

Hans Hess, *George Grosz*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, 272 pp., 230 illus., \$20.95

Robert J. Belton

Volume 16, numéro 1, 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073336ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073336ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Belton, R. J. (1989). Compte rendu de [Hans Hess, *George Grosz*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, 272 pp., 230 illus., \$20.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 16(1), 71–72.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073336ar>

his death. It may seem a trifle, but in light of the close association between Bailly-Herzberg and the Bibliothèque Nationale in the preparation of this book, the exclusion seems odd.

The closing 30-odd pages of the book consist of a series of important and extremely useful appendices. The author has compiled lists of some of the important print albums of the period, including their contents; of societies and associations to which printmakers belonged; of print merchants and dealers, with their addresses; of books for further consultation; and of techniques and processes used by printmakers during this period. Much of this information, with the exception of the technical data, which is based on two exhibition catalogues, is extremely difficult to find as it is scattered in libraries throughout France, and much of it has not been published before. It is important to note, however, that the listing of print albums and societies from 1830 to 1950 is not exhaustive. Such a list would require a second volume and is not within the scope of the present book. Rather, the author gives the flavour of the period and some indication of the rich resources that are available.

At times the cross-referencing in this section could be improved. For example, the Société des Peintres-Graveurs Indépendants is referred to in the entries on Lespinasse and Laboureur, but not in the entry on its third founding member, Marie Laurencin, and the reader who hopes to discover more about the activities of this society will be disappointed to find that it is not listed with the other societies and associations. And it is puzzling that the etcher Jacques Beltrand, at one time the president of the Société des Peintres-Graveurs Français, is referred to twice in the brief entry on this society but not included in the dictionary proper except for a mention that he was one of the four children of Tony Beltrand.

This final section of the *Dictionnaire de l'Estampe* is considerably more difficult to use than the first part. In the dictionary proper, alphabetical headings and numerous reproductions provide frequent visual variety. However, this second part is simply dense, and particularly so in the list of printers, editors, and dealers where name follows name for three and a half pages. This presentation is all the more unfortunate because the book itself is elegantly designed with both the casual browser and the serious researcher in mind. The white matte paper is suitable for the small black print and for the reproductions, although the paperback cover is unlikely to withstand the heavy use that the book can anticipate. The choice of Felix Vallotton's "La Paresse" for the cover is a delightfully ironic touch: I wonder if Janine Bailly-Herzberg chose it while reflecting on the nine years of toil that went into the book?

CAROLYN W. MACHARDY
Okanagan College
Kelowna, British Columbia V1Y 4X8

HANS HESS *George Grosz*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985, 272 pp., 230 illus., \$20.95.

Art historians have long surveyed the work of the German painter and draughtsman George Grosz (1893-1959) in terms of the influences of Expressionism, Dada, and *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*. They have discerned shrewd primitivism in early drawings like *Crime* (1912), broad political satire in mature watercolours like *Dusk* (1922), and tragic Romanticism in late oils like *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1937). The late Hans Hess's *George Grosz* will satisfy any reader interested chiefly in a restatement of such well-worn information and interpretations. This is not to say that it is uninteresting or repetitive, for it is a very thorough biography. Hess bases his study on a personal understanding of the German cultural atmosphere of the early twentieth century, as well as on very specific information made available to him by friends and relatives of Grosz. Of course, he also exploited the Grosz archives in Princeton and the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, which goes to show that this presentation of the artist as a man is at least responsible to documentary materials. In fact, as a digest of archival sources, Hess's study is exemplary.

The problem with the book lies in the realm of interpretation. Hess's discussion of single works is seriously hampered because there is no attempt to engage the works directly or even interpretively. This is quite ironic, given that Grosz's reputation was founded on social satire and anarchistic revolt. Cases in point are afforded by every instance in which violence, sex, or crime is depicted (figs. 23-24, 26, 30, 61, 63, and so on). Hess generalizes about the strange attraction of rape and horror, asking if Grosz "thought of murder as a form of art" (p. 38), which entirely sidesteps the grotesque impact of the pictures themselves. Moreover, when he does assess specific formal features and their contributions to the content—which must surely be the largest part of Grosz's art—he settles only on woolly generalities like "naive sophistication" (p. 74).

What is perhaps worst of all is his failure to question Grosz's and his own assumptions regarding the women depicted in some of these works. *The Woman-Slayer* of 1918, for example, is a scene of sexual mutilation and murder, directly influenced by Cubism and Futurism. The author acknowledges that it is "direct and gruesome." In the same breath, however, he notes that the "victim [is] still in ecstasy" (p. 74). Elsewhere, images of unequivocal sex-crimes are described as "haunting," painted "with loving care" (p. 72). Perhaps neither Grosz nor Hess should be condemned for being products of their time, but it should at least be noted that such presumptions—in this case, of female masochism; in other cases, of critical objectivity, political disinterestedness, and the like—continually undermine the text, at least in the mind of the contemporary critical reader.

The most glaring example of Hess's reticence is his failure to comment on the words of Grosz himself: "Life has no meaning, except the satisfaction of one's appetite for food and women" (p. 52). The equation of the sex drive with hunger is patently false, if only because underindulgence in food leads to tissue deterioration, whereas sexual abstinence does not. One must look else-

where to find an adequate explanation of such culturally stereotypical thinking. (See, for example, M. K. Flavell, "Über Alles die Liebe: Food, Sex, and Money in the Work of George Grosz," *Journal of European Studies*, xiii [1983], 268-88.) Hess is content to bypass the issue of cultural determination altogether, preferring to assert that Grosz was "a superior being standing above the mêlée in his own work" (p. 54).

The text's lack of criticality and its halfhearted analysis of cultural specificity are, in a nutshell, what render the book so troublesome. There are other problems, however, like the overly selective and dated bibliography—the study was first published in 1974 and seems to have undergone no revision. Current critical writing on Grosz brings to light the summary treatment that many fundamental issues receive here. Hess's two-page account of the famous Blasphemy Trial of 1930 is based on solid documentation, including allusions to the different verdicts by the original and the appeals courts (pp. 156-57). However, the substance of the discussion is dampened by Hess's rather superficial conclusion that "there are more ways than one to see a satire" (p. 157). Surely a more useful observation would be that the different verdicts reveal to what extent German society had been ethically and politically polarized in the years preceding Hitler's election. Despite Grosz's

obvious awareness of the rise of Hitler (see fig. 109), Hess ignores the potential connection to the outcome of the trials, turning instead to general remarks on the worldwide economic crisis of 1929. Scarcely longer, but more useful in this regard, is W. Hutt's "Die 'Gotteslästerung' des George Grosz," *Bildende Kunst*, xxxiii (1985), 362-65.

Hess's *George Grosz* does have value, despite its problems. It does include a very thorough presentation of those periods of the artist's career that have traditionally been given short shrift. The snippets of letters that appear here and there offer a pleasant alternative to the repetitive selections in the *Briefe* edited by H. Knust (Hamburg, 1979). Finally, the illustrations are of high quality for the most part, particularly the colour plates, and they are of sufficient size that the reader can easily pick out the smaller details that the text does not describe. In sum, the book is, on the one hand, much better than the average coffee-table book; on the other, it must be carefully read as a collection of information, not as a reflective interpretation. If there is a *parti pris*, it is that archival art history must accept things with indifference. In an era that is increasingly aware of the political overtones of even the most ostensibly apolitical writing, Hess's dispassionate look at the impassioned Grosz seems to lack contemporary significance.

ROBERT J. BELTON
Department of Fine Art
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario N6A 5B7