

Lot 10



Auction Modern, Post War & Contemporary, Evening Sale

Date 27.11.2024, ca. 18:07

Preview 22.11.2024 - 10:00:00 bis
25.11.2024 - 18:00:00

DIX, OTTO

1891 Untermhaus/Gera - 1969 Singen

Title: Ursus mit rotem Mohn.

Date: 1927.

Technique: Mixed media on wood.

Measurement: 80 x 100cm.

Notation: Signed (artist's signet) and dated upper right: DIX 1927.

Frame/Pedestal: Framed.

Provenance:

- Deutsche Kunstgemeinschaft e.V. at the Schloß Berlin (label)
- Private collection North Rhine-Westphalia

Literature:

- Löffler, Fritz: Otto Dix, 1891-1969 - Oeuvre der Gemälde, Recklinghausen 1981, cat. rais. no. 1927-8, ill.
- Löffler, Fritz: Otto Dix, Leben und Werk, Dresden 1972, p. 95, ill.

- In the New Objectivity style, Dix creates a picture of a child as a vanitas depiction in a simple, spatial context
- Impressive portrait of a child who has just been born, aware of the danger and finiteness of life
- One of the most important paintings from a series created in the context of the birth of his son Ursus
- Fascinating composition with an attractive contrasting effect
- The famous "Family Portrait" from the collection of Frankfurt's Städel Museum was also painted in 1927

An important event

The birth of his first son Ursus was obviously a special event for Otto Dix, who, despite some escapades, was an outspoken family man. Ursus was born on 11 March 1927 in Berlin, where Dix had moved with his wife Martha and daughter Nelly, born on 14 June 1923 in Düsseldorf, in November 1925. He left the capital of the Reich just a few months after the birth of Ursus to take up a professorship in painting in Dresden. Dix repeatedly depicted the members of his family in drawings and paintings, some of which have a programmatic character. (See for example: Schick, Karin (ed.): exhib. cat. Otto Dix - Hommage à Martha, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart 2005) This applies to the two famous portraits of his parents from 1921 and 1924 in Basel and Hanover, respectively, with which he documented his proletarian

background on the one hand, and on the other hand, in the second version, positioned portraiture against contemporary photography when he surpassed August Sander's photographs, which he was familiar with from the Rhineland. This applies to 'Nelly in Flowers' from 1924, in which he surprisingly already harked back to Romanticism, as in the first portrait of his parents, and in the veristic picture, to the children's portraits of Philipp Otto Runge and Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The same can be said of the Ursus pictures. Of the twelve pictures from 1927, exactly half are devoted to the birth of the son, and this number alone illustrates how significant the event was for the painter at a time of biographical change. Along with the Frankfurt 'Family Portrait' (Fig. 1), 'Ursus with Red Poppies' is the most important painting in this context and also the largest.

The process of birth

Initially, however, Dix was interested in the process of birth itself, which he captured in drawings and then also wanted to realise as a painting, albeit one that remained unfinished. The composition of this painting is remarkable because the doctor's arms, which are stretched out straight, seem to be carrying the newborn child into his lap rather than receiving him. The woman's birthing womb is hidden under a white cloth, but framed by her wide-open legs. With the detailed depiction of the blood clinging to the child and the blue umbilical cord, Dix emphasises the animalistic process. The traditional reading direction of the picture from left to right, the hands offering rather than taking, and the gaping legs give the painting a temporal structure that is unsettling for the process of birth: the sequence shown naturally means that the infant is being taken in by the doctor, but the composition of the picture confuses this temporal process by giving the impression of a return. This point is important because it could be linked to Dix's ideas, inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, of 'die and become', which so often underpin his images – most expressively and complexly in the famous triptych 'War' from 1929-1932 in the Dresden State Art Collections.

In contrast to this, the 'Newborn Child on Hands (Ursus)' from 1927 is a painting alluding to Dürer's famous hands, which is only 50 cm high. It seems to celebrate the miracle of a new existence, but it also breaks with this the typical humour of the painter Dix. The white cloth and the worn hands that hold the newborn, who is curled up and crumpled, stand out against a pure, undefined blue background. The baby's eyes are still closed, his face is contorted, his nose is blue, his hands are clenched into small fists, while his feet are spread apart. The isolation of the image makes human existence seem like a miracle – this indicates the proximity to Dürer – at the same time, it is banished to the realm of pure creatureliness when Dix strives for a ruthless image of the newborn, which is in no way idealised.

'Ursus with red poppies'

'Ursus with red poppies' is a comparatively large picture in this context and this illustrates all the more its importance for the painter. In an emphatically simple spatial context, Ursus lies in the right half of the picture on a narrow white pillow, partly wrapped in a white cloth, and writhes. The left side, on the other hand, is dominated by a glass jug containing a bouquet of bright red poppies, some of which seem to bend towards the child as if they were alive. The picture offers a simple and striking composition of charming contrasts between red and green, colour and non-colour (white), transparency (glass) and density. The painting seems to make reference here to the palette of numerous red shades in the famous 'Family Picture' in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, painted in the same year, which also features a reference to the old masters and brings up the symbolic meaning of the carnation as a passion flower but also as a symbol of the labour movement.

What is fascinating about 'Ursus with Red Poppies' is the intensification of the content, which Dix consciously achieves by bringing the plants almost uncannily to life. The two flowers on the right in particular seem to be eyeing the newborn baby and reaching out to it with their tentacles. Despite its closed eyes and relatively contented expression, the child moves slightly restlessly and begins to kick.

As in 'Nelly in Flowers', the aspect of blossoming life is thematised, the freshness and innocence of being a child is brought together with the splendour of fresh flowers. But Nelly stomped confidently through the garden (Fig. 2), while Ursus seems almost at the mercy of the flowers. What is crucial is that, with the example of the birth of his son, Dix is circling around the motif of mortality. The poppy is a bringer of death and proves to be a real danger for the child, who lies there unsuspecting but is beginning to stir. As in the unfinished birth painting, which attempted to suggest life and death, becoming and passing away through a subtle temporal structure, the Ursus children's painting becomes a vanitas depiction, which presents the newly begun life under the symbol of death. Years later, Dix would repeat this in the case of his daughter, when he had Nelly appear as a young girl with death in allusion to Hans Baldung Grien.

One final argument is important in this context. It concerns the unusual gift that Dix gave his wife Martha in March 1927: he presented her with the major work 'Unlikely Lovers' from 1925, dedicated to the birth of Ursus on the back, which is now in Stuttgart. In it, a scrawny old man in an armchair has taken a young, fleshy woman with wild eyes and windswept hair onto his lap, almost despairing in the face of the irrepressible vitality she exudes. The picture is comical, even bawdy, and yet also tragic. Dix himself named this tragedy, which arose from the contrast between the old man and the blossoming life. 'Ursus with Red Poppy' also draws on this tragic and existential understanding of life as an eternal process of becoming and decaying. It is a portrait of the artist's newborn child, painted with an awareness of the fragility and finiteness of all human life.

Olaf Peters

Estimate: 300.000 € - 500.000 €

