

# Otto Dix, The Skat Players

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## INTRODUCTION

The painting “The Skat Players- Card Playing War Invalids”, created by Otto Dix in 1920, shows the effect that World War I had on the nation, the soldiers, and most importantly on himself. The painter uses Dadaist and Cubist elements in the collage-like way the men are pictured and the geometric shapes used. These were very popular elements in the New Objectivity art style that was very common in Germany after the War; the artists of this age used more obvious symbolism to criticise society than during Expressionism.

## DESCRIPTION

The painting shows three disfigured men sitting around a table in a dark room, possibly a café, playing a card game, according to the title “Skat”. The man portrayed on the left has a wooden leg and arm and one able leg with which he is holding his cards. He also has a hearing tube attached to his ear, very patchy and sparse reddish blond hair, no right eye and a permanent grin because the right side of his mouth is missing. He also has multiple scars on his head and pus-filled boils on the left side of his forehead. The man in the middle has two fake legs, no arms, a metal cup holding his head together, a glass eye, a prosthetic jaw, nose and throat and no left ear. He has a card holder in front of him and is playing with his mouth. The man on the right, wearing an Iron Cross, has no legs, one fake arm, one real arm, a prosthetic jaw and no nose. We can see an inscription on this prosthesis which states “lower jaw: prosthesis brand Dix” with a picture of a man next to it. In the top left corner of work, we can see a round lamp with the contours of a skull inside.

The artist uses unrealistic shapes and forms, which is why the men’s faces are anatomically incorrect and their heads are disproportionate to their bodies; this makes the piece different and the viewer simply must look twice. This use of Cubism makes the men the focus of the painting. The darkness of the background makes them pop out even more, the only other light object in the room being the lamp. The atmosphere created is unsettling and even though we see the men from the outside, we automatically try to imagine what they feel like; it couldn’t have been good.

## ANALYSIS

Because they are the focus of the painting, I am going to concentrate on the meaning of the men and the lamp in this part of my analysis. Due to the fact that the man on the right is wearing an Iron Cross and the men are wildly disfigured, we can assume that these men are veterans of the war. They can’t do anything more with their lives except playing cards. The game that they are playing, Skat, was a very popular game in that era (after WW1). Even though we can’t see any expressions on the faces of the soldiers they seem to be suffering. The lamp with the skull represents their fallen comrades and there are two possible reasons for this: the lamp either shows the opinion of the public - soldiers having died for a noble cause need to be remembered - or it shows the opinion of the men that death is positive because it would mean an end to their suffering.

Another important thing to mention is the inscription on the jaw prosthesis of the man on the right. Otto Dix paints himself as this man, showing us that he identifies with these men and that this is how he sees himself, as a wounded and scarred man. I took a look at some of his earlier works. Before the war his self-portraits show a young, strapping man ready for anything. This changed tremendously

during the war. During the years he painted two types of self-portraits, one type was the scared, disturbed man he was becoming, the other type seems to have kept up appearances to protect himself, presenting himself as a brave and proud soldier.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with this painting Otto Dix shows us what it was like to be a soldier during World War I. He criticises how the war had ruined people by exaggerating their disfigurements. This is a very good example to illustrate how the War influenced art. Art wasn't only pretty anymore, it was a means of expressing your pain and suffering.

I think that this is a very effective painting and it gets the message across loud and clear; the war killed us, not only our bodies but also our souls. I also appreciate that Dix could access this pain and use it to create art. It couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

Kata (Year 9)