

1-1-2006

Otto Dix, From the Catacombs in Palermo I, ca. 1923-24

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Published version. "Otto Dix, From the Catacombs in Palermo I, ca. 1923-24," in *Perspectives on Art at the Haggerty Museum*. Milwaukee, WI: Haggerty Museum of Art, 2006: 32-33. [Publisher link](#). © 2006 Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University. Used with permission.



Otto Dix
German (1891-1969)
From the Catacombs in Palermo I, ca. 1923-24
Watercolor
19 ½ x 13 ½ in.
Museum purchase, 2000.31



ounded several times on the Western Front during World War I, by the mid-1920s Otto Dix was one of the most known artists of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), particularly its politically-committed Verist vein. Dix's depictions of war and of its lasting human consequences especially shocked the viewing public, bringing him both acclaim and notoriety.

It was at the time of unprecedented economic inflation and accompanying political chaos in the Weimar Republic, the German republic constituted following World War I, that Dix painted *From the Catacombs in Palermo II* (ca. 1923-24). Already in 1920, he had embarked on a huge output of watercolors, which would eventually consist of nearly five hundred works. This was a medium that allowed his imagination free rein. More importantly, it was a medium in which he could work quickly enough to earn a living when the value of money was declining catastrophically.

In the winter of 1923, Dix traveled to Italy and went to the famous Catacombs dei Cappuccini in Palermo. While there, he produced some eleven sketches. Soon after, he transformed several of these into a series of watercolors. In some of these paintings, Dix rendered mutilated figures, most of which are hardly recognizable as human forms. However, in this particular watercolor, he chose to depict a corpse seated upright, clothed in the simple brown habit worn by the Cappuchin monks, many of whom were embalmed in Palermo's catacombs. Dix's focus is on the dead monk's mummified face, a shockingly grotesque close-up comprised of a contortedly gaping mouth, hollow eye sockets, and leathery skin that only barely holds the skull together; green moss has replaced the corpse's hair. A cloud or aura painted blue – a color long believed to represent purity and spirituality – hovers in uncertainty behind the mummified monk.

From the Catacombs in Palermo, which Dix created between *The Trench* and the *War* portfolio, is representative of his intense post-World War I focus on death, on the decomposition of the human body, and – symbolically – on the decay of hope, of faith, and of redemption that the soulless Great War elicited from those who experienced its inhumanity first-hand. The painting is also important in that it survived the Nazis' cultural purges of the 1930s.

Dix was among those artists who remained in Germany during the Third Reich, defamed and humiliated. He was dismissed from his professional post at the Dresden Academy and, in 1934, was forbidden to exhibit. Altogether, eight of his paintings were included in the "Entartete Kunst" exhibition, while 260 of his works were removed from German museums and confiscated as "degenerate" art. The Haggerty Museum is, thus, extremely fortunate to have Dix's *From the Catacombs in Palermo II* among its holdings.

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