



Cause



Behaviour

Effect



Dix/Matisse

“We must act out passion before we can feel it”

Jean-Paul Sartre

Expressionism (symbolism)

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From the Museum

### Otto Dix: The War: 1932;

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany

### Henri Matisse: Dance II: 1910;

Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia

*The War* triptych is a monumental revisiting of the traps, revulsions and needlessness of war at the mid-point between two world wars (commenced 1929). Remembrances of horrors past now become harbingers of things to come. Although Dix's painting was in the tradition of the old masters, it was fused with the subjectivity of felt emotion and the objectivity of lived experience. The middle panel is reminiscent of the earlier "Trench" masterwork featuring widespread devastation framing a fragmenting circle of five disarranged corpses (impaled-inverted-dismembered-disfigured-masked). On the left of this "still life" explosion of mayhem are soldiers heading off to battle through an ominous morning fog, only to retreat in the right hand panel under a smoke-filled, burning sky. In the circularising predella below, a restful sleep beckons – a sleep however which is "too" close to death (as eternalised by the mythological twins: *hypnos* and *thanatos*). This is not for Dix, however, who had gone to war as a means of "experiencing" life to the fullest (never regretting having done so) and paints himself walking away shouldering a brother-in-arms. Dix courageously embraced life without dilution, inclusive of all its ugliness and his fanaticism for "truth" and "reality" meant that he was just as comfortable with the early expressionist slogan "Man is good" as he was with its supplanting anti-thesis "Man is a beast".

If Expressionistic art is "a spontaneous genial grab at life...a direct syntheses...a summary without going into the various elements", then this was true of all three forms of German Expressionism. The pre-war *Die Brücke* (Dresden) and *Der Blaue Reiter* (Munich) movements were distinct responses to avant-garde trends (utilising expressive distortions of colour, scale and space to convey the subjective in what was seen). *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) however, evolved in the 1920s and was as much a bitter post-war protest movement as a style of modern art. Dix's Nietzschean infused life philosophy led him to be both a founding member and a great exponent of the satirical style of German Expressionism in which realistic observation was caricatured with intense line, brutal detail and acid colour. Expressive-symbolism and meticulous detail resonated strongly with Dix's all-round training, irrepressible passion for life's experiment and unyielding embrace of "amor fati". Although the directness of Dix's art meant that it became politicised in a climate of growing fascism, his life-seizing parallel identities (proletarian, professor, provocateur) enabled him to view the world from multiple perspectives and to continually adapt/re-invent himself in response to many adversities; his "Art of life" easily morphing into an "Art of survival". For Dix, the cause and effect that was *entrenched* in his world applied equally to his behaviour and his expressionistic art – both best understood as a means of approaching life, change and the ephemeral nature of all things.

Like Dix, Matisse was exposed to both the traditional and revolutionary art influences of his time, broke out into his own bold, colour-focussed expressive style, vigorously guarded his independent artistic evolution, survived two world wars and had a late creative period. There, however, the similarities end. Matisse was a conservative, introspective loner (only son, rural upbringing, law degree before a late, accidental introduction to art) who became increasingly hermetic as he avoided the scandalous public, war-time activity and anything that upset his idealised world: "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject-matter." He therefore danced to a completely different drum to Dix. *Dance II* is a masterpiece of physical ecstasy depicting frenzied dancing, moving to a beat that can almost be heard. Volcanic red-orange figures of radiant energy are enraptured in a ritualistic, circular dance atop a grass-green hill surrounded by a cosmic-blue sky – all three primary colours in stunning accord as they unite man, earth and the heavens. The colour-inspired simplified forms and composition exude passionate arousal and expressive resonance with minimal effort. No (e)motion is superfluous in communicating the power of all-consuming dance and man's subconscious sense of being bound to nature's rhythms (witness the break in the hands of the front two dancers overlapping the knee of the fifth dancer – thereby simultaneously emphasising the individual and the group in a circle that is both one and broken). Profoundly, the dynamics of cause and effect are one as centripetal and centrifugal tensions balance into a harmonious whole. *Dance II* evolved from a "lighter" *Dance I* which itself was borrowed from the more "joyous" earlier Fauve masterpiece (*Bonheur de Vivre*, 1906). Whereas Dix's art was energised by calamitous external change, Matisse's art was driven by internal forces (even more-so when challenged by his contemporaneous rival and natural opposite – Picasso). Despite their very different life arcs, Matisse and Dix traversed the extremes of primal depths to societal (un)sophistications as they sought out "the essential character of things" in their quest for existential expression.

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