

De-constructing a George Grosz Painting

According to art historian Ivo Kranzfelder, "The career of George Grosz is the **perfect example of an artist's life tied inseparably to the historical, social and political movements of the age.**" Where words often fall short, art can succeed in capturing the politics, emotions and undercurrents of a time in history. Grosz had a unique ability to communicate through his canvasses. In this activity, we will examine one of Grosz's most famous paintings, "The Agitator." This activity involves discussing the painting with a partner. I will ask you in class to select someone with whom you want to discuss the painting.

Step 1: **Observe.** Observe the painting, and in an e-mail, describe what you see. This should be a list (e.g. a boot, a turkey, etc.). At this point, do not try to make meaning of what you see, simply create the list privately. When you are finished with your list, quietly **wait for your partner to complete their list. Now, exchange lists.**

Step 2: **Analyze.** When you receive your partner's list, analyze the symbolic meaning of items on her/his list by considering both the historical context in which Grosz painted the picture, as well as the location of the item in the larger picture (e.g. "the boot might symbolize power or force, and it's near the castle which might mean..."). **After you have finished analyzing the items, give the list back to your partner, tomorrow, turn the list in at the assignments box.**

Remember this is about interpreting art. There is more than one right answer. The important thing is to use evidence to back up your own opinion.

Step 3: **Interpret.** Finally, **as a class we will add your interpretations of the image as a whole on the projection screen.** What do you think George Grosz was trying to tell his audience with the picture? The German philosopher Hannah Arendt once commented that Grosz's work went beyond art; it also had journalistic elements.



George Grosz (1893 - 1959) George Grosz was a "German American expressionist painter and illustrator. Born in Berlin, he studied art at the Royal Academy, Dresden, the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, and the Academie Colarossi, Paris, and served in the army in World War I (1914-1918)."¹ Grosz ended his war service in a hospital for the shell-shocked suffering from what we would call today *post-traumatic stress syndrome*.



A man of the left, Grosz never belonged to any political party or group although he did work for the Spartacists. He was also briefly a member of the Dada movement. The prime targets of his satirical drawings and caricatures were industrialists, military officers and clergymen.

"Collections of these drawings, concerned with conditions in Germany at the end of World War I, appeared in *Ecce homo* (Behold the Man, 1923) and *Das Gesicht der Herrschenden Klasse* (The Face of the Ruling Class, 1921). *Republican Automatons* (1920) reflects his view of modern man as a machine.

An uncompromising opponent of militarism and National Socialism, Grosz was one of the first German artists to attack Adolf Hitler. Grosz went to the United States in 1932 and became a citizen in 1938. From about 1936 he began to work also in oils and turned to less biting themes, depicting nudes, still lifes and street scenes. With the approach of World War II (1939-1945) his art became increasingly despairing. Recognized as one of the most brilliant draftsmen of his time, Grosz was also well known as a teacher. An account of his experiences as an artist appears in his autobiography (*A Little Yes and a Big NO* 1946). He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1954, and in 1959, shortly before his death, resettled in Berlin."²

Grosz called himself a profound pessimist with little faith in the future or in most people yet he relentlessly criticized the Weimar Republic for its shortcomings and its lack of sufficient reform.

¹"Grosz, George," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2001
<http://encarta.msn.com> © 1997-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

²Ibid.

Additional Web Resources on George Grosz:

- Paleta: The Art Project. This website has high-quality scans of some of Grosz' paintings.
- Art-cyclopedia: George Grosz. An excellent reference site on Grosz. This is a great starting point for web exploration.
- Germanexpressionism.com. This website on Grosz contains a bio as well as some examples of his drawings.

Additional Print & Video Resources on George Grosz:

- *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., Brookline, Massachusetts) 1994, pp. 133-4, 136.
- George Grosz, *George Grosz: An Autobiography* (University of California Press) 1998.
- John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety 1917-1933* (De Capo Press, New York) 1996.