Weimar: The Fabulous Ferris Wheel

Stern, Fred, The World and I

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness." That is how Charles Dickens began his 1859 novel of the French Revolution, A Tale of Two Cities.

The quotation is also an apt metaphor for the almost 14-year history of the Weimar Republic, the German government founded in 1919 after World War I and the abdication of the German Kaiser. The Kaiser had fled to the Netherlands where he spent his time felling trees.

The way was clear for the formation of a responsive new government. The Weimar Republic got off to a good start in an auspicious location. Weimar is a small, centrally located German city where the dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had risen to prominence and where he had frequently met Friedrich Schiller the poet who had written the Ode to Joy which framed the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Germany was governed under the statutes of the Weimar Republic until Hitler's rise to power prior to World War II.

But from the start the Weimar Republic functioned badly, and did little to cope with the overwhelming problems left in the wake of the First World War.

By late 1918 Germany had lost World War I, also known then as "The Great War." The victorious allies blindly ordered exorbitant restitution from the bankrupt German state, forbade the maintenance of even a token military, and took away Germany's African colonies. French troops occupied the Rhineland. The country's population was severely demoralized.

More than a million German soldiers had come back home. Many were injured badly, missing limbs, neurologically compromised, or otherwise seriously disabled. The vast majority of the war veterans were unable to find employment - then and throughout the Republic's life. They wandered aimlessly in the streets of major German cities, primarily Berlin. Depressed and destitute, some discharged soldiers turned lawless, holding up small businesses, banks, restaurants. War widows, without the financial support, begged in the streets or became prostitutes.

The devastating local economic conditions were made worse by a worldwide depression. One chancellor after another tendered his resignation after finding conditions in Germany beyond repair.

But despite these deplorable conditions, the 14 years of Weimar, surprisingly, were exceptionally fruitful for the arts, literature, music and the theater. Thus as Charles Dickens had written, "It was the best of times." In large part, the revival of the arts, a veritable renaissance, was an antidote to the economic miasma produced

by World War I. This revival did not just take place in Weimar Germany but across the entire Western World. New art movements sprang up like weeds in the fertile ground of boredom and disgust with the failed developments of the post World War I scene. But the German creative world was especially active.

Dada

For example, there was the art movement called "Dada." Nobody seems to know how the word originated. Some thought it meant "yes" in Romanian, others insisted it was created randomly by inserting a pen knife in a dictionary. Whatever. Dada originated in 1916 in a Zurich coffeehouse and rapidly zoomed its way from there to Berlin, Cologne, Paris, New York, the Netherlands, even the Russian province of Georgia.

It was a fun movement, part performance and part art. It came about because people had lost their belief in the redemptive quality of cultural life. Dada permitted everything. Essentially, Dada meant that it was okay to have a good time. There were a great many Dada magazines helping to spread its message. Artists took ordinary objects and called them art. The French artist Marcel Duchamp provides us with a prime example of Dada with his 1917 work, Urinal, an actual plumbing fixture raised to the level of art. It still amuses and shocks us today.

Among the German artists identified with the Dada movement was Hannah Hoech who brought Dada images to her highly acclaimed photographic work. She perfected the Dada collage - a way of mounting extraneous elements such as labels or newsprint on photographs. A very successful Hoech revival is even now taking place.

Among the most original Dadaists in Germany was Kurt Schwitters who used found objects in the most ingenious manner and mounted them in his huge constructions.

Surrealism

Dada was quickly followed by a movement called "Surrealism." Surrealism owed its existence to the theories of Sigmund Freud and his interpretation of dreams. The artists practicing Surrealism believed in a kind of automatic writing. This they quickly translated into the creation of landscapes, still lifes and other art forms, based on impressions they had experienced while dreaming. Surrealist artists took great pains to reproduce these dreams, with all the tension and color at their command.

Like Dada, Surrealism was an international movement. Its masters included Georgio de Chirico of Italy, Rene Magritte of France and in Germany, among many others, Max Ernst (1891-1976) whose work is represented prominently in American museums. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art gave Ernst a major retrospective recently. Ernst lived to a ripe old age, and throughout those many years, he remained enthralled with the Surrealist interpretation of images.

Expressionism

The majority of Weimar artists fall into the category of "German Expressionist," and Berlin was the hub of the movement. These artists were motivated to portray the dismal scene in the streets, and the contrasting images in cabarets, theaters and salons where people tried to shut out those street scenes. Many had served

in the German army during World War I, and their art was a reflection of what they had experienced. Cynicism and sarcasm and pity predominate in their canvases.

George Grosz (1893-1959). Grosz began his career as a cartoonist. That was good training for his later work which satirized the Prussian officer class as monocled, fat and selfish. Grosz pictured them at their Stammtisch (reserved table at their favorite restaurant) or on the street with bulging briefcase, proudly wearing spiked helmets. Grosz knew his subject well; he had served in the army but got an early discharge. A brilliant social critic, he also pictured the man in the street, prostitutes, and drunks.

Unable to cope with its large population of disabled veterans, the Weimar Republic tried unsuccessfully to hide them by isolating them away from large cities. But the amputees countered by holding protest marches on the broad boulevards of Berlin. Grosz painted those sad marches. His technique was both sophisticated and compassionate.

George Grosz ultimately left Germany in 1933 at the time of the Nazi take-over and came to the United States where he taught at the Art Students League in New York.

Otto Dix (1891-1969). The etchings, woodcuts, drypoints and paintings of Otto Dix picture every aspect of Weimar society, including the intellectuals. "When Dix paints people it is as if he were issuing warrants for their arrests," wrote one art historian. During World War I Dix was a non-commissioned officer, wounded several times. The experience left him with deep empathy for the German soldiers disabled in the war. Like his colleagues, Dix sought to portray the crippled men and publicize their plight. Fifty etchings collected in a portfolio called War were published in 1924.

Dix's painting technique was similar to that of the Old Masters (ie, painters of the Renaissance and pre-Renaissance). He used a thin oil glaze over a tempera base. Tempera is a medium in which pigment is dissolved in water and mixed with an organic gum or egg. It is much more difficult to work with than more modern oil paint, but Dix persisted, trying to achieve the effect he wanted.

The Nazis did not like Dix's work, and when they came to power they insisted that he only paint landscapes. Later, in 1937, they included his work in their exhibition of "Degenerate Art." That exhibit was meant to insult and marginalize the artists whose work was represented, but in fact it had the opposite effect outside of fascist Germany, securely establishing the reputations of artists such as Otto Dix.

Max Beckmann (1884-1950). Prior to World War I, Beckmann's work was based on the style of the Old Masters. But the war changed that. He was a medic during the hostilities, and those experiences are clearly reflected in his work.

Beckmann's portrayals of the agonies of life in Europe are presented in triptychs (three-paneled paintings) and can be found in many American museums. But he also had an amusing side. New York City's Museum of Modern Art launched a Beckmann retrospective a few years ago in which viewers encountered the self portraits he produced throughout his career. An elegant looking man, he was pictured in nightclubs in evening clothes, playing a horn, consorting with actors, acrobats and other show business folks. The international reputation of Max Beckmann is enhanced year after year.

The Bauhaus

But the visual arts were not the only arena of Weimar culture. Architecture was an important component, and one school of architecture in particular played a pivotal role: The Bauhaus. The Bauhaus functioned from 1919 to 1933, training young architects who were responsible for designing many of the fine new buildings constructed during the period. Building design and advanced production facilities were integrated under The Bauhaus influence, and new materials, such as poured concrete and unclad steel came into wide usage.

The Bauhaus also served as a school for crafts, decorative and applied arts, and industrial design. Specialties included furniture, jewelry, table settings, tools, utensils, appliances, and much more. The Nazis did not like the modernist styles advanced by The Bauhaus and closed it down after gaining power. But The Bauhaus influence lived on through its pioneers in design innovation such as Mies van der Rohe and Marcel Breuer.

The Theatrical Muse and Weimar

The theater, the cinema and the cabaret experienced their heyday in Weimar Germany, especially in Berlin. People wanted to forget their troubles and enjoy the kind of freedom they had been denied in the dreary days of the Prussian empire. Jazz was all the rage. Then the Nazis came and much of Berlin's nightlife was outlawed or forced underground.

I can't think of a better introduction to the Weimar atmosphere than the film or play, Cabaret. The story is based on the experiences of two British writers, Christopher Isherwood and W. H. Auden. Their nonjudgemental eyes experienced the joys and sorrows of Weimar Berlin in the Kit Kat Club or with the fun loving English girl, Sally Bowles (played in the movie by Liza Minelli). The Club's master of ceremonies (played in the movie by Joel Grey) captures the scene in his own sad, sarcastic way. You'll meet the girls in the band; altercations between landlady Fraeulein Schneider and one of her tenants, Herr Schultz; and lots of other small vignettes that cast a light on what life was like during Weimar.

During this time, Germany's favorite movie star was the famous Marlene Dietrich who in her inimitable way represented the Weimar cabaret singer, chorus girl and film star. Her fame reached a pinnacle with her starring role in the movie, The Blue Angel. But that was not her only great film. Morocco, Shanghai Express, Blonde Venus and The Devil is a Woman were others.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). Brecht was, in most critics' opinion, Weimar's top playwright. He started out by studying medicine but found the theatrical scene irresistible. His oft-performed play, The Threepenny Opera was an adaptation of the British work by John Gay called The Beggar's Opera. Brecht's play was first performed in 1931 in Leipzig, Germany where it was shouted down by Nazis. Then, it went on to Berlin, causing a sensation there. Americans who have not seen the play, no doubt do know the recording based on the play, Mack the Knife sung by Louie Armstrong, among others.

Brecht's earlier plays Drums in the Night (1918-1920) and In the Jungle of the Cities vividly paint the picture of the riot-ridden Weimar years immediately after the war.

The End of Weimar

The Weimar Republic came down with a crashing roar on January 30, 1933, when Hitler was sworn in as German Chancellor. It was not merely a change in leadership. It changed the complexion of Germany, indeed of the whole world. And that changed again when the war ended in 1945. The world was a different place.... battered, sadder, perhaps wiser, but those years that came before were too painful for many people to think about. However, the creativity of the artists who worked in the 14 brief years between the wars, continues to exert a profound influence on contemporary arts and artists.

Fred Stern has explored the creative efforts of artists and writers worldwide. His work has appeared in European and Asian publications as well as on Artnet.com. He writes a bimonthly column on the arts for Commuter Week and is a frequent contributor to The World & I. He has given courses on American writers and has taught poetry and creative writing at the Institute of New Dimensions. He has lectured widely on these topics. A volume of his verses was published in 2006 under the title Corridors of Light.

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