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The Museum of Modern Art

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART HOSTS FIRST MAJOR U.S. RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF GERMAN ARTIST HANNAH HÖCH

The Photomontages of Hannah Höch

February 27-May 20, 1997

The first major U.S. retrospective of the photomontages of celebrated German artist Hannah Höch (1889-1978) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 27, 1997. Comprising more than 100 works, the exhibition traces the evolution of the artist's six-decade career, including the protest and parody that marked her work as part of the Berlin Dada movement, the private visions that dominated during the Nazi years, and her abstract experiments of the 1940s and 1950s. MoMA is the only venue on the exhibition's three-city tour that will exhibit Höch's best-known montage, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*.

The Photomontages of Hannah Höch, on view at MoMA until May 20, examines not only the artist's career but the impact on her work of the social upheavals that racked Germany through much of the twentieth century: the horrors of World War I; the alternating hope and despair that characterized the Weimar Republic; the rise and defeat of Nazism; the division of the state during the Cold War; and the hedonism of the 1960s. Höch's work provides a highly personal reaction to issues and events that have shaped modern Germany and, by extension, Western history.

While also prolific in painting, watercolor, and drawing, Höch is best known as one of the originators of the medium of photomontage and the only female member of the Berlin Dada group, which protested the carnage of World War I by calling for the abolition of rules, traditions, and conventions. Höch created some of the most memorable and radical images of the period from photographs clipped from mass-media periodicals, a method she employed throughout her career. The large and complex *Cut with the Kitchen Knife...* (1919-20) juxtaposes pictures of the "anti-Dada" (representatives of the establishment) with those of intellectuals and artists, and suggests that the newly enfranchised women of Germany would soon "cut" through the male "beer-belly" culture.

After the dissolution of Dada in the early 1920s, Höch spent the remainder of the Weimar period creating work that trenchantly commented on prevalent social issues with wry humor, a finely tuned sensibility, and careful attention to pictorial issues. In particular, Höch's work from this period is notable for its focus on gender issues. Weimar Germany was the site of intense debate about the emancipated "New Woman," whose life was typically romanticized by the new illustrated periodicals of the day. Höch's art provided an alternative view of the modern woman as a locus of conflicting values whose liberation was largely illusory. Among the works from this period is her series "From an Ethnographic Museum," which equates contemporary attitudes toward women with those held toward "primitive" cultures.

Unlike many of her avant-garde contemporaries, Höch remained in Germany during the Nazi era. She retreated to a cottage in the Berlin suburbs, creating work that was less socially oriented and more private in nature. Featuring biomorphic imagery, this work represented a withdrawal from the social realm in favor of the worlds of nature and the imagination.

After the war, Höch was enormously productive and exhibited frequently, though she continued to live in relative isolation. Her work from the late 1940s and 1950s is characterized by a foray into total abstraction and a fanciful but sometimes sinister melding of organic and industrial motifs.

In the 1960s Höch again focused on images of women in a group of works that seems to bring her career full circle. The photomontages of this decade intentionally recall her earlier work through their titles and subjects but are less charged with multiple layers of meaning and take a less wicked aim at societal conventions. Instead, they are brash, gaudy, and filled with wit. Failing eyesight finally forced Höch to stop making art in 1973. For all its variety, throughout the decades Höch's work is bound by humor, elegance, and a focus on the media's portrayal of women and their shifting status in the modern world.

Organized by Peter Boswell, former Associate Curator, and Maria Makela, Guest Curator, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, *The Photomontages of Hannah Höch* is coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by Carolyn Lanchner, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, who also contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue.

The exhibition opened at the Walker Art Center (October 20, 1996–February 2, 1997) and will conclude its tour at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 26–September 14, 1997).

Publication

The Photomontages of Hannah Höch, by Peter Boswell, Maria Makela, and Carolyn Lanchner. 244 pages, fully illustrated, including more than 100 color plates. A detailed chronology of the artist's life and an extensive exhibition history and bibliography are also included. Clothbound, \$55, distributed by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., New York, and paperbound, \$35; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

Sponsorship

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