

Berlin's Little Grosz Museum (Das kleine Grosz Museum) set to close

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The Kleine Grosz Museum [Little Grosz Museum] in Berlin, a private institution dedicated to the work of German-born artist George Grosz (1893–1959), has been open for just two and a half years. The museum was due to stay open for at least five years. However, the sponsoring association has just announced the museum will close at the end of November.

Although the project received a certain amount of funding, it was not enough to maintain operations. The George Grosz Association in Berlin announced it was impossible to keep the museum functioning without running a loss. According to the organisers, the museum was only able to make ends meet thanks to a great deal of voluntary work by its staff.

The closure is a great loss. In the current political situation, marked by wars and crises, the artistic legacy of the painter, graphic artist and caricaturist Grosz is of burning relevance. It is a disgrace and apparently a sign of the times that Berlin, the city in which Grosz was born in 1893, lived and worked for many years and died in 1959, has not done more to support this initiative and embrace it as its own.

Georg Ehrenfried Groß, to give him his real name, changed his surname to the anglicised Grosz in protest against the widespread anti-English sentiment during the First World War. His family lived in the working-class district of Wedding, but after the early death of the father in 1902, his mother moved with her son to Stolp in Pomerania (now Słupsk in Poland), where she took over the running of an officers' mess. It was there that the young Grosz was able to observe the physiognomy and behaviour of the military.

In recent decades, Germany's leading museums have rarely included major exhibitions of Grosz's work in their programmes. Shamefully, in the post-World War II period, it wasn't until 1964 that Grosz's drawings were shown in West Germany at the documenta III art show. After a few smaller exhibitions in Austria and East and West Germany, the last comprehensive exhibition of his works, *George Grosz: Berlin - New York*, was presented in Berlin and Düsseldorf in 1994-95.

In 2018, the Berlin Bröhan Museum took the centenary of Germany's November Revolution as an opportunity to show his extensive graphic work from the 1920s in particular, as well as some works from his early and late work.

Establishing a museum for Grosz in Berlin was a highly commendable and, especially in today's world, an entirely appropriate step. Grosz's works are distributed among many institutions around the world, so it was a great achievement to finally establish an artistic venue that showcased his efforts.

The small Grosz Museum, housed in a brilliantly converted former petrol station at 18 Bülowstrasse in Schöneberg, is not far from Nollendorfplatz—the Berlin district from which Grosz drew inspiration for much of his art in the period between the end of World War I and the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933. The New National Gallery is also nearby. One of Grosz's most scathing paintings, *Pillars of Society* (1926), hangs in the latter. It caricatures the state power, judiciary, military, press, church and Social Democracy, revealing them all as adjuncts or tools of the ruling class.

The Little Grosz Museum was able to focus on aspects of Grosz's work, such as his work in exile in the US, which were less known in Germany. The museum also provided information about the artist's life and work through a multimedia permanent exhibition.

In its short lifetime, the museum was able to present some very well-attended and intriguing exhibitions, such as the one held last year, *1922: George Grosz Travels to Soviet Russia*, which helped clarify the historical record. In the first half of 2024, it showed a special exhibition: *George Grosz. A Piece of My World in a World Without Peace - The Collages*.

The museum's curator reported that more than 30,000 visitors attended the exhibitions annually. This was thanks to the association and its efforts. The chairman of the association, Ralf Kemper, explained: "We couldn't be more satisfied with what we have achieved, because George Grosz is on everyone's lips again." His co-chairman, Pay Matthis

Karstens, added that they wanted to “close at a peak.” Nevertheless, the loss cannot be glossed over. It is to be feared that in view of increasing cuts in the cultural sector, an artist as politically significant as Grosz will no longer be sufficiently exhibited.

The current exhibition, *What Kind of Times Are These? Grosz, Brecht & Piscator*, continues until November 25. It is dedicated to the intensive artistic collaboration between Grosz, poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, and revolutionary theatre director Erwin Piscator.

A highlight of this joint work was Piscator’s 1927 production of Jaroslav Hašek’s *The Adventures of the Good Soldier Schwejk* at the Theater am Nollendorfplatz, which was a great success. Brecht worked intensively on the dramatisation of the novel. The three artists’ joint struggle against militarism, philistinism and the attacks on freedom of art and opinion has lost none of its relevance over the intervening century.

Grosz provided hundreds of drawings for the play. The portfolio published by Grosz to accompany the performance led to the longest art lawsuit in the history of the Weimar Republic.

This was not the only time that the Weimar Republic’s judiciary brought the artist before the court. As early as 1921, he had been fined 300 marks for “insulting the Reichswehr [German army]” with his portfolio *God with us*. In 1923, he was charged with “attacking public morals” under section 184 of the German Criminal Code, concerned with “decency.”

A year later, Grosz, his publisher Wieland Herzfelde, and Julian Gumperz, an employee of the Institute for Social Research, were each fined 500 marks. Five watercolours and 17 drawings had to be removed; the corresponding plates and moulds were also to be destroyed. From 1927 to 1932, Grosz had to defend himself in court five times. On one occasion he was charged with blasphemy and he was particularly criticised for his drawing *Shut up and Keep Serving*, which depicted Christ on the cross wearing a gas mask.

More than any of his contemporaries, Grosz used biting satire to expose the ugly, undemocratic face of the German bourgeoisie and its Social Democratic accomplices in the Weimar Republic.

Grosz was one of the founders of the German Dada movement, which initially questioned every tradition and thoroughly shook up the world of art and culture. In the wake of the Russian Revolution and the revolutionary aspirations of German workers in 1918/1919, he regarded himself as a representative of art for a new era. Together with his friends Wieland Herzfelde, John Heartfield and Piscator, Grosz joined the newly founded Communist Party

in 1919. He became a member of the November Group, an artists’ association that saw itself as radical and revolutionary and worked closely with the Workers’ Council for Art.

When the German Social Democrats made a pact with the old elites and betrayed the 1918-19 revolution, he increasingly saw his role as exposing the dangers of the counter-revolution and hypocrisy of the new rulers.

Grosz’s caricatures refute the ubiquitous propaganda that the Weimar Republic was the birth of German democracy. Rather, he shows how the forces of reaction gathered behind the democratic façade, how counter-revolution lurked in every pore of the state apparatus after the crushing of the revolution in 1919, which preserved the power of big business and the military.

The parallels to the present situation are obvious: the so-called democratic parties and their media propagate nationalism, militarism, police state power and anti-migrant agitation. The elites promote nationalist ideologues who are able to spread their xenophobia with impunity and create a climate in which preparations for dictatorship flourish. The crisis of capitalism is coming to a head day by day: mass layoffs have been announced and glaring social inequality proves to be incompatible with democracy.

Along with Otto Dix, Grosz was the artist most hated by Hitler and the Nazis. Shortly before the Nazis seized power, Grosz was able to flee to the US to avoid being arrested as an enemy of the state. There he remained very active as an artist and created an extensive body of work—but many of his later works, such as the series *Stickmen*, express a gloomy resignation.

In the 1940s, he felt increasingly burnt out and empty. His paintings entitled *The Painter of the Hole* (1947/48) are emblematic of his state of mind at the time. Full of sad self-irony, he seems to believe the painter can no longer see any meaning in his work. Even his return to Berlin in 1959 failed to mark a new beginning. Shortly after his return, he died after falling down a staircase while intoxicated.



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