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‘EVERY WOMEN WITHOUT A RING ON HER THIRD  
FINGER IS A WITCH’: OLD MASTER IMAGES OF  
WITCHES AS INSPIRATION FOR OTTO DIX’S  
PAINTINGS OF PROSTITUTES

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**‘Every Woman without a Ring on her third finger is a witch’: Old Master Images of Witches as Inspiration for Otto Dix’s Paintings of Prostitutes**

**Synopsis:**

In his paintings, *The Salon II* of 1921 and *Three Wenches* of 1926, German New Objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit) artist Otto Dix (1891-1969) referenced images of witches by Old Master artists such as Hans Baldung Grien, Albrecht Dürer, and Lucas Cranach the Elder. He updated past motifs by these artists in order to address Weimar-era gender conflicts and perceptions that liberated New Women and prostitutes were morally suspect femme fatales who exerted a corrupting influence on “good” German men.

## **‘Every Woman without a Ring on her third finger is a witch’: Old Master Images of Witches as Inspiration for Otto Dix’s Paintings of Prostitutes**

The misogynistic idea that women were temptresses who lured men into sin and set in motion events that precipitated man’s moral or physical ruin did not originate during the Weimar Republic. The notion of women causing man’s downfall appears in many ancient myths, especially in the Judgment of Paris, and is often found in Old Master art works inspired by such stories. Otto Dix intervened in this discourse by manipulating both the composition and the theme of the dangers of female sexual allure in Old Master images of witches. Both witches and goddesses seemed to exert a supernatural, erotic pull over men despite the obvious dangers they posed and, for Dix, this inexplicable magnetism found a corollary in the strangely seductive appeal of prostitutes. Weimar-era social critics blamed prostitutes for corrupting honorable German men. Thus, the ideas of women being morally suspect, sexually dangerous, and potentially harmful to otherwise “good” men that are implied by Old Master images of witches and the Judgment of Paris were echoed in a new form in Dix’s Weimar images of prostitutes. By visually correlating prostitutes with witches and other females who caused harm to men, Dix updated past motifs not only to assert his own artistic superiority as a New Master but also to produce a visual structure for his perception of Weimar gender politics via the bodies of interwar women who pushed the bounds of bourgeois respectability.

Since ancient times, witches have been associated with female prostitutes. In *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (*Dialogi Metericii*), the Greek rhetorician, Lucian, includes a dialogue about a witch who performs love-related enchantments that ultimately drive men to humiliation, madness and death. Such works by classical authors were well known to German humanist scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who observed similarities between women of their own era who

violated conventional standards of behavior and women of the past who practiced witchcraft.<sup>1</sup> In turn, these humanist scholars strongly influenced German Old Master artists such as Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien.

During the interwar years, panic over the rise in the number of female prostitutes brought the issue of normative versus “deviant” female sexuality to the forefront of public debate. In “The Mobility of the German Woman,” published in *The American Journal of Sociology* in 1915, Frieda Bertha Zeeb noted the difference in treatment between married and unmarried women. As a woman’s social value was predicated upon whether or not she was married, unmarried women were considered deficient, thus, were without the respect and protections afforded to married women. Married women were not only theoretically under the control of a man but they also presumably bore children and fulfilled their traditional socially proscribed gender and sex roles. Women who behaved otherwise were socially and morally suspect as Zeeb implies with her recounting of a popular “old German proverb” which stated that “Every woman without a ring on her third finger is a witch.”<sup>2</sup>

Otto Dix openly admired the works of German Old Master artists. In interviews, Dix readily admitted his admiration for Dürer and Cranach<sup>3</sup> and he was so inspired by Baldung Grien that the artist George Grosz nicknamed him “Hans Baldung Dix.”<sup>4</sup> In “Object shapes Form,” in the *Berliner Nachtausgabe* on December 3, 1927, Dix remarked that “the new in painting” existed in

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<sup>1</sup>Sullivan, Margaret A. “The Witches of Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien.” *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer 2000), 345, 348. In her discussion of “love magic,” Sullivan quotes Lucian’s “Glycera and Thais” from *Dialogi Meretricii (Dialogues of the Courtesan)*, 7:359.

<sup>2</sup>Zeeb, Frieda Bertha. “The Mobility of the German Woman.” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 21, (Sept., 1915), 235.

<sup>3</sup>“Gespräch mit Hans Kinkel, 1961/1967.” Cited in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1978. 252. Dix was interviewed by Hans Kinkel in 1961/1967, but his remark about Cranach was made in reference to art the former created in the nineteen twenties.

<sup>4</sup>Whitford, Frank. “The Revolutionary Reactionary.” *Otto Dix: 1891 – 1969*. London: Tate Gallery, 1992. 13.

the “expansion of the subject matter, in an increase of the forms of expression already in existence at the core of the Old Masters.”<sup>5</sup> While Dix may have not perceived his own unique engagement with Old Master motifs via contemporary subjects and his personal artistic style as “new” per se, he seems to have regarded it as a strategy to envision their works anew thereby demonstrating not only his appreciation for the Old Masters but also asserting his own artistic skill through his reinvigoration of their works through contemporary artistic manipulation.

Dix demonstrated his fascination with lewd female figures in his many depictions of groups of female prostitutes. In *Der Salon II (The Salon II)* of 1921 which is, unfortunately, no longer extant, he portrays four nearly naked prostitutes in a brothel parlor. Although the dapper young client chooses among a group of prostitutes rather than between three comely goddesses, this work is often interpreted as satirizing Old Master images of the Judgment of Paris.<sup>6</sup> The ancient myth of the Judgment of Paris was commonly represented by German Old Masters, including Lucas Cranach the Elder who painted multiple versions of it including *Das Urteil des Paris (The Judgment of Paris)* of 1530. In the Renaissance period, corporeal attractiveness was linked with a lack of chastity as such beauty was believed to tempt men from mere aesthetic appreciation into lust and sins of the flesh.<sup>7</sup> There are four adult figures present in addition to Paris who is shown as a bearded German man wearing a suit of armor. The three nude goddesses from which Paris chooses, Aphrodite, Athena and Hera, stand to the right and pose in ways that best display their charms. Directly to Paris’ right, the god Apollo, in the guise of an older, white haired, bearded man, functions as the goddesses’ accomplice by rousing the Trojan prince from his slumber in order to

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<sup>5</sup> Dix, Otto. “Objekt gestaltet Form.” *Berliner Nachtausgabe* (Dec. 3 1927), cited in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1978. 205-206.

<sup>6</sup> Rewald, Sabine. “*The Salon I, 1921*.” *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits of the 1920s*. Ed. Sabine Rewald. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006. 65.

<sup>7</sup> Grössinger, Christa. *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997. 16.

choose the most comely of the three nude deities. The presence of the figure of Apollo indicates that an Old Master precedent exists for representing Paris with four additional figures.

Dix appropriated but altered this precedent in *Der Salon II* which depicts four nude women and one man by transforming the male figure of Apollo into an additional female prostitute. The young man in the brothel parlor seems to gaze directly at his likely choice, the young blonde prostitute standing in front of him. The connection with the Judgment of Paris implies that, as with the prince of Troy, the man's decision will not end well. Paris' lusty choice of Venus' offer of a beautiful woman, Helen, ultimately led to violence, chaos and death in the form of the Trojan War.

The Weimar Republic witnessed a rise in the number of sexually transmitted diseases and a variety of treatises accused prostitutes of being the cause of the epidemic. Prostitutes were regarded as carriers of disease, bodily decay and, due to widespread fears about syphilis, even death. While the man *Der Salon II* may enjoy sexual satisfaction from his choice, given the prevalence of venereal diseases among Weimar prostitutes, there is a distinct undercurrent of potential danger and his choice may prove unwise.

A precedent also exists for depicting dangerous females in a group of four. In some Old Master representations of witches, including Albrecht Dürer's 1497 engraving *Die Vier Hexen* (*Four Witches*), witches are shown in groups of four. Not only does this engraving depict four nude women standing in an interior chamber but the layout and details of the room are similar to those in Dix's painting. Although there are four women, the three foreground women are similar to those found in depictions of the goddesses in representations of the Judgment of Paris. However, the presence of a small devil prowling amidst flames on the left side of the image and the human skull

and bone strewn on the floor at their feet indicate that these women are witches rather than benign female entities.

In *Der Salon II*, Dix blends an allusion to the Judgment of Paris with a reference to a depiction of witches. He tempers any positive associations with goddesses and attributes such as beauty, with a reference to witches and the negative physical, spiritual and moral implications they traditionally connote. During the Renaissance period, nudity was often correlated with sinfulness. Thus, the four nude women in Dürer's are automatically suspect and are implied to be women of questionable morality.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the skulking devil reinforces the diabolical undertones of the scene. The devil, visible through a doorway, holds an object that appears to be two slender sticks with string attached to them. This implement is a device used to catch birds; however, the instrument was often used in a metaphorical sense to reference the ensnaring of a person by the devil or by a woman.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Dürer's work perhaps implies that the alluring, nude female witches function as beguiling decoys to lure men to their deaths, as indicated by the skull and bone, if not their damnation, as implied by the background devil.

This idea of exposing the real, wicked nature of the otherwise attractive witches and tempting women luring men to their downfall that are evidenced in Dürer's engraving is relevant to Dix's representations of prostitutes. The blonde-haired prostitute and the prostitute in the background of *Der Salon* are conventionally attractive and, ostensibly, healthy. However, the presence of the aged, dark-haired prostitute on the right and the seated, overweight prostitute reveals not only the ravages of time but also the physical and economic hardships of the profession.

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<sup>8</sup> Grössinger, *Picturing Women*, 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Stumpel, Jeroen. "The Foul Fowler Found Out: On a Key Motif in Dürer's 'Four Witches.'" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4 (2003), 146-150. The bird-catching device was known as a *Klobe*, *Klob*, or *Clob*. The goal was to somehow catch the bird between the two sticks.

Despite their makeup, the wrinkles of their aging faces are noticeable and their drooping breasts are on full display. The superficial adornments of jewelry, hair ornaments and cosmetics cannot mask their decay.

The notion that prostitutes were dangerous and two-faced was found throughout socially critical Weimar literature. In his 1929 book, *Das Weib als Sexualverbrecherin (Woman as a Sexual Criminal)*, Erich Wulffen decried prostitutes, procuresses and other “criminal” females and often attributed their motives to pathological, sexual deviance. In his condemnation of the “artful defrauder,” he likened fortunetellers to procuresses and accuses the latter, who exchanges sex for money, of experiencing a “witch-like, malicious joy in her domination over persons...”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the sexual “deviance” of women who prostitute themselves is aligned with the supposedly malevolent, actions of witches who were similarly accused of sexual impropriety and of causing harm to communities.

During the Renaissance period, witches were defined by their unappeasable lust and were supposedly so sexually voracious that they participated in orgies with the devil as part of their rites during witches’ Sabbaths.<sup>11</sup> Just as female witches of the Renaissance period were associated with female sexual deviancy and the degradation of society, so too were “wayward” Weimar women such as prostitutes and New Women often regarded as causing all manner of societal problems, ranging from the spread of sexually transmitted diseases to the declining birth rate.

Although some of the women fall short of the ideal of feminine beauty, these four prostitutes still seem to hold some strange allure for the prospective client. The shamelessness of their nudity,

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<sup>10</sup> Wulffen, Erich. *Woman as a Sexual Criminal*. North Hollywood, CA: Brandon House, 1967, 86-87. Wulffen’s book was originally published in German in 1923 as *Das Weib als Sexualverbrecherin; ein Handbuch für Juristen, Verwaltungsbeamte und Ärzte*.

<sup>11</sup> Grössinger, *Picturing Women*, 131.



the provocative nature of their poses, and the brazenness of their gazes exert a seductive attraction over the male customer that cannot be denied despite the hazards posed by the nature of a sexual encounter. This extraordinary attraction is suggested by the allusions to the witches and to the three goddesses from whom Paris made his choice. Despite their dark, wicked nature and the implication that interaction with such women will result in demon-inflicted horrors, Dürer's nude witches are erotically appealing. Similarly, Cranach's goddesses are aesthetically attractive and Paris cannot seem to refuse the temptation of selecting one regardless of the repercussions to himself. Thus, the pull exerted by the prostitutes is implied to be otherworldly or at least beyond rational explanation. For Dix, who was an avid follower of Friedrich Nietzsche, the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian could explain such male bewitchment or entrancement by the female sex that causes men to pursue sexual fulfillment and to seek heightened emotional and physical extremes regardless of the ultimate cost.

Five years after painting *Der Salon II*, Dix again depicted a group of prostitutes located within a brothel interior which recalls the prostitutes depicted in the earlier painting. However, there are only three prostitutes in *Drei Weiber (Three Wenches)* and, while they presumably display themselves for a male client, he is outside the frame and is, perhaps, implied to be the viewer. In contrast to the women in the earlier paintings, the women in this work are almost entirely nude except for stockings, jewelry and other accessories.

On the left side of the canvas stands a tall, emaciated blonde woman. Her pose and transparent veil recall numerous paintings of Venus by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Although the Venus demurely holds the veil in front of her hips, the gossamer material does not interfere with the viewer's ability to see her genitalia. In Dix's work, the translucency of the veil is irrelevant as the prostitute makes no attempt to cover herself and drapes the material behind her body. The lack of

success in Venus' effort to drape herself and the blonde prostitute's failure to even try have the same result: the bodies of both women are distinctly on display. Venus' failed attempt at modesty makes her appear modest and ladylike while the blonde prostitute's self-conscious display seems overt and vulgar.

Two figures holding a length of material around their bodies in ways similar to the blonde prostitute in Dix's painting also appear in two works by Hans Baldung Grien. In another interview, Dix noted the artistic longevity of Baldung Grien and specifically wondered if any of the works in his current exhibition would equal Baldung Grien's in terms of their lasting artistic merit.<sup>12</sup> Although Dix did not discuss the precise nature of Baldung Grien's influence on his work, his comments indicate that not only did he admire the earlier painter's skill and works but that he also seems to have been interested in whether his works would be perceived as measuring up to those of the German Old Master painter. In an address to art students, Dix stressed the importance of studying the works of "great masters" in person or via reproductions.<sup>13</sup> Based upon the manner in which Dix stressed the importance of studying a variety of aspects of works by distinguished painters, one can infer that this method of study played a significant role in his own practice. Combined with his apparent desire to measure his own works against those of Old Master painters, it seems likely that Dix utilized his analysis of such artists in his attempt to artistically surpass them.

Parallels exist between Dix's *Drei Weiber* and several images of witches by Hans Baldung Grien. The correlation between Dix's work and several of Baldung Grien's drawing is especially evident when one views Dix's 1926 cartoon for *Drei Weiber*. The arrangement of the three

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<sup>12</sup> "Gespräch mit Sonja Kätsch, 1950." cited in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1978. 221. Although Sonja Kätsch's interview occurred in 1950, Dix's admiration for Baldung Grien is documented much earlier so it is reasonable to assume that his desire to compare himself with Baldung Grien was present from early in his career.

<sup>13</sup> "Malerei und Komposition. Washington School of Arts, Lektion 19. 1958." cited in Diether Schmidt, *Otto Dix im Selbstbildnis*. Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1978. 229.

prostitutes recalls the composition of Hans Baldung Grien's work *Hexensabbat (Witches' Sabbath)* of 1514. Another drawing by Baldung Grien from 1514 is also entitled *Hexensabbat (Witches' Sabbath)* and likewise depicts a group of nude witches in a similar arrangement. Art historian and curator, Sabine Rewald, has observed but not investigated the similarity between Dix's work and the former drawing by Baldung Grien.<sup>14</sup>

Dix's *Drei Weiber* addresses the idea of sexually threatening females but does so using prostitutes rather than witches. In his article "*Die Verhuring Berlins*" of 1920, Thomas Wehrin decried the declining moral values he perceived in Berlin. He specifically condemned the large number of prostitutes and the sexual immorality he claimed to have witnessed. He was appalled to see German men who appeared to be "fine" and "strong" arm-in-arm with "abhorrent females."<sup>15</sup> The implication here is that these "degenerate" women will corrupt the otherwise "fine" men with whom they consort. Not only is the moral integrity of these men being compromised but, the mention of their strength implies that their physical health and wellbeing will also suffer due to their interactions with the city's prostitutes.

Wehrin not only castigated prostitutes and urban women in general for their lack of moral turpitude but chided men for being too weak to control their women's behavior. He claimed that, although such moral degeneration was preventable, modern men lacked sufficient manliness and were too ineffectual to entice women away from the supposed lures of prostitution with their solid, masculine virtues. According to him, not only had men been corrupted by prostitutes but they had

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<sup>14</sup> In the catalogue entry for "Cartoon for Three Wenches" in *Glitter and Doom: German Portraits of the 1920s*, Sabine Rewald includes an image of Baldung Grien's 1514 drawing on reddish brown paper, *Hexensabbat*. However, she does not discuss Baldung Grien's image or offer any sort of commentary on the inclusion.

<sup>15</sup>Wehrin, Thomas. "*Die Verhuring Berlins*." *Das Tage-buch*, Heft 43. Jahrg. 1, Berlin: 6 November 1920. 1381.

effectively been castrated by promiscuous “wayward” women who rendered the men sexually, socially and domestically impotent.<sup>16</sup>

However, Wehrlin did not completely abandon hope for the female sex. He paraphrased Otto Weiniger and remarked that most women exist in a state between being a mother and being a prostitute and vacillate between the two. The balance of such women can be tipped in favor of motherhood if only they are molded by the love of a good man. Yet, Wehrlin noted the absence of such strong, decent men when he asks “Where are these strong, sustaining men?” He blamed the prevalence of birth control devices for enabling women to be sexually promiscuous and, thus, in his view, barely distinguishable from prostitutes. In his view, such modern, “deviant” women were more concerned with sex and fashion than with motherhood and were debased versions of what women should be as defined by their traditionally accepted “destiny” (“*Schicksal*”) as females.<sup>17</sup>

During the Weimar Republic, theories regarding the beautiful female body persisted, however, these ideas were directly influenced by the post-war situation in which conventional gender norms had been upended by the increased number and visibility of women in the workplace. Interwar discussions about illnesses and bodily health indicated anxieties over the dramatic shifts in gender politics and some were concerned that Weimar women were forsaking their long-established society roles.<sup>18</sup> Writers such as Wehrlin, who were plagued by apprehension over shifting gender roles and relations, were not alone in their fears that Weimar women were not only becoming suspiciously masculine in their physical appearance and their behavior but that they were also abandoning long-held cultural assumptions about the traditional roles, especially the public and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1381-1382.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1383-1384.

<sup>18</sup> Hau, Michael. *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 174. Hau specifically references Austrian gynecologist, Paul Mathes, who wrote about both Austrian and German women and German physician, Gerhard Venzmer.

sexual roles, that women should play. Consequently, “deviant” women, whether they were prostitutes or New Women were treated as suspect.

Although his works were inspired by canonical Old Master artists, Dix altered the themes by recasting the subjects as prostitutes. His artistic rivalry with the Old Masters manifested itself in a unique engagement with Old Master motifs. This resulted in a strategy to envision their works anew thereby demonstrating his appreciation for the Old Masters and asserting his own artistic skill via his reinvigoration of their works through contemporary artistic manipulation. Rather than recounting a mythological story or referencing diabolical pagan females, Dix shifts the themes’ focus to contemporary, dangerous female sexuality. Through his images of prostitutes, he attempted to unpack and sort through the complex web of cultural, political and social issues and conflicts that had been projected onto the bodies of these supposedly “deviant” females. Dix projected his own anxieties about his masculinity and artistic legacy onto these women whom he found strangely appealing despite their simultaneously threatening and alluring sexuality. In them, he perceived qualities that he desired and feared; as a result, he was both entranced and repelled by these women and created his images of them according to this complicated network of conflicting ideas. Otto Dix’s particular artistic vision was a way for him to wrestle with the uncertainty of the time, especially the complex debates about rapidly changing gender roles. His distinctive artistic engagement with depictions of prostitutes functions as a lens through which to view the Weimar Republic’s complex and often conflicting ideas about the shifting roles of both men and women in a society that was struggling to make sense of the changes that were rapidly occurring in its very fabric.