

George Grosz

*Der Weg allen Fleisches, 1924-31*

16 – 20 November 2011

In 1930—the year in which the NSDAP achieved its political breakthrough in the election to the Reichstag, when the unemployment rate reached a new high, and *The Blue Angel* with Marlene Dietrich was all the rage in cinemas—George Grosz painted what would be a seminal work of his later Berlin years: *Butcher Shop*. The following year, Grosz expanded on the butcher theme with three further paintings, calling them *The Way of All Flesh (I-III)*. And in November 1931, a contribution that Grosz both wrote and illustrated was published in a popular illustrated magazine under the title "Pig Slaughter in the Countryside".

1930 and 1931 were very productive years for George Grosz. The forthcoming catalogue raisonné of his paintings lists no less than 40 works from this time—of which eight are today presumed to be lost. His final years in Berlin were impacted by the horrendous political and economic upheavals that accompanied the failure of Germany's first democracy. In January 1933, Grosz turned his back on Germany, the "Winter's Tale", where the National Socialists had now gained the upper hand, and made the United States his home for the next 25 years. The works of his Berlin years, which practically coincide with those of the Weimar Republic, make Grosz one of the most significant artists of the 20th century.

The paintings Grosz produced at the beginning of the 1930s are less political and socially critical than those of the previous decade. Stylistically, he had turned away from verism in favour of magical realism. Still-lives and street scenes became dominant motifs, while portraits were rare. What was it that moved Grosz to use a butcher and his shop as the subject of an entire group of works? Unlike August Sander's encyclopaedic series of photographic portraits of the various professions—realized only a few years previously and with which Grosz was certainly familiar—no further descriptions of daily working life followed after the "butcher". Nor did Grosz seem to reference the well-known still-lives of carcasses by genre masters Rembrandt and Soutine.

One possible explanation for Grosz's fascination with meat, the precious staple food, could be the extremely precarious food supply situation for the German population at the time. Their suffering had already begun in 1915 with the sea blockade implemented against Germany by the British with the aim of shattering the civil population's war morale through starvation. The drastic food rationing traumatised an entire generation. In 1915, Grosz was released from military duty for health reasons and experienced the full impact of the social misery first hand. After the war as well, the daily life of many Germans was marked by malnutrition. Food ration tickets remained indispensable for survival, especially in the major cities. As a result of inflation, the catastrophic food situation reached its climax at the end of 1923. The prices for groceries were astronomical; a piece of meat became a luxury item. Fat, milk, eggs and vegetables had disappeared from the menus of most families. Bakers and green grocers became courted citizens—but it was the butcher, above all, who enjoyed the greatest respect.

In 1924, seven politically active artists produced "Hunger—7 Original Lithographs", a portfolio of prints for the International Workers' Relief. In addition to Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix and Heinrich Zille, George Grosz was also part of this act of solidarity. Grosz's contribution once again confirmed his reputation as a pitiless, at times cynical, commentator on the Weimar Republic. Unlike his six collaborators, Grosz did not isolate the hungry from their social context in his portrayals. His composition quite effectively portrays an emaciated working-class family staring incredulously into the abundantly filled window of a delicatessen. For Grosz, hunger was not only a result of economic scarcity, but also of the increasingly unjust distribution of wealth. Grosz published this drawing again in 1925, in his book *Der Spießler-Spiegel (The Mirror of the Bourgeoisie)*.

To those starving in the cities, the scene described in "Pig Slaughter in the Countryside" must have seemed like a feverish fantasy. In 1931, Grosz topped his series of drawings and watercolours devoted to this theme with a short text in the *Frankfurter Illustrierte* magazine. In it, he enthusiastically describes the slaughtering process and, with childlike naïveté, defends the bloody ritual with the question, "for whence shall our ham hock with sauerkraut come, or the splendid smoked ham, the scrumptious sausages, not to mention boiled pork and sausage soup!"

In 1947 Grosz turned once again to the hunger fantasy theme—this time in the grotesque old-masterly style that characterized his middle years in America. Now it is the gaunt "Stickmen", who, driven

by their relentless hunger, carve up a man-sized crucified ham with martial vigour. And in 1958, one year before his death, Grosz created the opulent collage *Schlaraffenland: The Valley of Sausages*, depicting a forest of erect sausages before a Rocky Mountains landscape. It is a final, scathing commentary on his host country, in which ultimately milk and honey do not flow for everyone.

The omnipresence of hunger may not have been the sole source of inspiration for the butcher pictures. In veristic art following the First World War, the butcher shop motif also appears in the work of other artists, such as Otto Dix, as a metaphor for a brutalised society: instead of providing nourishment, the butcher is portrayed as a harbinger of death. And some art historians support the somewhat sensationalist, but not fully unfounded theory that Grosz was referencing the serial killer Fritz Haarmann in his butcher depictions. Haarmann, commonly known as the “Butcher of Hannover”, was executed in 1925, after being found guilty of the brutal murders of 24 male youths. The reports published in the communist newspaper *Rote Fahne* were typical of the furore that the case caused in the Weimar Republic: “There (in his room) he fell upon his victims in homosexual and sadistic orgies, during which Haarmann bit through their throats. Then the dead were drained of their blood. They were undressed, washed and literally carved up.” Soon rumours circulated that Haarmann sold or gave away the flesh of his victims. Up until his arrest, he had had a successful business peddling meats and sausages—and no one could explain where he got his wares in those times of need. Grosz also followed the Haarmann trial with great interest, visiting a police exhibition about the case in 1926. There was also a personal link: one of his gallerists, the flamboyant Herbert von Garvens, was gravely implicated in the course of the Haarmann trial. The art collector and homosexual bon vivant had allegedly driven Haarmann to murder, in order to conceal his own contacts to male prostitutes. These outrageous allegations certainly lacked any foundation; the relentless gossip, however, led von Garvens to emigrate to Denmark. His collection was auctioned off—including among the pictures was George Grosz’s seminal work *Germany, a Winter’s Tale*, which is missing to this day. In the 1950s, Grosz still propagated the alleged connection between von Garvens and Haarmann in an interview.

An interesting, yet inexplicable question is how Grosz arrived at the title *The Way of All Flesh*, which he used not only for the three paintings mentioned above, but also for numerous drawings and prints. And these works were not restricted to the obvious subject of the butcher and his wares, but included soldiers marching in rows towards the front, overweight women on massage tables, corpses on the dissection table, naked men under the shower and old men being pushed in wheel chairs by lewd nurses. For Grosz, all such figures followed the “way of all flesh”. Grosz had surely seen the eponymous Hollywood silent film, for which Emil Jannings won an Oscar in 1927, and one of his favourite authors was Samuel Butler, who in his autobiographical novel *The Way of all Flesh* criticized the hypocrisy of Victorian society. But perhaps the following thunderous passage from the first Book of Moses was decisive:

“And God, looking on the earth, saw that it was evil: for the way of all flesh had become evil on the earth. And God said to Noah, The end of all flesh has come; the earth is full of their violent doings, and now I will put an end to them with the earth.”

This could well have been very much in the spirit of the great critic and moralist George Grosz.