

George Grosz, *The Pillars of Society* (1926)

Eclipse of the Sun

*I thought the war would never end.
And perhaps it never did.*

George Grosz

GEORGE GROSZ WAS KNOWN TO occasionally greet first-time visitors to his home dressed in a servant's suit, claiming to be Grosz's butler and apologizing for the absence of his 'master.'

As an artist and satirist, Grosz enjoyed practicing the art of disguise, but he could be forgiven if the ruse may have also revealed a degree of mild paranoia: In the 1930s, Grosz was probably the most reviled artist in all of Nazi Germany.

Born in Berlin in 1893, George Groß changed his surname to Grosz in his 20s, to 'de-Germanize' his name. He grew in Stolp, a small German town not far from the Baltic Sea, but returned to Berlin in 1910 to study art at the Berlin College of Arts and Crafts.

In Berlin, Grosz soon became a fixture at the Café des Westens, a popular gathering place for the German Expressionists.

The First World War broke out while Grosz was still a student, and he reluctantly enlisted in November 1914, only to be discharged shortly afterward on medical grounds. Recalled in 1917, he was never sent to the front, spending most of his time in hospitals and, after suffering a mental break-down, psychiatric wards, before finally being declared unfit for service and discharged.

To pass the time in the hospital, Grosz began drawing sketches of those around him, portraying in his words, "the brutal faces of my fellow soldiers, angry war invalids, arrogant officers, lecherous nurses."

After recovering, Grosz returned to painting, producing two notable works: *The Funeral* and *Germany, A Winter's Tale*.

The paintings, completed in 1918, reveal the influence on the artist of the emerging Futurist movement in their dynamic, angular forms and fractured perspective.

Grosz produced about 20 major paintings between Spring of 1917 and the end of the war in late 1918, seven of which were lost, presumably confiscated and destroyed by the Nazis. These mostly nightmarish works satirize the corrupt and bourgeois society of Germany in the late war period, and foreshadow its descent into economic chaos and moral decadence in the Weimar period.

In the early 1920s, Grosz was a key figure in the Dada movement, rooted in the belief that traditional forms of art could no longer express the madness the world had succumbed to during the war. (Among the new art forms Grosz pioneered was photomontage, the assembly of fragments of photographs into new, composite images—perhaps reflecting the patchwork reassembly of a fractured Europe after the war.)

Sympathetic toward Europe's downtrodden working class, Grosz briefly joined the Communist Party, but—always more of an anarchist than socialist—quit the party after a disappointing trip to the Soviet Union.

Grosz's scandalous book, *Ecce Homo* (1923), replete with grotesque images of pimps and prostitutes, raised such a furor that Grosz purchased a gun for self-defense.

Seeking temporary respite in Paris in 1924-25, Grosz frequented the Dingo Bar, infamous drinking haunt of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Picasso, and other notable artists and writers of the Roaring Twenties period.

Grosz's *Eclipse of the Sun* (1926) depicts seven figures around a table—a bloodthirsty President Hindenberg, a corpulent industrialist, four headless bankers, and a donkey representing the German people.

The painting implies that greedy capitalists and the military were the real powers behind Germany's postwar Weimar government, with the public as their hapless workhorse. (Ironically, the anti-capitalist painting—bartered to a housepainter for \$140 worth of work—sold for \$19 million in 2005.)

Another painting from the same period, *The Pillars of Society*, depicts caricatures of the paramilitary Freikorps and a Catholic priest, along with a journalist, politician, and Nazi businessman, who represent the remnants of the Second Reich and the fascist factions which would conspire to bring Hitler to power in the 1930s.

Grosz emigrated to the U.S. in 1933, just days before the Gestapo raided his Berlin studio. He became an American citizen in 1938, and spent the following two decades in New York, painting mostly prosaic street scenes, nudes, and landscapes.

In 1937, Grosz was labelled 'Cultural Bolshevik Number One' by the Nazis, and many of his surviving works were displayed in Munich's 'Degenerate Art' Exhibition, attended by over 2 million people.

Grosz never softened his hatred of the Nazis, as evidenced by his painting, *Hitler in Hell*, (1944). Grosz's mother, who hadn't emigrated with him, was killed in a bombing raid during the war, and—perhaps haunted by his wartime experiences—Grosz began drinking heavily in the 1950s.

Depressed and seeking emotional closure, Grosz returned to Germany with his wife in 1956, but just six weeks later, the 65 year-old fell down a flight of stairs after a night of drinking and died from his injuries.

In a final ironic twist of fate, George Grosz may have been unable in the end to escape the nightmarish visions he so brilliantly sought to warn the world of in his art. ■