One of the most well-known works exhibited at Women in Need was the painting Paragraph 218 (1931) by the Communist artist Alice Lex-Nerlinger. (See fig. 1-2) In her painting Lex-Nerlinger pictured a group of women working in unison to topple a massive cross labeled “Paragraph 218.” The women stand with their feet firmly planted on the ground, their bodies stretched taut as they push against the cross with all their might. Their identical poses convey a sense of collective strength, while the diagonal composition of the painting reinforces the dynamic action of the group. The women struggle to overthrow Paragraph 218 on behalf of

---

suffering proletarian mothers. This is made clear by the inclusion of a heavily pregnant, working-class woman in the left-hand side of the painting.

Lex-Nerlinger was a member of the KPD and the Berlin branch of the Association of Revolutionary Artists, both of which she had joined in 1928 with her artist-husband Oskar Nerlinger. Wholeheartedly embracing the artistic goals of the ASSO, Lex-Nerlinger envisioned her art as a tool to empower the masses and mobilize them to action. This aim is apparent in *Paragraph 218*. Rather than focusing solely on the suffering of the mother in an attempt to elicit a sympathetic response from the viewer, Lex-Nerlinger instead foregrounded the potential of the group of women to act as a force of revolutionary change. Her painting visualizes the strength of the masses and, in doing so, issues a powerful call to collective action.

The revolutionary content of Lex-Nerlinger’s work is supported by the experimental *Spritzblatt* (spray-painting) technique she employed to create it. Believing that artistic form could convey political meaning, Lex-Nerlinger frequently experimented with new artistic forms and techniques, such as photomontage and *Spritzblatt*. By using photographic processes or stencils and spray paint she was able to avoid any indications of the artist’s “touch” that could distract from the political message of her art. In *Paragraph 218*, for instance, the paint application is perfectly smooth and even, lending the work an impersonal, “machine-produced” quality. The artist believed that revolutionary art was not meant to engage in formalist or individualist pursuits, but rather to function mainly as a weapon in the class struggle. Moreover, as Meskimmon has noted, Lex-Nerlinger’s use of the *Spritzblatt* technique in

---

82 See Alice Lex-Nerlinger/Oskar Nerlinger: Malerei, Graphik, Foto-Graphik (Berlin: Akademie der Künste der Deutschen Demokratischen Republic, 1975) for more on Lex-Nerlinger and her political and artistic commitments.

83 In reference to the photomontages of the ASSO artists, Lex-Nerlinger remarked, “The works of the ASSO artists did not come from formalist, individualist games, but rather it was important to these artists to support the revolutionary class struggle with the harsh weapon of political photomontage.” See Alice Lex-Nerlinger, “Fotomontage—Ausdruck revolutionären Willens,” in Ibid., 15.
Paragraph 218 acted as an “aesthetic mark of allegiance.”\textsuperscript{84} It linked her painting to the work of the Russian Constructivists, who had similarly promoted the use of objective and simplified styles to create art for the new Soviet state.

Due to its heroic portrayal of empowered women, Lex-Nerlinger’s painting has frequently been championed by feminist scholars as more progressive than the standard imagery of the Weimar abortion debates. In contrast to artists like Rudolf Schlichter and Eva Schulze-Knabe, who presented women solely as the passive victims of the abortion law in their anti-218 works, Lex-Nerlinger instead presented them as powerful agents of political change. As Marsha Meskimmon notes, the figure of the mute, suffering mother in Lex-Nerlinger’s painting is sidelined by the active agency of the women working to topple the symbol of Paragraph 218.\textsuperscript{85} By emphasizing women’s political agency Lex-Nerlinger broke not only from the traditions of Communist anti-218 imagery, but also from the standard iconography of Communist art in general. Moreover, Gisela Schirmer has further argued that, unlike most Communist artists, Lex-Nerlinger did not focus solely on the political aspects of the abortion issue in her work. As Schirmer notes, the women actively fighting against the abortion law in \textit{Paragraph 218} do not wear the headkerchiefs that would have marked them as members of the working class. As such, she contends, Lex-Nerlinger’s painting is meant to transcend class divisions and to argue for the right of all women to reproductive freedom, not just proletarian women. According to Schirmer, Lex-Nerlinger’s work presents abortion as a women’s issue, rather than simply a political one.\textsuperscript{86}

While Lex-Nerlinger did deviate in many ways from the standard imagery of the Communist anti-218 campaign, it is important to note that the traditional figure of the suffering proletarian mother is still a central part of her painting. Contrary to Atina Grossmann’s

\textsuperscript{84} Meskimmon, 112.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{86} Schirmer, 263-265.
dismissive claim that this maternal figure simply “recedes pale and faceless into the background,” her image actually dominates the entire left-hand side of the painting.\textsuperscript{87} The proletarian woman is portrayed much larger than the figures of the women working to topple Paragraph 218. I would argue that the monumental scale of the mother is an indication of her importance to the overall meaning of the work. Moreover, a consideration of Lex-Nerlinger’s inclusion of this maternal trope serves to complicate Meskimmon and Grossmann’s feminist interpretation of her painting.

The heavily pregnant woman in Lex-Nerlinger’s image conforms to the traditional leftist iconography of the “woman in need.” Her simple clothes and kerchiefed head indicate her working-class status, while her slumped shoulders and defeated posture reveal her sense of despair at the thought of another child she cannot support. Thus, Lex-Nerlinger presents the suffering proletarian mother as the main type of woman affected by Paragraph 218 and most desperately in need of abortion rights.

Interestingly, Lex-Nerlinger depicted the suffering mother without a face. The art historian Rachel Epp Buller has noted that the artist often portrayed the characters in her art as faceless and anonymous stereotypes devoid of individual identity. Epp Buller argued that Lex-Nerlinger employed this strategy to connect with and activate the viewer. As she stated, “By eliminating distinguishing features in her figures, Lex suggested that they could be Everyman or Everywoman, universal characters with whom her working-class audience could ultimately identify.”\textsuperscript{88} According to Buller, the anonymity of the woman in \textit{Paragraph 218} suggests that

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{87} Grossmann, Reforming Sex, 86.
she could be *any* working mother, thus provoking the viewer into understanding the commonality of women’s plight.

While Lex-Nerlinger’s inclusion of an anonymous and generalized maternal type in *Paragraph 218* does make the painting more accessible to the viewer, it also opens the work to critique. Many feminist art historians, Meskimmon included, have argued that a truly progressive portrayal of maternity in art must address the complexities of lived motherhood. As Meskimmon discussed, throughout the entire history of art most artists, particularly male artists, have tended to produce prescriptive and universalizing images of mothers. In their art, she elaborates, the image of the mother tended to operate as a “monolithic symbol of woman” defined in and through relationships to masculine social and political structures.\(^8^9\) In order to break free from this patriarchal tradition, she states, artists must focus on women’s personal and lived experiences of motherhood.\(^9^0\) If a focus on the individual experiences of mothers is the litmus test for a progressive approach to the depiction of motherhood Lex-Nerlinger’s painting clearly fails. In *Paragraph 218* the image of the mother is reduced to a monolithic political symbol. Within the context of the Communist campaign to legalize abortion, the figure of the “woman in need” stood for “poverty” and “capitalist oppression”—the only circumstances under which the KPD found abortion acceptable. In making use of this universalized and normalizing trope Lex-Nerlinger ignored the individual experiences of real women with *Paragraph 218* and dismissed the possibility that there were motivations other than financial need driving them to seek abortions. Thus, despite her emphasis on women’s political agency in *Paragraph 218*, Lex-Nerlinger still promoted the standard Communist interpretation of abortion as an economic and political issue. Tellingly, in yet another *Spritzblatt* work from 1931 on the subject of abortion,

---

\(^8^9\) Meskimmon, 76.
\(^9^0\) See also Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009), 1-5 for a discussion of the requirements of a “feminist” depiction of motherhood in art.
the artist focused solely on the image of the suffering mother without any reference to women’s activism. ⑨¹ (fig. 1-15)

Lex-Nerlinger was, of course, not alone in her use of maternal stereotypes. As this chapter has made clear, the majority of the artists creating works for the KPD’s anti-218 campaign, male and female alike, addressed the abortion issue with the universalized image of the “woman in need.” Their consistent and repeated use of the trope of the downtrodden pregnant proletarian mother can be best explained by their political commitments. All of the artists were either members of the KPD or, in the case of Kollwitz, closely affiliated with the political left. As such, they addressed the abortion issue within the parameters established by the Communist Party. Although the Party agitated relentlessly for the legalization of abortion, it did not do so out of a commitment to women’s reproductive freedom. Rather, the KPD fought for abortion reform in the name of party politics. Its attempt to repeal Paragraph 218 was predicated largely on the belief that women required abortion rights only within the current exploitative capitalist system. Artists visualized these ideas in the image of the “woman in need.” Within the terms of the Communist campaign, this maternal trope provided the most effective propaganda image. As I have demonstrated, the image of the suffering mother was capable of both inspiring sympathy for the poor mother who needed abortion rights to end her suffering while also countering anti-abortionist claims that women sought abortions out of selfishness and immorality. In addition, this maternal type best embodied the ideological goals of the KPD’s anti-218 campaign. The image of the downtrodden proletarian mother visualized the class inequality of the capitalist and bourgeois state.

Ultimately, the Communist campaign to legalize abortion ended in failure. Although Paragraph 218 was slightly amended in 1926—the punishment for aborting women was reduced from penal servitude to jail time—the KPD was unsuccessful in its attempts to have it completely repealed. Even in the face of mass protest and dissension, the Weimar government insisted on keeping an abortion law on the books. With the release of Dr. Kienle and Wolf from prison in the spring of 1931, the public protests that had earlier rocked the Republic began to calm. In the face of the growing political extremism and repression that characterized the final years of the Weimar Republic, the KPD found itself unable to maintain its role as a catalyst for mass broad-based protests. By the end of 1931 the coalition movement had collapsed. As Grossmann states, “Inasmuch as the anti-218 campaign was part of the general working-class movement, it shared its fate and was destroyed by the combined pressures of economic collapse, growing National Socialist strength, the disunity of the left, and intensifying political repression.”

An amended version of Paragraph 218 remains a part of the German Penal Code still today.

Despite its lack of success, however, the campaign against Paragraph 218 provided Communist artists with the ideal opportunity to put into practice their newly developed ideas on the creation of effective political art. Recognizing the importance of producing “clear and simple” art that could be easily understood by the masses, most of the artists affiliated with the KPD made use of simplistic, yet realistic styles. They also pictured easily recognizable class tropes in their art, including, as I’ve demonstrated, the trope of the suffering proletarian mother.

92 Grossmann, Reforming Sex, 106.
93 Today, Paragraph 218 still maintains the unlawfulness of abortion in Germany. However, Paragraph 218a mandates that the woman and doctor undergoing and performing an abortion are not to be prosecuted under the following circumstances: the pregnant woman agrees to undergo state-regulated consulting at least 3 days prior to the abortion; the abortion is performed by a medical doctor; the abortion is carried out in the first trimester of pregnancy. See Susanne Dieper, “The Legal Framework of Abortions in Germany,” American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, John Hopkins University. February 23, 2012. Accessed February 1, 2016. http://www.aicgs.org/issue/the-legal-framework-of-abortions-in-germany.
While this chapter has made it clear that Communist artists during the Weimar period frequently used the image of the mother as an ideological weapon in the direct service of party politics, in order to understand fully the politicization of maternal imagery at this time it is important to consider the art of non-Communist artists as well. As I will discuss in chapters two and three, Weimar artists working from a range of leftist positions used the image of the mother as a tool of social and political engagement.
Chapter Two

The Image of the Mother as Tool of Social Critique: Otto Dix and the Verist Attack on Weimar Society

This chapter will demonstrate that leftist artists, such as Otto Dix, frequently used the image of the mother to express their social criticisms. Accordingly, I will examine Dix’s maternal imagery in order to explain how his veristic paintings and prints of suffering proletarian mothers were intended to expose the social evils and injustices of the Weimar years.

1. Introduction

The early years of Otto Dix’s (1891-1969) artistic training and career were marked by a searching stylistic pluralism. After completing an apprenticeship as a decorative painter in 1909, he enrolled in the Dresden Kunstgewerbeschule (Academy of Applied Arts), which he attended until 1914. At the Academy Dix acquired a solid foundation in painting techniques. He explored a wide variety of different artistic styles at this time, creating images in the Impressionist, Expressionist and Old Master manner.

Dix’s stylistic experimentation continued during the Great War. Having volunteered for front line duty in 1914, the artist spent his years as a soldier recording his experience of war in a series of dynamic, abstracted, Cubo-Futurist images. After the war’s end Dix became involved with the radical art group Dada. His paintings from 1920 display the satirical subjects, chaotic compositional organization and use of collage typical of much Dada art.

By 1921 Dix was creating the brutal and harshly realistic images of Weimar society for which he is best known today. Throughout the twenties the artist was drawn to depict the dark
side of contemporary urban life in his art. His paintings, drawings and prints of this period abound with images of diseased prostitutes, disfigured war veterans and the suffering proletariat. Dix portrayed these subjects with a detailed and sharp-edged naturalism often combined with expressive elements of caricature and exaggeration.¹ (figs. 2-1 and 2-2)

Due to his focus on contemporary reality as well as the critical and provocative aspects of his art, Dix is typically associated with the left-wing or Verist branch of Gustav Hartlaub’s *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Hartlaub himself presented Dix as a leading representative of this artistic direction, displaying seven of the artist’s works in his landmark exhibition at the Mannheim *Kunsthalle*.

Other notable Weimar art critics similarly placed Dix in the company of the Verists. In a 1924 article published in the influential art journal *Das Kunstblatt* (The Art Journal), Paul F. Schmidt singled out Dix, along with George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter, Otto Griebel and Georg Scholz, as the leading members of the “German Verists.” Schmidt characterized the paintings and prints of these artists as displaying “a fanatic love of the truth” intended to “directly comment on our current reality.”² Carl Einstein likewise linked Dix to the Verists Grosz and Schlichter, claiming in a 1923 essay that all three used their painting as a form of “critical observation.”³ Today, Dix continues to be classified as a Verist in the literature on the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.⁴

One of the major issues that has dominated the discourse on Dix for decades is the question of whether or not the artist’s works possess political meaning. Most of the leading proponents of German Verism were socially-engaged artists who placed their art in the direct

---

service of leftist politics. Art historians and critics have long questioned if the same is true of Dix. On the one hand, the artist’s frequent portrayal of the downtrodden and the oppressed seems to imply a political critique of Weimar society. Moreover, Dix was involved with a number of radical artist groups, including Berlin Dada and the Rote Gruppe (Red Group), both associations with strong ties to the German Communist Party (KPD). He also frequently participated in leftist art exhibitions and causes. On the other hand, however, Dix never joined a political party. Furthermore, the artist harbored a deep antipathy towards organized politics. When his friend and fellow artist Conrad Felixmüller invited him to join the KPD in 1919 Dix famously replied, “I don’t want to hear about your stupid politics—I’d rather spend the 5 marks’ membership fee on a whore.”

The question of Dix’s political commitment has polarized art critics and historians since the Weimar years. During the twenties many of the art writers affiliated with the KPD as well as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) championed Dix as an artist sympathetic to the leftist cause. They believed that his art exposed the evils of bourgeois society and, as such, could be used as a tool to mobilize the working class. As a result, Dix’s paintings and prints were frequently reproduced in the Socialist and Communist press at this time. Due to his lack of party membership, however, other leftist critics expressed concern about the “correctness” of Dix’s political views. They also questioned the political effectiveness of his so-called “pictures of


6 Dix’s works were frequently reproduced in leftist newspapers such as the Communist Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung and the Socialist Volk und Zeit. See W. L. Guttsman, Art for the Workers. Ideology and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), Appendix I for a list of the major leftist publications that reproduced Dix’s art.
miserability.” As one Communist critic asked in a 1924 review, “What exactly can Otto Dix’s art do to oppose the corruption of the bourgeoisie? Who benefits from these images?”

Non-partisan art critics also disagreed about the political motivations of Dix’s art. In his 1923 article on the artist Einstein attributed a leftist intent to his paintings and prints. He argued that Dix was engaged in an artistic war against the bourgeoisie. According to Einstein, Dix used his art as instrument of “harsh attack” to expose the hypocrisy of the middle class and the evils of Weimar society. In contrast to Einstein, the critic Ernst Kállai described Dix’s art as ambiguous and contradictory. Writing in 1927 on Dix’s famous war painting *The Trench*, Kállai argued that it was hard to tell whether the work affirmed or rejected the horrors that it portrayed in such great detail. As he stated, “Dix’s *Schützengraben* (The Trench) could just as easily be the object of supreme adoration of a fanatic worshipper of the god of war as it could be pacifist propaganda.”

The scholarly debates on the political meaning of Dix’s art continue to this day. Many art historians in both the German and the English literature continue to agree with Einstein’s 1923 assessment of Dix as a radical, progressive artist who used his art to expose the social injustices of the Weimar period and to oppose the corruption, cynicism and perversion of the bourgeoisie.

Since the early eighties, however, many scholars have argued that Dix’s art was motivated not by leftist politics, but rather by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Dix was an enthusiastic admirer of the philosopher, having read many of his canonical texts prior to World

---

7 See Guttsman, 159-165.
9 “harten Angriffs.” Einstein, 97.
War One, and as a result many art historians have argued that Nietzsche’s philosophy was the single most important influence on Dix throughout the course of his career. In his groundbreaking book *Der andere Dix: Sein Bild vom Menschen und vom Krieg* (The Other Dix: His Image of Mankind and of War) (1983), the German art historian Otto Conzelmann was one of the first to examine the impact of Nietzsche on Dix’s art. As he stated in his introduction, Conzelmann intended to counter “the still very widespread view of his [Dix’s] art as, first and foremost, ‘social criticism’ in the service of class warfare.”\(^{12}\) According to Conzelmann, Dix portrayed the ugly side of Weimar society not as a form of leftist criticism, but rather as an ecstatic, Nietzschean affirmation of life. In writings such as *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1891) Nietzsche presented his idea of the Übermensch (Superman) as someone who embraced all of life’s experiences, both the joyful and the painful.\(^{13}\) In line with this idea Conzelmann presented Dix as a Nietzschen artist who was willing to depict the unvarnished, ugly truth of contemporary reality in his works in order to affirm all that is questionable and terrible in existence. Today, art historians continue to invoke the Nietzschean and yea-sayer Dix as counterevidence to the critical and political Dix.\(^{14}\)

In the past two decades, other Dix scholars present the artist as a pragmatic, politically-detached careerist and opportunist. Many have noted that Dix carefully orchestrated his rise to artistic renown. James Van Dyke, for instance, has examined how the artist intentionally selected specific themes and artistic styles for his art in order to increase his notoriety and position


\(^{13}\) See Walter Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (United States: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982) for an English translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

himself within the Weimar art world.\textsuperscript{15} Recently, the German art historian Ursula Zeller elaborated on the image of Dix the careerist in an attempt to counter the claims of his political commitment. In a 2011 essay on the artist, Zeller argued that Dix participated in political exhibitions and radical artist groups in order to establish a name for himself and increase his renown, not due to his leftist political beliefs.\textsuperscript{16}

Many of the scholars who have argued against the political interpretation of Dix’s art have used the artist’s own words as the main proof of his political detachment. They often refer to Dix’s criticism of his Communist artist friends. In addition to telling Conrad Felixmüller that he would rather visit a whore house than join the KPD, Dix also berated the painter Otto Griebel in 1920, “You and your damn politics: why don’t you just sit your ass down and paint.”\textsuperscript{17} Art historians also often reference a 1965 interview in which Dix claimed that he and his art were not political. Looking back on the Weimar years the artist stated: “No, I didn’t associate myself with any political platform; I probably didn’t tolerate the rhetoric. I didn’t want to be used by any particular interests.”\textsuperscript{18} It is important to note, however, that such statements mainly reveal Dix’s antipathy towards organized politics and his disinterest in creating party propaganda. This doesn’t necessarily mean that a more expanded notion of political engagement isn’t applicable to his art. Moreover, Dix often contradicted his own claims that his art was not tendentious. In 1923 the artist stood trial on the charge of distributing obscene pictures. The charge was leveled at Dix on account of his painting \textit{Salon II}, an image of prostitutes in a brothel. Dix successfully defended the painting by claiming, “the idea of the picture is to show prostitution in all of its

\textsuperscript{17} Griebel recounted Dix’s critique of his involvement with the KPD in his autobiography, \textit{Ich war ein Mann der Strasse. Lebenserinnerungen eines Dresdner Malers} (Halle and Leipzig, 1986), 102.
horrific, dehumanizing effects, *to lash out at it as a social evil*, and to depict its destructive consequences for the body and soul…The entire rendering is geared toward causing disgust, that is, the very opposite of lewdness.”

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, when it comes to the question of art and politics Dix’s actions speak more clearly than his words. The painter’s consistent participation in radical artist groups and leftist exhibitions throughout the twenties and early thirties—even *after* his reputation was established and career secured—indicates his social commitment. I will argue that, although Dix’s art was never intended as straightforward party propaganda his work does have political meaning. During the Weimar years Dix used his paintings and prints to comment—often critically—on contemporary social and political issues. Moreover, despite his antipathy towards organized politics, his art was influenced to a large degree by leftist politics, particularly during the early twenties. As I will show, Dix’s affiliation with left-wing groups and causes impacted both the subject matter and style of his art. This leftist impact is especially apparent in the artist’s motherhood images.

Although not typically thought of as a painter of mother and child, Dix engaged repeatedly with the theme of maternity in his art during the Weimar years. Between 1919 and 1933 he created six paintings of mothers with children as well as seven images of pregnancy in a wide variety of artistic styles. During the Weimar years his variations on this theme ranged from ecstatic, Expressionistic images of pregnancy and birth to critical, sharply detailed depictions of the hardships of proletarian motherhood. *(figs. 2-3 and 2-4)* As I will demonstrate

---


in this chapter, Dix used the image of the mother in these works as a tool of leftist social engagement.

Despite the prevalence of maternal images in Dix’s oeuvre, the painter’s interest in the theme of motherhood has received relatively little scholarly attention. In the English literature on the artist there is almost no discussion of his motherhood works. British and American art historians have tended to instead focus mainly on Dix’s depictions of prostitutes when analyzing his images of women. German scholars, in contrast, have given a bit more consideration to the artist’s interest in maternity. In particular, two feminist art historians, Jung-Hee Kim and Gisela Schirmer, have discussed Dix’s maternal images.

In her 1994 book Frauenbilder von Otto Dix: Wirklichkeit und Selbstbekenntnis (Images of Women by Otto Dix: Reality and Self-Confession), Jung-Hee Kim performed a feminist critique of Dix’s art. According to Kim, Dix was an anti-feminist whose representations of women reflect his conservative and patriarchal beliefs. As she claims, Dix portrayed women in his art in two main roles—that of mother and that of sex object. These images, Kim elaborates, were created in line with the dominant bourgeois gender conceptions of the day. The artist demonized female sexuality in his portrayals of prostitutes, while glorifying motherhood as women’s “true calling” in his maternal works. Kim further claims that Dix’s motherhood works have nothing to do with leftist political engagement. Instead, she argues, these works simply express the artist’s personal patriarchal beliefs about women and motherhood.

In contrast to Kim, Gisela Schirmer has acknowledged the social and political aspects of Dix’s motherhood works, but interprets them as conservative and gender-biased. In her book Käthe Kollwitz und die Kunst Ihrer Zeit: Positionen zur Geburtenpolitik (Käthe Kollwitz and the Art of Her Time: Positions on the Politics of Reproduction) (1998) Schirmer discussed Dix’s use

21 Ibid.
of the image of the mother to comment on highly politicized issues such as social hygiene and state welfare reform.22 Like Kim, however, Schirmer’s main focus is a feminist critique of Dix’s art. She similarly feels that Dix adhered to traditional, bourgeois gender concepts in his representations of women, particularly in his images of mothers.

In this chapter I will expand the discussion of Dix’s motherhood works as well as the political meaning of his art by examining in detail his use of maternal imagery as a vehicle for leftist social engagement. To do so, I will analyze Dix’s images of mothers in relation to his participation in radical artist groups and left-wing causes. As I will show, the artist’s leftist affiliations deeply impacted both the subject matter and style of his maternal works. Examining the Expressionist paintings of pregnant women Dix created in 1919 while involved with the radical Dresden Secession Group 1919, I will argue that these works reflect the idealistic social hopes of the immediate post-war period. In line with the utopian socialist beliefs of the Group 1919, Dix used the image of the pregnant woman to symbolize the birth of a new world order. Analyzing the numerous veristic paintings and prints of suffering proletarian mothers that Dix created during the twenties and thirties when he was at the height of his political engagement, I will argue that these works were impacted by the Communist politics of Berlin Dada, the Red Group and the other leftist organizations that Dix was involved with at this time. As I will show, these motherhood works were meant to expose the dire plight of working-class mothers while also offering a scathing critique of the social injustices of the Weimar years. I plan to demonstrate that the artist’s use of a harshly realistic style was intended to reinforce the socio-critical intentions of these maternal images.

In addition to demonstrating the political intent of Dix’s motherhood works, I will also address the issue of the artist’s supposed misogyny and anti-feminism. Since the 1980s feminist scholars such as Jung-Hee Kim, Gisela Schirmer, Beth Irwin Lewis and others have used Dix’s images of violent sex murders, diseased prostitutes and idealized mothers to argue for his antipathy towards women and resistance to female emancipation.23 More recent literature, however, has complicated the claim that Dix adhered to conservative, bourgeois gender conceptions in his art. Änne Söll and Susan Laikin Funkenstein, for instance, have argued that Dix challenged traditional gender roles and examined alternative forms of masculine and feminine sexuality in his works depicting prostitutes and his images of social dance.24 The time is ripe, then, for a reassessment of Dix’s maternal images as well. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, labeling Dix’s motherhood works “conservative” and “anti-feminist” is decidedly too simplistic. Instead, I will argue that these works reveal the artist’s ambivalent and oftentimes contradictory response to women’s changing gender roles.

2. 1919: Utopian Hopes and Cosmic Expressionism

Dix’s direct involvement with the radical artistic avant-garde began shortly after the end of World War One. After being released from military duty, Dix relocated to Dresden and enrolled in the Staatliche Akademie (State Art Academy). Simultaneous with his academic training, Dix pursed his interest in modern artistic styles. Throughout 1919 he continued his experimentations with Expressionism. He also took part in a number of avant-garde activities at

this time. In early January he co-founded the Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919 (Dresden Secession Group 1919) with Conrad Felixmüller and several other artists. As is well known, the group was established to promote Expressionist art in Dresden and to support political causes of the left.

The Group 1919 was just one of numerous radical Expressionist artist groups founded in the heady aftermath of the First World War. The outbreak of the November Revolution in late 1918, followed shortly thereafter by the collapse of the Wilhelmine Empire and the establishment of the Weimar Republic, ushered in a brief, ecstatic period of utopian optimism about the future of mankind. Many German artists and intellectuals greeted these events with euphoria, believing that the dawn of a new, more spiritual age was at hand. As the poet René Schickele ecstatically proclaimed, “Now, now, finally now! The new world has begun.”

The Expressionists in particular, intoxicated by the vision of Germany rising phoenix-like from the ashes of war, rallied around the Socialist revolution. Believing that their art could play an important role in shaping a new, more liberal and egalitarian society, Expressionist artists and writers throughout Germany established artist-workers groups and creative brotherhoods. These groups were intended to forge a unity between artists and the masses and to promote the spiritual importance of Expressionist art to the new German society. Many of these organizations, such as the Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Working Council for the Arts) and the Novembergruppe (November Group), also formed direct contacts to the Socialist and Communist parties.

---

25 René Schickele, Der Neunte November (Berlin: Reiss, 1919).
In some ways, the Group 1919 was less overtly politicized than many of the other radical Expressionist organizations formed in the wake of the November Revolution. The group’s founding manifesto, for instance, made no mention of the revolution or partisan political commitment. In general, however, the majority of the members leaned to the left of the political spectrum. Most importantly, the leaders of the Dresden Secessionists--the painter (and KPD member) Conrad Felixmüller and the architect Hugo Zehder--both envisioned the group as promoting radical political activity.

Despite the lack of a concrete political program it is clear from both the writings and the art of the Group 1919 that its members embraced the utopian socialist ideals so prevalent in Germany during the immediate post-war period. An initial statement published by the group on January 29th, for instance, proudly proclaimed, “The Secession ‘Group 1919’ consists of a number of artists engaged in terms of their art, in planning utopian projects. Basic principles are: truth—brotherhood—art.” That the Secessionist artists devised a motto inspired by the slogan of the French Revolution (“liberty, equality, fraternity”) clearly reveals their support of the revolutionary cause in Germany. Even more than this, they viewed themselves as the heralds of the new world order. Their January 29th statement continues, “The energy of the time has produced this group, and the energy of the time to come can destroy it: we will contribute by preparing the way for what is to come, a way we already represent.”

The revolutionary aspirations and optimistic utopian yearnings of the Dresden Secessionists were repeated in the catalog for their first exhibition, which opened in April at the Emil Richter gallery. The introduction to the catalog, significantly titled “The New World,” was written by the Expressionist poet Walter Rheiner. In high-blown, ecstatic verse Rheiner

trumpeted the dawn of a new, more spiritual age in Germany and declared the Group 1919 artists its revolutionary forerunners. As he wrote:

Young painters appear, heralds of a new world. Hunted, tortured, blessed, and sacred prophets of the wonder of wonders: this roaring world, human beings thrown to the heavens, the resonating clouds, screaming sun, fluttering moon, browsing animals, the chaotic commotion that comes storming along and has no end. And they call to you and they sing and they cry—: full of the cosmos that is taking new shape inside of them, new with every day, every hour…

Rheiner also accorded the art of the Group 1919 artists an affirmative power, claiming that their revolutionary paintings could inspire social and spiritual renewal. As he proclaimed:

Do not search [in their art] for portrayal, beautiful reproduction, tender repetition, mere poetry of the eye! These young painters have grasped profoundly that such an understanding, formed and cultivated inside you, deserves to be destroyed. They assist the process, pushing the weak points, toppling what is already off-balance. Your splendid world is breaking up! It is lying in ruins! It is decayed and dead…But—: live beyond yourselves! Become more than you are! A new cosmos—the spirit—originates out of torn forms, liberated colors, quivering surfaces and spaces; the phoenix arises from the ashes…

It is clear from his essay that Rheiner attributed the revolutionary power of the Group 1919’s art to its Expressionist pictorial language. As the art historian Joan Weinstein has discussed at length, many radical artists and writers in post-war Germany embraced Expressionism as the most appropriate manifestation of revolutionary utopianism. They linked the formal characteristics of the style—the “torn forms” and “liberated colors” described by Rheiner—to the idea of oppositional destruction and constructive rebirth. The Group 1919 members in particular also believed that Expressionist art had the power to foster spiritual renewal. In a 1919 issue of the Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung (New Pages for Art and Poetry), the official publication of the Group 1919, Hugo Zehder presented the art of the Dresden

29 Weinstein, The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918-1919.
Secessionists as a spiritual tool that could inspire hope for the future. As he wrote, “Our new art will include that which spirit and soul experience in our present, as well as the seed of all that lies in the future and will unfold in time…The products of this art, born from the need and the longing for a kind of existence that had once again found its final anchor in the divine, are appeals for human dignity, for love and for humility.”

Accordingly, many of the Group 1919 members adopted a mystical Expressionism rich in cosmic and religious metaphor. The theme of death and resurrection was particularly prevalent in their art. Artists such as Felixmüller and Constantin von Mitschke-Collande, for instance, created quasi-religious works that combined the religious imagery of the apocalypse with the promise of resurrection. Such imagery was meant to embody the hope of renewal and salvation after the horrors of the war. Regeneration was also an especially ubiquitous theme. The Group 1919 artists—Dix included—created numerous images of pregnant women, newborn infants and couples frolicking in verdant landscapes meant to express their anticipation of Germany’s social and spiritual rebirth.

The themes of apocalypse, death and rebirth had already appeared frequently in Dix’s art during the war. While serving in the army he had created hundreds of drawings, watercolors and gouaches detailing his war experience. A 1918 work titled *Awakening* is typical of these images. (fig. 2-5) Indebted to the art of Wassily Kandinsky, both in terms of its expressive style and apocalyptic subject, the painting depicts a cavalry unit preparing for battle. As the title suggests, however, the implication is of a resurrection scene. The soldiers open their arms wide to the sky as if celebrating the sheer power of war.

---


31 Works by the Group 1919 on the theme of regeneration include, for example, Wilhelm Heckrott’s painting *Queen of May (Madonna)* and woodcut *Harvest Dream* and Otto Schubert’s *In the Forest*. 
The jubilant spirit of *Awakening* reflects the enthusiasm with which Dix greeted the outbreak of war. Filled with the desire to experience life at its most extreme, Dix immediately volunteered for military service in 1914. As he later stated in a 1960s interview, “War was a dreadful thing, but nevertheless something powerful. I couldn’t possibly miss it! In order to know something about men, you must have seen them in this unfettered state.” He continued, “I had to experience for myself what it was like when someone next to you falls down dead…I had to experience all that just as it was.”

Dix’s desire to live life to its fullest intensity by experiencing the war has been attributed to his admiration for the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In writings like *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-1891) and *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche insisted that man can only reach his full potential by opening himself to the most intense experience of his senses. Dix’s art and writings of the war-time period make it clear that he envisioned himself as a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, a “Superman” open to all sensations and experiences.

During this time Dix was also drawn to Nietzsche’s conception of life as an endless cosmic cycle of growth and decay, of birth and death ruled by the primal struggle between the elementary forces of *Eros* and *Thanatos* (Sex and Death). Accordingly, many of his works from the war combine scenes of death and destruction with elements of sexuality and regeneration. His 1917 drawing *Lover’s Grave*, for instance, pictures a pair of lovers copulating on a freshly dug grave, reflecting both Nietzsche’s belief in the cyclical concept of time as well as the philosopher’s celebration of sexuality as a central life force. (fig. 2-6)

In the early months of 1919 Dix’s essentially Nietzschean worldview merged with the utopian socialist ideals of the Dresden Secessionists. At this time he used his art to envision his

---

belief that a new, better world would emerge from the destruction of the war. He often expressed
this hope in paintings and prints on the theme of sexuality and procreation. In a series of
eroticized, Expressionist images of pregnant women and mothers in labor that he created in early
1919, Dix combined Nietzsche’s affirmation of sexuality with the optimistic utopian hopes of the
Group 1919, using these maternal works to symbolize the birth of a more spiritual age.

One of the largest and most important motherhood works Dix created at this time is the
oil *Pregnant Woman*. (see fig. 2-3) Painted in the spring of 1919 and exhibited shortly thereafter
at the Dresden Secessionists’ second group show, the work depicts in near abstract terms a
cosmic, Mother-Goddess figure floating against the constellations of the nighttime sky. The
maternal apparition looks down with star-filled eyes towards her swollen, pregnant belly. One of
her arms curves upwards the heavens while the other reaches down towards a bull laying at her
feet.

Like many of his paintings from this period, Dix created *Pregnant Woman* as a cosmic
celebration of the regenerative powers of sexuality. The goddess’s ripe, rounded body,
comprised primarily of simplistic circles and ellipses, calls to mind prehistoric fertility figurines
such as the *Woman of Willendorf*. (fig. 2-7) Like the creator of the Paleolithic statue, Dix
emphasized the woman’s fecundity through her ample, voluminous form. The eroticism of the
painting is further heightened by the bull, a traditional symbol of virility, straddled suggestively
between the woman’s legs. Moreover, as many art historians have noted, the painting openly
parodies the traditional Christian theme of the assumption of the Virgin. With its vision of a
woman floating in the sky, *Pregnant Woman* resembles Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* (1512), a
work then on display in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie. Rather than portraying the apotheosis of the Virgin Mary, however, Dix instead created an image of the triumph of Eros.

In addition to the celebration of sexuality, the central theme of Pregnant Woman is the idea of rebirth, both in a Nietzschean as well as in a socio-political sense. The work clearly embodies Nietzsche’s conception of life as an endlessly repeating cycle of growth and decay. The red and blue swirling forms that spiral out from the goddess’s swollen belly give visual form to the philosopher’s cyclical concept of time. Contained within these spirals are flowers, stars and skulls, a further reference to the cosmic cycle of birth, flowering and death.

The spiraling forms of Pregnant Woman lead to the center of the painting. Here Dix pictured the child that germinates inside the goddess’s pregnant belly. Portrayed as a skull imprinted with a radiant star, the child simultaneously embodies the principles of Eros and Thanatos and is clearly related to Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermensch. The philosopher first introduced his idea of the “Superman” as a goal for humanity in his text Thus Spake Zarathustra, where he envisioned this new man as a life-affirming figure who would break free from the social and moral values of the past. That Dix intended to portray his mystical mother-goddess as about to give birth to this “new man” is clear from the iconography of his image, particularly his repeated use of the star. In the prologue to Zarathustra, where the concept of the “Superman” is first introduced, Nietzsche wrote, “One must have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.” In a later section he continued, “Let the flash of a star glitter in your love! Let your hope be: ‘May I bear the Superman!’”

Dix was not the only artist at this time to depict the Übermensch in his art. The birth of a “new man” or “star child” was a recurring theme in the paintings and prints of the Dresden

---

33 See for instance Kim, 71-74.
34 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spake Zarathustra” (1883-1891); translated in The Portable Nietzsche, 129.
35 Ibid., 178.
Expressionists. Following the collapse of the Wilhelmine Empire the Group 1919 artists anticipated not only the dawn of a new era, but also the birth of a new, more spiritual people in tune with the cosmos. As the Expressionist poet Rudolf Probst stated in his introduction to the group’s second exhibition catalog, “Everywhere the labor pains of the new humanity is apparent.” Accordingly, many of the artists of the Group 1919, most notably Conrad Felixmüller, used the image of the “star child” or “new man” to symbolize the German people’s vital and spiritual new beginning.

Felixmüller, in addition to being the leading figure of the Group 1919, was also its most politically radicalized member. He joined the German Communist Party shortly after its establishment in late 1918 and during the early years of the Weimar Republic he was also involved with several leftist artist associations, including the Group 1919 and the November Group. Although by 1920 Felixmüller had dedicated himself fully to the oppositional politics of Communism, in 1919 he was still equally drawn to the optimistic, constructive ideals of utopian Socialism, vividly apparent in the art that he created at this time.

Between 1917 and 1919 Felixmüller produced a series of paintings and prints featuring images of birth and procreation which had an impact on Dix. Typical of these works is a woodcut titled Birth, depicting in an Expressionist manner a woman giving birth with the assistance of her husband. (fig. 2-9) The mother’s angular, simplified body leans to the right of the image while the figure of her husband leans to the left. Their bodies connect at both the waist and the arms, forming a protective circle around their newborn child, placed at the center of the work. As the art historian Dieter Gleisberg has argued, Felixmüller intended Birth as more than

---

37 Between 1917 and 1919 Felixmüller produced more than nine paintings and prints on the theme of procreation and regeneration. See Schirmer, 198-202.
just a simple family scene. The white lines that surround the infant’s head like a halo lend the print a holy, spiritual air and symbolize the birth of the new humanity.  

Dix had met Felixmüller in early 1919, when he invited him to join the newly founded Dresden Secession Group. The decisive influence that Felixmüller had on Dix’s art at this time is readily apparent in a 1919 woodcut titled Birth. (fig. 2-10) Similar to Felixmüller’s print of two years earlier, the work depicts in dramatically reductive terms a woman giving birth. Although Dix’s image is much more sexually direct—he presents a close-up view of the infant emerging from between the mother’s spread legs—it is clear that he too intended to portray the birth of a new, spiritually renewed humanity. Beams of light radiate from around the child’s body, proclaiming his status as the “new man.” The sun and the moon watch protectively from above, lending the work a cosmic significance. Overall, works such as Dix’s Birth (1919) and Pregnant Woman (1919) and Felixmüller’s Birth (1917) and Pregnant Woman in the Autumn Forest (1918) (fig. 2-11) make it clear that both artists repeatedly employed procreative imagery at this time to give form to their utopian socialist hopes for a new world order.

Around the same time as Dix was painting Pregnant Woman he was also working on a related work titled Moon Woman. (fig. 2-12) Similar to Pregnant Woman, Moon Woman is a celebration of cosmic fecundity. In an image of apotheosis, Dix portrayed the voluptuous figure of a pregnant goddess dancing ecstatically above a nocturnal cityscape. Her abstracted and translucent body merges with the blue of the sky, while her head and arms dissolve into diagonal lines that radiate out from the center of the image. Included in the work are numerous symbolic references to sexuality and fertility. Blooming flowers are scattered across the composition and a tiny, winged Cupid flies out from between the woman’s thighs.

As in so many of his works of this period, Dix drew on both Nietzschean and Christian ideas in *Moon Woman* to create a painting that embodies the utopian hopes of the Group 1919 artists. The stars that dot the goddess’s body and form a crown upon her head may be read as a reference to the *Übermensch*. As in *Pregnant Woman*, Dix portrayed the goddess in this work as soon to give birth to the new man. This message is reinforced by the numerous biblical references in the painting. As Jung-Hee Kim has noted, the moon woman bears a strong resemblance to the Woman of the Apocalypse, described in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. As stated in the biblical text, “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth… She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.”\(^{39}\) According to Kim, “The pregnant moon woman [portrayed in Dix’s painting] will bring a savior to the apocalyptic world of the post-war period.”\(^{40}\)

Overall, as works such as *Pregnant Woman* and *Moon Woman* make clear, by 1919 Dix was using the image of the mother as a tool for leftist social commentary. Both paintings perfectly embody the heady idealism of the immediate post-war period. At this time Dix repeatedly used maternal imagery to symbolize his utopian socialist hopes for a spiritually renewed society. Significantly, the idealistic, leftist intentions of these motherhood works was recognized by many contemporary art critics and collectors. Both *Pregnant Woman* and *Moon Woman* were reproduced in the September 1919 issue of *Menschen* (Mankind), an activist journal committed to radical art and politics. The journal published numerous essays promoting the revolutionary significance of Expressionism and championing the art of the Dresden

\(^{39}\) Rev. 12:1-5 (NAB)
\(^{40}\) “Das schwangere Mondweib wird der apokalyptischen Welt der Nachkriegszeit einen Erlöser bringen.” Kim, 73.
Secessionists. In addition to appearing in the pages of Menschen, Moon Woman was also purchased by Fritz Glaser, a left-leaning lawyer and Communist-sympathizer who became one of Dix’s most important early patrons. Glaser clearly felt that Dix’s painting reflected his own leftist political sympathies.41

The utopian optimism so clearly conveyed by Dix’s Expressionist motherhood paintings soon turned to disillusionment. By the end of 1919 the dire social realities of the Weimar period had dispelled Dix’s idealistic hopes for the new Republic and deeply affected the art that Dix created. Thereafter, confronted by the hunger, mass unemployment and deprivation of the Weimar years, the artist’s work—including his images of mothers—quickly took on a socio-critical edge.

3. 1920-1925: The Verist Critique of Weimar Society

1920 to 1925 was a period of great change for Dix and his art. It was during this time that the artist developed the socio-critical Verist style for which he is best known today and became increasingly affiliated with the political left. By late 1919 Dix was moving away from Expressionism. Pregnant Woman and Moon Woman are among the last paintings that he created in a “Cosmic Expressionist” style. This abandonment of Expressionism was partly prompted by Dix’s growing disillusionment with the Weimar Republic. For this artist, the utopian new world envisioned by the Dresden Secessionists was nothing more than a hopeless pipe dream. The early years of the Weimar Republic were marked by wide scale social and political strife. Hunger, homelessness and unemployment were prevalent throughout Germany during this time. As a

---

result, for many artists, Dix included, the utopian pathos and exuberant hopes of Expressionism seemed laughably out of sync with the grim social reality of the day.

Dix’s move away from Expressionism was also prompted by his involvement with the artists of the Dada movement. During the latter years of the Great War, Dada, which had been launched in Zurich in 1916, had spread to many of the major cities in Germany. In late 1919, Dix became involved with a small Dresden-based Dada group centered on the pianist Erwin Schulhoff. More important for the future development of his art, Dix was also in close contact at this time with the Berlin branch of the Dada movement. In mid-1920 he was invited by the leading Berlin Dadaists George Grosz and John Heartfield to participate in the group’s *First International Dada Fair*, which was held from June 30th to August 25th in the Berlin art gallery of Otto Burchard. Dix exhibited several works in the show, including his infamous painting *War Cripples (45% Fit for Service)*. (fig. 2-13)

*War Cripples*, which depicts four horrifically maimed war veterans in full military dress marching along a city street, clearly reveals the impact that Berlin Dada had on Dix’s art. Rather than depicting a timeless and universal scene of cosmic significance, Dix instead turned his attention to contemporary life. In the post-war period crippled and disfigured veterans were a common sight in Germany.

Dix’s turn to social reality was consistent with the Dadaists’ proclamation that artists should focus on the contemporary world in their art. Many of the leading figures of Berlin Dada condemned Expressionism for its fixation on the transcendental and the spiritual. They accused the Expressionist artists of failing to grasp reality and of ignoring the critical issues of the day in their art. In his *Dada Manifesto* of 1918 the poet Richard Huelsenbeck called instead for an art

---

which “in its conscious content presents the thousandfold problems of the day, an art which allows itself to be noticeably shattered by last week’s explosions, which is forever trying to collect itself after the shock of recent days.” Huelsenbeck continued “The best and most challenging artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the turbulent whirl of life, who with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time.”

Dada had originally developed in protest to the First World War and War Cripples reflects the anti-war stance of the Berlin Dadaists. Even after the war’s end the members of the Berlin branch were united by a strong opposition to militarism and nationalism. It is clear from this painting that by 1920 Dix shared these views. He no longer celebrated the war in his art as an affirmative experience, but instead focused on its horrifying aftermath. With the cynicism and grotesque humor typical of Dada, Dix portrayed the war veterans as comically pathetic figures. The pompous, patriotic pride with which they parade through the streets contrasts strongly with their horrifically maimed and disfigured bodies. As the art historian Daniel Spanke has noted, “The depiction of the miserably crippled veterans unsettled, and, indeed, caricatured the usual heroic images of soldiers in a society that was thoroughly steeped in militarism.”

It is also apparent from War Cripples that Dix’s contact with the Berlin Dadaists led him to adopt a more socially critical attitude in his art. As many art historians have noted, Berlin Dada was the most highly politicized branch of the Dada movement. Many of its members moved in anarchist and Communist circles. As a result, they perceived of their art as a political

---

45 Spanke, 17.
tool with which to attack Weimar hypocrisy and complacency. *War Cripples*, with its caricatured figures, forced viewers to confront the brutal realities of the postwar period.

With its insistence on critically engaging with contemporary reality, Berlin Dada helped pave the way for the development of Dix’s Verist style. Art historians typical mark late 1920 to early 1921 as the beginning of *Neue Sachlichkeit* representationalism in the artist’s oeuvre as Dix began to take an increasingly “realistic” approach in his art, both in terms of subject matter as well as style, at this time.47

In a 1924 article titled “The German Verists” the influential art critic Paul Ferdinand Schmidt characterized Verism as a commitment to verity and “fanatic love of the truth” intended to “directly comment on our current reality.”48 As a leading proponent of Verism, Dix aspired during the twenties to portray both the good and the bad, the “glitter and doom” of life in the Weimar Republic.49 Alongside images of fashionable jazz clubs and elegantly dressed men and women, his paintings and prints of this period also featured crippled war veterans, haggard prostitutes and starving mothers and children. No aspect of contemporary life escaped the artist’s unsparing and unflinching gaze.

To support the realism of his subject matter Dix utilized a highly detailed, schematized figurative style in much of his art of the twenties. Gone are the abstract distortions of his Cosmic Expressionist works, replaced with more recognizable, although excessively caricatured, figures. The artist’s Verist works are characterized by a focus on surface appearance and sharp simulation combined with an exaggeration of form.

47 See for instance Spanke, 15.
48 Schmidt, 369.
Dix’s turn to a more veristic style at this time was prompted in part by his intensifying passion for Gothic and Renaissance art. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, many of the Neue Sachlichkeit artists admired and emulated the painting style and techniques of the Northern and Italian Old Masters. Dix had been interested in past artistic traditions since the beginning of his career as an artist. Many of his early self-portraits imitated the style of the Old Masters and, as noted in section 2, even a Cosmic Expressionist work like Pregnant Woman referred to Raphael’s Sistine Madonna. This interest in Gothic and Renaissance art increased during the twenties. Many of Dix’s paintings from this period reveal not only stylistic analogies and similar iconographic and compositional models to the painting of artists like Matthias Grünewald and Hans Baldung Grien, but also a use of the same technical procedures. Like many of his Neue Sachlichkeit colleagues, Dix intently studied Max Doerner’s 1921 painting manual Malmaterial und seine Verwendung im Bilde (The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting, 1921), learning from this influential handbook the glazing techniques employed by the old master artists. The use of this and similar painting techniques allowed Dix to achieve the “realistic” affects and minute detail characteristic of his Neue Sachlichkeit art.

The development of Dix’s Verism in late 1920 was also influenced by his involvement with the artists of Berlin Dada. Many of the movement’s leading figures, including George Grosz and Rudolf Schlichter, were members of the KPD. As committed Communists determined to create clear and legible works of art that would appeal to the masses, they rejected the

---

50 Dix’s Self-Portrait with Carnation (1912), for instance, bears both a strong stylistic and compositional similarity to Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait with Thistle (1493).
51 See Michalski, 59 for more on Dix and the Old Masters.
53 From around 1924 onward Dix primarily used a mixed oil and tempera technique in his paintings.
abstractions of Expressionism in favor of a more accessible figurative style. Like Dix, by 1921 both Grosz and Schlichter were working in a Verist style.

In addition to influencing the development of his artistic verism, Dix’s participation in Berlin Dada also paved the way for his increasing politicization. Dix was friends with many of the Communist artists in the group, most importantly Grosz, with whom he remained close throughout the twenties. From these friendships he became involved with numerous leftist organizations and began to increasingly use his art as a tool of social and political engagement.

In the spring of 1921 Dix, along with several former Berlin Dadaists, Grosz and Schlichter included, published an “Open Letter to the November Group” in the Communist satirical journal Der Gegner (The Opponent). The November Group was one of the numerous radical Expressionist artist groups established in Germany shortly after the end of World War One. The group’s stated aim was to support the Socialist revolution and to forge a new unity between the arts and the masses. Despite these revolutionary claims, however, by 1921 the November Group had become little more than an exhibition society.

Dix had joined the November Group sometime in 1919. Two years later, however, he resigned from the organization, along with his former Dada colleagues. Most of the resigning artists were Communists and, as their “Open Letter” makes quite clear, they believed that the November Group had betrayed the revolution. They accused the organization leaders of focusing solely on artistic and financial interests rather than on revolutionary politics. They also called for the development of a new radical art that could communicate to the masses and engage with the social problems of the day. As they stated “…today art is a protest against bourgeois

---

54 See the introduction to this dissertation and chapter one for a discussion of the Communist engagement with realist figuration.
sleepwalking…[We] must be…an instrument of the necessity of our time and of the masses, and we refuse any relationship with the aesthetic profiteers and academicians of tomorrow.”

Three years after the publication of the “Open Letter,” George Grosz established the Rote Gruppe (Red Group), an organization of Communist and left-wing artists that was officially linked to the KPD. The Red Group put into practice many of the ideas discussed in the “Open Letter.” The members of the group called for the subordination of art to political ideology and declared their work a weapon of class warfare. Their manifesto, published in the Communist newspaper Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag) on June 18th, stated “…a good Communist is in the first instance a Communist and only then a specialist, artist, etc…all knowledge and capabilities are to him only tools in the service of class struggle.” Much of the art created by the Red Group artists was meant to expose the oppression of the working class by the bourgeoisie. Significantly, Dix accepted Grosz’ invitation to join the group shortly after its founding.

Despite his participation in the Red Group and his affiliation with Communist artists, Dix never became a member of the KPD. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the artist was vehemently opposed to party politics. However, Dix was clearly drawn to the idea that art could function as a weapon of social accusation and critique. His paintings and prints of the early twenties repeatedly portrayed the social evils of the Weimar period. Similar to Communist artists such as Grosz, his art from this period abounds with images of the downtrodden and oppressed.

---


58 Dix remained a member of the Red Group for several years as revealed by his participation in the 1926 exhibition Arbeiterausstellung der Roten Gruppe (The Worker’s Exhibition of the Red Group).
Many of the art critics of the day recognized the socio-critical intentions of Dix’s art. Most famous is Carl Einstein’s 1923 assessment of the artist. Einstein, one of the most highly regarded critics of the interwar period and a champion of Berlin Dada, described Dix’s artistic approach as “painting, a means of cool observation. Observation as an instrument of harsh attack.”

Dix, Einstein continued, “is carrying out a war against the bourgeoisie. [He] gives this era—which is only the caricature of one—a resolute and technically sound kick in its swollen belly, wrings confessions of vileness from it, and produces an upright depiction of its people, their sly faces grinning an array of stolen mugs.”

That Dix intended his Verist art to be a political tool is made clear by the manner in which he displayed his work to the public. Many of his images of social misery and of war were reproduced in Communist journals such as Der Gegner and Der Knüppel (The Nightstick). During the twenties he also frequently participated in leftist art exhibitions. In 1922, for instance, he took part in the show Hungerndes Russland (Hungry Russia). He was also a participant in many of the “popular art shows” organized by his friend, the Communist artist Otto Nagel. Nagel’s intention with these exhibitions was to unite the arts and the masses by exhibiting the work of leftist and socially-engaged artists. Additionally, Dix was a member of the Künstlerhilfe der Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (Artists Aid of the International Workers Aid), a Communist relief organization founded in 1921 by the political activist Willi Münzenberg. The organization regularly held charity events, with proceeds being donated to community kitchens, along with publishing portfolios of graphic works by contemporary artists addressing contemporary social issues such as hunger and war. Dix contributed works to several of these

61 See Guttsman, 122-124 for information on Nagel’s popular art shows.
portfolios. Overall, it is clear from these activities that during the early twenties Dix envisioned his art as a political tool with which to engage critically with the social problems of the day.

Between 1920 and 1925 the figure of the mother continued to appear frequently in Dix’s art. During this time, however, the artist’s approach to the theme of maternity changed greatly. Rather than creating timeless, near-abstract maternal images, Dix instead produced veristic pictures of contemporary motherhood, including several works portraying suffering proletarian mothers. Dix no longer used the image of the mother as a utopian symbol of hope, but rather as a critical weapon to expose the social ills of the Weimar period.

The change in Dix’s approach to the subject of maternity is readily apparent in a 1922 print titled Pregnancy. (fig. 2-14) In a stark image of desolation and despair Dix depicted a dejected, pregnant proletarian woman on a deserted battlefield, surrounded by death and destruction. The ground at her feet is littered with the debris of war—dead bodies and damaged weapons. In terms of its style, Pregnancy is much more naturalistic than Dix’s earlier, Cosmic Expressionist works. The expectant mother is portrayed with convincing detail and, unlike the figures in Pregnant Woman and Moon Woman, her body is comprised of forms largely accurate to the human figure, rather than circles and ellipses. At the same time, however, the tendency towards exaggeration and caricature typical of Dix’s Verism is apparent in her hanging breasts and skull-like face with its triangular, pointed chin.

Pregnancy is the fourth image in a portfolio of six prints titled Death and Resurrection. This graphic series reveals Dix’s turn to social reality during the early twenties. The prints depict, in order, images of suicide, sex murder, street fighting, pregnancy, a dead soldier and a funeral. Despite this new focus on contemporary life, however, the overall theme of the series is consistent with Dix’s earlier interest in the notion of life as an endless cycle of birth, flowering
and death. Each print combines scenes of death with references to the possibility of resurrection and rebirth. For example, in *Pregnancy* the expectant mother, carrying new life within her womb, stands almost directly on top of a decomposing corpse. This combination of sexuality and death was already a theme in earlier works by Dix, such as *Lover’s Grave*.

What sets the *Death and Resurrection* prints apart from Dix’s earlier images portraying the cosmic cycle of life is the despairing tone of the series. By 1922 Dix no longer believed that a new, more spiritual world order would emerge from the destruction of the war. As such, his images of “resurrection” are bleak and cynical. This is especially apparent in *Pregnancy*. In contrast to the ecstatic, optimistic figures depicted in *Moon Woman* and *Pregnant Woman*, the expectant mother in this print is shown in an attitude of dejection, her shoulders slumping and head hanging down. Her body is outlined with thick, black lines reinforcing this sense of depression. Rather than being surrounded by flowers, stars and other signs of fertility she instead stands in a desolate wasteland. It is clear that the baby she carries will not be an *Übermensch* destined to remake the world, but rather just another proletarian child doomed to a life of hardship. Overall, in this work the figure of the pregnant woman no longer symbolizes Dix’s utopian hopes, but rather reflects his profound social disillusionment.

Dix’s disillusionment with the Weimar Republic is also apparent in several paintings of suffering proletarian mothers that he created during the early twenties. The artist’s earliest painting on this theme is a 1921 work titled *Woman and Child*. (see fig. 2-4) In this work Dix depicted a haggard, heavily pregnant working-class woman standing in a bleak urban setting. The mother wearily holds an infant on top of her swollen stomach while staring vacantly off into the distance. Every aspect of the painting attests to the acute material deprivation and destitution of the woman and child. Their shabby clothing and rundown surroundings—the tenement
building behind them is riddled with bullet holes—speaks of their extreme poverty. Both figures are also clearly malnourished. The mother is so emaciated as to appear skeletal while the child’s misshapen head hints at rickets, an illness caused by severe malnutrition.62

In Woman and Child Dix presented a snapshot of contemporary social misery. His work depicts the hardships faced by proletarian mothers during the post-war years of hunger, inflation and unemployment. During the early twenties hyperinflation raged in the Weimar Republic. At this time the German Mark became essentially worthless. While most Germans suffered great hardships, the working class fared especially badly. As the real wages of workers dropped dramatically, many found themselves unable to afford sufficient food and proper housing, often forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary tenement buildings in which disease ran rampant.

Dix captured the social hardships of the inflation period in his painting. He portrayed the mother and infant in Woman and Child as the victims of poverty and poor living conditions. Unable to afford to live in a healthy environment, both figures are afflicted by illness. Like many working-class children, the infant suffers from nutritional deficiency. Meanwhile, the mother’s sunken eyes and fever-reddened cheeks suggests that she suffers from tuberculosis, a common ailment amongst the proletariat at this time.63

Art historians have long debated whether paintings such as Woman and Child possess political meaning. Many scholars have claimed that Dix’s veristic images of the working class were not meant as leftist social criticism, but rather as matter-of-fact portrayals of proletarian life. For instance, Jung-Hee Kim, writing on Dix’s images of lower-class mothers, has argued

---

63 Ibid.
that Dix simply desired to be an objective “witness to his time.”\textsuperscript{64} I agree, however, with Dietrich Schubert and other art historians who have instead interpreted works such as \textit{Woman and Child} as a form of “engaged accusation.”\textsuperscript{65} The artistic decisions that Dix made when creating this painting reveal that he was anything but objective. He clearly intended this image to comment critically on the plight of the poor in Weimar society.

Dix based the mother in \textit{Woman and Child} on an actual working-class woman, using living models for his paintings. However, while the initial preparatory drawing for the image depicts a short, squat pregnant woman, in the final work Dix lengthened the mother’s body, giving her a more painfully malnourished look and emphasizing her near starvation. (\textbf{fig. 2-15}) Dix also decided to include a young child in the final painting, thus increasing the hopelessness of the mother’s situation. It is clear that she is too poor to properly feed herself and her infant, let alone the new baby on the way. Like many proletarian women in Germany at this time she is locked in a vicious cycle of pregnancy and poverty. These artistic modifications transform \textit{Woman and Child} from straightforward reportage into a biting social accusation.

The accusatory and critical message of \textit{Woman and Child} is reinforced by the verism of the painting. Dix attempted to convey the mother’s suffering through verisimilitude and detail. The veins protruding from the woman’s hand and the sharp angles of her face attest to years of hard labor and hunger, while the ghastly pallor of her face and deep shadows under her eyes suggest illness and exhaustion. This fixation on portraying poverty in a starkly unidealized manner reveals the critical potential of Verism. As the art writer Wilhelm Hausenstein stated in

\textsuperscript{64} “Zeuge seiner Zeit.” Kim, 95.

\textsuperscript{65} In regard to \textit{Woman and Child} Schubert states “Diese Frauendarstellung ist eine engagierte Anklage der Lage der Mütter in den Jahren der Inflation, Arbeitslosigkeit und des Hungers.” (This image of a woman is an engaged accusation of the situation of mothers in the years of inflation, unemployment and hunger). See Dietrich Schubert, \textit{Otto Dix im Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten} (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), 49-50.
1920, Verism is “the return of naturalism to the point of intransigence.” It is important to note, however, that this extreme focus on the details of poverty is combined with a decidedly anti-naturalistic approach to color. As in many of his images of working-class misery, Dix used a drab and monochromatic palette in this painting in order to reinforce the overall sense of deprivation and despair.

Dix’s attention to detail combined with expressive color in Woman and Child reveals the influence of Matthias Grünewald on his art. Grünewald was one of the Northern old master painters that Dix admired most, even referring to himself as Grünewald’s “student.” Above all Dix was drawn to the Gothic artist’s emotional use of color. In paintings such as the Isenheim Altarpiece, a work that Dix could have seen on display in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich from 1917-1919, Grünewald made use of anti-naturalistic color to heighten the emotional intensity of his image. The central panel of the altarpiece—a crucifixion scene—portrays the twisted and tortured body of Jesus hanging from the cross. Grünewald’s exaggeration and distortion of the figure, with its overly long arms stretched painfully taut against the cross, combined with the sickly, green-tinged coloring of the skin were intended to emphasize Christ’s suffering and, in doing so, inspire Christian devotion by acknowledging the enormity of Jesus’ sacrifice. In Woman and Child Dix applied Grünewald’s expressive approach to coloring to a contemporary subject. The working-class mother and infant are both portrayed with ghastly and unnaturally colored skin. In doing so Dix intensified the sense of their suffering and thus heightened the socio-critical message of his work.

---

66 Wilhelm Hausenstein, Kunst in diesem Augenblick (Munich: Hyperionverlag, 1920), 37. Hausenstein was writing in reference to the works of George Grosz and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen.

Dix’s socio-critical intentions are also evident from the marked thematic similarity of *Woman and Child* to the maternal images of Käthe Kollwitz and Heinrich Zille. As discussed in chapter one, Kollwitz and Zille belonged to an earlier generation of activist artists working in the Naturalist tradition. Both artists portrayed the realities of contemporary working-class life in their art, oftentimes focusing on its hardships and miseries with the intention of inspiring social change. Representations of proletarian motherhood appeared with especial frequency in their drawings and prints. They created numerous images of exhausted, heavily pregnant working-class women surrounded by multiple children. *(see figs. 1-4 and 1-8)* These images typically portray the proletarian mother as a downtrodden and dejected figure, oppressed by poverty and the burden of caring for an every-growing family. As chapter one made clear, such works were meant to appeal to public compassion and emphasize the need for social reform. In specific, Kollwitz and Zille often used these motherhood images to campaign for improved maternal welfare services and easier access to birth control for the working class.68

By the 1920s Kollwitz and Zille were well-established members of the German art world. Due to their considerable renown, their art proved to be incredibly influential on the next generation of leftist artists working during the Weimar years. In particular, many of the Verists greatly admired their art, Dix included. As Hans-Ulrich Lehmann has noted, Dix studied the works by Kollwitz that were on display in the Emil Richter Gallery in Dresden.69 He also would have been familiar with both Kollwitz and Zille from their mutual involvement in the

---

68 See chapter one for more information on Kollwitz and Zille and their use of maternal imagery in the service of leftist politics.
International Workers Aid. Their influence is particularly noticeable in Dix’s portrayals of proletarian motherhood.

Despite its more angularly distorted style, Dix’s *Woman and Child* bears a strong resemblance to the motherhood works of the Naturalist artists, at least in terms of its subject matter. Like Kollwitz and Zille, Dix portrayed the proletarian woman as the victim of poverty and uncontrolled fertility. He most likely also intended his painting to highlight the need for better state care for mothers and children. During the early years of the Weimar Republic the parties of the political left frequently campaigned for increased state-supported maternal and child welfare programs and the complete legalization of birth control devices. Given his involvement in leftist activist groups such as the IAH Dix most certainly would have been aware of these efforts. Moreover, his decision to include an extra child in the painting imitates the strategy used by Kollwitz and Zille to highlight the need for such services.

Overall, by modeling the content of his motherhood paintings on the maternal images of Kollwitz and Zille, Dix aligned himself both artistically and politically with the left-leaning Naturalists. This artistic positioning did not escape the notice of contemporary art critics. In a 1925 article, the critic Albert Dresdner referred to Dix as a “grim Naturalist,” thus linking the artist to the earlier artistic tradition. This association with the German Naturalists helped to solidify Dix’s reputation as an artist of the political left.

Two years after completing *Woman and Child* Dix created a second painting portraying the plight of proletarian mothers during the period of inflation and hunger. Similar to the earlier

---

70 All three artists contributed works to the Artists Aid of the International Workers Aid’s print portfolios, such as the 1924 portfolio *Hunger*.

71 Article 184.3 of the German Penal Code banned the advertising and display of contraceptive devises. This clause, along with the articles outlawing abortion (218-220), were the target of numerous Communist campaigns during the Weimar years.

painting, *Mother and Child* (1923) depicts a downtrodden, working-class woman and child in a bleak urban setting. *(fig. 2-17)* With his characteristic use of veristic detail and expressive coloring, Dix emphasized the poverty and poor health of the figures. The woman’s exhausted, heavily lined face is tinged an unhealthy shade of bluish grey. The sickly, shockingly shriveled infant she clutches in her arms appears pallid and listless. Both figures wear identical expressions of misery.

Given paintings such as *Mother and Child* many art historians have accused Dix of creating deliberately ugly and decidedly unsympathetic images of the working class.73 As Ursula Zeller has discussed in a recent essay, due to his use of exaggeration and expressive distortion, Dix’s portrayals of the proletariat often appear to be caricatured and even mocking. This brutal treatment of the subject of proletarian misery has been taken as evidence by many scholars that the painter did not intend his art to champion the cause of the working class. According to Zeller, Dix’s works appear to be completely lacking in empathy, especially when compared to the art of socially-engaged artists such as Käthe Kollwitz. As she states, “Dix’s flaw is his lack of empathy and limited social commitment.”74

Although Dix’s portrayals of the proletariat are often brutal, they are by no means mocking. As I have already discussed, the artist’s use of exaggerated details and distorted colors was a strategy intended to highlight the suffering of the figures, thus increasing the socio-critical elements of his art. Moreover, I agree with art historians such as Olaf Peters who have argued that Dix’s images of the working class, and particularly his representations of children, “speak with a healthy portion of empathy.”75 This is especially apparent in *Mother and Child.*76

---

73 Kim refers to Dix’s “hässlichen proletarischen Mutter der ersten Hälfte der zwanziger Jahre,” (ugly proletarian mothers from the first half of the twenties), 108.
In this painting Dix convincingly conveyed not only the suffering of the mother, but also her love for her child. Despite her poverty, the woman has gone to great pains to ensure that her infant is kept clean and clothed. The baby is shown dressed in a crisp, white dress with little bows tied lovingly at her wrists. Her feet and legs are securely encased in sturdy shoes and warm socks. These details introduce a great deal of empathy into this image. Dix portrays the proletarian mother as a heroic figure, grimly struggling to care for her child in the face of poverty, sickness and hunger. Such an image effectively inspires sympathy for the woman’s plight along with moral outrage at the social conditions that have led to her desperate situation.

Works such as *Mother and Child* and *Woman and Child* make it quite clear that by the early twenties Dix had come to envision his art as a tool of social critique. His Verist paintings and prints of this period convincingly captured the cruel aspects of contemporary urban life and exposed the social ills of the Weimar years. The artist’s numerous images of starving, working-class mothers were intended as engaged indictments of the suffering of the proletariat during the years of hunger and inflation.

Dix’s maternal images from this period also reveal the impact of leftist politics on his art. Between 1920 and 1925 Dix was at the height of his political engagement. Works such as *Woman and Child* and *Mother and Child* reflect the goals of the radical artist groups that the painter was involved with at this time. These paintings were created in line with the leftist belief that artists must be “an instrument of the necessity of [the] time and of the masses.”

Dix intended his images of suffering proletarian mothers not only to critique the economic inequality

---


77 “Open Letter to the Novembergruppe,” 301.
of the Weimar years, but also to reveal the need for improved maternal welfare services for the working class.

With Dix’s growing political and artistic radicalism came an increase in his professional renown. The artist’s brutal images of working class misery, war and prostitution shocked and enthralled the Weimar public. During the early twenties Dix’s Verist paintings frequently became the source of artistic scandal. In 1922 and 1923, for instance, the artist faced legal proceedings against his “indecent” images of women. Due to paintings such as *Girl before the Mirror*, which features a worn-out, aging whore, he twice stood trial on the charge of distributing “obscene pictures.” Then in 1924 Dix’s controversial work *The Trench* caused a huge public outcry when it was purchased by the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. Although the painting was displayed behind a curtain, it became the object of fierce attacks. According to the famous critic Julius Meier-Graefe, the work’s harshly detailed depiction of trench warfare “…makes you want to vomit.” 

Scandals such as these helped to establish Dix’s reputation as an artist. By 1925 he had achieved wide-scale public renown, thus fulfilling his goal to become either famous or infamous.

4. 1926-1933: Dix as Artistic and Political Conservative?

1926 was an important year for Dix’s artistic career. In September of that year he was appointed to a professorship at the Dresden *Akademie der bildenden Künste* (Academy of the Arts). This appointment marked the peak of Dix’s public and professional recognition. It also prompted a change in his artistic production.

During the mid-to-late twenties Dix continued to depict the leftist subjects that had dominated his earlier art, creating harshly realistic and meticulously detailed images of war and working class misery. Many of his most well-known paintings, including the *Metropolis Triptych*, date from this period. However, at this time Dix also began to move increasingly towards more politically-neutral themes in his art, such as portraiture. In the mid-twenties he became highly successful as a portraitist of prominent Weimar personalities. The nude dancer Anita Berber, the journalist Sylvia von Harden and the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim number among his famous sitters.

Dix’s move away from overtly politicized subjects culminated in his art of the early thirties. Many of his paintings from this period depict universal themes grounded in artistic tradition. At this time he created numerous images of idealized breastfeeding mothers and reclining female nudes in timeless settings. He also painted variations on traditional allegorical themes, such as his 1932 painting *Vanitas (Youth and Old Age)*. (fig. 2-18) These works reveal Dix’s continued admiration for and engagement with the art of the German Old Masters. For instance, *Vanitas* calls to mind the painting *Death and the Maiden* (1518-1520) by Hans Baldung Grien, which similarly portrays a young, beautiful woman juxtaposed with a withered old crone. (fig. 2-19)

During the early thirties Dix’s art also underwent a stylistic transformation. At this time he largely abandoned the exaggeration and expressive coloring that had characterized his Verist works. His paintings from this period instead display a more idealized style. Given these stylistic and thematic changes, art historians such as René Hirner have referred to this period as the “Classical” phase of Dix’s *Neue Sachlichkeit*. According to Hirner, the artist no longer
focused primarily on creating disillusioned, critical images of contemporary life, but rather produced calm, timeless and idealized works grounded in the classical tradition.\(^79\)

Dix’s transition from a critical verism to a more classical *Neue Sachlichkeit* style during the early thirties is especially apparent in his motherhood works. Two maternal paintings from this period, *Nursing Mother* (1932) and *Mother with Child* (1932), form a clear contrast to his Verist images on this theme. \(^{80}\) Both paintings portray happy, healthy bourgeois mothers lovingly cradling plump, rosy-cheeked infants in their arms. The women in both works exude a sense of quiet happiness as they tenderly care for their children. These calm images of maternal contentment stand in stark contrast to Dix’s earlier images emphasizing the hardships of proletarian maternity. Gone are any signs of suffering or sorrow. Gone too is any indication of historical specificity. The figures in both paintings are dressed in timeless clothing and placed against a neutral background. Furthermore, Dix replaced the harsh verism of his earlier motherhood works with an idealized naturalism. Overall, it is clear that the artist intended these works as timeless maternal idylls rather than images of social accusation.

Many art historians have attributed Dix’s adoption of a classical style to the stabilization of his life during the late twenties. Dix’s appointment to the Academy in 1926 granted him both professional renown and job security. In addition to his career success, the artist married Martha Dix (née Lindner) in 1923. They had three children: daughter Nelly (1923) and sons Ursus (1927) and Jan (1928).\(^81\) According to the well-known Dix scholar Fritz Löffler, Dix’s paintings from this period embody the peace and harmony of his life.\(^82\)

---

\(^79\) Hirner, 25-28.
\(^80\) The mothers in these paintings have been identified as bourgeois by many art historians due to their clothing, soft, pampered hands and well-nourished bodies. See Hirner, 25 and Kim, 99.
\(^81\) See Hirner, 22-25 for a discussion of the impact of the birth of his children on Dix’s art.
Löffler also interprets Dix’s “classical” paintings as a sign of his weakening radical political commitment. Referencing the motherhood works in particular, Löffler claims that Dix became conservative, both artistically and politically, during the early thirties. As he states, from a “fanatical seeker after truth” and a “painter with the courage for ugliness” Dix became a painter of “professorial subjects” which “easily found their way into bourgeois family magazines.” Löffler further labeled Dix’s paintings of this period as “charming Biedermeier,” thus linking his art to middle class values.  

Many of Dix’s artistic contemporaries similarly viewed his art of this period as conservative. Leftist art critics and Communist artists in particular condemned his new approach to painting for its lack of radical political meaning. They accused Dix of catering to the middle class and creating “society art” and “capitalist painting.” Even Dix’s former champion, Carl Einstein, turned against him in 1926, condemning his embrace of traditional techniques and disapprovingly referring to him as [a] “painting reactionary using leftist motifs.” Other critics felt that the artist’s bourgeois lifestyle had led him to grow conservative and boring. For instance, in a 1932 letter to his wife, the artist and KPD member Hans Grundig claimed that middle class life had “broken” Dix. He continued “you have no idea how bad [his new paintings] are. They are absolute society art…without any formulated vision…hollow and empty.”

Like much of his art of this period, Dix’s “classical” motherhood works of the early thirties have often been interpreted as a sign of the artist’s growing conservatism. In particular, many feminist scholars have argued that works such as Nursing Mother and Mother with Child...
reveal Dix’s reactionary and patriarchal attitude towards women at this time. According to Jung-Hee Kim and Gisela Schirmer, Dix was an anti-feminist who was resistant to the increasing emancipation of women produced by the rapid dismantling of traditional gender roles during the twenties. At this time women began to move in ever greater numbers into the urban workforce and other areas previously dominated by men. Both Kim and Schirmer argue that the Dix felt threatened by women’s assumption of traditionally “masculine” positions and behaviors. They claim that the artist’s hostility towards women’s changing social roles and his longing for traditional gender conventions is evident in his images of women.88

According to both Kim and Schirmer, despite his focus on contemporary urban life, Dix rarely pictured the emancipated New Woman in his art. When he did, they claim, his images are marked by contempt and disdain for the sitter. For instance, in 1927 Dix painted a portrait of the well-known journalist and intellectual Sylvia von Harden. (fig. 2-22) With her bobbed hair, monocle and cigarette von Harden is portrayed as the very embodiment of the liberated, career-oriented, androgynous New Woman. Schirmer argues, however, that Dix’s painting clearly contains “spiteful undertones” and an emphasis on ugliness.89 Von Harden’s ghastly skin, ill-fitting dress and bunched stockings render her unattractive while her large hands and prominent jaw suggest mannishness. According to Schirmer, Dix intended to demonstrate “what happens to women when they venture into the territory of men.”90 His painting, she contends, reflects the contemporary fear that women’s emancipation would lead to their masculinization.

Dix’s supposedly “mocking” images of the New Woman stand in strong contrast to his almost reverential depictions of mothers from the late twenties and early thirties. According to both Kim and Schirmer, paintings such as Nursing Mother and Mother with Child glorify

---

88 See Kim, introduction and Schirmer, 193-196.
89 “gehässigen Unterton.” Schirmer, 230-231.
90 “demonstriert Dix, was mit der Weiblickeit geschieht, wenn sie sich auf Männerschauplatze wägt.” Schirmer, 231.
motherhood as women’s natural role. Unlike Dix’s “ugly” portrayal of von Harden, the women in these paintings are shown young and beautiful. Their calm demeanor and peaceful smile indicates the deep fulfillment they find in their maternal role. It is no coincidence that these works call to mind images of the Madonna and Child. As Kim claims, these paintings were intended to depict motherhood as women’s sacred duty.

Both Kim and Schirmer have linked Dix’s later motherhood images to the conservative “cult of the mother” that gained importance and national recognition in Germany during the mid-to-late twenties. At this time the political right and the morality leagues attempted to revitalize an ideology of motherhood in response to the social upheaval caused by the First World War. By supporting a veneration of motherhood they hoped to stem the decline in the birth-rate, promote family values and discourage the sexual libertarianism and gender transgressions of the New Woman. This new cult of the mother found its greatest public expression in the campaign for a German Mother’s Day, which was first celebrated in 1923. From 1925 onwards, when the Mother’s Day campaign came under the purview of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Volksgesundung (Task Force for the Recovery of the Volk), the holiday was increasingly linked to conservative values. In an attempt to restore traditional gender roles, the Task Force called for women to devote themselves single mindedly to their duties as mothers and proposed to restrict their employment accordingly. This glorification of motherhood as women’s main role continued during the Third Reich.

According to both Kim and Schirmer, Dix’s “classical” maternal works, with their glorification and sacralization of motherhood, reflect the reactionary values of this conservative

---

cult of the mother. Schirmer further extends this interpretation to include Dix’s portraits of his family, including a 1927 painting titled *The Artist’s Family*. (fig. 2-23) The work pictures Dix with his wife Martha and their two children, Ursus and Nelly. Martha is shown smiling tenderly at the infant cradled carefully on her lap while her daughter hands her a flower (the conventional Mother’s Day gift). As with the mothers in *Nursing Mother* and *Mother with Child*, Martha appears deeply contented and fulfilled by her maternal role. The painting is, according to Schirmer, “an almost perfect Mother’s Day idyll.”

Kim and Schirmer’s claim that Dix’s images of women embody traditional gender conceptions has some validity. The artist’s maternal images do often glorify motherhood as woman’s natural role. Moreover, as Kim has noted, many of Dix’s “classical” motherhood works bear a strong resemblance to the paintings of right-wing artists such as Karl Diebitsch who supported the conservative campaign to return women to the home. Diebitsch, a member of the National Socialist Party since 1920, is well known for his painting *Mutter* (1938), an idyllic image of a breastfeeding mother. (fig. 2-24) Like Dix in his *Breastfeeding Mother*, Diebitsch presented motherhood in a timeless, idealizing and celebratory manner in this work. Despite such stylistic and thematic similarities, however, I would argue that to simply label Dix a reactionary antifeminist is to greatly oversimplify the issue. Throughout the twenties Dix acknowledged both traditional and modern roles for women in his art. Despite Kim and Schirmer’s claim to the contrary, he created numerous images of the New Woman in addition to his representations of mothers. Along with his portraits of well-known emancipated women like Sylvia von Harden, he also painted many images of women dancers. Works such as the *Metropolis Triptych* (1927-28) and *To Beauty* (1922), for instance, depict fashionable flappers sporting the bobbed hair and

---

92 Kim has gone so far as to compare Dix’s maternal paintings to works created by National Socialist artists such as Karl Diebitsch who embodied the conservative ideology of motherhood in their works. See Kim, 100-104.

93 “eine fast vollkommene Muttertagsidylle.” Schirmer, 244.
short skirt of the New Woman. It is important to note that in these paintings there is nothing openly contemptuous about Dix’s depiction of the dancers. Moreover, even Dix’s portrait of von Harden isn’t entirely spiteful and mocking. As the art historian Susan Laikin Funkenstein has argued, despite the elements of caricature, the work depicts an active, engaged, working woman and thus should not be interpreted entirely negatively. In addition, von Harden herself was not offended by the portrait, considering it to be an apt characterization of herself.

Further complicating Kim and Schirmer’s claim that Dix was a conservative antifeminist is the artist’s marriage to Martha Dix. Martha was by no means a traditional bourgeois woman. She was highly educated and very independent. During the twenties and early thirties she readily adopted the guise of the New Woman—several photographs from this time show her sporting bobbed hair. (figs. 2-25 and 2-26) There is no indication that Dix disapproved of his wife’s modern tendencies. To the contrary, he created numerous portraits portraying Martha in the role of the sophisticated, emancipated woman. (figs. 2-27 and 2-28) Moreover, both Martha and Dix rejected conventional bourgeois notions of sexual morality. The two had met in 1921 while Martha was still married to her first husband, Hans Koch. Martha eventually abandoned her husband as well as her two children to run off with Dix. The two lived a very open-minded lifestyle together. They were friends with the scandalous nude dancer Anita Berber, notorious for her party-girl ways and alleged prostitution. Their Düsseldorf apartment was decorated with one

---

95 In 1959 von Harden recounted the meeting with Dix that resulted in the portrait’s creation. According to von Harden, upon seeing her Dix exclaimed, “I must paint you! I simply must...You are representative of an entire epoch!” To this Harden replied, “So, you want to paint my lackluster eyes, my ornate ears, my long nose, my thin lips; you want to paint my long hands, my short legs, my big feet—things which can only scare people off and delight no-one?” Sylvia von Harden, “Erinnerungen an Otto Dix” Frankfurter Rundschau (25 March 1959); translated and quoted in Sergiusz Michalski, New Objectivity: Painting, Graphic Art and Photography in Weimar Germany, 1919-1933, trans. Michael Claridge (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 56. From this response it is clear that von Harden would not have found Dix’s portrait offensive. Moreover, in 1960, she allowed herself to be photographed standing proudly alongside the work. See Jill Berk Jiminez and Joanna Banham, eds., Dictionary of Artists’ Models (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 262-263.
96 Martha divorced Koch in 1922 and married Dix in early 1923.
of Dix’s infamous sex murder paintings. Dix often dedicated his images of prostitutes to his wife. Overall, there is nothing in their marriage or their lifestyle to suggest that either Dix or Martha were conservative or traditional.⁹⁷

One final weakness in Kim and Schirmer’s argument that Dix was a reactionary antifeminist who embodied traditional gender conventions in his art is the fact that not all of his maternal images from the early thirties glorify motherhood. A 1930 painting titled *Pregnant Woman*, for instance, differs dramatically from the artist’s “classical” motherhood works. (fig. 2-29) The painting depicts a heavily pregnant woman seated in a simple interior setting. Unlike the happy mothers pictured in Dix’s classical works, there is no sign that the woman in *Pregnant Woman* views motherhood as a source of happiness and contentment. Rather, she seems exhausted and depressed by the thought of the upcoming birth of her child. Her listless demeanor reveals her dejected state of mind—slack-jawed and dull eyed, she stares vacantly into the distance. The weight of the woman’s pregnancy seems to drag down both her mind as well as her body. Her shoulders slump warily and her heavily lidded eyes sag partly shut. The overall feeling of despondency in this painting is reinforced by Dix’s use of a muted palette. The brown tonality of the image conveys a sense of bleakness.

With its overall air of hopelessness and despair, *Pregnant Woman* is more akin to Dix’s Verist art of the early twenties than to his “classical” motherhood paintings. As in his work *Woman and Child* from 1921, in *Pregnant Woman* Dix portrayed a woman for whom pregnancy is viewed as a burden rather than a blessing. Moreover, in both works Dix emphasized the hardships of maternity, framing this subject within the context of contemporary events. While the 1921 work commented on the dire plight of proletarian mothers during the period of

---

⁹⁷ See Karin Schick, *Hommage à Martha* (Stuttgart: Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2005), 108-119 for information on Martha and her marriage to Dix.
inflation, the 1930 painting most probably engaged with the debates on abortion that were raging throughout Germany at this time.

As discussed in chapter one, the legality of abortion became a highly controversial issue in Germany during the Weimar years. Throughout the twenties many doctors, sex reformers, feminists and others repeatedly called for the abolishment of Paragraph 218, the section of the German Penal Code that criminalized abortion. Among the most vocal opponents of Paragraph 218 were the parties of the political left, particularly the KPD. The Communist Party viewed abortion as a social problem caused by deprivation and financial hardship. As such, the Party agitated continually for the decriminalization of abortion throughout the Weimar period.98 The KPD campaign against Paragraph 218 culminated in late 1930 and early 1931.

Jung-Hee Kim has argued that Dix’s images of pregnant women from the early thirties are entirely removed from the contemporary debates on abortion. She claims that these paintings are timeless and ahistorical works of art that simply reflect the artist’s voyeuristic interest in the pregnant female body.99 In contrast to Kim, I believe that works such as *Pregnant Woman* not only reference the abortion debates, but also reveal Dix’s support of the KPD campaign. The artist’s commitment to women’s abortion rights is clear from the marked similarity of his painting to the anti-218 works produced by Communist artists at this time.

*Pregnant Woman* bears a strong resemblance, for instance, to the anti-218 photomontage by John Heartfield that was published in the Communist *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (Workers’ Illustrated Magazine) in 1930. (see fig. 1-13) Both works feature a heavily pregnant, working class woman in a moment of despair. Like the expectant mother in Dix’s *Pregnant Woman*, the body language of the woman in Heartfield’s work speaks of her misery. Her entire body slumps

---

98 See Usborne, 156-180 for more on the abortion debates in Weimar Germany.
99 See Kim, 85-86.
under the combined burden of her poverty and pregnancy and her face is stamped with an expression of hopelessness. Unlike Dix’s painting, Heartfield included a photo of a dead soldier in the background of his image. This was meant to embody the KPD claim that Paragraph 218 forced working class women to produce “cannonfodder” for the German government. As a member of the KPD Heartfield created a work more overtly propagandistic than Dix’s painting. Both artists, however, demonstrated the need for abortions rights by illustrating women suffering from the burden of an unwanted pregnancy.

Dix’s support of women’s abortion rights is also clear from his participation in the anti-218 art exhibition Frauen in Not (Women in Need). The exhibition, which opened in Berlin in October of 1931, was organized by the KPD artist Otto Nagel in affiliation with the International Workers Aid and the Communist journal Weg der Frau (Woman’s Way). The show was intended to support the political left’s campaign to legalize abortion. Many of the works of art displayed directly attacked the abortion law. Other works more generally addressed the contemporary social and political problems faced by the women of the working class. Dix, along with other well-known, socially-engaged artists such as Käthe Kollwitz, was invited to sit on the exhibition’s honorary committee. He also contributed several works of art to the show, including his notorious Woman before the Mirror, a painting which, according to the artist, exposed the problem of prostitution in Weimar society.

Overall, Dix’s participation in Frauen in Not and his production of paintings like Pregnant Woman complicates the argument that the artist became politically conservative during the late twenties and early thirties. Despite the common claim that Dix abandoned radical political commitment at this time, he continued to take part in leftist exhibitions and to create art.

---

100 See Schirmer, 266-282 for more information on Frauen in Not.
that engaged with left-wing themes and issues. Furthermore, it is apparent that the feminist assertion that Dix was a reactionary antifeminist is decidedly too simplistic. The diversity of his motherhood images from the thirties clearly demonstrates that Dix adhered to both conservative as well as progressive beliefs regarding women. While his idealized images of happy mothers glorified motherhood as women’s true calling, his disillusioned depictions of dejected women trapped by an unwanted pregnancy reveals his support of women’s abortion rights.

5. Dix under National Socialism

The success and renown that Dix enjoyed during the late twenties and early thirties did not last for long. After the National Socialist assumption of power in 1933 he became the target of Nazi hostility. On April 6th of that year Dix was dismissed from his teaching position at the Dresden Academy. Upon demanding a reason for his dismissal he was informed that his commitment to the Nazi state was viewed as questionable and that his art was considered an outraged to public decency and patriotism. The attacks on Dix and his art did not end there. In 1934 the artist was partially banned from exhibiting. In addition, many of his Verist paintings and prints were displayed in defamatory art exhibitions staged throughout Germany at this time. Most importantly, twenty-six of his works were included in the 1937 show Entartete Kunst

---

101 Dix’s anti-war triptych War was also created at this time (1929-1932).
102 The Professional Civil Service Restoration Act, passed in April of 1933, allowed Nazi officials to dismiss government employees, including professors, museum directors and curators, from their jobs based on racial or political grounds.
103 An official statement regarding Dix’s dismissal informed him that “Apart from the fact that among your paintings there are those that grossly violate moral sense and thus engender all moral reconstruction, you have painted pictures that are likely to detract from the will of the German people to defend itself. Accordingly, you afford no assurances that you will always unreservedly stand up for the state.” Translated in Peters, 239.
(Degenerate Art), a propagandistic exhibition intended to present the National Socialist’s condemnation of modern art to the general public.\textsuperscript{104}

Dix responded to the Nazi attacks on his art by retreating into “inner emigration.” After losing his position at the Dresden Academy he moved to relative isolation on Lake Constance, near the Swiss border, and devoted himself to landscape painting. For most of the remainder of the National Socialist regime he painted mainly idealized landscape images and allegorical works that superficially conformed to Nazi artistic ideals. Although at first glance these works appear to betray no sign of Dix’s leftist sympathies, many art historians have interpreted them as continuing the social critique of his earlier art. Olaf Peters, in particular, has interpreted Dix’s paintings from this period as a form of “subversive criticism of the unjust state of National Socialism.”\textsuperscript{105}

The National Socialists deemed Dix a subversive and degenerate artist on both aesthetic and political grounds. The artist’s relentless and provocative verism and his fixation on leftist themes stood at odds with the conservative, classicizing aesthetic championed in the Third Reich. Hitler condemned Expressionism, Cubism and other styles of modern art, believing them to be the product of diseased minds and “degenerate” peoples (namely, Jews and Communists).\textsuperscript{106} He instead promoted art that was rooted in tradition. National Socialist sculptures for the most part emulated the artistic ideals of classical antiquity, portraying heroic, nude figures meant to express the strength and beauty of the Aryan race, as seen, for instance, in Arno Breker’s \textit{Readiness} (1937). (\textbf{fig. 2-30}) As for paintings, Hitler preferred slickly painted oils

\textsuperscript{104} See Stephanie Barron, “\textit{Degenerate Art.}” \textit{The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany} (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991), 224-227 and Peters, 239-240 for more on Dix’s persecution by the Nazis.  
\textsuperscript{106} Hitler’s condemnation of modern art was already apparent in his \textit{Mein Kampf}, written in the mid-1920s.
depicting nationalist themes, such as farmers in the German countryside, created in an idealized, romantic realist style. Adolf Wissel’s *Farm Family from Kahlenberg* (1939) provides a typical example.\(^{107}\) (fig. 2-31) The painting presents an idyllic image of a prolific farming family seated in an outdoor setting. The scene is pervaded by a sense of contentment—the grandmother quietly sews, the children play with their toys and the mother cradles her youngest daughter on her lap while the father calmly watches. Like much National Socialist art, this work was intended to promote the Party’s Blood and Soil rhetoric, glorifying the peasantry as the ideal embodiment of the German *Volk* by portraying them as happy, healthy and industrious. Stylistically speaking, the painting does not reveal any trace of the modernist experimentations of the Expressionist and Cubist artists. Instead, it is painted in a manner akin to the 17\(^{th}\) century Dutch and 19\(^{th}\) century German schools of genre painting. With its subtle use of modeling, its emphasis on naturalistic detail and its traditional perspectival space, the painting calls to mind the portraits of Biedermeier artists such as Friedrich von Amerling. (fig. 2-32) It was paintings such as this that were presented to the public in the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstaustellung* (Great German Art exhibition), the annual showcase for the official art of the Third Reich.\(^{108}\) Tellingly, the exhibition venue—the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* in Munich—was designed to resemble an ancient Greek temple, thus underscoring the National Socialists’ embrace of artistic tradition.

Dix’s use of expressive color and distorted forms did not fit with this National Socialist aesthetic. As a result, his paintings and prints were condemned as embodying the “barbarism of representation” and a “progressive collapse of sensitivity to color and form.” Moreover, his

---


\(^{108}\) See the Great German Art Exhibition Research Platform (a joint project of the Deutsches Historisches Museum and the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte) [http://www.gdk-research.de](http://www.gdk-research.de) for more information on the exhibitions.
artistic output was labeled as a form of “art Bolshevism.” Unlike Weimar critics, National Socialist art writers were for the most part unanimous in their assessment of Dix’s art as leftist propaganda. They particularly condemned his works on the theme of war. Both War Cripples (1920) and The Trench (1920-23) were illustrated in the catalogue for the Degenerate Art show under the headline, “The painted sabotage of defense by the painter Otto Dix.” The National Socialists saw in these works:

A marked political tendency. Here, “art” enters the service of Marxist draft-dodging propaganda. The intention is manifest: the viewer is meant to see the soldier either as a murderer or a victim senselessly immolated for something known to the Bolshevik class struggle as “the capitalist world order.”

Along with his images of war, the National Socialists particularly loathed Dix’s motherhood works. Ignoring his idealized maternal images of the early thirties, Nazi art critics singled out his Verist portrayals of suffering proletarian mothers for critique. A 1935 article in Das Schwarze Korps, the official newspaper of the Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS), accused Dix of creating intentionally ugly and “bestial” maternal works. His images of downtrodden proletarian women dejectedly bearing the burden of maternity were interpreted as a deliberate perversion of the sacrosanct nature of motherhood. Such images did not accord with the National Socialist vision of motherhood as the ultimate source of female fulfillment.

The National Socialists also recognized the political implications of Dix’s portrayals of proletarian maternity. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, throughout the twenties and early

---

111 “vertierten,” “Bremer Böttcherstrasse. Heute noch Zeitgemäss?” Das Schwarze Korps, (August 21, 1935), 10. Although the article focused mainly the artist Paula Modersohn-Becker reference was made to Dix’s “bestial” motherhood works.
thirties Dix used the image of the suffering working-class mother as a tool of leftist social critique. His paintings and prints on this theme were deeply influenced by his involvement with left-wing organizations and radical artist groups. It is therefore unsurprising that two of these works—a 1920 drawing of a pregnant proletarian woman and the 1923 painting *Mother and Child*—were reproduced in the Degenerate Art guide under the title “‘Art’ preaches class struggle.” The accompanying catalog entry stated:

The graphic works shown in this exhibition are conclusive proof of the political basis of degenerate art. The methods of artistic anarchy are used to convey an incitement to political anarchy. Every single image in this group is an incitement to class struggle in the Bolshevik sense…Workers, their wives, and their children stare out at the viewer with faces of utter misery in shades of gray and green…

The National Socialists were, of course, mistaken in their assumption that Dix was a Bolshevist. His images of mothers, however, do bear a similarity to those created by Communist artists. As chapters one and two have made clear, many of the artists affiliated with the "Verist" branch of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, including Communists such as John Heartfield and Rudolf Schlicther as well as non-party members like Dix, used maternal imagery in the service of left-wing politics, producing portraits of suffering proletarian mothers that gave voice to their social criticisms. As I will discuss in chapter three, artists linked to the right-wing "Classicist" branch also created motherhood images with a leftist intent, although they took a much more idyllic and utopian approach.

---

Chapter Three

The Image of the Mother as Utopian Symbol: Anarchism and the Ideal in Georg Schrimpf’s Maternal Images

To demonstrate that leftist artists used the image of the mother not only to express their social criticisms, but also to embody their utopian hopes, I will examine the maternal works of Georg Schrimpf, one of the most prolific producers of motherhood imagery during the 1920s. As I will show in this chapter, Schrimpf used the figure of the mother to picture an alternative to the prevailing capitalist order. His numerous classicizing paintings and prints of idealized mothers in idyllic rural settings embody his social and political ideal of an agrarian utopia inspired by his anarcho-socialist beliefs.

1. Introduction

Georg Schrimpf (1889-1938) was a painter and graphic artist active in Berlin and Munich from 1915, the year in which he created his first oil painting, until his death in 1938. Largely self-taught as an artist, Schrimpf spent the first few years of his career exploring a wide range of different artistic styles. Between 1915 and 1920 he moved rapidly from an exuberant Expressionism influenced by the dynamic vitality of Franz Marc’s animal paintings to a static and symmetrical style motivated by his study of the Italian Late Gothic.

By 1921 Schrimpf had developed the calm, classicizing artistic style for which he is best known today. His paintings of this period are characterized by a smooth, crisp paint application and an idealizing “realism” that compliment his choice of subject matter. During the twenties Schrimpf was primarily a painter of idyllic rural imagery. His art abounds with idealized images
of young women lounging in timeless landscapes, cowherds calmly tending their flocks, and peaceful peasant mothers with their children. (figs. 3-1, 3-2 and 3-3)

Due to these timeless and idyllic paintings, Schrimpf has long been associated with the classical branch of Gustav Hartlaub’s Neue Sachlichkeit and, as a result, contrasted with the verist or left-wing artists. Hartlaub himself included twelve works by Schrimpf in his 1925 Neue Sachlichkeit exhibition, making him one of the most represented artists in the show.¹ Other important art critics of the day also singled Schrimpf out as a leading exponent of a new, classicizing realism in German art. The influential art critic Franz Roh, for instance, championed Schrimpf’s paintings, describing in great detail their peaceful monumentality and classical clarity of form and referring to the artist as “an idyllist…in the classical tradition.”²

Today, Schrimpf continues to be presented as a main representative of the classical branch of Neue Sachlichkeit in surveys of the style.³ Despite his importance to the development of German art during the twenties, however, the artist has received very little attention from art historians in the United States. To date there are no books or articles in English that focus solely on his art. He is examined only within the broader context of Neue Sachlichkeit. While there are

¹ See Appendix A in Dennis Crockett’s German Post-Expressionism. The Art of the Great Disorder 1918-1924 (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) for a list of the artists included in Hartlaub’s Neue Sachlichkeit exhibitions and how many works they had on display. Only Max Beckmann and Alexander Kanoldt had more works included than Schrimpf (15 works each).
several German monographs on Schrimpf, there is still nowhere near the amount of literature
devoted to the major figures of Hartlaub’s Verist branch.⁴

This relative dearth of art historical discussion is most likely due to the manner in which
Schrimpf and his art have typically been interpreted. Due to his classicizing and idealized
imagery Schrimpf has long been seen as a conservative artist who created a resolutely apolitical
art. This interpretation has been frequently applied to the other artists who make up the right-
wing branch of Neue Sachlichkeit as well, as the classical wing of Weimar realism has
traditionally been defined as being without political tendency.⁵ The characterization of Schrimpf
as an artist unconcerned with politics has placed him at a significant disadvantage in comparison
to Verist artists such as George Grosz and Otto Dix. Since the 1970s, when the interest in Neue
Sachlichkeit first began to increase in both Germany and the United States, art historians have
focused primarily on the art and artists affiliated with the political left.⁶ Further disadvantaging
Schrimpf is his association with the National Socialists. Although he did not support the Nazi
party and was discredited as a “degenerate” artist in 1937, Schrimpf and his paintings of
idealized rural scenes initially found great favor during the Third Reich, a fact which has helped
to solidify his reputation as a conservative artist.⁷

The characterization of Schrimpf as an apolitical painter of idylls dates to the Weimar
era. As early as 1923 the writer Oskar Maria Graf referred to the artist as “the greatest idiellyist of

⁴ Oskar Maria Graf, Georg Schrimpf (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1923); Matthias Pförtner, Georg Schrimpf
(Berlin: Rembrandt Verlag, 1940); Renate Hartleb, Georg Schrimpf (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1984); Wolfgang
⁵ Marsha Meskimmon has discussed the original definitions of the politics of the Neue Sachlichkeit in great depth.
See Marsha Meskimmon, “Politics, the Neue Sachlichkeit and Women artists,” in Visions of the “Neue Frau”:
Women and the Visual Arts in Weimar Germany, ed. Marsha Meskimmon and Shearer West (England: Scolar Press,
1995); 9-27.
⁶ The exhibition “German Realism of the Twenties: The Artist as Social Critic,” which opened at the Minneapolis
Institute of Arts in September of 1980, was the first major exhibition of Neue Sachlichkeit art in the United States.
Its focus on socially critical art helped to establish this trend.
⁷ See for instance Christine Fischer-Defoy and Paul Crossley, “Artists and Art Institutions in Germany 1933-1945,”
our time.”

Throughout the twenties, art historians, critics and other art writers consistently described Schrimpf’s paintings as timeless images entirely divorced from contemporary reality. Many critics affiliated with the political left even referred critically to his “escapist” art. For instance, in 1927 the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch accused Schrimpf and his fellow classicizing artist Alexander Kanoldt of creating idyllic works in an attempt to flee the political chaos of the present. Bloch’s belief that Schrimpf’s idealized images offer a deliberate disengagement from the turbulent political and social situation of the Weimar years persists in the literature on the artist to this day.

The idea that Schrimpf created an apolitical art stands at odds with the fact that the artist was closely affiliated with the political left. During the Weimar years Schrimpf was involved with numerous anarchist and socialist groups and was briefly active in the German Communist Party. The dominant line of reasoning in the literature, however, has been that Schrimpf’s art does not reveal any trace of his leftist political activities. Scholars such as Michael Koch have persistently argued that his art was apolitical, even if the artist was not. According to Koch, Schrimpf was primarily concerned with formal issues in his paintings, seeking to embody a

10 For instance, Mathias Eberle has argued that, unlike other artists, Schrimpf did not directly engage with the turbulent reality of the period, but instead painted its opposite. See “Gegenüber Neuer Sachlichkeit und Romantik. Notizen zu Georg Schrimpf,” in Georg Schrimpf und Maria Uhden. Leben und Werk, ed. Wolfgang Storch (Berlin: Charlottenpress, 1985), 12-13. More recently, Daniela Fabricius has argued that Schrimpf’s idealized rural images reveal the artist’s attempt to flee from the political chaos of the Weimar years. See Daniela Fabricius, “The City and the Nature of Landscape,” in New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933, ed. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), 186.
11 According to Fabricius, Schrimpf’s “leftist politics and experiences of economic hardship were all but absent from his paintings.” New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933, 185. German art historians have argued the same. According to Ulrich Gerster, Schrimpf’s “intensive political engagement” made “little impact on his art.” Ulrich Gerster, “Kontinuität und Bruch. Georg Schrimpf zwischen Räterepublik und NS-Herrschaft,” Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 63 (2000), 536.
“harmony of truth and beauty,” rather than to engage with the social and political issues of the day.\textsuperscript{13}

Within the last two decades, German scholars have begun to analyze the political implications of Schrmpf’s art with greater nuance. Most significantly, in 1993 the exhibition \textit{Süddeutsche Freiheit: Kunst der Revolution in München 1919} (South German Freedom: The Art of the Revolution in Munich 1919) examined the art that was created in Munich during the revolutionary period of early 1919, when a Communist council republic was briefly established in Bavaria. As Schrmpf was involved with the council republic, the exhibition placed his art of this period within a political context. The essays included in the catalog presented Schrmpf as a utopian-socialist whose early Expressionist works were politicized investigations of the relationship between man, the city and nature. It is important to note, however, that the artist’s mature works of the twenties were still deemed apolitical. According to Justin Hoffmann in his essay “Künstler und Ihre Revolution” (Artists and Their Revolution) after the failure of the council republic in mid-1919, Schrmpf’s art lost its critical and political edge and became more idyllic in nature.\textsuperscript{14} Scholars such as Ulrich Gerster have continued to acknowledge the political meaning of Schrmpf’s early art, while dismissing his later, \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} paintings as politically detached.\textsuperscript{15}

The main reason Schrmpf’s mature art has so often been interpreted apart from his radical politics is that it does not fit the narrow definition of “politically-engaged art” typically used in the discourse on \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit}. As Marsha Meskimmon has discussed in detail, the traditional argument for the association of leftist politics and the art of the \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} has

\textsuperscript{15} Gerster, 532-542.
been based on the analysis of the activist art produced by the Verists. Thus, politically-committed art is typically identified by its satirical and critical approach to contemporary political figures and issues, its blatant criticism of the prevailing structures of power and its embodiment of party ideology. Based on these criteria, Schrimpf’s mature work may indeed appear apolitical, particularly in comparison to the work of an artist such as Grosz. His classicizing paintings are not overtly agitational, they do not appear to reference contemporary reality, and they were not intended to espouse a party political ideology.

To state, however, that Schrimpf’s mature work reveals no trace of his leftist political engagements is incorrect. I will argue that Schrimpf did, in fact, create a type of politically committed, revolutionary art throughout the course of his career. While his idyllic images may not have been explicitly critical, they did challenge the prevailing social order by picturing an alternative to it. As I will demonstrate, the peaceful rural utopia figured so frequently in Schrimpf’s paintings during the twenties was not a mere escapist fantasy, but rather was grounded in his radical left political beliefs and his desire for revolutionary social change. As I will show, Schrimpf used his art as a tool to communicate his personal political vision of an anarcho-socialist utopia.

In this chapter I will examine Schrimpf’s political engagements and chart their impact on both his early and mature art. I will discuss in detail his affiliation with anarchist intellectual circles and leftist cultural publications, his political activism during the revolutionary period in Munich and his membership in the German Communist Party. I will demonstrate that two leftist intellectuals in particular influenced the development of Schrimpf’s utopian political beliefs—

---

16 See Meskimmon, 10-15.
17 The original inspiration for this chapter came from Dr. Rose-Carol Washton Long’s seminar, “Representation in the Weimar Republic,” held in spring 2007 at The Graduate Center, CUNY. In her discussion of Schrimpf, Dr. Long considered the potential left-wing intentions of the artist’s paintings of fishermen and other laborers.
Otto Gross and Gustav Landauer. Gross, an Austrian psychoanalyst, championed sexual liberation, gender equality and matriarchalism. Landauer was an influential theorist of socialist anarchism who called for the creation of independent rural communes. Both men believed that the social strictures and power structures that existed within Germany at the time were artificial and unnatural and advocated the establishment of a new social order. Their radical theories reinforced Schrimpf’s own desire for revolutionary social change and found expression in his art, impacting the development of his artistic iconography and style.

The central focus of this chapter will be Schrimpf’s numerous depictions of motherhood, a subject that dominated his oeuvre from 1915 to 1923. Within Schrimpf’s politicized iconography the figure of the mother was of especial importance. As I will demonstrate, the artist consistently used the image of the mother as a utopian symbol of social regeneration and change. I will first chart the development of Schrimpf’s depiction of this motif in relation to his political activities and beliefs and will show that the artist’s decision to use the figure of the mother as his main utopian symbol was initially prompted by his contact with Gross and his matriarchal theories. I will then argue that the classicizing paintings of peaceful peasant mothers in idyllic rural settings that Schrimp created during the early twenties represent the culmination of his politically-committed art. In these works Schrimpf merged the theories of Gross and Landauer to create a highly personal vision of an agrarian and maternal utopia.

In addition to examining the iconography of Schrimpf’s motherhood works I will also give consideration to matters of style. I will chart the artist’s move from Expressionism to the classicizing realism for which he is best known today. As I will show, Schrimpf’s stylistic choices were informed by his political intentions. I plan to argue that the idealizing classicism of
his mature *Neue Sachlichkeit* paintings was not a sign of the artist’s political or artistic conservatism, but rather was intended to support his radical, utopian vision.

2. The Formative Years: Schrimpf’s Intellectual, Political and Artistic Development through 1917

The years 1905 to 1909 were a pivotal period for the development of Schrimpf’s revolutionary consciousness. Having completed an apprenticeship as a baker in Passau, the young man spent the next several years wandering throughout Europe. Alone and in serious financial straits, Schrimpf was often forced to go hungry and to sleep under bridges. The hardships and privation that he endured at this time ignited in Schrimpf a critical attitude towards modern capitalist society. As he later recalled, his experiences during his “wander years” awakened him to the realization that “the relation of people to one another is unnatural and false.”

He saw only one solution to the alienation and artificiality of modern life—“the revolutionary overthrow of the existing social order.”

In 1909 Schrimpf moved to Munich and settled in the bohemian Schwabing district. Here he found himself surrounded by kindred spirits. At the turn of the century, Schwabing was the gathering place for artists, occultists, socialists, anarchists, pacifists and other intellectuals interested in instigating radical social change. Schrimpf felt at home among intellectuals who shared his belief that society had grown too authoritarian and was dominated by materialistic and commercial concerns. What followed next was a period of intense development of Schrimpf’s radical political beliefs and his revolutionary sensibility.

---

19 “Ich sah nur einen Ausweg: die revolutionäre Umgestaltung der bestehenden Gesellschaftsordnung.” Ibid.
While living in Munich, Schrimpf was increasingly drawn to anarchism. Shortly after settling in Schwabing, he joined the Gruppe Tat, an agitational anarchist group founded in 1909 by the writer and bohemian intellectual Erich Mühsam as an offshoot of Gustav Landauer’s Sozialistischer Bund (Socialist Federation). The main intention of the group was to propagandize among the lumpenproletariat (social outcasts)—to inspire them to revolt against capitalist society. While involved with the Gruppe Tat Schrimpf was first introduced to Otto Gross, a renegade pupil of Sigmund Freud whose radical theories would strongly impact his political thinking and art, and Oskar Maria Graf, a writer who became one of Schrimpf’s closest friends and whose autobiographical writings are an important source of information about the artist’s early political activities. Also at this time Schrimpf began to immerse himself in anarchist theory, reading the works of Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin. He embraced anarchism’s emphasis on mutual assistance, cooperation and communalism as well as its condemnation of the artificiality of modern society.

In 1913 Schrimpf traveled with Graf to Ascona in Switzerland. During the first decade of the twentieth century Ascona was the established international center for the Life Reform Movement. On Monte Verità, the “Hill of Truth,” several anarchist and life reform communities were founded that advocated pacifism, gender equality, internationalism, vegetarianism, sexual liberation and environmentalism. At this time Ascona attracted bohemians from all over Europe who were searching for an alternative style of living free from the strictures of bourgeois morality. Ascona was, according to the historian Martin Greene, “the semiofficial meeting place

---

20 The Sozialistischer Bund was a loosely coordinated network of anarchist groups and communes intended to prepare for and initiate an anarchist reality.
21 See David A. Shepherd, From Bohemia to the Barricades: Erich Mühsam and the Development of a Revolutionary Drama (New York: P. Lang, 1993) for more information on Mühsam and the Gruppe Tat.
22 See Crockett, 99 for a discussion of Ascona.
for all Europe’s spiritual rebels.” Schimpf wholeheartedly embraced the ideals of Ascona, writing that during the time he spent there he lived “as though he were in paradise.” It was at this time that Schimpf began to pursue his childhood dream of becoming an artist. He studied the art of Michelangelo and Raphael and began to draw and work in watercolor.

During the summer of 1915 Schimpf and Graf relocated to Berlin, along with several fellow former Gruppe Tat members, including the writer Franz Jung. While in Berlin Schimpf continued to move in radical and bohemian circles. When Jung founded an anarchist publication in 1915, Die Freie Strasse (The Free Road), Schimpf eagerly participated, joining the editorial committee and contributing works of art. As stated in its first issue, the goal of Die Freie Strasse was to prepare for the radical reorganization of society. The journal primarily addressed moral and psychological issues, analyzing the relationship between men and women, pondering the possibility of a new ethical system based on psychoanalysis, and preaching the complete freedom of the individual.

Particularly well-represented in the pages of Die Freie Strasse were the ideas of Otto Gross, an Austrian psychoanalyst who merged anarchism, matriarchal theory, and psychoanalysis into a utopian program for social change. Gross believed in a universal human state of morality, the idea that every person has an authentic self that is naturally altruistic and cooperative. Gross associated this natural state of morality with matriarchy. In modern society, however, this authentic self—what Gross termed das Eigene—was buried beneath the pathological layers of patriarchal sociocultural evolution. Das Eigene had been corrupted by das

---

25 Die Freie Strasse ran from 1915 to 1918 with ten issues in total. The Dadaists Raoul Hausmann, Johannes Baader and Richard Huelsenbeck were involved with the last few issues. See the facsimile of the first six issues of the publication, Freie Strasse. Erste bis Sechste Folge der Vorarbeit, 1915-1917 (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1978).
Fremde—egoism, authoritarianism and a will to power. Gross criticized modern bourgeois society for being patriarchal, hierarchical and repressive. The negative effect of such a repressive social system, he claimed, was the development of psychological neurosis and alienation. For Gross, the solution to modern society’s ills was to challenge its restrictive structures of power. As the historian Petteri Pietikainen has discussed, Gross championed gender equality and sexual liberation in the hopes of returning man to an ideal non-hierarchical and cooperative state. Gross’ ultimate goal was the reestablishment of an egalitarian society in which women and men both would be guaranteed economic and sexual freedom.27

The theories of the charismatic Gross made a major impact on the bohemian intellectual circles in both Munich and Berlin. Jung in particular was one of Gross’ most fervent disciples. He invited the psychoanalyst to join the editorial committee of Die Freie Strasse and published many of his writings in the journal, including Gross’ influential article “Vom Konflikt des Eigenen und Fremden” (On the Conflict between One’s Own and That of the Other).28

From his involvement with the Gruppe Tat and Die Freie Strasse, Schrimpf was introduced to anarchist theory and exposed to Gross’ radical ideas. By 1917, the year in which he returned to Munich, he had formulated his personal political beliefs based on his experiences of the preceding years. A self-described anarchist, Schrimpf advocated for the destruction of the State and the artificial structures of society. Like many who were swayed by Gross’ theories, he opposed traditional bourgeois morality, enthusiastically embracing the idea of sexual liberation

and championing women’s equality. As I will demonstrate next, these revolutionary anarchistic ideals found expression in Schrimpf’s art.

While in Berlin, Schrimpf began to work in oil. His first painting in this medium, *Comrades*, was created in 1915. (fig. 3-4) The work depicts five nude women standing in an idyllic landscape setting. The rhythmic motions and sinuous, curving forms of the women’s bodies are reminiscent of *Jugendstil*, while the simplification and intense, expressive coloring—flaming red sky and deep blue mountains—call to mind the Expressionist work of Franz Marc.

With its abstracted, Expressionist style, *Comrades* is typical of Schrimpf’s early work. Between 1915 and 1917, the years in which he was in Berlin, Schrimpf was part of the Expressionist circle affiliated with Herwarth Walden’s *Der Sturm* gallery. The first exhibition of his art took place at *Der Sturm* and he had a contract with the gallery from 1916 to 1917. Schrimpf also published in Expressionist journals at this time, including Franz Pfemfert’s *Die Aktion* (The Action), a literary and political journal that championed Expressionism, internationalism and anarchism.

Schrimpf’s adoption of an Expressionist style was not without political intent. By the second decade of the twentieth century the link between Expressionism and anarchism was firmly established in Germany. Since the turn of the century, many socially-committed, Expressionist artists, such as the Munich-based painter Wassily Kandinsky, had been drawn to anarchist theory and its critique of contemporary bourgeois society. Sharing with the anarchists an abhorrence for artificial rules and codified laws, these artists began to experiment with their

---

29 In *Mitmenschen* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1950), 191 Graf talks about Schrimpf’s protest against the suppression of women, recounting a tale of how the artist attempted to save a prostitute who had been arrested by going to court and claiming he would marry her (he was ignored, however, since he was drunk). See also Jennifer Michaels, *Anarchy and Eros: Otto Gross’ Impact on German Expressionist Writers—Leonard Frank, Franz Jung, Johannes R. Becher, Karl Otten, Curt Corrinth, Walter Hasenclever, Oskar Maria Graf, Franz Kafka, Franz Werfel, Max Brod, Raoul Hausmann, and Berlin Dada* (New York: P. Lang, 1983) and Jennifer Michaels, “Otto Gross’s Influence on German-language Writers,” in *Sexual Revolutions: Psychoanalysis, History and the Father*, ed. Gottfried Heuer (New York: Routledge, 2011), 155-167.
art, adopting an abstracted style that broke free from established artistic principles. Moreover, the Expressionists and anarchists both attributed to the arts an important role in instigating social change. The influential anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin, for instance, called for artists to use their “impressive pictures” to portray the “heroic struggles of the people against their oppressors.” Many Expressionist artists responded to this call, believing that their experimental art could challenge traditional authoritarian society and awaken the general public to the need for change, thus preparing the way for a new social order.

Many of Schrimpf’s early works picture his desire for a revolutionary new world order, paring an experimental Expressionist style with utopian subject matter. The German art historian Ulrich Gerster has interpreted Comrades in this manner, reading the work as a programmatic painting that embodies Schrimpf’s anarchist beliefs. The two women to the right, shown confidently striding forward in unison, have embraced what Gerster refers to as a “new rhythm of life.” The central figure gazes out of the image, inviting the viewer to join in, while the two figures to the left remain undecided, their hesitation reflected in their uncertain gestures.

Similar themes occur in Schrimpf’s prints of this period. As with many other Expressionists, Schrimpf was greatly interested in printmaking techniques, drawn to their relative inexpensiveness compared to paintings as well as the possibility of a wider circulation of

---

32 Gerster, 533-534.
33 “neuen Lebensrhythmus.” Ibid., 533.
his images. 34 In 1915 he began to explore the expressive potential of woodcuts and later experimented with lithography as well. Exemplary of his early prints are the woodcuts that he published in Die Freie Strasse. Schrimpf designed the vignette for the title page of the publication—an image of four nude, gracefully posed women—and included works in the first several issues as well.

The second issue of Die Freie Strasse was devoted entirely to Schrimpf and his art. It included a short essay by the artist and five prints, all of which depict nude women in timeless settings. The print Two Women under Trees is typical of these works.35 (fig. 3-5) Two women are depicted in a primitive forest. Both the figures and the trees are illustrated with an economy of means, their forms rendered as directly and simplistically as possible. The position of the central woman, whose arms encircle her head, combined with the thick, curving lines of her body give to the figure a sense of undulating movement, as though she were dancing. Schrimpf felt that the work embodied his celebration of “the purity and glory of the world’s existence.”36 As the artist explained in the introductory essay to the issue, his art was intended to give a sense of “the beauty and joy of all things.”37

The world celebrated in Schrimpf’s early prints is one far removed from the social realities of contemporary Germany. The artist has illustrated his personal utopia, modeled on the radical ideals of Ascona and Die Freie Strasse. The figures in Two Women under Trees are shown liberated from bourgeois morality. They frolic in the forest, comfortable in their nudity and at one with nature, the undulating movements of their bodies echoing the curving of the

34 Schrimpf created more woodcuts than paintings while living in Berlin and his first solo exhibition, held in June and July 1918 at Hans Goltz’s Neue Kunst Gallery in Munich, was devoted to his Expressionist woodcuts.
35 The prints are not titled in Die Freie Strasse. I am following the titles given in Storch, Georg Schrimpf und Maria Uhden. Leben und Werk.
37 “…die grosse Freude und Schönheit aller Dinge.” Ibid.
trees. The women also display an uninhibited sensuality. Their bodies are full and soft and their gestures are seductive. The central figure is shown straddling the branch of a tree, a position repeated in the print *Nude IX*, while other prints feature women coyly peeking out from behind raised arms. *(fig. 3-6)* According to Schrimpf, the prints are a “manifestation...of the religious experience of the sexual impulse as the radiating center of all relationships.”

Unlike Brücke artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Erich Heckel, who frequently depicted idyllic scenes of couples in primeval settings, Schrimpf chose not to include representations of men in his woodcuts for *Die Freie Strasse*. Within Schrimpf’s artistic iconography, it was the image of woman who was the bearer of the artist’s revolutionary hopes. In Schrimpf’s early works women are typically pictured either leading the way to a utopian future—as in *Comrades*—or already inhabiting an ideal world.

The importance that Schrimpf placed on women as the initiators of social change can be traced to his involvement with *Die Freie Strasse*. Gross and his followers were firm advocates of women’s equality, believing that freeing women from patriarchal slavery was the first step towards a radical reorganization of society. According to Graf, Schrimpf recognized the revolutionary potential of women’s emancipation, an idea which is reflected in his art. His early woodcuts picture women free from patriarchal oppression, living in a world inhabited only by other women and children. As Graf noted in a 1915 review that appeared in the influential art journal *Das Kunstblatt* (The Art Journal), Schrimpf’s *Freie Strasse* prints treat women as more

---

38 “…Sie sind Manifest...das religiöse Erleben sexuellen Geschehens als treibender, ausstrahlender Mittelpunkt aller Beziehung.” Ibid.

39 The idea that the emancipation of women from all forms of oppression was an integral part of changing society and ultimately overthrowing the capitalist system was discussed at length in the Marxist politician and Social Democratic Party (SPD) co-founder August Bebel’s *Woman and Socialism*, first published in 1879. Bebel’s ideas influenced many members of the SPD and found currency amongst German artists and other intellectuals interested in the establishment of a new revolutionary world order. See Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance. Women, Artists and the Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 35.
than mere decorative objects. His works are “cosmic proclamations of the experience of woman.”

As part of his artistic interest in the image of woman, during this period Schrimpf began to explore the theme of motherhood. The subject came to dominate his art for the next eight years. Two of the nine woodcuts by Schrimpf included in Die Freie Strasse depict a mother and child. *(figs. 3-7 and 3-8)* The figures are represented in the same manner as the women in *Two Women under Trees*—they are shown nude and in a timeless setting. These woodcuts are among the first illustrations of a specifically matriarchal utopia that appears consistently in the artist’s work until the early twenties.

Schrimpf’s interest in motherhood was initially prompted by his contact with Gross. At this time, Gross was the intellectual who made the greatest impact on the artist’s radical political beliefs. Of particular importance were Gross’ ideas concerning matriarchy.

Beginning around 1910, Gross became deeply interested in the proto-feminist theories of the Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen. In 1861 Bachofen had published his highly influential book *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World). Although generally discredited in scientific circles, *Das Mutterrecht* was of great interest to many intellectuals in turn-of-the-century Germany. In this book, Bachofen postulated that the earliest civilizations of the ancient world were matriarchal. According to him, humans originally lived in a state of polyamorous sexual promiscuity. Since such a state excludes any certainty of paternity, family lineage was

---

40 “…kosmischen Verkündigung des Erlebens der Frau.” Oskar Maria Graf, “Brief über Georg Schrimpf,” *Das Kunstblatt* 3 (1918), 76.
determined through the mother. Women thus held a position of high honor and respect, which ultimately resulted in the foundation of a matriarchal social structure. Eventually, however, this system of “mother right” gave way to a new patriarchal world order (“father right”) from which modern civilization emerged.

For Gross, Bachofen’s postulated matriarchal past represented a Golden Age. Gross believed that matriarchalism offered a non-hierarchical and egalitarian social structure that allowed both men and women sexual and economic freedom. In contrast to this, he viewed the patriarchalism of modern society as repressive, authoritarian and based on the subordination of women and children to men. According to Gross, the way to salvation for modern man lay in the return to matriarchy. As he stated in his 1914 essay “Über Destruktionssymbolik” (On the Symbolism of Destruction):

Matriarchy guarantees women economic, and therefore sexual and human, independence from a particular man, and gives women as mothers a direct responsibility to society; the future is in their hands. The mythologies of all people preserve the memory of a prehistoric state of free matriarchy in the idea of a golden age of justice and an original paradise. The hope of a better future for humanity must lie in a return to the freedom of matriarchy.42

Schrimpf wholeheartedly embraced Gross’ matriarchal vision and gave form to it repeatedly in his art. His first painting to picture this theme is the work Maria’s Dream (The Miracle). (fig. 3-9) The Maria referenced in the title is Maria Uhden, an Expressionist artist who Schrimpf married in May of 1917, the same year in which the painting was created.43


43 Schrimpf had met Uhden earlier that year—they were both a part of the Expressionist circle centered on Walden’s Der Sturm.
In Maria's Dream, Uhden is depicted in a primordial jungle setting. Her monumentalized, nude body dominates the center of the painting, while to the right an infant, pictured in miniature scale, is cradled in the leaves of a tree. The overall theme of the painting is the birth of a new world order, pictured specifically as a maternal utopia. Uhden is shown as the initiator of social change. Similar to the figures in Comrades, she is depicted confidently striding forward, her arms spread wide in a celebratory gesture. Her gaze is directed upwards, towards a blazing sun, while a small moon and stars are behind her.

The inclusion of the cosmic figures of sun, moons and stars is meant to be symbolic. Uhden walks towards the warm, welcoming light of the future, leaving behind the darkness of the repressive, patriarchal world order. As discussed in chapter two, cosmic symbols appeared frequently in Expressionist art towards the end of World War One and during the revolutionary period. Artists such as Otto Dix and Conrad Felixmüller, amongst others, used such imagery to symbolize the revitalization of society and the birth of a new, spiritually-renewed people in tune with the cosmos. The idea of a “new people” was common in theosophical, anarchistic and leftist circles in Germany at this time and was motivated in part by Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of the Übermensch (Super Man), first formulated in his widely read Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883-1891). From his time spent in the Gruppe Tat, Schrimpf would have been well-acquainted with Nietzsche’s theories. The philosopher’s writings were frequently discussed by the group’s members.

With its cosmic, celebratory portrayal of motherhood Maria’s Dream bears a strong resemblance to Dix’s Moon Woman (1919), analyzed at length in chapter two. Both works portray monumentalized nude mothers with their arms outstretched in ecstatic greeting. That they greet the dawn of a new age is made apparent through the inclusion of suns,
stars, and other cosmic symbols. While the goddess in Dix’s painting still carries the Übermensch within her womb, the mother in Maria’s Dream may have already given birth to the new man in the form of the infant beside her. Overall, both Dix and Schrimpf made use of maternal and procreative imagery in their works to symbolize their hopes for a new world order.

Like Dix in Moon Woman, Schrimpf also employed an Expressionist style in Maria’s Dream to support his utopian yearnings. The artist alludes to a desired harmony between man and nature in his painting through formal means—Uhden’s arms mirror the coloring and position of the trees behind her. The painting’s flat, child-like appearance calls to mind the “primitive” jungle scenes of Henri Rousseau, whose art was reproduced in Kandinsky and Marc’s Blaue Reiter Almanac and subsequently inspired many Expressionist painters, Schrimpf included. The “naïve” style of the painting supports the simplicity of Schrimpf’s social and political vision. The matriarchal utopia pictured in Maria’s Dream is far removed from the industrialized reality of contemporary Germany—the only indication of human civilization is the rustic hut pictured in the background. Overall, Schrimpf’s experimental, Expressionist style works in tandem with his use of the figure of the mother as a regenerative symbol to create an image of a revolutionary new world order.

3. 1918-1921: Political Revolution and Artistic Evolution

In the summer of 1917, Schrimpf relocated to Munich, accompanied by his new wife. The artist’s return to the city was most likely not entirely voluntary. According to Graf in his autobiographical text Wir Sind Gefangene (Prisoners All), Schrimpf was forced to flee Berlin in order to avoid being drafted into military service.44 He had initially been able to avoid serving in

World War One due to his chronic arthritis, but in 1917 he was declared fit for duty. An avowed pacifist, Schrimpf attempted to flee with Uhden to Holland, but was stopped at the border and so moved to Munich instead.

While in Munich, Schrimpf became more directly involved in contemporary politics. He and Graf began to attend weekly discussion evenings hosted by the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), founded in April of 1917 as a splinter group of the established Social Democratic Party (SPD), due to its rejection of war.45

Both Graf and Schrimpf were against the continuation of the war. In January of 1918 they participated in a strike of munitions workers incited by Kurt Eisner, the head of the USPD. That same month they were also arrested for helping to disseminate copies of the *Lichnowsky Memorandum*, a pamphlet written by the German ambassador in London that accused the German government of failing to support him in his efforts to avert the outbreak of the war.46 The police accused Graf and Schrimpf of using the pamphlet as an agitational device to incite the munitions strike and arrested them. They were, however, quickly released.

In January of the following year Schrimpf became a member of the newly-founded German Communist Party (KPD). Art historians disagree on how long he remained in the party. Some believe that he left as early as April, while others assert that he was a member until around 1926.47 Regardless of its duration, Schrimpf’s membership in the KPD is significant for its

---

45 In December of 1915 the members of the future USPD voted against the authorization of further loans to finance the war, an act which led to their expulsion from the SPD.
46 The pamphlet was originally privately published as *Meine Londoner Mission (1912-1914)* and circulated amongst upper-class circles in Germany. In 1918 it was retitled the *Lichnowsky-Tagebuchs* and published in the United States, Sweden and Britain. See Herwig Roggemann and Dirk Fischer, *Transformation des Rechts in Ost und West: Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Herwig Roggemann zum 70. Geburtstag* (Berlin: BVW, 2006), 540.
47 In the timeline included in Wolfgang Storch’s *Georg Schrimpf und Maria Uhden*, April is listed as the month in which Schrimpf leaves the KPD. However, Hoffmann in his essay in *Süddeutsche Freiheit: Kunst der Revolution in München 1919* argues against the short duration of Schrimpf’s membership in the party. While April 1919 is the departure date listed on a National Socialist questionnaire that Schrimpf filled out while working at the Staatliche Hochschule für Kunsterziehung in Berlin, Hoffmann believes that Schrimpf intentionally downplayed his leftist
affirmation of the artist’s affiliation with the political left at this time. In his search for an alternative to the existing social order, Schrimpf was exploring different options. Although ultimately the ideology of the KPD would make little impact on Schrimpf and his art, his membership in the party reveals that he was caught up in the revolutionary fervor that was sweeping through Germany at this time.

Late 1918 through early 1919 was a politically turbulent period in Germany. As the military’s inevitable defeat in the war became ever more apparent, revolution and rebellion broke out throughout the country. Bavaria in particular was a center of violent revolutionary struggle. In a period of six months four different governments were established in Munich in quick succession.

On November 7th, Kurt Eisner declared Bavaria a republic and founded the Free People’s State of Bavaria. Following Eisner’s assassination in February of 1919, the government fled Munich and a second republican government came to power, headed by Johannes Hoffmann, a member of the Social Democratic Party. Hoffmann’s government was overthrown on April 7th, when members of the USPD, led by the dramatist Ernst Toller, seized power and founded the Bavarian Council Republic. Six days later, following an attempt to overthrow Toller’s government by the government in exile, the Communist Council Republic was established by the leaders of the Bavarian Communist Party.48

As Dennis Crockett has stated, in 1919 the radical left had its day in Munich.49 This was true not only in the political arena, but also in the art world as well. Following the establishment of the Free People’s State of Bavaria, a large group of Munich-based artists founded the Council for Art Education in order to protect his job. Having seen the questionnaire and other personal articles of the artist at the archive of the Universität der Künste in Berlin (Personalakte 1, Bestand 9, Nr. 261 and Personalakte 2, Bestand 16, Nr. 5862), I agree with Hoffmann’s assertion.

48 See Weinstein, 161-218 for a complete discussion of the different Bavarian governments.
49 Crockett, 100.
of Artists with the intention of representing the visual arts in the new government. Just a few months later, in February 1919, a small splinter group, including Schrimpf and Graf, formed the Aktionsausschuss revolutionärer Künstler (Action Committee of Revolutionary Artists).  

The Action Committee mainly consisted of young radicalized artists dissatisfied with the artistic and political conservatism of the Council of Artists.

The Action Committee left behind very few records documenting its founding and goals. As the art historian Joan Weinstein has discussed, however, many of the members, Schrimpf and Graf included, were affiliated with the periodical Der Weg (The Way), whose pages offer an insight into their political perspective. Der Weg was a newly-established Expressionist journal that published examples of Expressionist art and poetry as well as political articles. Although the publication had no unified and coherent political position, many of the contributors adopted a reformist-anarchist stance, decrying the evils of capitalism, calling for a reorganization of society and denouncing any abridgement of individual freedom. Particularly well-represented in the journal were the ideas of Gustav Landauer.

Landauer was one of the leading theorists of socialist anarchism in Germany at this time. His theories primarily centered on his dissatisfaction with the current state of society. Landauer felt that modern civilization had evolved a social environment that was hostile to the nature of man. He believed that the growth of industrialization, capitalism and the state in contemporary Germany had led to a sense of alienation amongst humanity and a decline in what he termed “Geist”—an inherent and natural sense of communal awareness.

---

50 Schrimpf, along with the American artist Hermann Sachs, was in charge of the crafts division of the group. See Hoffmann, “Künstler und Ihrer Revolution,” 41.

51 The February issue of the journal reproduced Schrimpf’s print Girl at the Window. Graf contributed poetry. See Weinstein for more information on the publication.
Landauer’s proposed solution to mankind’s alienation was the overthrow of the state and the creation of a new world order. He emphasized, however, that revolutionary social change needed to be achieved through peaceful means. Rather than violently destroying the state, Landauer encouraged people to simply leave it—to exit the current society and to participate in the creation of a new reality by forming communitarian societies. He advocated for immediate action and individual self-realization. According to Landauer, the first step towards changing society was to change one’s own behavior and mode of living. As he stated in his 1910 article “Schwache Staatsmänner, Schwacheres Volk!” (Weak Statesmen, Weaker People), “The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another.”52 Essentially, what Landauer proposed was a spiritual revolution from below that would begin with the individual and extend through all of society.53

By 1918 Landauer’s ideas were widely known. He had begun to attract a substantial following during the war years, and he exercised a great deal of influence on the artists, writers and intellectuals involved in the Munich revolution. In November he was invited to Munich by Kurt Eisner to help implement the revolution, and in April of 1919 he was appointed the People’s Delegate for Culture and Education for the first Council Republic.

Landauer was a logical choice for this position. He had long been interested in the role of culture in bringing about revolutionary social change. Landauer believed that revolutionary activity was not limited to the fight against state laws and social systems, but rather concerned all

dimensions of life. Like many socialist anarchists, he promoted the idea that art could be used as a tool to revolutionize human consciousness.

Following his appointment, Landauer called upon the Action Committee to help him implement the cultural course of the revolution. According to Weinstein, “This choice confirmed the ideological convergence between Landauer’s anarchism and the program espoused by the Action Committee members in Der Weg.” Like many of the other revolutionary artist groups established in Germany during the immediate post-war period, the Action Committee called for the reform of arts education and the reorganization of art schools. It also championed Expressionism as the artistic style of the revolution. However, as Weinstein’s discussion of the group makes clear, in the three weeks that the committee was in charge of the Munich art world it accomplished little more than firing some of the professors at the academy.

By mid-1919 the revolutionary hopes of the Action Committee members and all those associated with the first and second Bavarian Council Republics had been dashed. In May the new government was violently suppressed by a Prussian division of the Free Corps, and Landauer, along with many others, was brutally murdered. Schrimpf was arrested and spent six weeks in jail. Thereafter, the far left no longer had a voice in Bavarian politics.

Despite the failure of the Munich revolution, the importance of this period on the development of Schrimpf’s political sensibilities cannot be overstated. Through his experiences with Der Weg and the Action Committee, Schrimpf became well-acquainted with Landauer’s anarcho-socialist theories, which came to shape his own utopian aspirations and ultimately found expression in his art. As I will demonstrate in section 4, when Schrimpf reached his artistic

54 Weinstein, 180.
55 Schrimpf was arrested for procuring a fake passport for the Communist Fritz Drach, who was trying to flee Munich after the city was taken by the Free Corps.
maturity in the early twenties, his imagery began to reflect Landauer’s notion of a communitarian utopia.

1918-1921 was a period of not only intense political engagement, but also of rapid artistic development. Graf would later note that Schrimpf’s rise as an artist began at this time. By late 1917, Schrimpf was moving away from the Expressionist distortions that had dominated his earlier works, embracing instead a new solidity and naturalism of form. This stylistic shift was prompted by Schrimpf’s engagement with the artistic traditions of Italian late Gothic painting. During the fall of 1917, the artist began to create a series of motherhood paintings inspired by the Madonna and child imagery of medieval artists such as Duccio di Buoninsegna and Giotto di Bondone.

In 1918 Schrimpf painted Visit to the Child, a work which depicts a young mother cradling an infant in her arms. (fig. 3-10) Seated on a bench in the center of the image, the mother and child are surrounded by adoring women. Schrimpf’s stylistic shift away from Expressionism toward a new solidity of form is readily apparent in this painting. Despite some persisting simplifications and distortions, including the oversized hands and eyes, the figures are quite naturalistic in comparison to the sinuous, curving, almost balloon-like forms seen in earlier works such as Comrades. Schrimpf’s use of modeling, reminiscent of Giotto, gives the women in the painting a solid and statuesque appearance. At the same time, however, the outlining of the figures, most noticeable in the mother’s face, as well as the flattened, almost claustrophobic space is still reminiscent of the artist’s earlier Expressionist works.

In terms of its subject matter and composition, Visit to the Child greatly resembles a medieval maestà. The central placement of the mother and the overall symmetry of the work call to mind, for example, Giotto’s Virgin and Child Enthroned (1305-1310). (fig. 3-11) The

influence of Italian late Gothic painting is also apparent in Schrimpf’s use of the hieratic scale to emphasize the importance of the mother and child.

Schrimpf’s reliance on an Italian prototype for this work is not surprising. As Wieland Schmied noted in an essay on Schrimpf, Italian art of the Trecento, Quattrocento and Cinquecento played a major role in the development of the painter’s artistic language.57 Schrimpf was initially inspired to start drawing through his exposure to the work of Michelangelo and Raphael and, beginning in 1909, he made periodic trips to Italy where he would have seen medieval and Renaissance art in person. Schrimpf’s interest in the work of the Nazarenes, the nineteenth-century group of German Romantic artists who looked to Italian medieval art for inspiration, can also explain his assumption of late Gothic forms.58

What most likely prompted Schrimpf to engage in particular with Italian Madonna imagery at this time, however, was his continued theoretical and personal interest in the theme of motherhood.59 Along with the impact of Gross and his matriarchal theories, several events of this period spurred Schrimpf’s attraction to this subject. In the fall of 1917 Maria Uhden became pregnant. She gave birth the following June to Schrimpf’s first son, Marc. Shortly thereafter she died as a result of complications from the birth. Following this tragic event, maternal imagery began to appear with greater frequency in Schrimpf’s art. Many scholars have interpreted his continual representation of motherhood over the next few years as a process of mourning and memorializing his dead wife.60

58 It is also important to note that many art critics compared Expressionism to the distortions of Gothic art. See for example Adolf Behne, “Deutsche Expressionisten: Vortrag zur Eröffnung der neuen Sturm-Ausstellung,” Der Sturm 5 (December 1914), 114-115; translated in German Expressionism. Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism, Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993), 61-63.
59 Other motherhood paintings of this period include The Birth (1917) and Breastfeeding Mother (1919).
60 See for instance Schmied, 11.
In light of this personal tragedy, the appeal of the maestà to Schrimpf is clear. By modeling his works after images of the Madonna and child he was able to present motherhood in a sacred light. Although the mother and child in *Visit to the Child* have been secularized and divested of any specifically Christian meaning, they remain the focus of worship and adoration. The figure of the mother now represented for Schrimpf a personal as well as a political ideal. His veneration of motherhood encompassed both his love and longing for the deceased Uhden and his desire for social regeneration. From this moment forward he would continue to sacralize motherhood in his paintings by referencing Christian artistic traditions.

Over the next several years Schrimpf’s artistic language continued to evolve. He gradually abandoned the use of intense, expressive colors and Expressionist distortions in favor of a muted palette and more naturalistic treatment of space and form. By 1921 he had developed the main vocabulary of his *Neue Sachlichkeit* artistic style.

In May of 1921, the influential art writer and champion of modern art Leopold Zahn noted in an article that Schrimpf’s painting had arrived at a “new naturalism.” Zahn’s review was written on the occasion of an exhibition of work by Schrimpf and the painters Carlo Mense, Heinrich Maria Davringhausen and Tommy Parzinger at the *Neue Kunst* gallery in Munich, operated by the prominent art dealer Hans Goltz. The exhibition was meant to showcase the work of these four painters, who both Goltz and Zahn believed were developing a new artistic style. According to Zahn, this new style was characterized by a smooth, crisp paint application, a fidelity to the depiction of objects as they appear in nature and an interest in perspectival spatial construction.

---

62 Zahn was the editor of *Der Ararat*, a modern art journal published by Goltz’s gallery.
Both Zahn and Goltz believed that the development of this new approach to painting was prompted in part by the artists’ interest in the classical artistic tradition. All four painters were influenced by the Italian Old Masters as well as the Nazarenes. This connection was made explicit in the layout of Goltz’s exhibition. Before entering the galleries displaying the paintings by the contemporary artists, visitors first had to pass through two rooms filled with reproductions of classical works of art. While the works exhibited by Schrimpf, Davringhausen, Mense and Parzinger were clearly inspired by classical art, however, they still reveal the impact of the artists’ previous avant-garde experimentations. Schrimpf’s paintings, for instance, continued the simplifications and limited use of modeling typical of his earlier, Expressionist art. In his review of the *Neue Kunst* exhibition, Zahn noted this combination of classical and modernist qualities. As he stated, “Schrimpf’s Nazarene-like paintings and watercolors are the results of a long, continuously progressing development of this artist, who has been thoroughly influenced by Franz Marc.”

Schrimpf, Davringhausen, Mense and Parzinger were all under contract with Goltz (Schrimpf had an exclusive contract with him from 1918-1921) and exhibited together frequently, both at the *Neue Kunst* gallery as well as at the Munich New Secession. Along with the painter Alexander Kanoldt, these artists formed an informal group of loosely-affiliated, Munich-based artists working in a similar artistic style. By the mid-twenties, Schrimpf, Mense and Kanoldt were singled out by art critics as the main representatives of the classical branch of Hartlaub’s *Neue Sachlichkeit*. They were frequently referred to as the Neoclassicists and the

---


64 Fifteen works by Kanoldt and eleven by Mense were displayed at Hartlaub’s *Neue Sachlichkeit* show in Mannheim. As mentioned earlier, Schrimpf had twelve works included.
Neo-Nazarenes, due to their creation of timeless idylls and their classicizing emphasis on clarity of form and compositional harmony.

Schrimpf’s stylistic transformation during this period has been a major issue of discussion in the discourse on the artist. Many art historians have questioned the reasons for and political implications of the artist’s retreat from Expressionism and embrace of a new realism at this time. Foremost in the literature is the belief that Schrimpf’s painting style changed due to his interest in the Rome-based art journal *Valori Plastici*, which began publication in November 1918.⁶⁵ *Valori Plastici* was devoted to fostering a new art grounded in the Italian classical tradition. It reproduced examples of this new art by contemporary artists such as Carlo Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico. As Crockett has charted in detail, *Valori Plastici* was widely discussed in German artistic circles after the war.⁶⁶ Schrimpf would have been aware of the publication through Goltz, who began distributing the journal through his gallery in 1919. Moreover, when Schrimpf briefly lived in Rome in 1921 and 1922, he made contact with the *Valori Plastici* circle. Scholars such as Jeanne Anne Nugent have made the argument that Schrimpf was influenced by the *Valori Plastici* artists, and that his interest in their paintings ultimately led him to reject Expressionism in favor of a new classicism.⁶⁷ However, Schrimpf’s art had already started to move towards a classicizing realism by 1918, before he became aware of the developments in contemporary Italian art. As Schmied has convincingly argued, *Valori Plastici* did not prompt Schrimpf’s stylistic change, but instead offered a validation of his own artistic developments.

---

⁶⁵ See for instance Michalski’s discussion of Schrimpf.  
⁶⁶ Crockett, 16-19.  
⁶⁷ Nugent, 160.
Other art historians have interpreted Schrimpf’s stylistic shift as signaling his abandonment of his earlier political ideals and aspirations. According to this argument, Expressionism, with its links to anarchism and radical left politics, was viewed by many as the artistic style of the revolution, particularly in Munich. After the failure of the revolution, many artists, Schrimpf included, were disappointed by the lack of social change and chose to abandon both Expressionism and political engagement. As further proof of Schrimpf’s disillusionment with radical left politics, scholars note that over the next few years he settled into a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle. The artist remarried in 1921 and three years later his second son was born. By the mid-twenties Schrimpf had become an established figure in the German art world. He was the subject of two monographs and was appointed a teaching position in Haubinda. The final assessment of these scholars is that Schrimpf’s post-1919 works are calm and idyllic images that reflect both the stabilization of his life as well as his move away from political engagement.

As already noted, Schrimpf’s transition to a new realism had begun as early as 1918. Undoubtedly, his changing life circumstances after the revolution reinforced this direction; however, the artist’s adoption of a bourgeois lifestyle does not necessarily imply a disillusionment with radical politics. Many middle class artists during the 1920s and 30s were committed leftists, such as, for example, George Grosz. I will argue instead that Schrimpf’s stylistic transformation was directly linked to the continuing development of his political consciousness and the leftist intent of his art.

---

68 See Gerster, “Kontinuität und Bruch,” 542; Hartleb, 5; Hoffmann, 42.
70 For another example of a bourgeois artist committed to leftist politics see Rose-Carol Washton Long’s analysis of August Sander’s “The Persecuted” and “Political Prisoners” portfolios. Rose-Carol Washton Long, “August Sander’s Portraits of Persecuted Jews,” Tate Papers 19 (April 2013).
During the revolutionary period Schrimpf did not create many new paintings, choosing instead to focus on his political activities. The paintings he created directly after the revolution, however, display the further development of the revolutionary motifs already seen in his earlier works. The image of woman, and in particular the figure of the mother, continued to be used as a utopian symbol of societal change and regeneration. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the artist’s post-1919 motherhood paintings embody the theories of both Otto Gross and Gustav Landauer. During the early twenties Schrimpf used the figure of the mother to communicate his vision of an ideal society, a matriarchal and communitarian utopia grounded in the ideas of Gross and Landauer. The calm, classicizing and idealizing realism that he introduced into his paintings at this time was meant to aesthetically underscore this peaceful utopian vision.

4. The Impact of Otto Gross and Gustav Landauer on Schrimpf’s Maternal Imagery during the Early Twenties

During the early twenties the theories of Otto Gross continued to be one of the main intellectual influences on Schrimpf and his art. As discussed in section 2, Schrimpf was introduced to Gross as early as 1909, when both men were members of the Gruppe Tat. Schrimpf recognized in Gross a kindred spirit, a fellow intellectual who shared his desire for the complete overthrow of the existing social order. Gross’ revolutionary psychological and political theories, and particularly his ideas on matriarchy, provided Schrimpf with a model on which to base his own radical beliefs. I’ve demonstrated that it was from his sustained contact with Gross that Schrimpf was drawn to express his utopian hopes for social change in maternal imagery. As I will now discuss, it was in his motherhood works of the early twenties that Schrimpf most thoroughly engaged with Gross’ theories.
In 1922, Schrimpf created the work *Midday Rest.* (see fig. 3-3) The painting depicts a mother and child in a loving embrace, sleeping peacefully in a serene, sunny landscape. The branches of a tree provide shade for the figures, while a small dog dozes nearby. In this idyllic image of maternal bliss Schrimpf pictured his ideal social order as envisioned through the lens of Gross’ matriarchal theories.

In *Midday Rest*, Schrimpf presents motherhood in a sacred light. The painting resembles a secularized version of the rest on the flight into Egypt. The mother’s dress and mantle, her placement under the tree and the sweeping landscape in the background call to mind traditional depictions of this biblical story. (fig. 3-12) Moreover, the woman is dressed in blue, red, and white, the symbolic colors of the Virgin Mary. By referencing the traditions of Christian art, Schrimpf imbues motherhood with a sacred importance, raising it to the level of the ideal. As with his painting *Visit to the Child*, however, the artist has divested the work of any specifically Christian meaning. It is motherhood itself, rather than the Madonna and child, that is glorified here.

Further contributing to Schrimpf’s celebration of motherhood in this work is his use of scale. The mother and child are shown solid and statuesque. Their larger-than-life size bodies dominate the picture plane and dwarf the landscape elements. Schrimpf has literally monumentalized motherhood in this painting.

Schrimpf’s glorification of the mother, partly motivated by the death of Maria Uhden, was also consistent with Gross’ beliefs. Gross considered motherhood an issue of great importance for the establishment of a new, egalitarian social order. In later writings such as “Die Kommunistische Grundidee in der Paradiessymbolik” (The Communist Idea in the Symbolism of Paradise, 1919) Gross discussed his belief that reforming maternal care—specifically,
providing state support for maternity—could act as a catalyst for the massive transformation of social structures away from a patriarchal and morally oppressive order towards a collectivized state.\textsuperscript{71} Moreover, he believed that it was only in a matriarchal society that women would be treated as the equals of men.

Notably absent in \textit{Midday Rest} is the figure of the father. All of Schrimpf’s maternal images depict only the mother and child. Schrimpf’s consistent exclusion of the father from his motherhood paintings was motivated by Gross’ argument that the father was a figure of oppression and that the patriarchal family was the root of gender inequality. Drawing on the writings of Bachofen, Gross asserted that the origins of the patriarchal family were in the forced marriages of women slaves, captured in war. Thus, the institution of marriage was founded on the exploitation of women and their subordination to men. For Gross, marriage was a form of slavery, with the woman being treated as the property of her husband and forced to abandon any sense of individuality. This system was deemed by Gross psychologically damaging not only for women, but also for children. As he argued, within the confines of the patriarchal family, children are forced to conform to their parents’ repressive way of thinking in order to earn their love.\textsuperscript{72} Gross believed that a truly egalitarian society could only be established with the abolition of the patriarchal family. Following this idea, Schrimpf consistently presented an alternative to the patriarchal family in his motherhood paintings. \textit{Midday Rest} depicts a maternal utopia in which women and children are free from patriarchal suppression.

The classicizing style Schrimpf adopted in \textit{Midday Rest} aesthetically supports his depiction of an ideal world order. The work is painted in the Italianate, pastoral tradition. With


\textsuperscript{72} See Pietikainen, “Anarchy, Eros and the Mother Right.”
its idyllic, mountainous setting and balanced composition, it calls to mind the paintings of Joseph Anton Koch, an artist affiliated with the Nazarenes who created landscapes in the classicizing manner of Claude Lorrain.\(^{73}\) (fig. 3-13) In *Midday Rest*, a meandering path leads the viewer’s eye in a long sweep out to the distant horizon, while the tree on the left acts as a repoussoir.\(^{74}\) The left-leaning tree also counters the strong diagonal created by the reclining mother and child, creating a sense of balance and harmony. The curves of the mother’s body echo the rounded contours of the hill upon which she sleeps, suggesting a unity of woman and nature. Overall, the work is pervaded by a feeling of peace and harmony. Schrimpf’s classicizing realism works in tandem with the subject matter to create a utopian image of maternal bliss.

In addition to the classicizing compositional elements evident in *Midday Rest*, the painting also bears the mark of Schrimpf’s earlier Expressionist experimentations. The simplification of form and lack of specific detail, for instance, are reminiscent of paintings such as *Comrades* and *Maria’s Dream*. Moreover, the minimal use of modeling creates a sense of spatial ambiguity in the image. The trunk of the tree and the upper body of the mother appear somewhat flat, emphasizing the surface of the painting and contradicting the illusionistic sense of depth created by the diagonal path. Overall, as *Midday Rest* makes clear, Schrimpf’s *Neue Sachlichkeit* style contained both classicist and modernist stylistic features.

In another work painted in 1922, *Woman and Children with Bird*, Schrimpf employed similar representational strategies in order to depict motherhood in a celebratory manner. (fig. 3-14) The painting features a seated woman surrounded by four children, the youngest of which stands on her lap. Although the mother gazes stoically into the distance, her gestures towards her

---


\(^{74}\) The inclusion of a group of trees in the right or left foreground of a painting to frame the composition and function as a *repoussoir* was typical of Lorrain’s landscapes, as was the use of paths, streams, etc. to lead the viewer’s eye from the foreground to the background.
children are loving and protective. Her arm encircles the young boy to her left, while her oversized right hand clasps the ankle of the infant.

As with *Midday Rest*, the mother in *Woman and Children with Bird* has been monumentalized. Her massive, solid form fills the front center of the painting, dwarfing the buildings in the background. The children are also depicted in a large scale. Through the solidity and enlargement of the figures Schrimpf attempts to glorify the idea of motherhood.

*Woman and Children with Bird* also continues Schrimpf’s tendency to reference the traditions of Christian art. The painting employs the compositional format of the maestà, complete with its attendant sacralizing message. The bird referenced in the title of the work is held by the young girl standing to the right of the mother and is focus of the infant’s attention. Within Christian art the image of a bird is commonly used as a symbol of the human soul as well as an emblem of peace. In paintings of the infant Christ and the Virgin Mary, Jesus is often depicted holding a small bird, typically either a dove or a goldfinch. Schrimpf’s inclusion of a bird emphasizes the idyllic nature of the work and suggests that the artist is depicting an ideal reality.

What sets *Woman and Children with Bird* apart from earlier works by the artist modeled on the medieval maestà, such as *Visit to the Child*, is the manner in which it is painted. Instead of a Gothic-inspired style, Schrimpf employs the same classicizing and idealizing naturalism seen in *Midday Rest*. Through the use of one-point perspective he creates a rational and orderly space. The figures are arranged in a pyramidal composition that lends the work a sense of stability and balance. In this painting, Schrimpf’s calm classicism aesthetically underscores his idyllic vision of a peaceful maternal utopia.

---

The setting of *Woman and Children with Bird* is also different from that of Schrimpf’s earlier motherhood paintings. The mothers in Schrimpf’s images of the preceding decade were typically located in forests, jungles or interior spaces. *Woman and Children with Bird* is set instead in a rural location. The landscape in the background of the painting is distinctly agrarian. The land looks well-maintained and there are several barns behind the mother and children. As I will demonstrate next, Schrimpf’s decision to locate his maternal utopia in a specifically rural setting reflects the impact of Gustav Landauer on his art and political thinking at this time.

As made clear in section 2, Schrimpf’s main contact with Landauer occurred in late 1918 and early 1919, when the artist was involved with the Action Committee of Revolutionary Artists in Munich. Landauer’s anarcho-socialist theories and his critique of the modern capitalist state deeply impacted the intellectuals affiliated with this group, Schrimpf included. In particular, the ideas articulated in Landauer’s *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (Call to Socialism) played an especially important role in shaping their political consciousness.

*Aufruf zum Sozialismus* was first published in 1911 and then reprinted in January of 1919, during the November Revolution, due to popular demand.76 In this political tract, Landauer discussed what he perceived to be the evils of the current capitalist system and laid out his plans for the establishment of a new social order. Landauer’s critique of capitalism was centered on three main problems. First, he disagreed with the idea of the individual ownership of land, believing that it created an inequality between those who own land and those who do not. Without land, one cannot make an independent living. Thus, Landauer argued that land ownership was the root of slavery and bondage. The second capitalist evil that Landauer identified was the use of money as the principle means of exchange. According to Landauer, money can be treated as a commodity in and of itself. Finally, Landauer critiqued the idea of

---

added value. He noted that products were typically sold for more than the worker was paid to create them. Wages and price were no longer mutually dependent. Workers cannot buy the very products they produce, resulting in the alienation of work from consumption.

In opposition to the existing capitalist order, Landauer advocated the establishment of a stateless society based on voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. This ideal anarchist order was to be achieved through the foundation of small, self-sufficient communes. Within these communities, individuals would work for their own needs, rather than for money or the market. This would reestablish a relationship between work and consumption. People would also live and work closely together, thus fostering a sense of communal awareness and bringing an end to social alienation.77

The anarchist communes that Landauer proposed in his *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* were to be founded in association with rural villages. Landauer believed that the agricultural countryside was the ideal geographical location for the establishment of these settlements. Throughout his *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* he stressed the importance of farmable land for the development of a new social order. As he stated, “The struggle of socialism is a struggle for land; the social question is an agrarian question.”78

Landauer’s focus on the rural countryside reflects the influence of the communitarian-anarchist Peter Kropotkin on his thinking.79 In his *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), Kropotkin praised the rural environment for its simplicity, localized lifestyle and tradition of communal work and property. Landauer shared these ideas, as well as the conviction that agrarian communes would stand the greatest chance of self-sufficiency. Moreover, Landauer and

---

78 Gustav Landauer, *For Socialism*, 134.
79 Landauer met Kropotkin in person in 1903 while he was in England. The following year he translated several of Kropotkin’s writings into German.
Kropotkin both celebrated what they perceived to be a harmonious relationship between nature and the rural peasantry.

Schrimpf was most likely introduced to Landauer’s *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* shortly after it was first published in 1911. It was discussed by the *Gruppe Tat* members—Graf notes in his *Wir Sind Gefangene* the impact that the work made on his own view of anarchism. It was not, however, until Schrimpf’s involvement with the Action Committee that Landauer’s theories began to make a strong impact on his art and political consciousness. Schrimpf’s close contact with Landauer at this time most likely heightened his perceptivity to his ideas. As I will demonstrate, *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* helped Schrimpf give a more concrete form to his vision of a utopian society. If Gross’ theories led Schrimpf to select matriarchy as the ideal social structure, Landauer’s writings were one more source that led him to select the agricultural countryside as the ideal geographical location for a new world order.

Beginning around 1920, Landauer’s proposed agrarian utopia began to be figured frequently in Schrimpf’s art. From this point forward most of his works picture a rural environment. The young women and children that populate his paintings of the twenties are typically placed in the agricultural countryside. Paintings such as *Wild Horses* (1921), *Girl with Sheep* (1923) and *Swineherd* (1923), for example, feature farm animals, barns and other indicators of a specifically agricultural lifestyle. *(figs. 3-15, 3-16 and 3-17)*

Many of Schrimpf’s motherhood paintings of the twenties are also set in a rural location. As seen with *Woman and Children with Bird*, the artist frequently depicted mothers in the countryside. In another work painted in 1922, *Woman and Child with Dove*, Schrimpf portrayed an idealized mother and child seated in front of an open window overlooking an idyllic rural village. *(fig. 3-18)* Although reference to the Christian artistic tradition is less overt in this
painting than in earlier works, the presence of a dove on the windowsill can be interpreted symbolically. In Christian iconography, the dove is an emblem of peace as well as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Within the context of Schrimpf’s painting the inclusion of the dove reinforces the peaceful and idyllic nature of the work. Woman and Child with Dove depicts Schrimpf’s ideal social order, a simplistic agricultural world in which mankind and nature coexist in harmony.

Concomitant with his decision to picture motherhood in an agrarian setting, Schrimpf began to make the attributes of class much more apparent in his works. Whereas in his early paintings the mothers are typically portrayed nude, in his mature works they are often depicted wearing the loose dresses and head kerchief typical of the rural working class. It was the paintings of this period that inspired the art historian Leopold Zahn, one of Schrimpf’s chief champions at this point, to refer to the artist as the “idyllist of proletarian life.”

Both aesthetically and theoretically, Schrimpf’s images of an agrarian utopia share many similarities with the art of the French Neo-Impressionists. As Robyn Roslak has discussed, many of the socially-conscious Neo-Impressionist painters active in France during the 1880s and 90s were interested in anarcho-communist theory. Artists such as Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro were drawn especially to the writings of Kropotkin. As Roslak demonstrates, Pissarro in particular used his art to give visual form to Kropotkin’s vision of an ideal anarcho-communist society. In paintings such as Peasant Women Planting Pea Sticks, Pissarro illustrated Kropotkin’s celebration of life in the rural countryside. (fig. 3-19)

---

80 Zahn, 284.
With its monumentalized female figures, dressed in traditional peasant garb, and calm, sunny landscape setting, *Peasant Women Planting Pea Sticks* calls to mind works by Schrimpf such as *Midday Rest* and *Woman and Children with Bird*. Both Pissarro and Schrimpf refer in their paintings to a perceived harmony between nature and the rural peasantry through formal means, with the bodies of the women echoing the landscape elements. The artists also take an idealistic view of agricultural life, ignoring many of its harsh realities. The similarity of their artistic vision stems from their shared interest in communitarian-anarchist theory and their desire to picture an ideal world order.

Although the painting techniques employed by Pissarro and Schrimpf differ greatly, the issue of artistic style and paint application was of great importance for the political intentions of both artists’ work. Roslak has convincingly demonstrated the affinity that existed between Kropotkin’s utopian, anarcho-communist theories and the formal construction of Pissarro’s Neo-Impressionist landscapes. According to her, the pointillist technique employed by Pissarro was meant to embody the anarchist concept of “unity in diversity.” Each dot of paint stands on its own and asserts itself as a pure color; at the same time, however, when viewed from the proper distance the individual points of color form an image, thus working together as a harmonious whole. As Roslak argues, this painting technique was meant to embody the anarcho-communist ideal of a society made up of specific individuals who would never lose their autonomy, even while functioning as members of a greater social whole.\(^{82}\) Unlike Pissarro, Schrimpf did not employ a pointillist technique. By the end of the nineteenth century pointillism was criticized by many art critics and artists as being cold, monotonous and distracting.\(^{83}\) Moreover, as the previous chapters of this dissertation have made clear, many of the leftist artists working in

---

Germany during the Weimar years, particularly those with ties to the KPD, preferred a more representational approach to painting. Accordingly, in his paintings from the twenties Schrimpf chose to apply his paint with smooth, perfectly blended brushstrokes, thus portraying his vision of a rural utopia with a clarity of form that renders the image instantly intelligible and relatable to the viewer. The crisp smoothness of his paint application works in tandem with his balanced compositions to impart a classicizing sense of calm harmony that reinforces the idyllic subject matter of his art. In addition, the simplicity of Schrimpf’s style, with each figure being depicted with an economy of means, mirrors the simplicity of the agrarian lifestyle. Schrimpf, like Pissarro, used a painting technique and style meant to visually support his utopian political vision.

Overall, the motherhood paintings that Schrimpf created during the twenties make it clear that the artist was drawn to Landauer’s idea of a rural bliss. He shared with the anarcho-socialist theorist the belief that the embrace of a simplistic agrarian lifestyle was the key to social harmony. The impact of Landauer’s Aufruf zum Sozialismus on Schrimpf was long lasting. Throughout the rest of his career he continually painted idealized agricultural landscapes. Later in life Schrimpf even attempted to make Landauer’s vision of a rural utopia a personal reality. In 1929 he moved to Lochhausen, a small suburb of Munich located on the edge of the Dachau marsh. He lived there for several years with his family. Contemporaneous photographs of Lochhausen picture an idyllic rural village similar to that which the artist depicted consistently in his art. (figs. 3-20 and 3-21).

As I’ve demonstrated, Schrimpf’s idyllic motherhood images of the early twenties were deeply impacted by his involvement with the radical political left. The artist’s political vision of a rural and maternal utopia, expressed with great frequency in his art, was grounded in the

---

84 See Storch, 158-166.
utopian, anarchist theories of Otto Gross and Gustav Landauer. Schimpf’s paintings of this period picture an ideal social reality, an alternative to the existing patriarchal, bourgeois and capitalist order.

5. 1933-1938: Schimpf under National Socialism

As I have shown in this chapter, throughout the course of his career Schimpf used his art to embody his anarcho-socialist ideals. Despite his clear commitment to radical leftist politics, however, the artist continues to be described as “apolitical” and even conservative by art historians today. One of the main factors that has complicated a political reading of Schimpf’s mature art is the painter’s involvement with the National Socialists during the 1930s. Unlike other leftist artists who chose to flee the country after the Nazis came to power in 1933, Schimpf continued to live and work in Germany. Moreover, he found official favor during the Third Reich. In October of 1933 Schimpf was appointed to a professorship at the Staatliche Hochschule für Kunsterziehung in Berlin-Schöneberg (State Academy of Art Education). His appointment was due largely to the influence of Alexander Kanoldt, who was the director of the school and a member of the National Socialist Party. Schimpf’s paintings of idealized rural scenes were also prized by many high-ranking members of the party. He received a series of commissions from Rudolf Hess, Deputy Führer to Adolf Hitler, and one of his landscapes hung in the German embassy in London.85

Many art historians have noted the contradiction between Schimpf’s early artistic career, when he was affiliated with the radical left, and his later career, when he found favor with the National Socialists. This contradiction has led many to dismiss the possibility that the artist’s

85 Hess commissioned Schimpf to create a series of landscapes of the German countryside in 1936. See Gerster, “Kontinuität und Bruch,” 552-556 for more details. Walter Darré, Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture, may have also owned works by Schimpf.
mature paintings were motivated by leftist politics.\textsuperscript{86} At the most extreme, some scholars have even argued that Schrimpf actively supported the National Socialists and tailored his art during the thirties to fit their nationalist ideology. In an article on artists and art institutions in Nazi Germany, for instance, Christine Fischer-Defoy and Paul Crossley present Schrimpf as an artist whose “political positions changed in line with the power relations…and who found artistic expression which corresponded to that change” and argue for his “extreme conformity to the views of the new holders of power [the National Socialists].”\textsuperscript{87}

Despite Fischer-Defoy and Crossley’s argument, there is no evidence to suggest that Schrimpf ever subscribed to the National Socialist ideology. Unlike Kanoldt, the painter never joined the Nazi party. Furthermore, Schrimpf maintained his ties to the radical left through at least the mid-to-late twenties. He became a member of the Communist \textit{Rote Hilfe}, the German affiliate of the International Red Aid, in 1925. It was, in fact, the artist’s “red past” that eventually led to his fall from official favor. In 1937 Schrimpf’s earlier membership in the German Communist Party and the \textit{Rote Hilfe} came to light. Despite the efforts of Hess and others to defend the painter, at the end of the year Schrimpf lost his teaching position. In the same year, when the National Socialists began to remove works of art they deemed “offensive” from public institutions, thirty-three works by Schrimpf were confiscated from German museums. One of his early Expressionist works was even displayed at the defamatory propaganda exhibition \textit{Degenerate Art}.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, the artist’s involvement with the National Socialists was short lived.

\textsuperscript{86} See for instance Gerster, “Kontinuität und Bruch.”
\textsuperscript{87} Fischer-Defoy and Crossley, 22.
Not only is there is no evidence that Schrimpf politically supported the Nazis, there is also little to suggest that he intentionally tailored his art to fit with their artistic ideals. The idealized landscapes of the German countryside that were prized in the Third Reich were already a staple in Schrimpf’s artistic oeuvre by the mid-twenties. The artist had begun to create pure landscapes, typically of Upper Bavarian sites, around 1925, well before his involvement with the National Socialists. (fig. 3-22 and 3-23)

During the thirties, Schrimpf’s landscape images became the focus of contemporary art criticism. At this time the artist was frequently presented as the leader of a new school of German Romantic landscape painting.\(^8^9\) His works were placed within a national tradition extending from Dürer to the nineteenth-century German Romantics.\(^9^0\) Increasingly, Schrimpf’s depictions of the Bavarian countryside were linked to the nationalist ideology of the political right. Critics such as Richard Bie praised his landscapes for their celebration of the German Heimat and their embodiment of the spirit of the German Volk.\(^9^1\)

It is clear that Schrimpf did not alter his artistic content or style in order to support the National Socialist ideology. Rather, his idyllic images of the German landscape were appropriated by the political right and interpreted in line with the Nazi’s Blood and Soil rhetoric. As an artist with a family to support, Schrimpf may have had little choice but to allow the right-wing interpretation of his art and accept the National Socialist’s patronage. This does not mean, however, that the artist abandoned his former leftist ideals and embraced the new regime. At most he accepted it with passive resignation. As Graf would later state in his defense of Schrimpf, “[W]ho among us is a hero in such dangerous and life-threatening times? In any case,

---


\(^{9^0}\) During the Thirties Schrimpf’s landscapes were frequently featured in exhibitions of the New German Romanticism, such as the 1931 show Die Deutsche Neuromantik in der Malerei der Gegenwart (Frankfurt am Main) and the 1932 exhibition Neue Deutsche Romanik (Hannover).

\(^{9^1}\) Richard Bie, Deutsche Malerei der Gegenwart (Weimar: Duncker, 1930).
like all those who were small and powerless, he bowed down before the crushing, unpredictable force of the dictatorship.”

Further evidence that Schrmpf did not subscribe to the ideology of the political right later in his career is his decision to cease painting motherhood imagery around 1925, a time when such imagery was increasingly linked to conservative values. As discussed in chapter two, during the mid-to-late twenties a conservative cult of motherhood gained in importance and national recognition in Germany. At this time the parties and organizations of the political right attempted to revitalize an ideology of motherhood. Viewing women’s emancipation as a threat to the established social order, they attempted to restore traditional social values and renew conventional gender roles by restoring the value of motherhood and reminding women of their “true calling.” This glorification of motherhood intensified during the Third Reich. The National Socialists sought the “emancipation of woman from the women’s emancipation movement,” to use the words of the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, and proclaimed motherhood to be women’s sacred duty to the Volk. Significantly, it was only after Hitler’s assumption of power that Mother’s Day, first established in 1923, was declared an official holiday in Germany. In addition, the National Socialists honored mothers by staging exhibitions such as Frau und Mutter. Lebensquelle des Volkes (Woman and Mother: Life Force of the People, 1939) and Die Mutter zu Ehren (In Honor of the Mother, 1940) as well as awarding the Ehrenkreuz der

---


93 Alfred Rosenberg, Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts (Munich: Hohenschien-Verlag, 1938), 512.

Deutschen Mutter (Cross of Honor of the German Mother) to women who conceived and raised four or more children.\textsuperscript{95}

In line with the growing veneration of motherhood, many right-wing artists during the late twenties and early thirties began to create idealized representations of mothers and children, such as Rudolf Schäfler’s Junge Mutter (1930). (\textbf{fig. 3-24}) Later, during the Third Reich, images of secularized madonnas became especially popular. This can be seen, for example, in the art of Richard Heymann. Heymann was one of the most popular and prolific motherhood painters in Nazi-era Germany.\textsuperscript{96} He specialized in the creation of slickly painted, idealizing oils depicting happy mothers and children. Typical of his art is a work such as Sunny Life (1939). (\textbf{fig. 3-25}) In this painting a smiling mother and her two children are pictured in a sunlit garden. Both the figures and the setting are given a generalized appearance—there are no indicators of an exact time or location. Motherhood is presented as a timeless ideal. Heymann’s artistic approach to motherhood supports Nazi social policy regarding women. His painting was meant to depict motherhood as the main source of women’s happiness. The loving behavior of the figures, the mother’s contented smile and the title of the painting itself are intended to encourage women to devote themselves to their maternal duties. This message is reinforced by the sacralizing elements of the painting. The placement of the mother and her children call to mind traditional images of the Virgin Mary with the young Jesus and St. John the Baptist, while the light


\textit{Die Mutter zu Ehren} (May 5-June 9, 1940, Städtischen Kunsthaus, Bielefeld). The Cross of Honor of the German Mother was awarded from 1939 to 1945.

\textsuperscript{96} Between 1938 and 1944 Heymann exhibited more paintings on the theme of motherhood than any other artist at the Great German Art Exhibition, an annual exhibition intended to showcase the official art of the Third Reich. Many of these paintings were purchased by Adolf Hitler himself. Heymann’s works were also frequently reproduced in National Socialist publications, including \textit{Kunst dem Volk, NS-Frauen Warte} and the \textit{Nationalsozialistischer Monatshefte}. For more information on Heymann see Stefanie Poley, ed., \textit{Rollenbilder im Nationalsozialismus—Umgang mit dem Erbe} (Bad Honnef: Bock, 1991). To see which works by Heymann were exhibited at the Great German Art Exhibitions and who they were purchased by see the Great German Art Exhibition Research Platform (a joint project of the Deutsches Historisches Museum and the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte) \url{http://www.gdk-research.de}. 
streaming in from the left-hand side of the painting emphasizes the idea of motherhood as a sacred calling. It is important to note, however, that only a specifically Aryan motherhood is celebrated in this work—with their blonde hair and pale skin the women and children adhere to National Socialist racial ideals.

In many ways, Heymann’s Sunny Life resembles the motherhood paintings that Schrimpf had been creating since the early twenties, at least in terms of its subject matter. Although stylistically Schrimpf’s works bear the mark of his earlier modernist experimentations, featuring flattened spaces and simplified forms, while Heymann painted in the traditional, romantic realist style preferred by the National Socialists, both artists created timeless and idealized images of maternal bliss. Schrimpf’s decision to stop creating idyllic motherhood paintings in 1925, a time when such imagery was increasingly being appropriated by the political right, can be interpreted as an attempt to distance himself and his paintings from right-wing values. The figure of the mother had long been Schrimpf’s main revolutionary symbol, a cipher for his utopian anarchist hopes for a new world order. It appears that, rather than risk having his maternal imagery misread as an expression of a conservative and nationalist ideology, he ceased his representation of the subject. This chapter has demonstrated that artists affiliated with the political left, including Schrimpf, created idealized and celebratory maternal imagers to express their utopian hopes. In the next chapter I will examine how this glorification of motherhood extended to artists, critics and collectors on the political right as well.
Chapter Four

The Image of the Mother as Conservative Icon: The Weimar Reception of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s Motherhood Works

This chapter will demonstrate that the politicization of motherhood imagery in Weimar Germany involved not just artists, but also art historians, critics and collectors. To do so, I will examine the reception of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s art during the twenties and thirties. I will discuss how the artist and her motherhood paintings, created in a range of figurative styles, were appropriated by art writers and collectors, many affiliated with the political right, to support various conservative and nationalist agendas.

1. Introduction

The Weimar years were the pivotal period for Paula Modersohn-Becker’s (1876-1907) rise to renown in Germany. Although the artist had died in 1907, her art did not begin to receive serious and sustained interest until over a decade later.¹ Her first major claim to fame came in 1920 with the posthumous publication of her letters and journals in book form.² The book soon became a nation-wide bestseller and its enormous popularity served to draw wide scale attention to the artist and her work. The first catalog of Modersohn-Becker’s paintings and etchings was published around this time as well.³

¹ Modersohn-Becker’s public exposure was relatively limited prior to 1919. She exhibited her work only three times before her death. In 1908 there were several memorial exhibitions staged by her family and friends in Worpswede and Bremen which were later followed by a few group exhibitions in which her work was included. Overall, however, her reputation did not begin to grow until the Weimar years.
³ Gustav Pauli, Paula Modersohn-Becker (Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1919). Both the catalog and Modersohn-Becker’s letters and journals were published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag, the leading Expressionist publishing house of the day. Although the catalog was published first, it was the artist’s writings that initially captured the German public’s attention and guaranteed her ensuing fame.
During the twenties Modersohn-Becker’s fame continued to grow. She was promoted by some of the most important avant-garde art dealers of the day, including J.B. Neumann and Alfred Flechtheim, thus ensuring her reputation as one of Germany’s foremost pioneering modernist figurative painters. Additionally, her paintings and drawings were exhibited in major museums across Germany and frequently reviewed in influential art journals. Prominent art critics and writers praised her innovative artistic vision and her daring use of expressive brushwork and simplified forms. The opening of a museum dedicated to Modersohn-Becker in 1927 in Bremen reveals the extent of her popularity and renown in Germany by the end of the decade.

Modersohn-Becker’s rise from relative obscurity to national renown during the Weimar years has recently been discussed by Diane Radycki, the foremost Modersohn-Becker scholar in the United States. In her book Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist (2013) Radycki charted the artist’s posthumous reception in Germany. Examining both her exhibition history as well as contemporary art criticism, Radycki noted that the art writers and dealers of the day had difficulty classifying Modersohn-Becker. Although they recognized her importance for the development of modernism in Germany, they were uncertain as to how to situate her within the broader history of art. Due to her unique mixture of French and German sources her art could not be easily aligned with specific artistic trends. As such, during the teens and twenties

---

4 For instance, the architectural writer Adolf Behne discussed Modersohn-Becker’s pictorial construction and her use of simplified forms in his article “Paula Modersohn und der Übergang zur Bildkonstruktion,” Sozialistische Monatshefte 29 (1923): 294-98.

5 Radycki has written extensively on Modersohn-Becker. In addition to her recent book, Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013) she also provided one of the first translations of the artist’s letters and journals into English, The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980). Her dissertation examined Modersohn-Becker’s posthumous reception in great detail, see “Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Gendered Discourse in Modernism” (Ph.D diss., Harvard University, 1993). She also organized a session devoted to the artist at the 2009 College Art Association Annual Conference. The papers from the conference, including my own, were later published in a special edition of Woman’s Art Journal.
Modersohn-Becker was “quickly aligned, then as quickly realigned, with one [art] movement after another”⁶: first with Worpswede Realism, Post-Impressionism and Fauvism and then ultimately with German Expressionism.

Today, Modersohn-Becker continues to defy easy categorization. Along with being linked to the Worpswede Realists, she has even been described as a precursor to Neue Sachlichkeit.⁷ In the limited literature on the artist in the United States she is most often presented as an early independent exponent of Expressionism.⁸ This, however, is an uneasy fit. According to Radycki, “…she has always resonated differently from Expressionism.”⁹

In her book Radycki argues that the reason Modersohn-Becker is so difficult to classify and her artistic genius is so often misunderstood is that she was an artistic pioneer, a revolutionary figure who challenged artistic tradition in her art. She bases this claim on the artist’s representations of the female body. According to Radycki, Modersohn-Becker was a “daring innovator of gender imagery”¹⁰—the first woman artist to create nude self-portraits and the first to paint nude images of mothers and children. (figs. 4-2 and 4-3) As a result, Radycki credits Modersohn-Becker as being the first modern woman artist. As she states, “Modernism’s innovations of style and subject matter begin with his [Picasso’s] Cubism and her [Modersohn-Becker’s] female bodies.”¹¹

---

⁶ Radycki, First Modern Woman Artist, 26.
⁷ Manja Seelen has argued that Modersohn-Becker was an inspiration for many of the female artists affiliated with Neue Sachlichkeit, most notably Elsa Haensgen-Dingkuhns. These artists were drawn to Modersohn-Becker’s objective, unidealized images of women, particularly her representations of mothers. Manja Seelen, Das Bild der Frau in Werken deutscher Künstlerinnen und Künstler der Neuen Sachlichkeit (Münster: Lit Verlag, 1995), 22-25.
⁹ Diane Radycki, introduction to the session “Paula Modersohn-Becker: Art, Risk, and Fame” at the 2009 College Art Association annual conference.
¹⁰ Radycki, First Woman Artist, 1.
¹¹ Ibid., 142.
Radycki’s overall thesis is convincingly and compelling argued. Her examination of Modersohn-Becker’s Weimar reception, however, only tells half of the story. The artist’s posthumous popularity was due not only to her radical artistic innovations, but also to the turbulent political and social climate of the Weimar years. As I will show in this chapter, during the twenties Modersohn-Becker was aligned not only with different artistic movements, but also with different political and social ideologies. Art critics and collectors used her paintings to support various conservative, reactionary and right-wing agendas.

The years during which Modersohn-Becker was rising to fame was a period of profound social transformation in Germany. In addition to the upheaval of war and revolution, the Weimar era witnessed the rapid change of traditional gender roles. With the ratification of the Weimar constitution in 1919 women were granted social, political and legal equality. As a result, during the twenties they began to move in ever greater numbers into the urban workforce and other areas previously dominated by men. In addition, many women began to challenge conventional morality, calling for greater sexual freedom and autonomy for women. Overall, the Weimar period saw the rise of the Neue Frau—the modern, sexually-emancipated, independent career woman.12

With female emancipation came questions about the role of women in modern society. Women’s ever increasing public presence during the twenties challenged the traditional domestic order, which restricted women to the private roles of wife and mother. As a result, the social position and duties of women was a subject of much heated debate at this time. For the most part, the idea that motherhood was the appropriate and natural female role continued to hold sway.

However, maternity itself became a source of intense debate during the Weimar years. As Rosemary Betterton has noted, there were numerous different values and meanings attached to motherhood within German feminism and politics at this time.\textsuperscript{13} While the major organizations of the women’s movement as well as parties across the political spectrum promoted the notion that maternity was woman’s supreme calling, they adhered to different models of motherhood. Many Weimar feminists believed that it was through their position as mothers that women could make the greatest impact on society. For instance, Gertrud Baumer, the leader of the bourgeois women’s movement, argued that women’s role was to extend domestic values into the public sphere. For the parties of the left, motherhood and female emancipation were not viewed as incompatible. Both the Social Democratic Party and the German Communist Party recognized women’s political equality and right to work while maintaining that mothering was their central social duty. The parties of the political right, in contrast, sought a return to the old domestic order. They attempted to combat the “moral decadence” of the Neue Frau by championing the image of the mother as the preserver of the family and morality. Overall, motherhood was an issue of great public concern during the Weimar years. As Karin Hausen has noted, “…motherliness and motherhood were common words in the Weimar period.”\textsuperscript{14} As I will show in this chapter, it was against this backdrop of a heightened social and political focus on maternity that Modersohn-Becker’s rise to fame took place.

Modersohn-Becker’s \textit{oeuvre} meshed quite well with the Weimar emphasis on motherhood. The artist has long been thought of as a painter of Mother and Child. Throughout the course of her career she engaged repeatedly with this theme in her art. Between 1901 and

\textsuperscript{13} Rosemary Betterton, \textit{An Intimate Distance. Women, Artists and the Body} (Great Britain, United States and Canada: Routledge, 1996), 34-39.
1906 she created over twenty maternal paintings and drawings. Her representations of the subject range from conventional images of breastfeeding women to innovative portrayals of nude mothers and children.

It is possible to chart Modersohn-Becker’s stylistic development and evolving artistic interests in her representations of motherhood. Her earliest variations on this theme were created while she was living in Worpswede, a small village located in the flat moorland about twenty miles north of Bremen, home to a well-known artists’ community since the end of the 19th century. Established in 1889 by Fritz Mackensen and Otto Modersohn, two disaffected students from the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, the colony attracted artists who sought to escape from modern urban life and return to nature. Rebelling against the constraints of traditional academic training, the Worpswede artists turned to nature and the local countryside for inspiration. According to Radycki, “Neither the examples of history and mythology, nor the heroics of the military and the doings of society, but a bucolic landscape—this was their utopian subject matter.”15 Modersohn-Becker moved to Worpswede from nearby Bremen in 1898 to study under Mackensen. The village remained her home for the rest of her life.

Modersohn-Becker’s early motherhood paintings are openly indebted to her Worpswede training. A comparison between Mackensen’s 1892 Mother and Infant and Modersohn-Becker’s 1903 Peasant Woman and Child makes the impact he had on her work quite clear. (figs. 4-4 and 4-5) Mackensen’s painting depicts a rural woman seated on a peat cart, baby at her breast. His choice of subject matter is typical of the Worpswede artists, who often focused on the North German landscape and peasantry in their art. Modersohn-Becker too chose to portray a local woman and setting in her painting—her breastfeeding peasant mother is set against the Worpswede moors. At this time the artist often drew her models from the village inhabitants.

15 Radycki, First Modern Woman Artist, 85.
Modersohn-Becker’s painting also echoes Mackensen’s in terms of the composition. Both artists monumentalize the mother, placing her prominently at the center of the work.

Despite the similar approach to the subject matter, Modersohn-Becker’s painting differs significantly from Mackensen’s in terms of style. Modersohn-Becker was never satisfied with the romanticized realism of the Worpswede artists. Her image is not in the least bit atmospheric or idealized. She typically ignored conventional standards of beauty in her art, embracing instead what Radycki refers to as an “aesthetic of ugliness.”\(^{16}\) Her painting is also far less detailed than Mackensen’s. Modersohn-Becker strove to capture the fundamental essence of the people she portrayed, rather than focusing on incidental and specific detail. As such, she often made use of a simplified naturalism in her art at this time. In a journal entry of 1902 the artist stated that she was striving for a “greater simplicity of form.”\(^ {17}\)

The simplification of form and expressive brushwork in *Peasant Woman and Child* point towards Modersohn-Becker’s interest in modern French art. Beginning in 1900, the artist made frequent trips to Paris, often staying in the city for months at a time.\(^ {18}\) These Paris sojourns were of the utmost importance for her continuing development as an artist. In addition to studying at the Academie Colarossi and the Academie Julien, where she was able to work from the nude, Modersohn-Becker also visited the city’s numerous art museums and galleries, where she encountered the work of the French modernists. She became interested in contemporary art, developing a deep admiration for the work of Gauguin, Cézanne and Van Gogh in particular.


\(^{18}\) She returned to Paris in 1903, 1905 and 1906.
The impact of these Paris sojourns on Modersohn-Becker’s late art can clearly be seen in a 1906 motherhood painting titled *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude.* (fig. 4-6) Its stylized treatment of the subject differs vastly from her earlier *Peasant Mother and Child.* Rather than a Worpswede mother, the painting features an anonymous maternal figure kneeling in a circle of fruit. The work is stripped of any historical specifics. In a radical break with artistic tradition, Modersohn-Becker depicts both the mother and the infant at her breast in the nude. In formal terms this painting is clearly indebted to the art of the French modernists. The lack of traditional modeling and the artist’s use of broad planes of color reveal the influence of Gauguin, while the heavy angularity is reminiscent of Cézanne.

Art historians have long linked Modersohn-Becker’s numerous mother and child images to her deep and enduring fascination with motherhood. The artist’s letters and journals reveal that she regarded maternity with an almost religious sense of awe, seeing in it something holy and mysterious. On Christmas day, 1900, Modersohn-Becker wrote to her husband, Otto Modersohn:

> And then, you know, it [Christmas] is such a celebration for women in particular, because these tidings of motherhood go on and on, living in every woman. All that is so holy. It’s a mystery which for me is so deep and impenetrable, and tender and all-embracing. I bow down to it where I encounter it; I kneel before it in humility. That, and death, that is my religion, because I cannot comprehend them.\(^{19}\)

In the face of Modersohn-Becker’s admiration for mothers—she saw them as heroic, self-sacrificing figures\(^{20}\)—many scholars have interpreted her maternal works as a celebration of motherhood as woman’s highest calling. In her groundbreaking essay on the artist, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin referred to Modersohn-Becker’s images of mothers as “mythic

---

19 Wensinger and Hoey, 216.
20 In an 1898 diary entry, Modersohn-Becker described a breastfeeding mother, stating “…the woman gave her life and her youth and her power to the child in utter simplicity, unaware that she was a heroine.” See Wensinger and Hoey, 112.
projections of essentialist femininity.”21 Whitney Chadwick elaborated on this view, stating that her motherhood paintings collaborate with “the late nineteenth century ideology of timeless, unvarying, “natural” motherhood.”22 Given the artist’s tendency to surround the mothers in her paintings with fruits, flowers and other vegetation, scholars have described them as primitive “earth mothers” who embody the traditional association between woman and nature.23

Despite her admiration for mothers, however, Modersohn-Becker was somewhat uncertain about becoming one herself. Fearful that the roles of “artist” and “mother” would be in conflict, she suffered from a racking irresolution about motherhood. To have children meant a loss of artistic freedom; the price of that freedom, however, was the sacrifice of her maternal desires. Throughout the course of her short life she struggled between her intense longing for a child and her passionate artistic ambitions.24

In 1901 Modersohn-Becker married her fellow Worpswede painter Otto Modersohn. Due to both her own reservations and her husband’s fear of the dangers of childbirth, their marriage went unconsummated for years.25 Modersohn-Becker quickly became disillusioned with her marriage, as her journal entries from this time reveal. She wrote in 1902, “My experience tells me that marriage does not make one happier. It takes away the illusion that had sustained a deep

---

24 Many art historians feel that Modersohn-Becker’s mixed feelings towards motherhood are reflected in her maternal images. Stuart Buettner, for example, argues that the mothers in the artist’s paintings appear emotionally detached and distant, thus revealing her own ambivalence. See Stuart Buettner, “Images of Modern Motherhood in the Art of Morisot, Cassatt, Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz,” Woman’s Art Journal 7 (Autumn 1986-Winter 1987), 14-21.
25 See Radycki, The First Modern Woman Artist, 133.
belief in the possibility of a kindred soul. In marriage one feels doubly misunderstood....” 26 After five years Modersohn-Becker reached the decision to place her career goals before her marital and family duties. In February of 1906 she abandoned her husband and moved to Paris with the intention of making her way as an independent woman and artist. After a period of financial struggle and much pleading from her family and friends, however, Modersohn-Becker reconciled with her husband six months later. The two were reunited in October when Modersohn traveled to Paris to be with his wife. When they returned to Worpswede half a year later, Modersohn-Becker was pregnant. In a tragic twist of fate the artist’s decision to finally become a mother ultimately led to her death. Several weeks after the birth of her first and only child, a daughter Mathilde, Modersohn-Becker died of a pulmonary embolism.

This chapter will discuss how Modersohn-Becker’s fixation on motherhood in her art and writings as well as her tragic death following the birth of her daughter deeply impacted her reception during the twenties and thirties. In the face of the contemporary political and social focus on maternity, critics and other art writers of the day tended to single out her representations of mothers for examination, holding them up as the most characteristic and powerful examples of her art. Both the artist and her artistic vision were also frequently described as “maternal” and “motherly.” As I will show, art critics, writers and collectors used Modersohn-Becker’s life and maternal paintings to engage with the currents debates on women’s changing social roles and to support various conservative political and social agendas.

I will first discuss the posthumous publication of Modersohn-Becker’s letters and journals. I will argue that the editor in charge of the project, Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz, framed the artist’s writings to portray her in line with the conservative values of the bourgeois women’s movement, particularly its emphasis on motherhood as women’s highest social calling. I will

26 Wensinger and Hoey, 274.
next examine Modersohn-Becker’s reception by art historians and critics during the twenties. Drawing on archival and primary source material, I will discuss how the artist and her paintings were inserted into a gendered art discourse that sought to reinforce traditional gender roles.

Finally, I will discuss the opening of the Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus in Bremen. I will argue that the industrialist, art enthusiast and Nazi sympathizer who financed the museum, Ludwig Roselius, used Modersohn-Becker and her motherhood paintings to support his nationalist vision of a Germanic cultural revival. While art historians have long noted that Roselius championed Modersohn-Becker as the ideal Nordic artist, few have discussed why. As I will show, Roselius was drawn to the “realism” of her paintings, particularly her ability to capture the “essence” of the German people in her art.

2. The Letters and Journals

The story of Modersohn-Becker’s posthumous rise to fame begins not with her art, but rather with her writings. In the decade following the artist’s early death her family arranged for the publication of her personal letters and journals. Over the course of several years these writings were republished multiple times and in several different forms. By the twenties, the Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker had become enormously popular in Germany. According to Radycki, “The war-weary public took to its heart a disarmingly winning correspondent and diarist who was balancing the roles of daughter, wife, and stepmother with that of artist.”27 The popularity of Modersohn-Becker’s writings eventually helped to fuel greater interest in her art.

The publishing history of the letters and journals began in 1913, when a small selection of Modersohn-Becker’s writings was printed in Die Güldenkammer (The Golden Chamber), a

27 Radycki, First Modern Woman Artist, 31.
Bremen-based art-and-culture magazine financed by the art patron and industrialist Ludwig Roselius.28 Four years later her writings were published in book form. Eine Künstlerin. Paula Becker-Modersohn. Briefe und Tagebuchblätter (An Artist. Paula Becker-Modersohn. Letters and Journals) was a small volume printed to accompany an exhibition of the artist’s work by the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover.29 In 1920 an expanded edition of the letters and journals appeared. Published by the Kurt Wolff Verlag, Briefe und Tagebuchblätter von Paula Modersohn-Becker (The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker) was 245 pages long and included 7 black-and-white illustrations. This definitive edition quickly became a “veritable classic and best-seller in the German-speaking world.”30 Between 1920 and 1936 it was reprinted over a dozen times, with a print run totaling 45,000.

The Kurt Wolff edition of the letters and journals was edited by the cultural journalist and writer Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz.31 Gallwitz, a well-known figure in Bremen, was the editor of the Die Güldenkammer from 1910 to 1915 and also wrote for several major area newspapers, including the Bremer Nachrichten.32 As an important champion of Bremen culture during the twenties, she authored several books on the history and art of the city, including a volume dedicated to the Worpswede artist colony.33

Gallwitz was also an active member of the bourgeois women’s movement. She was a frequent contributor to Die Frau (Woman), the official publication of the moderate feminist

---

28 The excerpts appeared in issues 4 through 8 of the publication.
30 Busch and von Reinken, 9.
31 Gallwitz also edited the selections that appeared in Die Güldenkammer as well as the 1917 edition of the Letters and Journals.
33 Dreissig Jahr Worpswede. Künstler, Geist, Werden (Bremen: Angelsachsen Verlag, 1922); Das Schöne Bremen. Die Lebensgeschichte einer Stadt (Bremen: Friesen Verlag, 1925); Bremen wie es ist und wie es wurde. Ein Kulturführer für Fremde und Einheimische (Bremen: Franz Leuwer Verlag, 1929).
organization the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women’s Associations). Throughout the course of her career she penned multiple articles calling for greater career and educational opportunities for women. She also sought to increase public recognition of women’s contributions to the arts.\(^{34}\) She authored several biographies on important female cultural figures, including the poet Ina Seidel.\(^{35}\)

Given her interest in Bremen culture and her personal mission to enhance the status of women artists Gallwitz was ideally suited to take on the task of preparing Modersohn-Becker’s writings for publication. She carefully selected, sorted, edited and arranged the artist’s journal entries and personal letters. She also penned an introduction and biographical sketch of the painter.

Over the past few decades scholars have accused Gallwitz of being too heavy-handed in her editing of Modersohn-Becker’s writings. Since the publication of an unabridged edition of the letters and journals in 1979 it has become apparent that the Kurt Wolff edition was “truncated, highly selective, and over-edited.”\(^{36}\) Most noticeably, Gallwitz left out any material that could potentially have been deemed “problematic.” This includes several letters that reveal Modersohn-Becker’s marital troubles and her flagrant disregard for established social conventions. In addition, Gallwitz’ introduction, written in flowery, saccharine language, surrounded the artist’s letters and journals with a “sentimentality and pathos” that today appears “inappropriate.”\(^{37}\) Overall, the sweet and charming personality portrayed in the Gallwitz edition is not an accurate or complete portrait of the artist. Gallwitz presented Modersohn-Becker as a

---

\(^{34}\) See for instance an article she wrote for Die Frau discussing the challenges faced by women artists. “Zum Kampf der Künstlerinnen” Die Frau 14 (December, 1906).


\(^{36}\) Wensinger and Hoey, ix.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., viii.
“charming daughter, wife, mother and artist,” while ignoring for the most part her personal struggles.\(^{38}\)

Gallwitz’s portrayal of Modersohn-Becker was most likely largely shaped by the wishes of the deceased artist’s parents, who were responsible for the early efforts to publish her letters and journals.\(^{39}\) They would almost certainly have not wanted their daughter’s marital troubles exposed to the general public. However, the scholar Adina Lerner has also convincingly argued that Gallwitz’s editorial strategy was biased by her own middle class values.\(^{40}\) According to Lerner, Gallwitz intentionally molded Modersohn-Becker into a “personality who reflected the proper role of a [bourgeois] German woman.”\(^{41}\) In her introduction and with her selective editing Gallwitz presented the artist primarily as a dutiful daughter, wife and mother, a role in which Modersohn-Becker “never explicitly placed herself.”\(^{42}\) Gallwitz’ intention, Lerner claims, was to create a role model for the reading public.

An analysis of the 1920 edition of the letters and journals reveals the accuracy of Lerner’s argument. In order to craft Modersohn-Becker into a perfect example of bourgeois womanhood Gallwitz, “ignored the issues which might contradict an example of appropriate behavior demanded by the middle class.”\(^{43}\) In her introduction Gallwitz presented Modersohn-Becker’s marriage as a source of deep contentment for the painter. In overly romantic language she states, “She found in Otto Modersohn her other half. She was blessed by the union of her life

\(^{38}\) Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, 5.

\(^{39}\) In 1916 Frau Becker approached the poet Rainer Maria Rilke with the request to edit Modersohn-Becker’s writings for the 1917 Kestner Gesellschaft publication. He refused, however, on the grounds that her letters and journals could potentially diminish her art since they end at the time the artist was reaching her artistic maturity. See Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, 31-32.


\(^{41}\) Lerner, 10.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 10-11.
Moreover, Modersohn-Becker’s separation from her husband and move to Paris is described as a necessary sacrifice for her art, not as the artist abandoning her marital duties. Gallwitz intentionally attempted to downplay the artist’s desire to end her marriage. She chose not to include a letter to Otto Modersohn in which the artist firmly states, “Let me go, Otto. I do not want you as my husband. I do not want it. Accept this fact.”

In addition to portraying Modersohn-Becker as a loving wife, Gallwitz also presented her as a woman romantically longing for motherhood above all else. Throughout her introduction she placed an exaggerated focus on the artist’s maternal desires. When discussing her pregnancy Gallwitz sentimentally stated, “…life blessed her with the most deeply desired good…with motherhood.” Additionally, Gallwitz chose to ignore Modersohn-Becker’s uncertainty and ambivalence about becoming a mother. Describing a photograph of Modersohn-Becker holding her infant daughter Gallwitz wrote “…her beautiful eyes revealed a truly transcendent expression of happiness and contentment.” (fig. 4-7) Moreover, in her closing statements Gallwitz chose to honor Modersohn-Becker the mother, rather than Modersohn-Becker the artist. The editor ended her introduction by recalling how she met Modersohn-Becker once, in 1907, shortly before the artist gave birth. Gallwitz recounts, “…her state of approaching motherhood gave to her attitude and movements a beautiful dignity. It was as if in that moment she belonged to those women who our old masters painted as the Virgin Mary.” With these words the reader is left with an image of Modersohn-Becker’s maternal grace, rather than her artistic talent.

44 “Sie hatte in Otto Modersohn ihr Du erfunden, sie war beseligt in der Verschmelzung ihres Lebens mit dem seinigen gewesen.” Gallwitz, Briefe, xi.
45 Letter of September 3, 1906. Busch and von Reinken, 408. Most likely Gallwitz also chose not to include this letter out of consideration for Modersohn-Becker’s husband and family.
46 “…das Leben segnet sie mit dem höchsten ersehnten Gut…mit der Mutterschaft.” Gallwitz, Briefe, xiv.
47 “…zeigt in den schönen Augen einen wahrhaft verklärten Ausdruck von Glück und Genüge.” Ibid., xv.
48 “… ihr Zustand einer nahenden Mutterschaft gab ihrer Haltung und ihren Bewegungen eine schöne Würde. Es war in dem Augenblick, als gehörte sie zu jenen Frauen, die unsere alten Meister als Gottessmutter gemalt haben.” Ibid., xvi.
By presenting Modersohn-Becker as a woman fully fulfilled by marriage and motherhood, Gallwitz constructed an image of the artist that reflected the conservative values of the bourgeois women’s movement. Since the turn of the century Gallwitz had been a member of the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women’s Associations, BDF), a collective of bourgeois feminist organizations founded in 1894. Between 1904 and 1941 she contributed over forty articles to the association’s official publication, Die Frau.

The BDF represented the moderate branch of the middle-class women’s movement. As an umbrella organization it sought to represent only those views that were acceptable to a majority of its members, thus rejecting more radical feminist demands. Most notably, the BDF opposed the legalization of abortion. In addition to advocating for women’s legal and social equality, the organization committed itself to enforcing bourgeois standards of morality. Throughout the Weimar years BDF members actively campaigned against pornography and prostitution and sought to increase censorship of books, films and plays.

During the twenties and the thirties the BDF was highly concerned with defining the role that women were to play in the new republic. Many of the organization’s leading members, including Helene Lange, the editor of Die Frau, and Marianne Weber, the chairwoman of the BDF from 1919-1923, adhered to the conservative notion that women’s role in modern society was bound up with her biological function as mother. The organization promoted the idea that women had a “special cultural mission” to restore morality and personal values to the German people. This was a task best accomplished in their role as mothers and nurturers. Thus, the BDF championed motherhood as women’s “supreme calling” and her “most important civil duty.”

---

49 “The Special Cultural Mission of Women” (“Die besonderen kulturellen Aufgaben der Frau”) was the title of an article by Weber published in Die Frau in 1918.

50 Frevert, 200.
The model of motherhood supported by the BDF was to an extent highly traditional. The organization tended to be relatively conservative when it came to matters of family and sexual policy. For instance, the BDF rejected the “radical” demands for government support for unmarried mothers promoted by associations such as the *Bund für Mutterschutz* (League for the Protection of Mothers). The group instead glorified the conservative ideal of motherhood within monogamous marriage. It was into this traditional model of maternity that Gallwitz attempted to fit Modersohn-Becker.

Overall, by emphasizing Modersohn-Becker’s maternal and marital fulfillment Gallwitz placed her in a suitably contemporary mold of idealized womanhood. In order to craft a role model for the reading public she downplayed the artist’s estrangement from her husband and mixed feelings towards motherhood, while highlighting her maternal desires. In doing so, she framed the artist’s letters and journals within the conservative feminist doctrine promoted by the BDF. As I will show in the next section, Gallwitz’ portrayal of Modersohn-Becker as a maternal woman deeply impacted the reception of her art during the Weimar years.

3. Art Historians, Critics and Other Art Writers

Thanks to the immense popularity of Modersohn-Becker’s published letters and journals, interest in her art increased dramatically during the Weimar years. In addition to being exhibited across Germany, her paintings also began to garner serious scholarly consideration. Articles on the artist and reviews of her work appeared frequently in some of the most important art journals of the day, including *Der Cicerone* (The Guide) and *Das Kunstblatt* (The Art Journal). Her
paintings were also included in several art historical surveys of modern German art that were published at this time.\textsuperscript{51}

Significantly, many of the art historians and critics writing about Modersohn-Becker during the twenties and thirties chose to focus their attention on the maternal aspects of her art. As Gillian Perry has noted, “In the 1920s…critics tended to single out the depictions of motherhood in her work…”\textsuperscript{52} Articles on Modersohn-Becker were typically accompanied by reproductions of her most well-known mother and child paintings. Moreover, both artist and art were frequently discussed in gendered language. Critics used phrases like “deep womanly quality”\textsuperscript{53} and “the fervor of motherly love”\textsuperscript{54} to describe the essential characteristics of her paintings and referred to the “loving motherliness”\textsuperscript{55} of her artistic vision and feeling. Modersohn-Becker herself was often described as a “true woman”\textsuperscript{56} who was able to intuitively grasp and express the eternal aspects of motherhood in her art.

The scholarly fixation on the “motherly” qualities of Modersohn-Becker’s art at this time can in part be attributed to the popularity of her letters and journals. Many art historians and critics of the day believed that the artist’s writings provided the key to unlocking her art. The art historian Richard Hamann went so far as to say “[in order to understand] her pictures you must continually read the letters and journals.”\textsuperscript{57} As a result, Gallwitz’s exaggerated focus on Modersohn-Becker’s maternal longings and desires greatly influenced the contemporary

\textsuperscript{52} Perry, 62. Perry briefly notes the link between the artist’s reception and the fixation on motherhood during the Weimar years, but does not elaborate further.
\textsuperscript{54} “…die Inbrunst der Mutterliebe.” Walter Müller-Wulekow, \textit{Die Paula Becker-Modersohn-Sammlung des Ludwig Roselius in der Böttcherstrasse in Bremen} (Bremen: Angelsachsen-Verlag, 1927), 17.
\textsuperscript{55} “…liebenden Mütterlichkeit…” Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{56} “…einer wirklichen Frau…” V. C. Habicht, “Paula Modersohn. Der Weibliche Genius der Niedersächsischen Malerei,” \textit{Der Kunstwart} 2 (Nov. 1927), np.
\textsuperscript{57} “…zu deren Bildern man immer Briefe und Tagebuchblätter vorlesen muss…” Hamann, 466.
discourse on the artist. Many art writers similarly emphasized Modersohn-Becker’s fascination with motherhood. They quoted extensively from her writings on the subject to support their interpretation of her work as an embodiment of the “eternal feminine.” Other critics, believing that the painter’s artistic creativity was inextricably linked to her procreativity, dwelled in their reviews on her life story, particularly her tragic death following the birth of her daughter. In a 1923 article on the artist, Oskar Schürer wrote, “We want to linger again on these quiet pictures. She who created them has been dead for half a generation. She died due to her child. It is as if her life was satisfied with this symbolization of her deepest being. As if she had satisfied her rules—the deepest rules of women. And for such fulfillment she was forced to sacrifice further life and artistic creation.”

The characterization of Modersohn-Becker and her art as “womanly-motherly” by Weimar critics and other art writers was also related to the contemporary debates on motherhood, particularly to the notion that women are innately maternal. During the 1920s and 30s many of the scientific, political and feminist discourses on maternity were dominated by a prevailing biological determinism. The idea that men and women had separate, biologically determined roles was widely accepted. As such, mothering was seen not only as woman’s chief social duty, but also as her natural role and single true purpose. This idea that women are nurturers by nature was particularly popular with the conservative branch of the bourgeois

58 “…das Ewigweibliche…” Habicht, n/p. In his discussion of Modersohn-Becker’s “evocation of the mother” in her art, Habicht quotes from her 1900 letter to her husband in which she proclaims motherhood and death to be her religion. See footnote 18 for the full quotation.
women’s movement at this time.\textsuperscript{61} Many feminist organizations, most prominently the BDF, celebrated motherhood as an essential female function. As the twenties progressed this essentialist understanding of motherhood was increasingly championed by the parties of the political right, who sought a return to traditional gender roles and duties. The notion that women are predestined to become mothers later formed the basis for National Socialist concepts of motherhood.

Those who argued that woman’s role in society was bound up with her biological function as mother found support for their gender essentialism in the writings of the Swedish social theorist and feminist activist Ellen Key. Key was well known in Germany at this time for her positive evaluation of sexual difference. In essays such as \textit{Women’s Misused Energy} (1898) and \textit{The Renaissance of Motherhood} (1914) she claimed that mothering was women’s primary role and highest cultural calling. Disagreeing with the egalitarian aims of the contemporary women’s movement, Key argued that women should focus their energies on their innate talent for mothering, rather than pursuing male professions. Key sought to raise the social status of women through the elevation of motherhood. She advocated for social and legal reforms to free mothers from economic dependence and domestic drudgery. Key’s ideas had considerable impact on the bourgeois women’s movement during the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{62} Her understanding of motherhood as essential to all women became particularly influential in the 1920s when such attitudes underwent a revival in Germany.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} According to Rosemary Betterton, the working-class women’s movement, led by Clara Zetkin, continued to argue for the rights of women to political and economic independence, rather than buying into the notion of “separate spheres” and women’s biologically determined “cultural mission.” See Betterton, 38.

\textsuperscript{62} See Betterton, 36-37 for a discussion of Key’s ideas on motherhood and their impact on the German women’s movement.

\textsuperscript{63} The writings of the Swiss anthropologist Johannes Bachofen were also influential at this time. As discussed in chapter one his \textit{Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World} (1861) was widely discussed in German intellectual and artistic circles during the opening decades of
Many Weimar art critics and writers seized upon Modersohn-Becker as a figurehead for this gender essentialist ideology. In both her writings and her art they found support for the idea that motherhood was women’s natural and primary role. For instance, in a journal entry of 1898 Modersohn-Becker wrote, “My blonde was here again today. This time with her little boy at her breast. I had to draw her as a mother, had to. That is her single true purpose.” This statement and others reveal the artist’s own adherence to the notion that motherhood was an essential female function. Most likely Modersohn-Becker was influenced in her thinking by the theories of Key herself, who she had befriended in Paris in 1903. Certainly her mother and child paintings, particularly the later fecund maternities, appear to embody the positive evaluation of motherhood found in Key’s writings.

During the 1920s many art writers evaluated Modersohn-Becker’s art within the context of Key’s gender essentialist theories. In a survey of German art published in 1925, for example, Richard Hamann summed up Modersohn-Becker’s oeuvre with a single sentence, “Paula Modersohn, the painted shriek, yearning for a child. Ellen Key transposed to paint.” Hamann’s condescending tone reveals his leftist political stance. As an independent Socialist, Hamann most likely would have rejected Key’s argument that mothering was women’s only social purpose. Accordingly, he dismissed Modersohn-Becker’s paintings as mere “family art,” works that displayed a fixation on motherhood similar to that found in Key’s writings. His comment sneeringly suggests that the main impulse behind her art was her overwhelming desire to have a child.

the twentieth century. His idea that motherhood is the source of human society, religion and morality was particularly popular.

64 Journal entry of Dec. 16, 1898. See Wensinger and Hoey, 120.
65 Modersohn-Becker was introduced to Key by her good friend Rainer Maria Rilke. The three socialized together while Key was in Paris on a lecture tour. See Radycki, First Modern Woman Artist, 123.
67 “Familienkunst.” Ibid., 466.
Other scholars writing on Modersohn-Becker were not quite as direct as Hamann in linking the artist to the contemporary discourse on motherhood. However, their gendered language reveals that they too evaluated her art within this context. Writing on Modersohn-Becker in 1927, the art historian Walter Müller-Wulckow praised the “loving motherliness” of her artistic vision. He enthusiastically extolled her ability as a woman artist to capture the “fervor of motherly love” in her mother and child paintings.68 Such wording echoes Key’s own discussion of the intensity of the mother-child bond. In her essay “The Renaissance of Motherhood” Key wrote: “In every strong maternal feeling there is also a strong sensuous feeling of pleasure…which thrills the mother with blissful emotion when she puts the child to her breast; and at the same moment motherliness attains its most sublime spiritual state, sinks into the depths of eternity, which no ecstatic words—only tears—can express.”69 For Müller-Wulckow, Modersohn-Becker’s maternal paintings similarly celebrated motherhood as the highest source of female fulfillment.

Despite his admiration for modern art, Müller-Wulckow was a social and political conservative. During the 1930s he became an active supporter of the National Socialists, even joining the party in 1939. Significantly, his celebration of Modersohn-Becker as a maternal artist coincided with increasing efforts of the political right to revitalize an ideology of motherhood. As discussed in chapters two and three, during the mid-to-late twenties, in an effort to remove women from the public sphere and return them to the home, the parties and organizations of the right glorified motherhood as women’s highest purpose. These ideas would later culminate in the Third Reich. As the feminist historian Sheila Jeffreys has noted, the elevation of motherhood in

68 Müller-Wulckow, 17.
Key’s writings influenced the development of this Nazi ideal of women’s destiny. Thus, by praising the maternal elements in Modersohn-Becker’s art and linking her to Key’s theories, Müller-Wulckow and other art writers at this time positioned her as a figurehead for this reactionary agenda.

The characterization of Modersohn-Becker and her art as “motherly” in the Weimar art discourse points not only toward contemporary notions of women as innately maternal, but also toward debates on women artists and their work taking place at this time. Since the turn of the century German art historians and critics had questioned the nature and status of “women’s art.” These debates were sparked by the steadily increasing presence and visibility of women in the visual arts at this time. In line with the emancipatory demands of the women’s movement, female artists began to call for greater recognition of their artistic achievements. They refused to be written off as mere “dilettantes” and wanted to be regarded as the equals of men. In an effort to gain parity with their male counterparts, they began to form professional associations, such as the Frauenkunstverband (The Women’s Art Association), founded in 1912 by the artist Käthe Kollwitz.

Traditionally, the visual arts had been a male-dominated domain, with few women working as professional artists. In addition, the talent for artistic creation had long been ascribed to men only, thanks to the prevalence of gender dichotomies equating man with culture and woman with nature. But as women entered the art world in ever greater numbers during the opening decades of the twentieth century, German art critics and writers struggled to provide a definition of “women’s art” and to position it in relation to the art created by men.

---

Majority opinion placed “men’s art” in the superior position. Many male critics believed that women were not intellectually, physically or temperamentally suited to artistic creation. For example, Karl Scheffler argued in his 1908 book Die Frau und die Kunst (Women and Art) that women’s genial nature was at odds with the “one dimensional force that is talent.” As a result, Scheffler stated, women should not “believe that they could equal men as creators.” He further claimed that women’s art is “never original” and that it simply imitates the art created by men. This opinion was still prevalent twenty years later. In his Die Frau als Künstlerin (Women as Artists, 1928) Hans Hildebrandt stated that although women were becoming more skilled in their art, their creativity should not be ranked higher than the “primitive” creative urges of children and primitive races.

Hildebrandt’s insistence on the difference between male and female artistic creativity was typical of the art scholarship of the Weimar period. During the twenties and thirties the predominate art discourse in Germany was gender specific. Men and women artists were held to different expectations with their art and were accorded different signifiers. Art critics and writers attributed to male artists a “bold Promethean creativity.” Men were seen as creating their work in a god-like manner, and their paintings and sculptures were frequently described as powerful and forceful. In contrast, women’s creativity was typically linked to their procreative ability and their “feminine” nature. Female artists were expected to focus on motherhood, procreation, family and other “womanly” subjects and to embody traditional “feminine” virtues such as

74 Hans Hildebrandt, Die Frau als Künstlerin (Berlin: Rudolf Mosse Buchverlag, 1928), 11-12.
modesty, grace and compassion in their art. Accordingly, women artists and their works were often identified with specific concepts of womanhood and femininity in the art literature of the day. It was not uncommon for female artists to be described as “maternal” and “motherly.” These descriptors were applied not only to Modersohn-Becker, but also to other well-known figures including Käthe Kollwitz and the sculptor Emy Roeder.

As the art historian Ute Seiderer has noted, the establishment of the “feminine” model of creativity as complementary to the “masculine” was intended to both acknowledge the contribution of women to the arts, while at the same time consolidating the superior position of male artists. Women’s increasing prominence in the arts at this time had destabilized prevailing notions of artistic creativity. Specifically, it had thrown into question the traditional construction of artistic genius as “male.” By aligning women artists and their work with conventional gender notions, Weimar art critics and writers ensured that the traditional gender hierarchy remained in place, while still providing a place for women in the current art discourse.

Given Modersohn-Becker’s thematic focus on mothers and children, the painter was easily inserted into the prevailing gendered art discourse during the Weimar years. Her art was frequently aligned with the contemporary notion of “female” artistic creativity. In addition to being described as “maternal,” other classic feminine characteristics were also ascribed to her work. For instance, the art historian Victor Curt Habicht characterized her paintings as possessing a “feminine grace.”

Modersohn-Becker’s paintings so closely fulfilling current expectations of “women’s art” accounts in part for the painter’s popularity during the Weimar years. According to Seiderer, female artists whose work fit the male dictate were generally well-received. Moreover, many art

76 Ibid., 95.
77 “weibliches Gnaden.” Habicht, np.
critics viewed Modersohn-Becker as the perfect example of the “New Woman artist”—the modern female painter whose “masculine” artistic genius was tempered by her “feminine” focus. In his Von Corinth bis Klee (From Corinth to Klee, 1931) Ludwig Justi, director of the National Gallery in Berlin, briefly examined Modersohn-Becker’s art, stating that her paintings possessed “…a special empathy for living creatures, something womanly-motherly, which otherwise does not occur in art history; women who paint mostly differ from men who paint in the degree of their talent.”78 Justi’s statement reveals that he regarded Modersohn-Becker as an exception to the rule that women were less gifted artists than men—he even went on to discuss the pioneering and revolutionary nature of her paintings. However, he still clearly viewed her art through the lens of her gender. According to Justi, Modersohn-Becker’s art is “womanly-motherly” and, as such poses no threat to traditional gender norms and the superior position of male artists.

As I have demonstrated in this section, throughout the Weimar years critics and other art writers repeatedly aligned Modersohn-Becker and her art with traditional notions of gender difference. As the debates on the social role of women raged during the twenties and thirties the artist’s paintings were continually linked to the conservative belief that women were innately maternal. Her numerous images of mothers and children were interpreted as a celebration of motherhood as women’s highest calling. As I will discuss next, in addition to being used to support a conservative social agenda, the artist’s paintings were also used at this time to promote a nationalist cultural program.

In 1927 Victor Curt Habicht, Professor of Art History at the Technische Hochschule (Institute of Technology) in Hannover, champion of German art and future member of the National Socialist party, wrote an article on Modersohn-Becker for the Munich-based art

78 “…nur eine Besonderheit des Mitempfindens für die Kreatur, etwas Weiblich-Mütterliches, das sonst in der Kunstgeschichte nicht vorkommt; die malenden Frauen unterscheiden sich von den malenden Männern meist nur durch das Mass der Begabung.” Justi, 96.
publication *Das Kunstwart* (The Art Guard).\(^{79}\) *Das Kunstwart* was founded with the intention of defending a conservative German nationalist program. The editors viewed the role of the publication as that of “guardian of the German classical heritage against the decadence and decline of modern life.”\(^{80}\) Habicht’s article, titled “Paula Modersohn. Der Weibliche Genius der Niedersächsischen Malerei” (Paula Modersohn. The Female Genius of Lower Saxon Painting) fit perfectly with the journal’s political stance.\(^{81}\)

In line with the prevailing gender-specific art discourse, Habicht first focused on the feminine aspects of Modersohn-Becker’s work. He praised the painter as a “true woman” who worshipped the mysteries of motherhood and sought to capture its essence in her paintings. He then went on to laud the specifically “Germanic” quality of her art—her emphasis on emotion and spirituality. According to Habicht, Modersohn-Becker was a “Nordic genius” whose art demonstrates the superiority of the Germanic artistic tradition. He closed his article by stating that the artist and her work are guaranteed an “immortal place in the temple of Nordic art.”\(^{82}\)

Habicht wrote his article to mark the occasion of the opening of the Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus in Bremen. The art historian was a close associate of the museum’s founder, Ludwig Roselius.\(^{83}\) Like Habicht, Roselius was a devoted champion of German art. He believed in the superiority of Nordic culture and dreamed of initiating a Germanic cultural revival. As I will discuss in the next section, Modersohn-Becker and her motherhood paintings played an essential role in his nationalist vision.

\(^{79}\) Habicht specialized in the history and art of Lower Saxony since the Middle Ages. He was a conservative nationalist who believed in the superiority of the German artistic in comparison to the “Latin” tradition. His enthusiasm for German culture led him to join the National Socialist party in 1933. See Arie Hartog, “Eine blosse Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln? Zur Ideengeschichte der Böttcherstrasse bis 1945, in *Projekt Böttcherstrasse*, ed. Hans Tallasch (Delmenhorst: Aschenbeck & Holstein, 2002), 345.


\(^{81}\) See footnote 55.

\(^{82}\) “…wird ihr und ihrem Kunst einen unveränglichen Platz im Tempel nordischer Kunst sichern.” Habicht, np.

4. The Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus in Bremen

On June 2nd, 1927 the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus opened on the Böttcherstrasse in Bremen with great pomp and circumstance. Over 500 guests were invited to the opening festivities, including such prominent figures as Paul von Hindenburg, President of the Republic, and Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus. As the first museum in Europe dedicated to a woman artist, the Paula-Becker-Modersohn Haus is a clear indication of the extent to which the artist’s fame had grown by the mid-twenties. The museum was the brainchild of the prominent Bremen-based entrepreneur and art enthusiast Ludwig Roselius (1874-1943). Of all of the early collectors of Modersohn-Becker’s art, Roselius was the most important for furthering the artist’s renown at this time. As I will show, however, Roselius did not promote her art on its own terms, but rather presented it in line with his nationalistic vision of a Germanic cultural revival. Roselius is best known today for his development of the first commercial process of decaffeinating coffee. In 1906 he founded the enormously successful coffee-roasting company Kaffee Hag. Thanks to his remarkable business acumen, Roselius quickly established an


85 In addition to the formal opening ceremony, with speeches by Roselius and Modersohn-Becker’s brother, there was also a series of activities and events held for the guests. These included excursions to Worpswede and boat trips around the harbor in Bremen. See Nils Aschenbeck, “Das Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus von Bernhard Hoetger,” in Projekt Böttcherstrasse, 157-167.

86 The third edition of Gustav Pauli’s Paula Modersohn-Becker, published in 1934, was dedicated to Roselius. This indicates that by the mid-thirties he was considered the major patron of the artist’s legacy.
international market for his product.\textsuperscript{87} By the beginning of the Weimar Republic, he had become one of the wealthiest and most powerful industrialists in Germany.\textsuperscript{88}

In addition to his business ventures, Roselius also enthusiastically pursued an interest in Germanic art and culture. He established a large and wide-ranging collection of German artworks and artifacts that included prehistoric objects from Northern Europe and paintings and sculptures of the twelfth through eighteenth centuries. Roselius also championed modern German art. Along with collecting the works of Modersohn-Becker he patronized the architect and sculptor Bernhard Hoetger. He also supported Herwarth Walden’s \textit{Der Sturm} magazine with back-page advertisements for \textit{Kaffee Hag}.\textsuperscript{89} Additionally, Roselius financed an arts circular, \textit{Die Güldekammer}, and owned a publishing house, the Angelsachsen Verlag, which printed books on German history and culture.

Roselius’ art collecting and other cultural activities were motivated not only by his enthusiasm for art, but also by his personal political and social vision. A self-proclaimed defender and champion of German culture, Roselius adhered to an eclectic mix of nationalist, völkish and racialist beliefs. He subscribed to romanticized notions of the German “Volk” as a people united by an inherent intellectual, moral and spiritual strength. He believed strongly in the preeminence of the Germanic race, attributing to the German people not only racial, but also cultural supremacy. As he stated in a 1924 letter to the sculptor Bernhard Hoetger, “…the Germans have accomplished much more than other peoples…”\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{87} Between the world wars Kaffee Hag became the largest coffee-roasting company in the world. See Sönke Hundt, “Kaffee HAG oder woher das Geld kam,” in \textit{Projekt Böttcherstrasse}, 221-235.


\textsuperscript{89} Roselius began running ads for \textit{Kaffee Hag} in \textit{Der Sturm} in 1912. See Radycki, \textit{First Modern Woman Artist}, 204.

\textsuperscript{90} Letter from Roselius to Hoetger, March 7, 1924. Böttcherstrasse Archiv, Bremen.
Roselius found support for his heroic view of the Germanic race in the theories of the well-known Germanophile and racialist writer Houston Stewart Chamberlain. In his most widely-acclaimed book, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century 1899), Chamberlain provided a racial and cultural history of Western civilization. The main premise of the book was that the Germanic (or “Teutonic”) race was responsible for all of the great intellectual and cultural achievements of Western civilization throughout history. Chamberlain believed that the Germanic people were physically and intellectually superior to all others. As he stated in *Die Grundlagen*, “…the races of mankind are markedly different in the nature and also in the extent of their gifts, and the Germanic races belong to the most highly gifted group, the group usually termed Aryan.” Unsurprisingly, Chamberlain’s theories were well-received in Germany during the opening decades of the twentieth century, particularly by the conservative elite. He was patronized by Kaiser Wilhelm II, who described his *Die Grundlagen* as a “hymn to Germanism,” and later celebrated by the National Socialists as a pioneer and spiritual forerunner. Roselius himself dedicated a volume of his own writings, *Briefe und Schriften zu Deutschlands Erneuerung* (Letters and Writings on Germany’s Renewal, 1933), to this influential theorist.

During the mid-twenties Roselius was also influenced by the writings of the philologist and ethnographer Hermann Wirth. Similar to Chamberlain, Wirth believed that the Nordic race was the initiator of cultural advancement throughout the world. In his *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* (The Ascent of Mankind) (1928) Wirth postulated the existence of a culturally

---

93 Both Adolf Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg deeply admired Chamberlain’s work. Hitler even visited the writer several times in 1923 and 1926. See Field, 1-3, 396-445.
95 Roselius and Wirth maintained a steady correspondence beginning in 1927.
advanced and “pure” Nordic race that had inhabited the mythological continent of Atlantis during the prehistoric era. Following the destruction of Atlantis, which Wirth believed had been located in the far North, this people spread throughout the world, carrying their advanced culture with them. Thus, according to Wirth, the Nordic people were the founders of all other advanced civilizations, including the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. 96 Wirth’s theories supported Roselius’ own belief that “…Greece, Italy, Arabia, Persia first received their art from us.” 97

Roselius was also drawn to some of Wirth’s more esoteric ideas on religion, particularly to his notion that the ancient Nordic people were the first practitioners of a monotheistic faith. According to Wirth, they worshipped a father god named “Odal,” who declined every year with the lowering of the Arctic sun and died a sacrificial death, only to be reborn at the time of the winter solstice. This religion, Wirth claimed, formed the basis for later religious faiths. The Norse gods of the Eddas and the Nibelungenlied and even Christianity were outgrowths of this original religion.

With the support of Chamberlain and Wirth’s theories of Nordic preeminence and his personal collection of German art and artifacts, Roselius constructed a grandiose vision of the German people’s glorious past. This grand past, however, stood in stark contrast to the disappointing present. Roselius believed that Germany was in a state of political, social and cultural decline. A conservative nationalist and Pan-Germanist, he had been a staunch supporter of the German Empire and its imperialist mission. As such, he viewed Germany’s defeat in World War One and the collapse of the Wilhelmine Empire as a national humiliation. Moreover, Roselius deeply disapproved of the Weimar Republic. He believed that a monarchical and authoritarian government was best suited to bringing about social harmony and maintaining a

96 See Elizabeth Tumasonis, “Bernhard Hoetger’s Tree of Life: German Expressionism and Racial Ideology,” Art Journal 51 (Spring, 1992), 85-87 for a concise summary of Wirth’s theories.
97 See footnote 88.
strong and unified Germany. Democracy, he felt, would only lead to divisiveness and social strife. In addition to bemoaning Germany’s present political situation, Roselius also decried what he saw as the ongoing destruction of regional, racial and spiritual values in modern society. He believed that modernization and industrialization were undermining traditional German culture and destroying the innate spirituality of the German people.98

In the face of Germany’s political and cultural decline, Roselius called for a national renewal. He made it his life mission to help restore the Germanic race to its former glory. The first step in this process, he believed, was to initiate a cultural rebirth. Roselius committed himself to reviving racial and instinctual forces in German art and to reasserting “authentic” German culture. His goal was to remake a truly Germanic art that would lead to a new “golden age” for the German people.

In advocating for a German cultural revival Roselius was drawing on the ideas of the conservative art historian and philosopher Julius Langbehn, particularly those ideas expressed in his widely popular book Rembrandt als Erzieher (Rembrandt as Educator, 1890).99 In this critical tract Langbehn lambasted modern life in all of its myriad manifestations—democracy, rationalism, liberalism, materialism, etc. He attacked in particular what he perceived to be the “despiritualization” of modern urban life and the loss of traditional values and morality. Langbehn believed that the German people and culture were being destroyed by science and intellectualism. The range of his cultural critique is clear from in the opening sentences of his book:

98 This belief appears to contradict Roselius’ own position as a prominent industrialist. Many scholars have noted the multi-faceted, eclectic and oftentimes contradictory nature of Roselius’ beliefs. See for instance Hartog, Ideengeschichte, 341.
99 Julius Langbehn, Rembrandt als Erzieher (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1890). The book was an instant success, particularly in middle class circles—it went through 39 editions almost immediately. Langbehn’s cultural critique was later praised by the National Socialists.
It has almost become an open secret that the spiritual life of the German [Volk] people today is in a state of slow – some would say rapid – decay. Science everywhere is splintering into specialization; epoch-making figures are missing in the fields of thought and literature; the visual arts, though represented by important masters, lack monumentality and thus their best effect; musicians are rare, performers many. Architecture is the axis of the fine arts, just as philosophy is the axis of all scientific thinking; at the moment, however, there is neither a German architecture nor a German philosophy. The great luminaries in the various fields are dying out; les rois s’en vont.100

As a solution to Germany’s spiritual decline Langbehn proposed a cultural renewal initiated by a resurgence of the arts. He attributed to the visual arts the ability to spiritually ennoble life. According to the cultural historian Fritz Stern, Langbehn believed that art “…was the highest good of a society…that it could soar to the highest form of truth, and that it should be a teacher of man and a guide to morality.”101 As a result, Langbehn placed the revival of an “authentic” German art at the forefront of his plan for national renewal. He fervently believed that such an art “would teach all Germans the essence of their being, it would teach them to know themselves”102 and thus help them to become “whole”103 again.

As part of his proposed artistic revival Langbehn called for artists to return to their Germanic roots. In order to create a truly German art he encouraged them to turn to local artistic traditions and to embrace regional art and architectural styles. Langbehn believed that it was in the rural peasantry and their art that the “essence” of the German Volk remained pure and uncorrupted. He urged artists to revive this essence in their work. As an example of an artist who successfully gave visual form to the German spirit Langbehn held up the Dutch painter

100 Translation taken from the German History in Documents and Images (GDHI) project sponsored by the German Historical Institute, Washington D.C. in cooperation with the Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, and IEG-MAPS, Institute for European History, Mainz. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/.
102 Stern, 133.
103 In the opening pages to his Rembrandt as Educator Langbehn stated, “[If the German people [Volk] returns once more to the true spirit of the image and of creativity, it will have an education; in that way it can become whole again.” See GDHI, 2.
Rembrandt. Praising him as the quintessence of the “lower German race,” Langbehn presented Rembrandt as an “educator” whose example would lead to a national rebirth.\footnote{Langbehn believed that the Dutch, the English and white Americans were all descended from the “lower German race” (“Niederdeutscher”).}

Langbehn’s \textit{Rembrandt als Erzieher} had a profound impact on Roselius. It not only offered him a blueprint for his desired cultural and spiritual rebirth, it also affirmed his own interest in local artistic traditions.\footnote{See Kirsten Leuenroth, “Heimatgedanke und Niedersachsenrunde,” in Projekt \textit{Böttcherstrasse}, 43-52.} Since his youth Roselius had been fascinated by the history and culture of his native Lower Saxony. As early as 1900 he became a member of an informal group of Bremen intellectuals who met on a weekly basis to discuss regional art, architecture and literature. He attended these \textit{Niedersachsenrunde} (Lower Saxon Roundtable) for the remainder of his life. In 1922 he established the \textit{Niedersachsenwoche} (Lower Saxon Week), a week-long celebration of traditional Lower Saxon culture. That same year his Angelsachsen Verlag began to publish the \textit{Niedersächsische Kunst in Einzeldarstellungen} (Lower Saxon Art in Individual Studies) a series of short books focused on local art. Through these activities, along with his art collecting and patronage, Roselius hoped to both celebrate the North German cultural heritage and to initiate a rebirth of “authentic” German art.

Roselius’ most ambitious attempt to realize his nationalist vision of a German cultural renewal was the reconstruction of the Böttcherstrasse, a small street located in the historic center of Bremen. During the Middle Ages the Böttcherstrasse had been a bustling street that housed the city’s barrel makers and coopers (Böttcher). By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the medieval street had fallen into disrepair. In 1902 Roselius purchased the three-hundred-year-old Patrician House and turned it into the city headquarters of Kaffee HAG. Over the course of the next several decades he purchased the remaining properties and carried out an ambitious, large-scale building program. He transformed the formerly dilapidated street into a
pedestrian walkway lined with shops and other amenities, including cafes, spas, several museums, a Glockenspiel and artisan studios where visitors could watch modern craftsmen at work. By the late twenties the Böttcherstrasse had become one of Bremen’s most popular tourist attractions.

With the rebuilding of the Böttcherstrasse Roselius constructed a propaganda set piece for his nationalist cultural agenda. The art, architecture and museums were intended to promote his vision of a revitalized German culture. The architecture of the street honored local building traditions. Some of the buildings were constructed using a neovernacular style, while others were created in an Expressionist style that fused modern elements with regional features and materials. Many of the buildings were also decorated with works of art displaying traditional Bremen themes and celebrating local lore and legendary heroes. In this way the buildings exemplified Langbehn’s call for artists to “tap into” the German essence by reworking regional styles. (fig. 4-8)

The museums on the street played an important role in Roselius’ vision as well. The Haus Atlantis (1931), named in accordance with Wirth’s notion of an ancient Nordic race that had originated on the lost continent, contained exhibition space for his collection of prehistoric German artifacts. This display was intended to demonstrate to visitors the greatness of the German cultural heritage.106 In a pamphlet for the museum Roselius wrote, “The Haus Atlantis is intended to make every German ask himself the question: What do you know about the proud past of your ancestors? Have you thought back to the time of Rome, Greece, and Egypt: do you know that these three great cultures were originated by the men of the north, your

---

106 The Haus Atlantis was conceived with the theories of Hermann Wirth in mind. The museum was intended to be the first stage in the development of an institute for the study of prehistoric art and culture, of which Wirth was to be the director. See Tumasonis, 87-88 for more.
forefathers?" On display in the Roselius Haus (1928) was Roselius’ collection of German paintings and sculptures from the Middle Ages through the Baroque period—further evidence of the superiority of German culture. The Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus (1927), as I will discuss shortly, was intended to showcase the groundbreaking work of a modern North German artist who gave visual form to the “Germanic spirit” in her art.

Overall, the entire Böttcherstrasse project was intended as a manifestation of Roselius’ worldview and an embodiment of his nationalist beliefs regarding the supremacy of Nordic culture. The rebuilding of the street was intended both as an example of and impetus for a Germanic cultural revival—it was seen as a step towards building a new Germany. As Roselius wrote in 1926, “The rebuilding of the Böttcherstrasse is an attempt to think ‘German.’ It is a manifestation of the will to awaken a new and more glorious time for Germany.”

The main architect put in charge of the Böttcherstrasse project was the artist Bernhard Hoetger. He designed several of the most important buildings on the street, including the Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus and the Haus Atlantis, as well as much of the architectural sculpture. Hoetger was a painter, sculptor and architect who worked mainly in an Expressionist style. Much of the art he created during the teens and twenties is characterized by a boldly abstracted and simplified style that reveals his interest in “primitive” art. Hoetger frequently turned to the arts of Africa, Oceania, Egypt and the Middle Ages for inspiration, believing that such “primitive” forms of art offered a more authentic and vital means of artistic expression. (figs. 4-9) Like many Expressionist artists, Hoetger attributed to the visual arts a spiritual mission. He believed that the

arts were a tool to express eternal values and to awaken the dormant spirituality in mankind.¹⁰⁹

Hoetger’s interest in the “primitive” and his search for “eternal values” in art eventually took on nationalist overtones. During the First World War the artist began to explore the idea of “Germanness” in the arts. He embraced regional art and architectural styles in an attempt to embody the essence of the Nordic race in his work.¹¹⁰ In 1914 Hoetger joined the artists’ colony in Worpswede. The house he built for himself there reveals his fascination with local building traditions. With its steeply pointed roof and richly patterned brickwork the house was an Expressionist variation on the vernacular farmhouse typical of Lower Saxony. (fig. 4-10) Much of the art the artist created throughout the twenties similarly attempted to rework traditional German forms in a modern context.

In Hoetger, Roselius found a kindred spirit who shared his vision of remaking a truly Germanic culture. He saw Hoetger as the heroic Nordic artist, the embodiment of Langbehn’s ideal of an artist giving form to the German spirit. According to Roselius, Hoetger strove to “...reawaken the pure Nordic impulse in the visual arts.”¹¹¹ Moreover, both Roselius and Hoetger shared many of the same beliefs regarding the preeminence of the Nordic people and culture.¹¹² As a result, Roselius became a major champion and patron of the artist.¹¹³ The two collaborated together closely on the Böttcherstrasse project throughout the twenties and early thirties.

¹¹¹ Letter from Roselius to the Board of Directors of the Association of Lower Saxon Folklore, July 9, 1921. Böttcherstrasse Archiv, Bremen.
¹¹² The correspondence between Hoetger and Roselius during the early twenties reveals that Hoetger too was interested in the racial theories of Chamberlain and Wirth. See for instance the letter from Roselius to Hoetger cited in note 88.
It was through Hoetger that Roselius first became interested in the art of Paula Modersohn-Becker. Hoetger was a close friend and enthusiastic champion of the painter, whom he had met while living in Paris in 1906. After Modersohn-Becker’s untimely death Hoetger inherited a sizeable collection of her paintings and drawings and took it upon himself to tirelessly promote her art. Hoetger deeply admired Modersohn-Becker, considering her artistic aims to be in line with his own. He believed that she shared his conception of art as a vehicle for the expression of eternal spiritual values. As he stated in a 1919 article on the artist, “…Paula Modersohn-Becker searched for the holy behind [artistic] form…her eyes were opened to the spirit of eternity.”

Moreover, the painter personified Hoetger’s ideal of an artist in touch with the Nordic spirit. In a letter to Roselius he wrote that Modersohn-Becker carried the “fire of the North” in her.

Roselius quickly came to share Hoetger’s enthusiasm for Modersohn-Becker. In 1920 he began to collect her art, eventually purchasing a majority of the works owned by Hoetger as well as works from other private collectors. By the mid-twenties he had established a large and impressive collection which contained many of the artist’s most revolutionary paintings.

Like Hoetger, Roselius celebrated Modersohn-Becker as a heroic Nordic artist. He saw in her images of Worpswede peasants, local landscapes and mother and child studies the expression of the Nordic impulse. Roselius placed Modersohn-Becker at the forefront of a long tradition of

---

116 Roselius owned over 100 paintings and drawings by Modersohn-Becker. For a history of Roselius’ Modersohn-Becker collection see Anczykowski, “Ludwig Roselius, das Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus und seine Sammlung.” While much has been written about Roselius’ patronage of Bernhard Hoetger, little has been written about his interest in Modersohn-Becker. Most scholars refer to his admiration for the painter with a few short sentences, but to my knowledge no one has discussed in detail why he was drawn to her art. Anczykowski’s article is the only writing that focuses specifically on Modersohn-Becker and Roselius; however, she includes only the basic factual information about his collection (which paintings he owned, when he purchased them, etc).
artists in touch with the German essence. According to Radycki, “Roselius interpreted Modersohn-Becker as the culmination of a particular German expression that reached back to medieval art.”\textsuperscript{117} In a letter of 1921 he went so far as to claim that she was “the greatest Nordic [female] painter.”\textsuperscript{118}

In addition to her Nordic sensibility, Roselius also praised Modersohn-Becker’s artistic innovativeness and originality. He hailed her as the creator of a revolutionary new style of art. Speaking at the opening of the Paula-Becker-Modersohn Haus in 1927 he announced, “She gave the world a new kind of art—new in thinking, new in creation and completely unmeasured and unequaled in its scope.”\textsuperscript{119} Roselius applauded Modersohn-Becker’s stylistic innovations, particularly the monumental simplicity of her paintings. Even more than this, however, he extolled the aesthetic and spiritual realism of her art, what he referred to as its “truthfulness.”\textsuperscript{120} Roselius deeply admired Modersohn-Becker’s rejection of classical and idealizing notions of beauty and her attempt to find the beautiful in the plain. He praised her for capturing the inner essence of the people she depicted, rather than focusing on superficial appearances. Above all he celebrated the painter’s emphasis on emotion, feeling and intuition rather than cold intellect.

Overall, Roselius saw in Modersohn-Becker and her revolutionary art the dawn of a new era of German art. He believed that her paintings pointed the way to a national, cultural and spiritual

\textsuperscript{118} “die grosse nordische Malerin.” Letter from Roselius to the Board of Directors of the Association of Lower Saxon Folklore, July 9, 1921. Böttcherstrasse Archiv, Bremen.
\textsuperscript{119} “Sie hat der Welt eine neue Kunst gegeben, neu im Denken, neu in der Schöpfung und ganz unausgemessen und ganz unausmessbar in ihrer Tragweite.” Ludwig Roselius, “Rede zur Einweihung des Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Hauses, 1927” in Reden und Schriften zur Böttcherstrasse in Bremen, 49.
\textsuperscript{120} In his remarks at the opening of the Paula-Becker-Modersohn Haus he referred to the artist as “the painter of truth.” Ibid.
rebirth. As he stated in his opening address, “...suddenly a meteor appears in the sky, breaking the darkness and lifting confusion—a woman [Modersohn-Becker] leads us to the light.”

It is apparent from Roselius’ writings and speeches that Modersohn-Becker played an important role in his nationalist vision of a German cultural renewal. In line with Langbehn’s theories he viewed Modersohn-Becker as a worthy successor to Rembrandt. He believed that the shining example of her art would lead the German people to a new, more spiritual age. These beliefs motivated Roselius to build a museum in her honor.

The decision to honor Modersohn-Becker with her own museum came in 1924. In December of that year Roselius sent Hoetger a letter stating his intention to construct a building to house his Modersohn-Becker collection and charging the architect with designing a suitable structure. Like the majority of the buildings on the Böttcherstrasse, the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus was intended to serve a propagandistic purpose. Both the building and the art it contained were meant to promote Roselius’ vision of a Germanic cultural revival. According to the German architectural historian Nils Aschenbeck, “Roselius’ worldview culminated in the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus. The architecture is programmatic through and through.”

With the Modersohn-Becker museum Hoetger designed a structure that revived regional architectural traditions. Similar to his house in Worpswede, the exterior of the museum combined elements from vernacular architecture with modern forms. The façade of the structure was composed of layers of textured red brick—the material traditionally used in indigenous farmhouses. The walls, left rough and uneven, appeared to have evolved organically—like the walls of medieval German towns. As the conservative art historian Walter Müller-Wulckow

---

121 “Da plötzlich erscheint am Firmament ein Meteor, die Dunkelheit brechend und Wirrnis klärend—eine Frau…zeigt uns den Weg zum Licht.” Ibid., 52.
stated in his 1927 book on the museum, published by Roselius’ Angelsachsen Verlag, “The spirit [of the museum] grew out of the Lower Saxon soil—just as did the character of Paula Becker Modersohn...” These traditional elements, however, were combined with Expressionist forms. The museum was a fantastical assemblage of towers, terraces and gable walls. Its curving, irregular walls were covered in fanciful, decorative sculptures and designs. Overall, Hoetger did not seek to simply reproduce the Lower Saxon architectural style, but rather to reimagine it.

The design of the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus contained symbolic elements as well. Many of the brick walls were patterned with circles meant to symbolize the sun. The use of the disc as a sun symbol was repeated elsewhere throughout the structure, including in the cast-iron railing that fenced in an upstairs terrace. The crowning element of the building was a tall stair tower topped with a metal cupola supporting the sun’s orb. (fig. 4-11) For both Roselius and Hoetger, light symbolized the cultural renaissance and the dawn of a new age. The Modersohn-Becker museum was the locus for this spiritual light and the heart of the cultural revival.124

In addition to the decorative brickwork, the museum was also adorned with numerous sculptures created by Hoetger. Most important for this discussion is a statue of a mother and child that was on display in the main vestibule of the building. (fig. 4-12) Made of bronze, the statue depicts a young, semi-nude woman tenderly cradling an infant in her arms. With its clean lines, simplified realism and graceful sway, the statue resembles a medieval Madonna. The work was lit from directly overhead by a glowing, blue glass light which bathed the vestibule in

showers of light. Both the mystical lighting and the statue created an appropriately religious environment within the museum.

The decision to mark the entrance to the Paula Modersohn-Becker museum with a statue on the mother-and-child theme reveals that both Hoetger and Roselius subscribed to the contemporary understanding of the painter as a “maternal” artist who focused on motherhood imagery in her art. In line with the gendered art discourse of the day, Hoetger described Modersohn-Becker’s artistic vision as “motherly” in his 1919 article on the artist. Similarly, in his speech for the opening of the museum, Roselius praised Modersohn-Becker as an artist who gave visual form to her “feminine feeling” and “womanly sense of self.” He extolled her ability to capture the “full sense of a mother’s love” in her paintings. Although he collected a wide range of the artist’s works, he believed that her motherhood images were the most powerful and characteristic examples of her art.

Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood works also played an important role in Roselius’ nationalist cultural vision. He owned some of her most revolutionary paintings of the subject, including her *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude* (1906), *Reclining Mother and Child Nude II* (1906) and *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day* (1906). It was in these works that Roselius found the strongest support for his dream of a renewed German artistic tradition. As such, they were given pride of place in his new museum.

The first painting to greet visitors to the Paula-Becker-Modersohn Haus was the artist’s *Self-Portrait, Age 30.* (fig. 4-13) The work was displayed in a small alcove located at the top of the staircase leading to the main exhibition space of the museum. In this self-portrait Modersohn-Becker depicted herself as if she were pregnant, although at the time she was not. Her semi-nude

---

125 “Hoetger, 36.
127 “Mutterliebe…zum vollen Empfinden zu bringen.” Ibid., 50.
body, captured in broad, rough strokes of paint, stands out against a flat, pale yellow background. With a soft smile on her lips, the artist stares directly at the viewer. Her arms gently encircle her heavy, slightly swollen stomach in the traditional gesture of pregnancy. With its reductive style and daring subject matter—it is the first nude self-portrait by a woman artist—*Self-Portrait, Age 30* is one of Modersohn-Becker’s most revolutionary works.

In order to understand why Roselius selected *Self-Portrait, Age 30* as the opening image to his Modersohn-Becker collection, it is necessary to consider the potential meanings of the painting. In his 1927 book on the Modersohn-Becker museum, Walter Müller-Wulckow described the work as “chastely revealing [the artist’s] longing for motherhood.”\(^{128}\) Such a reading of the image is consistent with the contemporary understanding of Modersohn-Becker as an artist driven by her maternal desires. However, while Müller-Wulckow’s interpretation is true in part—according to Radycki, Modersohn-Becker was in fact contemplating single motherhood at this time—it is also decidedly too simplistic. The painting is about much more than the artist’s desire for a child.

As recent scholars have noted, *Self-Portrait, Age 30* is a painting that celebrates Modersohn-Becker’s twofold creative power as both a woman and an artist. According to Radycki, “*Self Portrait, Age 30* is the artist as goddess and creatrix; the immediate embodiment of talent and the immemorial embodiment of progeny.”\(^{129}\) Notably, it is the only self-portrait that Modersohn-Becker created which references her role as painter. She inscribed the work, “I painted this, at age 30, on my sixth wedding day. P.B.” This inscription, coupled with her swollen belly, points towards both her creative and procreative potential.

---

\(^{128}\) “…in dem sich die mütterliche Sehnsucht aufs keuscheste offenbart.” Müller-Wulckow, *Bernhard Hoetgers Paula Modersohn-Becker Haus*, 12. Müller-Wulckow also discusses the prominent location of the painting.

\(^{129}\) Diane Radycki, “‘Pictures of Flesh’: Modersohn-Becker and the Nude,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 30 (Fall/Winter, 2009), 12.
Overall, *Self Portrait, Age 30* is a painting that perfectly encapsulated Roselius’ understanding of Modersohn-Becker and her artistic project. The image reveals both the maternal and the revolutionary aspects of her art. More importantly, the painting powerfully embodies Roselius’ vision of Modersohn-Becker as a daring artistic innovator who figuratively “gave birth” to a new type of art.

Roselius’ message that Modersohn-Becker was the revolutionary herald of a new, more spiritual era of German art and culture was further supported by the manner in which *Self Portrait, Age 30* was displayed. The painting was isolated in a niche as though it were a sacred, holy object. In keeping with the light symbolism present in the entire museum, the work was softly lit from above. This lighting lent both the painting and its creator a religious air. As Müller-Wulckow stated, “…through the lighting [the painting] appears to be lifted to another realm.”

The technique of spiritualizing Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood works by placing them in a specially lit niche was repeated elsewhere in the museum. The artist’s *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude* was displayed in a small alcove off the main exhibition space of the museum. As with *Self-Portrait, Age 30*, the painting was bathed in a soft light meant to signify the cultural renaissance and the dawn of a new age. (fig. 4-14)

As one of Modersohn-Becker’s most revolutionary motherhood works, *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude* lent itself well to reinterpretation according to Roselius’ cultural vision. With its radically reductive style and daring treatment of the subject the painting exemplified a new direction in German art. The lack of detail, limited use of modeling and broad, flat planes of color create a maternal image of monumental simplicity. Moreover, in a daring deviation from

---

artistic tradition, both mother and child are depicted nude. Such an approach to the subject of motherhood is almost without example in the history of art. As Radycki notes, “…in the Western tradition maternity is not a pretext for the nude.”

In stripping away the clothing of the figures in Kneeling Mother and Child Nude, Modersohn-Becker divested the work of the traditional artistic context in which the image of the breastfeeding mother typically appears. The woman in this painting is neither the Virgin Mary, nor is she a modern mother. By stripping away all historical details Modersohn-Becker created a universalizing image of the instinctual, protective love of mother for child. The woman kneels in a timeless setting surrounded by fruit—a traditional symbol of female fecundity—her solid, sturdy body providing sustenance for the suckling infant at her breast. With her heavy features, thick form and brownish-blue tinged skin, the woman defies the delicate beauty typical of representations of the breastfeeding Madonna. Modersohn-Becker instead portrays the mother as “a dark, anonymous goddess of nourishment…animal-like…bound to the earth…” to use the words of Linda Nochlin. It is paintings like Kneeling Mother and Child Nude that Roselius had in mind when he praised Modersohn-Becker for her “truthfulness” and for embodying the inner essence of her subjects.

Overall, the startling originality of Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood paintings supported Roselius’ presentation of the artist as the revolutionary herald of a new era of German art. As displayed in the Paula-Modersohn-Becker-Haus, images such as her Self-Portrait, Age 30 and Kneeling Mother and Child Nude were intended to promote Roselius’ vision of a renewed Nordic people and art. Within this context Modersohn-Becker’s maternal paintings became powerful symbols of Germany’s spiritual and cultural rebirth.

---

131 Radycki, “Pictures of Flesh,” 9. Radycki notes a few exceptions, including Giogione’s Tempest (1506-08), Gustav Klimt’s Mother and Child (1905), and several drawings by Picasso from 1902.
132 Nochlin, 39.
Roselius’ promotion of Modersohn-Becker was initially quite successful. The opening of the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus garnered nation-wide attention, with articles on the new museum appearing in major German newspapers across the country.\textsuperscript{133} Many of these articles reiterated Roselius’ belief that Modersohn-Becker was a heroic Nordic artist who developed a new type of art.\textsuperscript{134} Significantly, of those publications that chose to include examples of the artist’s work, the majority of them selected her images of mothers for reproduction. As the next section will show, however, Roselius’ presentation of Modersohn-Becker as the ideal German artist was soon challenged by the National Socialists. While Roselius saw in Modersohn-Becker’s art a revolutionary new approach to German painting, an expressively realistic figuration capable of embodying the spiritual essence and “truth” of the German \textit{Volk}, the Nazis saw only ugliness and degeneration.

5. Modersohn-Becker under National Socialism

When the National Socialists assumed power in 1933 Roselius rejoiced. The industrialist believed that his nationalist dreams had finally been fulfilled and that the time for Germany’s political and spiritual rebirth was at hand. Moreover, Roselius deeply admired Adolf Hitler, regarding him as a strong, decisive leader capable of restoring the German people to their former greatness. In the introduction to a collection of his writings published in 1933, Roselius praised Hitler in fulsome prose, stating: “No one can resist the influence of this rare man. The noble sweep of his soul, the purity of his feelings for the German cause raise him to grandeur.”\textsuperscript{135}

\textsuperscript{133} The Böttcherstrasse archive in Bremen contains stacks upon stacks of press clippings on the opening of the museum. There were even articles that appeared in international newspapers, including the \textit{New York Times}.
\textsuperscript{134} Many articles even reprinted portions of Roselius’ opening address. See for instance the article that appeared in the June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1927 edition of the \textit{Bremer Volkszeitung}.
\textsuperscript{135} “Niemand kann sich dem Einflusse dieses seltenes Mannes entziehen. Der hehre Schwung seiner Seele, die Reinheit seines Gefuehls fur die deutsche Sache wird zur Erhabenheit.” Roselius, \textit{Briefe und Schriften zu Deutschlands Erneuerung}, 5.
The National Socialists, however, did not return Roselius’ enthusiasm in kind.\textsuperscript{136} Despite his overt national chauvinism, the party authorities viewed many of Roselius’ racial and cultural ideas as politically suspect. Specifically, they found his mystical religious notions and his beliefs regarding the origins of the Nordic race too esoteric and at odds with mainstream Nazi ideology. Hitler himself publically denounced Roselius’ Nordic philosophy.\textsuperscript{137} On Sept. 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1936, in a speech delivered at a party convention in Nuremberg, Hitler declared:

“We have nothing to do with those elements which know National Socialism only from hearsay and therefore only too easily confuse it with undefinable Nordic catchwords, and which begin their thematic research with some mythical Atlantean civilization. National Socialism most empathetically rejects this kind of Böttcherstrasse-culture.”\textsuperscript{138}

Above all of these concerns, however, the National Socialists most strongly disapproved of Roselius’ championing of modern art. In particular, the party opposed his patronage of Bernhard Hoetger. While Roselius considered Hoetger the ideal Nordic artist, the Nazi authorities viewed him instead as an artistic degenerate. Despite the artist’s fervent support of Nationalism Socialism, the party rejected his art on cultural-political grounds.\textsuperscript{139} His abstracted, Expressionist style was seen as incompatible with the classicizing aesthetic Hitler wanted to impose on German art. As a result, Hoetger was forbidden from working or exhibiting and many of his public sculptures were removed from display.

\textsuperscript{136} Roselius attempted to join the National Socialist Party in 1933, but was denied membership on the suspicion that he was a Freemason who associated with Jews. See Strohmeyer, “Kunst in Zeichen der germanischen Vorfahren,” 78-79.
\textsuperscript{137} Despite Roselius’ admiration for Hitler, the relationship between the two men was troubled. In 1922 Hitler had approached Roselius asking for financial support to found his new political party. The industrialist declined, stating that he had to remain free from party politics in order to best serve Germany. According to Elizabeth Tumasonis, Hitler henceforth carried a grudge against Roselius. See Tumasonis, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{139} Hoetger became a member of the National Socialist Party in 1933. Like Roselius, he greeted the National Socialist takeover with great enthusiasm. See for instance a letter from Hoetger to Walter Müller-Wulckow from Aug. 9, 1933 in which he discusses the advent of the Third Reich and his personal Nordic artistic and worldview. The letter is one of many between the sculptor and the critic included in the Walter Müller-Wulckow Papers at the Getty Archives in Los Angeles.
In 1935 the Böttcherstrasse itself came under fire. Articles printed in the *Völkischer Beobachter* and *Das Schwarze Korps* (The Black Corps) in August of that year asked whether the street was compatible with the National Socialist concept of art.\(^{140}\) While the more traditional buildings on the street were deemed acceptable, Hoetger’ architectural and sculptural contributions were seen as decadent and even grotesque. The artist’s *Tree of Life*, a sculpture designed for the Haus Atlantis, was singled out for especial criticism due to its exaggerated and distorted style.\(^{141}\) (fig. 4-15) The following month the senate of Bremen debated whether Roselius should be forced to rebuild the Böttcherstrasse in accordance with National Socialist aesthetics. Ultimately, the street was allowed to remain unchanged in order to serve as an example of the “cultural Bolschevism” of the Weimar period. The museums designed by Hoetger, however, were forced to close in 1936.

Modersohn-Becker too came under attack by the National Socialists. Due to her use of simplified forms and expressive, anti-naturalistic coloring as well as her depiction of unidealized subjects she was declared a “degenerate artist.” In a vicious article that appeared in *Das Schwarze Korps* in 1935 her paintings were condemned as an “atrocious mix of colors.”\(^ {142}\) The artist was accused of portraying the “scum of humanity” in her paintings—sick children, idiotic farmers and other degenerates.\(^ {143}\) As a result of this Nazi condemnation Modersohn-Becker’s works were removed from public museums and art collections, the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-

\(^{140}\) See the August 21, 1935 issue of *Das Schwarze Korps* and the August 23, 1935 issue of the *Völkischer Beobachter*.

\(^{141}\) The statue depicts Odin in his sacrificial aspect. In Wirth’s mythology, Odin was a later version of Odal, the father god worshipped by the original ancient Nordic people. The sculpture was meant to suggest the spiritual redemption and renewal of the German people. According to Roselius, “Proclaiming the past, directing the present, promising the future—the tree of life is raised in the street…indicating the age-old significance of spiritual sacrifice, surrounded by the circle of eternal life, lifting to heaven the cross of the savior.” See Roselius, *Reden und Schriften*, 104.


\(^{143}\) “Auswurf der Menschheit,” Ibid.
Haus was forced to close and her art was included in the defamatory Degenerate Art exhibition (1937).144

The National Socialists directed their ire in particular at Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood works. Just as during the Weimar period, her images of mothers were seen as the most characteristic examples of her art. However, while Weimar art writers had perceived in these images the embodiment of the “eternal feminine” and a “maternal” worldview, Nazi critics took the opposite stance. In regard to the artist’s Reclining Mother and Child Nude II and Self-Portrait, Age 30, the author of the Das Schwarze Korps article questioned, “Where is the sensitive, motherly-womanly quality?”145 Modersohn-Becker was accused of creating “brutal” and irreverent paintings that attacked the sacred, spiritual nature of motherhood. Her maternal images were considered on par with the “bestial” works of Otto Dix and Käthe Kollwitz.146

How did Modersohn-Becker’s motherhood paintings go from wide-spread acclamation to defamation in less than a decade? Why did these images inspire such outrage from the National Socialists? As I have shown in this chapter, throughout the twenties the artist’s mother and child images were consistently linked to a conservative ideology of motherhood. In a time of rapidly changing gender roles, art historians, critics and collectors believed that Modersohn-Becker’s maternal paintings embodied the essentialist notion that women were innately maternal and that motherhood was their highest calling. During the thirties this reactionary ideology found a ready home in National Socialism. The problem, then, was not the artist’s depiction of the intensity of motherly love, but rather the type of mothers that she portrayed. The thick, swarthy, dark-haired women depicted in paintings such as Reclining Mother and Child Nude II did not fit with the Nazis’ racial ideals. The National Socialist celebration of motherhood was intended not only to

144 See Radycki, First Modern Woman Artist, 203 for more.
146 Ibid.
restore traditional gender roles, but also to promote the Party’s notion of Aryan supremacy. Accordingly, the motherhood images created by artists like Karl Diebitsch and Richard Heymann during the Third Reich typically featured idealized, blonde-haired, blue-eyed mothers and children. The Nazi’s viewed Modersohn-Becker’s “ugly” and “degenerate” mothers as a threat to this racial ideal. According to the critic for Das Schwarze Korps, the artist’s maternal images were “a slap in the face to our National Socialist vision.” Overall, Modersohn-Becker’s unidealized approach to the subject of motherhood coupled with her use of a simplified and expressive style of realist figuration was enough to earn her the label of degenerate artist. Despite the initial acceptance of her art by the political right during the twenties, her paintings were denounced by the National Socialists.

\[147\] “die unserer nationsozialistischen Einstellung ins Gesicht schlagen.” Ibid.
Conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation I raised two questions that have long preoccupied scholars of interwar German art and culture. Does the turn to realism in German painting during the 1920s and 30s represent a regressive return to tradition or a new artistic direction? Should it be associated with a reactionary or progressive political stance? My examination of motherhood imagery has allowed me to complicate our understanding of realism in the Weimar period. Not only did it allow me to explore the diverse stylistic directions of realism, but it also enabled me to examine the varied political directions of those artists who returned to figurative imagery.

As discussed in chapters one through three, during the Weimar years artists working from a range of political positions on the left employed a variety of realist styles in their motherhood works. Artists affiliated with the German Communist Party, such as Rudolf Schlichter, abandoned the distortions of Expressionism and embraced a more clear-cut figurative style with the intention of communicating political messages to the masses. Otto Dix, a committed leftist despite his lack of party membership, developed a veristic realism that revived the minute attention to detail and exaggerated use of color typical of the German Old Masters in order to expose the social evils of the Weimar years. Meanwhile, Georg Schrimpf employed an idealizing and classicizing realism grounded in the Italianate pastoral tradition in his maternal paintings to give form to his idyllic vision of an anarcho-socialist utopia.

My analysis of these artists complicates the argument put forth by scholars like Benjamin Buchloh and Jost Hermand that the art of the Neue Sachlichkeit was both politically and aesthetically conservative and that it cleared the way for the development of fascist realism in Germany. For artists such as Schlichter, Dix and Schrimpf, the embrace of realism and artistic tradition did not represent a regressive “return to order”—rather, they reworked traditional realist
styles and motifs to fit a contemporary context and to support the leftist intentions of their art. Moreover, they continued to make use of Expressionist elements in their paintings including anti-naturalistic coloring, simplified, distorted forms and flattened spaces.\(^1\) Thus, despite Buchloh and Hermand’s claim to the contrary, much of the realist art of the 20s—even Schrimpf’s classicizing paintings—differs significantly from the aesthetically conservative, romantic realism promoted in the Third Reich.

As chapter four of this dissertation made clear, however, members of the Weimar art world affiliated with the political right also championed artistic realism. The Nationalist Ludwig Roselius’s celebration of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s art was motivated by his belief that her paintings represented a revolutionary new approach to German painting, an expressively realistic figuration capable of embodying the spiritual essence and “truth” of the German Volk. At the same time, this chapter demonstrated the impossibility of simplistically assigning political meaning to artistic style. The very elements of Modersohn-Becker’s art praised by Roselius were later denounced by the National Socialists.

By providing a more nuanced examination of the politics and aesthetics of Neue Sachlichkeit art, this dissertation has opened up new ways of understanding some of the movement’s most important members, most notably Georg Schrimpf. Schrimpf has long been seen as an artist who created apolitical, socially-detached paintings that offered an escape from the turbulence of the Weimar years. My analysis of his motherhood paintings, however, has demonstrated that he used his art to express his leftist sympathies. Future research on Schrimpf

---

\(^1\) As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, Gustav Hartlaub considered Neue Sachlichkeit an outgrowth of Expressionism. In his preface to the 1925 Neue Sachlichkeit exhibition catalog, he noted that the new art had much in common with the earlier movement. See G. H. Hartlaub, “Zum Geleit,” Neue Sachlichkeit: Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1925); translated in German Expressionism. Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism, Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993), 291.
could extend this political analysis to the rest of the artist’s oeuvre. While his anarcho-socialist beliefs are most apparent in his images of mothers, they are also manifest in his landscape paintings and images of young men and women in the countryside. Given the recent increased interest in Neue Sachlichkeit art, the time is ripe for a reassessment of this important figure.

In addition to providing a nuanced examination of the politics of realist figuration in Weimar-era Germany, my dissertation has also contributed to the ongoing assessment of representations of women in the art of this period. While art historians have long been interested in images of the Neue Frau and their relationship to women’s increasing emancipation at this time, I have demonstrated the importance of considering images of mothers as well. As I have shown, the popularity of the mother motif in the art of the Weimar period was also a response to women’s changing social roles during the 1920s and 30s. At a time when female identities appeared to be in flux, many artists pictured women in their conventional maternal roles. It is too simplistic to state, however, that these images reveal nothing more than men’s misogynistic resistance to women’s newly acquired equality, as is often argued in regard to representations of the New Woman, or that they simply reflect a desire to restore the traditional patriarchal order. As I have demonstrated, the maternal works created during the Weimar years reveal a range of complex and oftentimes contradictory responses to women’s emancipation. Many artists, most notably those affiliated with the KPD as well as leftist artists such as Dix and Schrimpf, supported women’s equality and pursued progressive goals such as the legalization of abortion and easy access to contraception. At the same time, however, they did not attempt to challenge the traditional view that motherhood was women’s natural role.

While my dissertation focuses on Weimar Germany specifically, my research on the politicization of motherhood and its representation has broader art historical relevance. The use
of maternal imagery to reflect on the position of women in society is an artistic strategy that was popular throughout the twentieth century, both in Europe as well as the United States. Most notably, with the onset of second-wave feminism during the late sixties, many American feminist artists began to confront the theoretical divide between creativity and procreativity in their art, challenging the traditional assumption that women’s childbearing capacity renders them incompatible with artistic pursuits. Helen Redman, for instance, attempted to bridge the divide between being a mother and an artist in a series of pregnant self-portraits from the mid-60s in which she pictured herself at her easel simultaneously filling the roles of both expectant mother and painter. (fig. conclusion-1) As discussed in chapter four, this strategy was already anticipated by Paula Modersohn-Becker, an artist whom Redman deeply admires, in her Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day. However, while Modersohn-Becker’s painting gave visual form to her unrealized longing to balance motherhood and an artistic career, Redman turned the dream into a reality, making her experiences as a mother the inspiration for much of her art.²

A few years later, the conceptual and performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles addressed similar issues. In a series of Maintenance Art photographs, Ukeles documented herself performing maternal duties like mopping and cleaning a dirty diaper. (fig. conclusion-2) Her project was conceived as a response to a male sculpting teacher who informed Ukeles when she became pregnant that she could no longer be an artist. She sought to prove him wrong by demonstrating that her maternal work could be the basis for her art. At the same time she also sought to acknowledge the invisible daily experiences of women engaged in domestic labor.³

² For more information on Redman see the artist’s entry on the website for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/helen-redman.
The most well-known maternal work from this period, Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79), similarly made clear the realities of lived motherhood. In this project Kelly charted the development of her son from birth to age five through a series of artifacts, such as dirty diapers and baby clothing, and analytical texts. *(fig. conclusion-3)* She also recorded her emotional and psychological response to being a mother, including her anxieties and fears. In doing so, she demonstrated that motherhood—traditionally shown in art history as a sentimental bond between mother and child—is actually a complex and challenging relationship.⁴

My investigation of Weimar maternal imagery gives perspective to the greater agency of these second-wave feminist artists. It makes clear their attempt to dismantle traditional beliefs regarding motherhood that remained largely unchallenged in the work of Weimar artists like Dix and Schrimpf. My dissertation also sets the stage for future research on the political use of motherhood imagery by 21st century artists.

---

⁴ See the chapter on Mary Kelly in Ibid., 23-41.
Illustrations

Chapter One

Figure 1-1  Käthe Kollwitz, *Down with the Abortion Paragraphs*, 1923.

Figure 1-2  Alice Lex-Nerlinger, *Paragraph 218*, 1931.
Figure 1-3   Rudolf Schlichter, *Women’s Rights in Bourgeois Democracy*, 1922.

Figure 1-4   Heinrich Zille, *Into the Water*, 1904.
Figure 1-5  Heinrich Zille, *Into the Water*, 1919.

Figure 1-6  Käthe Kollwitz, *Pub* (Portraits of Misery series #2), 1909.
Figure 1-7  Käthe Kollwitz, *At the Doctor* (Portraits of Misery series #3), 1909.

Figure 1-8  Käthe Kollwitz, *Christmas* (Portraits of Misery series #6), 1909.
Figure 1-9  Program for *Paragraph 218: Tortured People*, 1929.

Figure 1-10  A. Paul Weber, Title Page for *Mord an der Zukunft*, 1929.
Figure 1-11  A. Paul Weber, Illustration for *Mord an der Zukunft*, 1929.

Figure 1-12  George Grosz, *Toads of Property*, 1920.
Figure 1-13  John Heartfield, *Forced to Deliver Human Material*, 1930.

Figure 1-14  Eva Schulze-Knabe, *Paragraph 218*, 1931.
Figure 1-15  Alice Lex-Nerlinger, *Paragraph 218* 1931.
Chapter Two

Figure 2-1  Otto Dix, *Working-Class Boy*, 1920.

Figure 2-2  Otto Dix, *The Salon I*, 1921.
Figure 2-3  Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1919.

Figure 2-4  Otto Dix, *Woman and Child*, 1921.
Figure 2-5  Otto Dix, *Awakening*, 1918.

Figure 2-6  Otto Dix, *Lover’s Grave*, 1917.
Figure 2-7  Woman of Willendorf, c. 24,000 BCE.

Figure 2-8  Raphael, Sistine Madonna, 1512.
Figure 2-9  Conrad Felixmüller, *Birth*, 1917.

Figure 2-10  Otto Dix, *Birth*, 1919.
Figure 2-11  Conrad Felixmüller, *Pregnant Woman in the Autumn Forest*, 1917.

Figure 2-12  Otto Dix, *Moon Woman*, 1919.
Figure 2-13  Otto Dix, *War Cripples (45% Fit for Service)*, 1920.

Figure 2-14  Otto Dix, *Pregnancy* (Death and Resurrection series #4), 1922.
Figure 2-15  Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1920.

Figure 2-16  Matthias Grünewald, *Crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1515.
Figure 2-17   Otto Dix, *Mother and Child*, 1923.

Figure 2-18   Otto Dix, *Vanitas (Youth and Old Age)*, 1932.
Figure 2-19  Hans Baldung Grien, *Death and the Maiden*, 1518-1520.

Figure 2-20  Otto Dix, *Nursing Mother*, 1932.
Figure 2-21  Otto Dix, *Mother with Child*, 1932.

Figure 2-22  Otto Dix, *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden*, 1926.
Figure 2-23  Otto Dix, *The Artist’s Family*, 1927.

Figure 2-24  Karl Diebitsch, *Mutter*, 1939.
Figure 2-25  A. Elnain, *Martha Dix*, 1926.

Figure 2-26  August Sander, *Painter Couple (Martha and Otto Dix)*, 1927.
Figure 2-27  Otto Dix, *Woman in Gold (Mutzli)*, 1923.

Figure 2-28  Otto Dix, *Portrait of My Wife*, 1924.
Figure 2-29  Otto Dix, *Pregnant Woman*, 1930.

Figure 2-30  Arno Breker, *Readiness*, 1937.
Figure 2-31  Adolf Wissel, *Farm Family from Kahlenberg*, 1939.

Figure 2-32 Friedrich von Amerling, *The Arthäber Family*, 1835.
Chapter Three

Figure 3-1  Georg Schrimpf, *Sleeping Girls*, 1926.

Figure 3-2  Georg Schrimpf, *Cowherd*, 1923.
Figure 3-3  Georg Schrimpf, *Midday Rest*, 1922.

Figure 3-4  Georg Schrimpf, *Comrades*, 1915.
Figure 3-5  Georg Schrimpf, *Two Women under Trees*, 1915.

Figure 3-6  Georg Schrimpf, *Nude IX*, 1915.
Figure 3-7  Georg Schrimpf, *Mother and Child*, 1915.

Figure 3-8  Georg Schrimpf, *Woman with Child*, 1916.
Figure 3-9  Georg Schrimpf, *Maria’s Dream (The Miracle)*, 1917.

Figure 3-10  Georg Schrimpf, *Visit to the Child*, 1918.
Figure 3-11  Giotto di Bondone, *Virgin and Child Enthroned*, 1305-1310.

Figure 3-12  Philipp Otto Runge, *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, 1800.
Figure 3-13  Joseph Anton Koch, *Landscape by Olevano with Riding Monk*, 1830.

Figure 3-14  Georg Schrimpf, *Woman and Children with Bird*, 1922.
Figure 3-15  Georg Schrimp, *Wild Horses*, 1921.

Figure 3-16  Georg Schrimp, *Girl with Sheep*, 1923.
Figure 3-17  Georg Schrimpf, *Swineherd*, 1923.

Figure 3-18  Georg Schrimpf, *Woman and Child with Dove*, 1921.
Figure 3-19  Camille Pissarro, *Peasant Women Planting Pea Sticks*, 1891.

Figure 3-20  Photograph of Lochhausen, 1939.
Figure 3-21  Photograph of Lochhausen, 1930s.

Figure 3-22  Georg Schrimpf, *Moor Landscape*, 1929.
Figure 3-23  Georg Schrimpf, *Landscape*, 1931.

Figure 3-24  Rudolf Schäfler, *Junge Mutter*, 1930.
Figure 3-25  Richard Heymann, *Sunny Life*, 1939.
Chapter Four

Figure 4-1  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Old Poorhouse Woman in a Garden, with Garden Ornament and Poppies*, 1907.

Figure 4-2  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait Nude with Amber Necklace, Half-Length II*, 1906.
Figure 4-3  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother and Child Nude II*, 1906.

Figure 4-4  Fritz Mackensen, *Mother and Infant (Worpsweder Madonna)*, 1892.
Figure 4-5  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Peasant Mother and Child*, 1903.

Figure 4-6  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother and Child Nude*, 1906.
Figure 4-7  Photograph of Modersohn-Becker and Daughter Tilly, 1907.

Figure 4-8  Photograph of the Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, view towards the Paula-Becker-Modersohn-Haus and the Roselius Haus, 1930.
Figure 4-9  Bernhard Hoetger, *Summer*, 1913.

Figure 4-10  Photograph of Hoetger’s second home in Worpswede, c. 1925.
Figure 4-11  Photograph of the terrace, Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1930.

Figure 4-12  Photograph of the vestibule of the Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus with Hoetger sculpture, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1930.
Figure 4-13  Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, 1906.

Figure 4-14  Photograph of a niche with overhead lighting, Paula Becker-Modersohn-Haus, Böttcherstrasse, Bremen, 1927.
Figure 4-15  Bernhard Hoetger, *Tree of Life*, 1929-31.
Conclusion

Figure Conclusion-1 Helen Redman, *Blue Body Pregnant Artist*, 1964.

Figure Conclusion-2 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art: Rinsing a B.M. Diaper*, 1969.
Bibliography

Archives

Archiv Böttcherstrasse, Bremen.
Archiv der Universität der Künste, Berlin.
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Archiv für Bildende Kunst, Otto Dix Nachlass, Nuremberg.
Hochschule der Künste Archiv, Berlin.
Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte, GDK Online Projekt.

Primary Sources


Deutsche Künstler und die SS. Berlin: Wilhelm Limpert Verlag, 1944.


*Käthe Kollwitz Mappe.* Munich: Callwey Verlag, 1913.


**Secondary Sources**


