

The Expression of Feminism in Portrait Works of Hannah Höch by Using Photomontage during Weimar Germany

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Abstract—This paper focuses on analyzing the expression of feminism in Hannah Höch's portrait works by using photomontage during Weimar Germany. Hannah Höch (1889-1978) is the only female Dadaist of Berlin Dada. Dada movement prevailed in Germany after the First World War and was influenced by the changes in politics, society, and economics. At the same time, photomontage was popular among Dadaists, which was made from cutting up photographs, newspapers, drawings, etc. for political propaganda, social criticism and advocacy of Dada movement. Besides, during Weimar Republic (1918-1933), because of the changes in the society, women found new social values and roles, and people's feminism consciousness was awakened. While most of the Dadaists used Photomontage to advocate their propositions of politics and society, Hannah Höch paid more attention to feminism. This paper starts by introducing the education and working experience of Hannah Höch as well as the influence of Dada movement and Weimar period on her. Then it analyses the development of Dadaism and photomontage as well as their relationships to lay a foundation for deeper discussions of Höch's way and purport of photomontage creation. Then, this paper focuses on analyzing two pieces of photomontage portrait work of Hannah Höch and contrasts them respectively with two pieces of work of Kurt Schwitters. Finally, it concludes that Hannah Höch's photomontage portrait works are not only extraordinary in her way of creation but also outstanding for her firm and thorough feminism.

Index Terms—Dadaism, photomontage, feminism, new woman, weimar

I. INTRODUCTION

Dada movement prevailed at the beginning of the 20th century. Early centers of Dada movement were in Zürich, Switzerland at the Cabaret Voltaire (circa 1915-1920), and then flourished almost synchronously in other cities, such as New York (circa 1915-1920), Berlin (circa 1918-1923), Hanover, Cologne, as well as Paris (circa 1919-1922).

As for the social background, after the First World War, Germany was defeated. Wilhelm II abdicated, and Weimar Republic (1918-1933) was established.

Changes took place in many aspects during Weimar period, including Germany's political and social environment and artistic views.

Hannah Höch is the only female Dadaist of Berlin Dada. And she is pioneered in photomontage. Under the new and changing social background during Weimar, feminism

became a rising social issue. And Hannah Höch's female portrait works at that time particularly epitomized her strong sense of feminism. For one thing, Höch's feminism is reflected in her reconfigurations of varieties of female and related images by which she demonstrates feminism in her own words; for another, Höch's photomontage works are like documents, which record the women's situation and are presented to people to motivate their thinking on feminism.

In this paper, I would like to discuss about the expression of feminism in Hannah Höch's female portrait works during Weimar, and to discuss about how she presents different thinking on feminism by photomontage.

II. HANNAH HÖCH

Hannah Höch was born in 1889 in Gotha, Germany. In 1912, she studied at the School of Applied Arts in Berlin under the guidance of glass designer Harold Bergen. To please her father, she majors in glass design and graphic arts instead of fine arts. In 1915, Höch entered the graphics class at the National Institute of the Museum of Arts and Crafts, learning image design and figure drawing from artist Emil Orlik (1870-1932).

In 1916, because of Höch's outstanding performance in art design, she was employed in the handicrafts department for Ullstein Verlag (The Ullstein Press), designing patterns of dress and embroidery for Die Dame (The Lady) and Die Praktische Berliner (The Practical Berlin Woman). At the same time, she also did works such as drawing illustration, writing print character, typesetting as well as photo arrangement for Ullstein Verlag.

There is no doubt that her art and design education and working experiences stimulate her talent in art and lay a solid foundation of her photomontage creation. As Taylor [1] points out that such details in experience are important in cultivating Höch as more an artist than an avocation designer.

Besides, the Dada movement as well as the Weimar society also have significant influence on Höch's works.

Höch participated in Dada movement due to her intimate relationship with Raoul Hausmann. Despite that Höch had considerable creation and outstanding talent, she still couldn't get fully involved in Dada movement. As Hannah Höch recalled in an interview in 1959 recorded in Hemus' book [2], "Thirty years ago it was not easy for a woman to make it as a modern artist in Germany. Most of the male colleagues considered us for a long time as charming, gifted amateurs, without ever wanting to afford us professional status."

It is obvious that, at that time, the status of Höch directly related to her gender. Nevertheless, that she chose to become

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an avant-garde artist shows her avant-garde thought especially her proposition on feminism. Thus, she eagers to express herself and makes people notice women's situation and rights, which is one of the motivations of her photomontage creation permeated with feminism.

III. DADA AND PHOTOMONTAGE

For Richter [3], Weimar German is like in Zurich, where preconceived ideas are free from old relationships, and Dadaists tried to create more possibilities. This is the spirit of German Dadaism. As stated, Dada movement in Germany was largely influenced by the social background. People suffered from different social problems after war. Avant-garde artists in Germany were disappointed by some of the traditional social value and wanted to overturn or bring a revolution to them.

As stated in *The Oxford Companion to 20th Century Art* [4], "A form consisted of cutting up photographs and mounting them together with pieces of newspaper, drawings, etc. in an illogical way which was called the alienation (*verfremdung*) of photography." Although photo collage can be found in works of Cubist and Futurist collages, Ades [5] thinks photomontage is invented by Berlin Dadaists. Photomontage abolishes logic and rebuild varieties combinations of the source. It seems like that photomontage can directly reflect the concept of Dadaists, that is, dismantling and rebuilding.

Besides, materials of photomontage are from different kinds of mass media such as newspapers, magazines, posters, etc. By using the materials, Dadaists create a new visual art form with considerable amount of information as well as strong visual impact. As Biro [6] points out that because of development of modern technology, people can't paint pictures like the classical art masters. People's conscious and psychological conditions has been changed. With the widely development of rapid media, people were more familiar with the true, timely and documentary contents. Dadaists were also eager to express themselves in a new and rapid visual form. This demand closely relates to the political and social nature of German Dada.

Thus, on the one hand, the spirit of Dadaism stimulates the invention of photomontage; on the other hand, the political and social nature of German Dada makes photomontage become one of the most important ways to express political and social appeal of Dadaists.

IV. FEMINISM AND HANNAH HÖCH

Feminism as a rising social issue naturally become a new focus of German Society.

During Weimar period, the status of women undergone dramatic changes. Besides the changes of women's appearance, their roles also changed in different social aspects including employment, politics, expenditure, entertainment, etc. At that time, German popular culture often refers to this kind of new woman as New Woman.

During the first 20 years of 20s century in Europe, industry and technology gradually changed many aspects of people's life. At the same time, women's role became a rising issue.

During this period, avant-garde artists attacked the traditions and customs that are thought to belong to the past.

Hannah Höch as an avant-garde caught up in this wave of feminism. As Dawn [7] points out, "Perhaps times are changing, not least because this slice of life is to be seen from a female perspective. Höch's generation saw women newly taking their place in the public realm..... Women are literally at the center of her collage."

There were some comments on Hannah Höch, and her photomontage works at that time pointing out that she lacked the political intensity. As Sawelson-Gorse [8] mentioned in his book, critic Manuela Hoelterhoff indicates that she concerns about the politics but her works lack of ideology. However, according to Harris [9] opinion, Hannah Höch, like other Dada artists in Berlin, is fascinated by the authenticity of the montage and the possibility of commenting on society and politics. Here is another comment, "Together they (Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann) entered into the charged spirit of protest that permeated German society, politics, and art."

Lavin [10] mentions in his book that, "Although it is true that Höch's work does not convey the explicitly and often prescriptive political message of Heartfield's photomontage, it is important to recognized that other political strategies were available. As we have seen, Höch developed a sophisticated critical language of social commentary concerning the typology and conditions of the modern woman."

After World War II, Photomontage, as described in *The Oxford Companion to 20th Century Art* [4], is used for political propaganda, social criticism and advocacy of Dada movement. Hannah Höch's photomontage works like other German Dadaists focus on politics and social issue, but different from other German Dadaist, she is expressing her political awareness as well as thoughtful concept in the perspective of feminism. Lavin comments that [10] among the Berlin Dada art works, Höch's work is outstanding for her allegorical expression of her photomontage works to discuss about issues of the gender identity and modernity of Weimar Germany.

So, the difference between Höch and other male Dadaists is that she pays more attention to feminism of German society. This may cause some misunderstanding of the ideology of her works.

To have a deeper analysis of Höch's feminism, I would like to choose her portrait works as examples. A portrait work is a direct reflection of a person's characteristic or an artist's thought. Schneider [11] says in his book that until 20th century, artists create portrait works with a concept of metaphysical existence to express the essence of people. It is thought that the content which is expected to be expressed through the portrait can be expressed directly from the appearance. In this case, a portrait work is a concentrated reflection of thoughts from an artist with simple and intense expression.

Thus, I would like to discuss two pieces of portrait works of Hannah Höch to focus on her concerns on women's physiology and sociality and how to express them by photomontage.

V. WOMEN AND KURT SCHWITTERS

Kurt Schwitters is also a German Dadaist. Like Hannah Höch, he pays attention to women. But different from Höch, he pays attention to the commodity property of women, instead of their modernity and independence with new roles of New Woman.

During 1920 and 1923, he organized a group of collage and portrayed women through mannequins, fashion plates, movies and even pornography to express that woman are the representation of modern mass culture. But most of his collage works about women focus on reinforcing the traditional women's social value and suppressing women's new political and social prominence.

So, I would like to compare Hannah Höch with Kurt Schwitters in terms of the expression of women in their works, to have a deeper understanding of the feminism in Hannah Höch's works and her uniqueness of art creation and thinking.

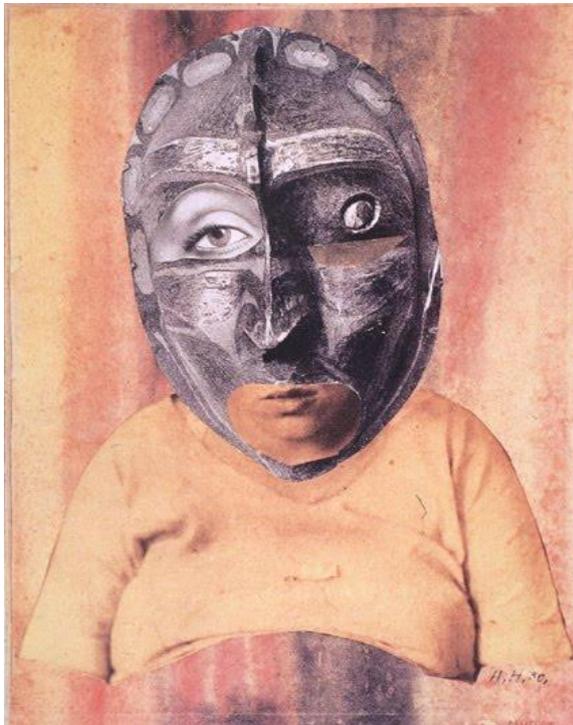


Fig. 1. Mutter (Mother) (1930)
Photomontage with Watercolor
25.6 × 20 cm

Musée National D'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

First, I would like to discuss about a Hannah Höch's work called Mutter (see Fig.1) which concerns about the physiology rights of women.

The source of this photomontage is a portrait of a pregnant proletarian woman. For Lavin [10], this work is considered to have relationships with the broad-based battle in Weimar Germany over an act called Paragraph 218 which bans abortion. As a woman, Höch has two illegal abortions. She knows the pain and stress of unwanted pregnancy, which makes she pay more attention to the physiology rights of women.

In this case, Höch uses a photo of a proletarian woman as a symbol. By showing the weakness and tiredness of the woman's body, Höch aims to present the context of pregnant exhaustion to fight for women's legalizing abortion.

The photo of body in this work undoubtedly has a strong visual language. And Höch is always interested in women's body.

There is a series of mass media scrapbooks of Höch, which includes most compelling iconographic categories about women's portraits (both European and African Women). These scrapbooks record women's femininity and maternity. Through the scrapbooks, Höch is trying to record and express women's conditions through their faces and bodies. As Lavin points out [10], "the scrapbook of mass media photographs that Hannah Höch compiled around 1933 provides many examples of images glorifying rationalization, in particular as depicted through images of the bodies of women."

Meanwhile, based on the photo of a pregnant body of proletarian woman, Hannah Höch tends to signify politically on other interrelated levels. This is a combination of original woman and New Woman.



Fig. 2. The action takes place in thebes and memphis at the time of the rule of the pharaohs.
(1921-1922)
Collage
16.2 × 20 cm
Private Collection

In Kurt Schwitters' collage work, The Action Takes Place in Thebes, and Memphis at the Time of the Rule of the Pharaohs (see Fig. 2), he also puts old and new women images together in the work, including sculpture of Madonna and illustration of New Woman. This collage seems to present the development of women and the change of their status, but we can find so many similarities between the old and new women. As Sawelson-Gorse [8] points out, "They have the same elongated, delicate features, regardless of whether they represent a Madonna or a modern woman." It shows that, different from Hannah Höch, Schwitters does not only try to express female changes by putting old and new women images together, but also tries to reinforce the traditional concept on women and suppresses women's independency and modernity.

In this way, Mutter of Hannh Höch become more commendable. On the one hand, she dares to present a real and negative image of a woman to overturn the stereotype of a beautiful woman in men's eyes to expose the reality; on the other hand, unlike the combination of old and new women images in Schwitters' work which aims to advocate women's

constant value, the combination of Höch's work implies an ambivalent maternity. The ambivalence is about the traditional maternity and the desire of women's freedom. For one thing, it shows the desire of respecting and entitling the fertility liberty of women; for another, it also calls for the New Woman to be the master of her physiology. Höch tries to wake up people, especially women, to realize women's situation and struggle for women's physiology rights.



Fig. 3. Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum (1930)
Photomontage with Collage
25.7 × 22.4 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

We can find Hannah Höch's concerns on women's sociality rights through Indian Female Dancer (see Fig.3). Compared with Mutter, Hannah Höch again presents a woman image of suffering in her work. The woman image is a publicity photo of the popular actress Marie Falconetti (1892-1946) portraying the heroine in Carl Theodor Dreyer's film (1928), *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*).

This film summarizes the time that Joan of Arc is a captive of England, depicting her trial and execution. She is a saint in the movie, who leads lots of military battles against the English during the Hundred Years' War. She is captured and brought to Rouen, Normandy to stand trial for heresy by French clergymen loyal to the English.

In the film, Marie Falconetti plays a role of heroines, which could be one of the reasons why Hannah Höch chooses Falconetti's portrait in *Indian Female Dancer*. As mentioned in a piece of article of *Une Femme* (2013) [12], what Hannah Höch focuses on in this work is its application to gender politics. The misery and misunderstanding of the heroine in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* is like the situation that women faced during Weimar Germany. On the one hand, women found their new social values; on the other hand, their social values were still misunderstood by most people.

As for ways of creation, Grosenick [13] mentioned Hannah Höch's words, "I should like to erase the fixed boundaries that we self-assured human like to draw around anything we can achieve." In this work, Hannah Höch breaks the

boundaries and puts an image of a heroine and images of tableware together. For one thing, this composite woman image has a trendy short haircut *Bubikopf*, which is a conspicuous symbol of modernity. Höch choose Falconetti as a representative of New Woman during Weimar. For another, half of the Marie Falconetti's face including her right eye and mouth is covered by multiple cut-out silhouettes of knives and spoons as well as a photograph of a dance mask from the *Bekom* tribe of Cameroon. The tableware, as Höch et al. describe [14], "The gray tiara, here decorated with knife-and-spoon cut-outs, references a moment in the film when Joan of Arc fashions a crown for herself of plaited straw."

As Biro [6] describes, ".....the same play between own and alien intimacy and anonymity, operates on a formal level as well. On the one hand, the image is uniquely Höch'. She created the bizarre and evocative figure by selecting appropriately sized components, butting them out of their original contexts, and gluing them together to communicate an original and idiosyncratic vision of what means to human.....She did not create them, but simply appropriate them."

By the combination of an image of a heroine which stands for New Woman and the images of tableware which are the traditional symbols of housewife, Höch tries to express the plight of New Woman in Weimar. On the one hand, the women have their own modern style and honorable crowns on their heads; on the other hand, the crowns are made by tableware, which shows that New Women find and try to play their new roles, but they are still shackled by traditional social values and roles.

This work shows a great contradiction. On the one hand, the crown stands for the New Woman; on the other hand, the table settings secure her stereotypic identity of a housewife.

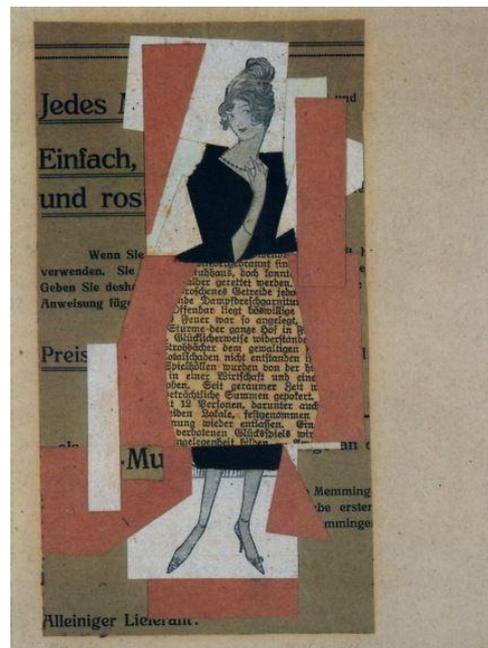


Fig. 4. Figurine (1921)
Collage
17.3 × 9.2 cm
Marlborough International Fine Art

Contrasting with *Indian Female Dancer*, figurine (see Fig.4) of Kurt Schwitters shows different perspective on women.

Unlike Höch, Schwitters evokes a beautiful paper doll in figurine and focuses on the harmless of women rather than their new social role and value. Here is a comment by Dietrich in Sawelson-Gorse's book [8] that although Schwitters focuses on the way of creating a woman relating to social reality – his quest for modernity, he still extends his dominion to the female body. Schwitters uses newspaper in this work instead of the usual fur or lace to make his figure an utterly contemporary. However, he still creates this image of woman as a decorative doll for pleasuring others, through which independency and new value of women are ignored.

While Schwitters presents a harmless and gentle image of women to emphasis and reassertion male authority, Höch presents a tough heroine in her work advocating the independency and new roles of New Woman rather than traditional concepts of housewives of women. So, what Höch wants to express from her work is to overturn the bondage of traditional concepts of female social roles and call on women to participate in society.

VI. CONCLUSION

Germany during Weimar changed in aspects of politics, society, economics, lifestyle as well as art. There were more requests and aspirations from people. And Dada movement made it possible for artists to express their requests and aspirations by art. Hannah Höch took this chance to express her feminism appeal through photomontage during Weimar. And her portrait works were the epitome of feminism spirit at that time.

By contrasting female theme works of Höch with female theme works of another male German Dadaist, Kurt Schwitters, we can find the unique way of art creation, perspective as well as the firm and thorough feminism of Hannah Höch.

First, based on the creation of Hannah Höch's photomontage portrait works, it can be found that Höch doesn't simply choose brilliant images of modern women to praise the improvement of the women's status. On the contrary, she also chooses symbolic images standing for traditional concepts of women. Höch presents a juxtaposition between modern women and traditional women in the form of portrait. This visual language is direct and intense, showing conflict between old and new women and the desire of New Woman who wants to break away from the traditional concept of women, even though the truth is that women still can't get out of the oppression of male chauvinism.

As Makela [15] mentioned in his book, Hannah Höch said in an interview in 1976, two years before she died, "My work did not attempt to glorify the modern woman, on the contrary, I was concerned more with the suffering woman."

Second, in terms of the feminism spirit in Höch's works, Hannah Höch, as a woman, can truly experience sufferings of

women, and pays attention to both women's physiology and sociality rights. Her portrait works are more like posters and documents.

On the one hand, she wants to present the unsatisfied situation of women during Weimar; on the other hand, she wants to call for rational physiological and social rights of women through her works. And her efforts on feminism undoubtedly more or less contribute to the feminism movements in the following decades.

A conclusion section is usually required. Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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