

**Opening speech by the Hon. Martin Hamilton-Smith  
Leader of the Opposition at the  
'WAR, Der Kreig'  
The Prints of Otto Dix  
Exhibition  
at the  
Art Gallery of South Australia**

Thursday, 29 November 2007

Speaking as Leader of the State Opposition and as a former Officer in the Australian Army's Special Forces, it is an honour to be opening this powerful exhibition of Otto Dix's "*Der Kreig*".

This is a special exhibition. It is both confronting and emotionally powerful. It will be controversial but it is an exhibition which must be seen.

Along with Francisco Goya's '*Disasters of War*' and Pablo Picasso's '*Guernica*', Dix's '*Der Krieg*' is universally acclaimed as one of the greatest anti-war statements in the history of European art.

The Gallery's own collection of Goya's prints highlight the direct influence Goya had on Dix's work. '*The Disasters of War*' prints detail Goya's account of the horrors of the Napoleonic invasion and the Spanish War of Independence from 1808 to 1814.

Dix's war was a very different one.

War for Goya was an intimate horror, its effect localized and individualized. Comparatively, Dix's war is a modern war, the scale is vast. It is horrific. It is awful. It is deeply human. The Peninsula War, the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, was characterized by the first modern guerilla conflicts, as Spain struggled towards liberation. In fact the term guerilla or 'little war' was first coined at this time.

As a contrast World War 1 was characterized by trench warfare, grand offensives across vast trenches and fortifications 600 kilometers long, artillery and machine guns. It was bloody and brutal.

Critics of Dix's work highlight the *truth* that he exhibits in his etchings. The *ugliness* of and, the *beauty of the ugliness*, the *thrill of adventure* and the *curiosity* that he captures.

At the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 Otto Dix volunteered for service in the German Army. His service was not inspired by patriotism or honour. Dix is a mysterious man. He has form and attitude mixed with a special insight. His work suggests that even in war he was pursuing realism for his art.

Much later in 1963, he explained his need to experience war:

*'I had to experience how someone beside me suddenly falls over and is dead...I had to experience that quite directly. I wanted it...I'm such a realist, you know, that I have to see everything with my own eyes...I have to experience all the ghastly, bottomless depths of life for myself...'*

He was assigned to a machine-gun unit and found himself at the Western Front by 1915. Among other battles, he fought at the Somme during the major allied offensive of 1916. The suffering, the pain and death he witnessed there were all too real.

By all accounts Dix was a brave soldier who served his nation well. Wounded several times, once almost fatally, Dix earned the Iron Cross (second class) and reached the rank of vice-sergeant-major before the wars end. Profoundly affected by the war, he often described a recurring nightmare in which he was crawling through the remnants of bombed and shelled houses. It has been suggested the nightmare is reflected in his well-known piece, '*Lens being bombed*'.

Dix was both horrified and yet fascinated by the experience of war.

It's curious to me that Dix's '*Der Krieg*' is owned by Australia and admired by Australia, perhaps more than in Germany, the country of his birth.

I recall my visit to the Normandy coast where a German friend and I visited the Omaha Beach graves. Six thousand dead allied soldiers entombed gloriously in marble, replete with grand avenues and plantings, fine tombstones, well ordered places. As a student of history I felt compelled to find the German graves. After a long search they were found. A single grave yard with over thirty thousand dead men in tombed beneath solemn stone. Many graves were unmarked.

"An unknown soldier of Germany" so frequently the only sign of a soul lost and a family forgotten. To the victors goes the glory.

Australian graves in France are so glorious, we remember the fallen. Some people known to us or our families would have faced Otto Dix and his German comrades in the trenches.

But Dix tells us of the other side of war and death. Dix tells us of the vanquished who suffered perhaps even more.

The characters portrayed by Dix are desperate, suffering souls, mostly now forgotten. Otto Dix reminds us that in war it is often not what a soldier has done but, what he has not done that haunts him the most. The act of bravery not undertaken through fear. The act of mercy or grace forsaken out of anger or rage.

When I view Dix's work I'm reminded that at the time his characters were living through the war, their own personal hell and in the post war years as they reflected on the horrors they were either witness to or involved in, there was no study or science of psychology to speak of. So many of these men, on both sides of the battle front returned with hearts and minds ruined. The term "post traumatic stress disorder" was unheard of.

Instead the wives and the children must have borne the brunt of their pain and slow rehabilitation.....or the pub, or the lonely lane or park bench.....year after year. In Australia perhaps Anzac Day and comradeship provided a psychological refuge, but what became of the characters Dix portrays? Dix's characters are the vanquished.

People wrote diaries. My own uncle, a former journalist was killed in one of these WW1 battles and lies in an unknown grave. Many of us would share such a story. He wrote beautiful letters but kept the worst to himself. The written word is commonly used to "get things off your chest" in the form of letters or diaries. Otto Dix used his art, these most powerful etchings to write his letter home.

Today, through this exhibition we can see what he has to say and try to begin to understand his mind.

Humanity has been told by great thinkers that 'Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it'!

Otto Dix reminds us with this work of events and experiences - none of us would ever want to see repeated.

How lucky we are not to have lived through it!

This is a wonderful opportunity for South Australians to view the complete 51 etchings that form Dix's '*Der Krieg*'.

I'm sure it will be very popular and a great success.

I would like to thank the National Gallery of Australia for affording South Australians the opportunity to view this most spectacular exhibition.

I commend it to all South Australians.