PREGNANT PAUSE

WAM acquisition provokes powerful responses - good and bad
Looking at a painting at Worcester Art Museum, a visitor had nothing but the highest praise: "Amazing painting and artist. Bravo to WAM for having it here in the gallery. There is so much to see and think about. Beautiful."

Another had the opposite reaction, stating: "I find the painting hard to look at," before theorizing that the artist was probably deeply depressed when he painted it.

A third visitor said, simply, "Yikes!!!"

All were viewing the same painting, a recent acquisition that inspires strong and wildly varying reactions among museum visitors, staff, and even members of the committee that ultimately recommended its purchase.

The work in question, "The Pregnant Woman," a 1931 painting by the German artist Otto Dix (1891-1969), is a provocative nude that museum director Matthias Waschek says breaks new ground in WAM's holdings of the first half of the 20th century.

Most other works the museum owns from that era, while masterful in their own ways, often also are considered more traditionally pleasing to the eye. The Dix nude, however, challenges the eye... as well as the brain and our notions of such things as motherhood, pregnancy, childbirth, and art. The work is a detailed depiction of a middle-aged woman whose heavily sagging breasts rest on a belly distorted by late-stage pregnancy. Her shoulders slump, her chin is lowered, her face turned away from the viewer.

Who is she? What is she thinking? Why is she looking away? Is she sad? Maybe... or maybe not. Each viewer will see something different.

"You may view this painting in various ways, from a celebration of beauty and future life, to a repulsive evocation of a nude pregnant woman, to a veneration of women's experiences in their bodies," Marcia Larger-colors and nuanced light in the work render an unusual and sensitive portrait."

Still, she said that she initially was a bit uncomfortable with the work because it caused her to wrestle with what it meant to her as an educator, art historian, a woman's studies Ph.D., a daughter, mother and grandmother.

Lagerwey said she was struck, as she did research on the piece and learned more about Dix, by part of the viewer, the varying answers that result from it and the thoughts, feelings and beliefs we project onto a painting are among aspects that make an artwork a true masterpiece, Waschek said.

"It's like the Mona Lisa, where you can't stop projecting," he said. "Is this a femme fatale? What is it about her smile? In this case, you're thinking about pregnancy. You're thinking about the times. You're thinking about yourself."

For Waschek, the painting brought back early memories when as a child of about 4 he saw his first pregnant woman.

"It was very awkward for me because I was told that I shouldn't think about it other than the stork bringing the baby and then all of a sudden, 'How does the stork get that baby into the belly?'" said Waschek, who grew up in Germany during the 1960s. "I remember there was tenderness but I also felt that I was seeing something I was not supposed to see. People were very prudish in those days, at least in Germany, and here was all this nervous laughter about things like that."

For Dix, painting "The Pregnant Woman" in Germany three decades earlier was a taboo-breaking effort that continues to at once enthrall and challenge viewers today.

"Almost nothing is a taboo anymore," Waschek said. "But there's one taboo that remains and that is depiction of pregnancy. It's really fascinating. Very rarely do we have an image that depicts pregnancy although that's one of the most important parts of life."

"If you only have controversial paintings, that's too much. If you don't have them at all, it's not a very interesting collection. You need them both."

MATTHIAS WASCHEK,
DIRECTOR OF WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

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Worcester Art Museum director Matthias Waschek talks about the museum’s recent acquisition “The Pregnant Woman,” painted in 1931 by Otto Dix. PHOTO BY RICK CINCRAIN

ABOVE LEFT: “The Studio of the Flower Painter Van Daël at the Sorbonne,” by Belgian artist Philippe-Jacques Van Brée, was acquired at the same time as “The Pregnant Woman.” WAM director Matthias Waschek says the Belgian’s work fits “a more traditional beauty narrative.” PHOTO COURTESY OF WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

ABOVE RIGHT: “Reclining Nude,” painted by Dutch artist Kees van Dongen around 1925, is a more traditional nude painting. PHOTO BY RICK CINCRAIN
GETTING OLDER IS A PRIVILEGE
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What prompted Dix to take on the subject is open to interpretation. One of the most significant European artists of the 20th century, Dix, like many other artists after World War I, turned away from the prevailing abstraction and expressionism in favor of a representational style that perhaps seemed more in tune with the convoluted social and political sentiments of that trying time. The movement is known as Neue Sachlichkeit. (Put a hot potato in your mouth and then you can pronounce it, Waschek jokes.)

Neue Sachlichkeit depicts aspects of life without complacency, and Dix chose a most demanding subject for that. "To depict a pregnant woman without complacency is a damn hard job because you can't emotionally disengage," Waschek said. "It's one of the most emotional parts in the life of human beings, for all of us, male or female, so from that viewpoint also the painting is very fascinating."

Pregnancy was a subject that absorbed Dix for much of his career, through a time when women of the Weimar Republic were pressured to repopulate the country following the immense loss of life during the war. It was a concept that continued when Nazis took over at the end of the Weimar Republic, with the slogan "Produce Children for the Fuhrer."

"Women were turned into this Gebärmaschine, or 'birth machine,' which took away all the sentimental layers you could have with pregnancy," Waschek said. Then there were the challenges of raising those children in the widespread poverty of the Weimar Republic, the dire conditions that helped fuel the Nazis' rise to power.

It was a starkly unsentimental situation that lent itself well to Neue Sachlichkeit. Were the difficult times one of Dix's motivations for the painting WAM now possesses? Again, the answer is ... maybe.

"This woman whose body is a little bit tired, it's probably this is not the
Mary Cassatt's "Reine Lefebvre Holding A Nude Baby," on view at the museum, offers a view of motherhood more frequently seen in paintings. PHOTO BY RICK CINCLAIR

first of the children she's had," Waschek said. "You could still see it as a beautiful depiction of a pregnant woman as some people do, or you could say it's a tired body having yet another child."

While Waschek finds the Dix painting thoroughly fascinating, some members of the museum's collections committee needed convincing at first.

"We had a very thorough conversation about this," he said. "There were people who were strongly opposed to buying it."

What were their complaints? "One person said, 'It's ugly. It devalues the woman.' Another person just said, 'I can't even look at it.' There were very very strong reactions.

"And then there was one person who said 'Listen guys, Worcester is among the top cities in this country to attract refugees from outside. They come from Africa, they come from Asia — many of them. They come from very different cultures. What they will all understand when they come to an art museum is that painting. I strongly advocate that we buy it.'"

For Waschek, it was also a question of balance. "If you only have controversial paintings, that's too much," he said. "If you don't have them at all, it's not a very interesting collection. You need them both."

Another possible way of defining an important work is whether it stays in your mind once you walk out of the museum. "The Pregnant Woman" easily passes that test.

"Once you've seen this in the gallery and you leave that gallery, it will stick with you," Waschek said. "It's a painting that you will not forget."