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Grosz, George

By [Dagmar Schmengler](#)

Grosz, *George*

German artist

Born 26 July 1893 in Berlin, Germany

Died 06 July 1959 in Berlin, Germany

The artist George Grosz was a keen observer of post-war Germany and highly critical of the bourgeois philistinism of his time. Deeply affected by his wartime experience, he was accusatory and romantic, visionary and traumatised in equal measure.

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1. The Accusatory and Romantic, Visionary and Traumatized George Grosz

Unlike many artists of his generation, George Grosz (1893-1959) did not see war as a great liberator and was fundamentally opposed to it. Nevertheless, he volunteered for military service in November 1914, thus pre-empting conscription. He was discharged on health grounds early in 1916, on the understanding that he might be recalled and sent back to the front. Drafted again in 1917, he was discharged as “permanently unfit” after a nervous breakdown and committed to an asylum for the rest of the war.

Deeply affected by his wartime experience, Grosz became accusatory and romantic, visionary and

traumatised in equal measure. He was a keen observer of post-war [Germany](#) and highly critical of the bourgeois philistinism of his time. There is little in his early, pre-1918 work to suggest the raw aggressiveness of the political allusions and direct provocations that were to make his name later on. In his autobiography, published in 1946, he explained that he was still fairly apolitical before 1918 and used his art as a sort of safety valve. Grosz's wartime sketchbooks show seemingly naïve, rapidly sketched line drawings, among them numerous anti-war images: cripples, a skeleton proclaimed fit for active service by a fat doctor, alcoholics, thugs, (sex) murderers, convicts, lewd women, and whores - in more general terms, marginal existences, victims, and lost souls. His drawings give expression to his experience, despair, hatred, and disillusionment. At the same time, it is evident that the artist and man-about-town relished the deviant thrills and decadent demimonde excess that metropolitan Berlin had to offer. His razor-sharp eye for [stereotypical](#) detail and his gift for [caricature](#) and the grotesque made him *the* German satirist of his time and drove him to side with the radical left and propagandists of the proletarian [revolution](#).

2. Groß Becomes Grosz

In a characteristically provocative gesture that gave voice to his contempt for Wilhelmine Germany, the artist anglicised his name from Georg Groß to George Grosz in 1916. He joined the Malik publishing house in Berlin, which specialised in leftist periodicals (*Neue Jugend*, *Die Pleite*), avant-garde [art](#), and Communist [literature](#). His *Erste George Grosz-Mappe* (First George Grosz Portfolio) and the *Kleine Grosz-Mappe* (Small Grosz Portfolio), two portfolios of lithographs after his brutally unsparring drawings, were published there in 1917. His paintings and watercolours of the time are dominated by blood-red and jet black, and they bear witness to his sense of the world being off-kilter. Later, looking back, Grosz did not dwell on these images of yearning. In *The Funeral (Dedicated to Oskar Panizza (1853-1921))*, 1917/18, and *The Adventurer*, 1917, ideals, illusions, and delusions appear as acts of self-liberation. In *The Funeral*, death takes on the role of the redeemer - Wilhelmine society is doomed. In *The Adventurer*, Grosz - an inveterate enthusiast of all things American - presents himself as the fearless Western hero putting the world to rights. His *Germany, A Winter's Tale*, 1918, sums up his critique, portraying a priest, a general, and a professor as the "three pillars of society."^[1] Alongside [Otto Dix's \(1891–1969\) *The War Cripples \(45% Fit for Work!\)*](#) it was one of the high points of the First International [Dada](#) Fair in Berlin in 1920.

Dagmar Schmengler, Independent Scholar

Section Editor: [Christoph Nübel](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Grosz, George: A Little Yes and a Big No. The Autobiography of George Grosz, transl. by Lola Sachs Dorin, New York 1946, p. 163.

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Citation

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