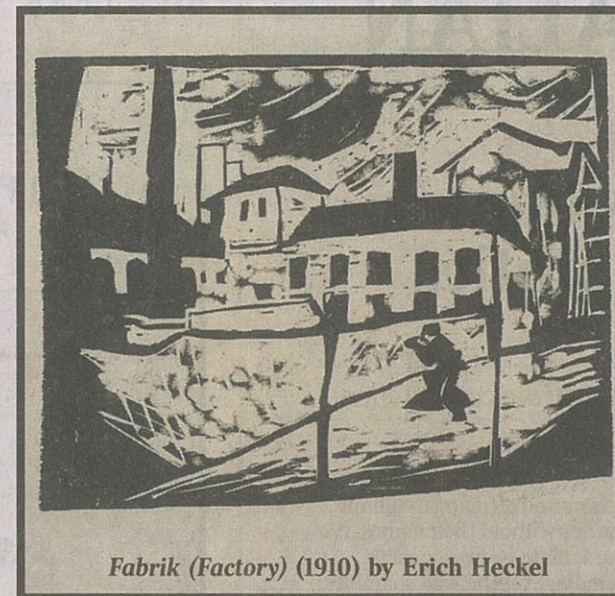


Prophet (1912) by Emil Nolde

Transplantation (Skin Graft) (1924)  
by Otto Dix

Fabrik (Factory) (1910) by Erich Heckel

Taubstumme (Deaf-Mute) (1921)  
by Max Beckmann

# Haunting images of war and decay

## VISUAL ART

German Expressionist  
Prints  
Olsen/Irwin Gallery,  
Sydney. Until August 21.

### CHRISTOPHER ALLEN

One of the best exhibitions in Sydney at the moment is to be found not in the big museums but at the Olsen/Irwin Gallery in a quiet street in Woollahra. It is the work of Rex Irwin and reminds us of the loss his imminent retirement will represent: apart from anything else, he has been one of the only Sydney dealers with the expertise and contacts to present fine prints and drawings from the baroque to the modernist periods.

The show covers the chronological and stylistic range of German expressionism, from its origins in the great upheaval of modernist art that, as many people forget, took place in the decade before World War I, to its subsequent inflections as it responded first to the devastation of the war and then to the crumbling social order of the postwar years.

The first years of the 20th century were, on the face of it, a time of unparalleled prosperity and progress. Yet underneath the surface there was a profound malaise: the ideas of Darwin, Marx and Freud had shaken confidence in religious doctrine and the secular humanism of the Enlightenment. There was a sense that the old

Verwundetentransport im Houthulster Wald  
(Transporting the Wounded in Houthulst Forest) (1924) by Otto Dix

order was stultified: some sought political renewal through revolution, others cultural renewal through recourse to primitive and archaic art, and others again spiritual renewal through theosophy and other alternative forms of religious experience.

Many artists were attracted to all three, and the most radical, such as the Italian futurists, fantasised — in peacetime, of course —

about the destructive but ecstatic force of war and violence. In Germany, Ernst Barlach celebrated the cleansing power of war, too, until war actually broke out; and the exhibition fittingly begins with his memorable but nightmarish lithograph (1912) of a woman knifing a horse in the neck.

Formally speaking, the primitivist tendency is best represented by the adoption of a deliberately

harsh woodblock style of printing. Emil Nolde's *Prophet* (1912), with its haggard and tormented Old Testament gaze, is one of the most haunting images of the time. There is nothing like the refined narrative and descriptive line of Durer's woodcuts: just dark, crude areas of flat shadow.

Erich Heckel's claustrophobic image of life in the shadow of industrialisation, *Fabrik* (1910), also

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reminds us of the flatness of the wood block, by leaving its edges to print as a black border. It is as though the image has been excavated into the panel: the subject appears as a sudden but fleeting vision out of darkness.

These works speak of the anxieties and yearnings that preceded the war. But the outbreak of conflict brought sufferings and moral dereliction of an entirely different order.

The war itself is evoked in the exhibition's second room, while the images in the first focus mostly on its effects on social life and the relations between people.

Thus George Grosz evokes a world in which feeling and compassion have become deadened, where those who still have some personal or financial security have hardened their hearts towards those who have lost everything.

Grosz's characters are irredeemably ugly and it is an ugliness that reflects their moral state; the relations between the sexes are reduced to the transaction of whore and client. The abasement and objectification of the female body is graphically evoked in several pieces. Others treat the same subject with more subtle touches,

such as Max Beckmann in an intriguing lithograph, *Taubstumme* (1921): there is pathos in the way the lonely man caresses the deaf and dumb girl, while she looks away, detached in her silent world.

The cause of such moral collapse is starkly revealed in the second gallery, dominated by a suite of 10 prints from the 50 that make up the full collection of Otto Dix's *Der Krieg* (1924).

These are the most effective and horrifying images of war of the past century or more, and at the same time they are strikingly inventive in their use of the resources of intaglio printing, employing etched line and tonal areas of aquatint in constantly varied combinations, but always serving the narrative and expressive needs of the subject.

Here, we see a picture of an abandoned trench, a tangle of lines that mimics the tangle of barbed wire and broken structures, amid which the eye gradually makes out ever more fragments of bodies. In another piece, sappers' advance through what seems knee-deep mud, but if we look more closely we realise it is a mass of cadavers.

There is a single close-up of the head of a soldier whose plastic surgery may have saved his life but has left him a monster. He stares out at the world, at what remains of his existence, with his one surviving eye. As TS Eliot wrote in the same years (1920), "after such knowledge, what forgiveness?"