

Early Works

Born in 1889 in Gotha, Germany, Hannah Höch left home in 1912 for cosmopolitan Berlin, studying at the School of Applied Arts and the Royal School of the Applied Arts Museum.

From 1916 to 1926, Höch worked for the famous Ullstein publishing house and its popular women's magazines. Höch's early figurative studies and designs, like *Gegensätze (Opposites, 1916)*, or *Zerbrochene Sterne (Broken Stars, 1917)*, took ornamental pattern as a basis for investigating abstraction, soon moving on to incorporate mass-media photography into these arrangements.

In 1918, Höch's work at Ullstein and her artistic interests came together in a manifesto of embroidery: the artist proclaimed that the purpose of art was not to 'decorate' or to replicate reality, but to act on behalf of the "spirit" and the changing values of a generation. Be it embroidery or collage, for Höch, art was essentially rebellious.

Dada

The art movement Dada flared briefly during and after World War I. The name applied to diverse avant-garde groups active in art, poetry and performance in Zurich, Berlin, Cologne, Hanover, Paris and New York. They rejected bourgeois culture and took apart art and language, appealing to the irrational, chance and subversive humour. Berlin Dada responded to the turbulent times – the defeat of Imperial Germany in 1918 and the establishment of the Weimar Republic – with explicitly political photomontages and exhibition installations.

Living in the German capital during the First World War, Höch met poets and painters, publishers and musicians. From 1916 to 1922, her partner was the volatile fellow artist and Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, and she later became friends and collaborated with Jean Arp, Sophie Taeuber, Kurt Schwitters, and others. The only woman prominently involved in Berlin Dada, Höch's photomontages cannibalise the images of popular culture to satirise not only political figures but also gender inequality and sexual stereotypes.

The famous *Hochfinanz* (*High Finance*, 1923), dedicated to Höch's friend, the Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy, was a sharp criticism of military-industrial collusion, while the jolly *Staatshäupter* (*Heads of State*, 1918–20), criticised figures of political authority. *Porträt Gerhard Hauptmann* (*Portrait of Gerhard Hauptmann*, 1919), cracks open the head of the revered dramatist and Nobel Prize winner to reveal a stream of mainly female faces, extending the pugilism of Höch's collage from the political into the cultural ring.

Anti-Revue

In the cultural battles of the European avant-gardes, images and texts were the most familiar weapons used by artists. But for the Dadaists and their contemporaries, live performances were of equal importance. Performance allows direct interaction, often intentionally and immediately shocking or provoking audiences expecting traditional forms of art. It was in cabarets that the Dadaists read their phonetic poems, wearing masks and performing wild dances to contemporary music and jazz.

In 1925, Höch collaborated with her friend Kurt Schwitters and the composer Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt on designs for an 'Anti-Revue' titled *Schlechter und Besser (Worse and Better)* - a renegade performance of music and texts for which she designed stage sets, costumes and 'figurines'. The Anti-Revue was never performed, but Höch's costume and stage designs - including such comic elements as the extravagantly dressed *Grosse Engländer (The Tall Englishman)* - present a notion of performance that not only included more female characters than many other performances of Höch's time, but also show her humour and playfulness.

From an Ethnographic Museum

Hannah Höch's series *From an Ethnographic Museum* includes some of her most beautiful, intriguing and complex collages. Never conceived as a cohesive group, it consists of several individual works made between 1924 and 1930. Höch is often reported to have been influenced for the series by a visit to an Ethnographic Museum with her then partner, the female poet Til Brugman. Beyond the biographical anecdote, the works become relevant to the layered politics of their time.

The collages juxtapose body parts, mainly of women, with ethnographic objects. They often make use of an iconography of display, incorporating plinths or elements reminiscent of showcases and presentation devices. At once beautiful and monstrous, the compositions allow for a complex discussion about the presentation of the female body, of notions of exoticism and of the legacy of colonial aesthetics and politics.

Höch never publicly challenged contemporary racism or colonialist ideas. However, her choice of collage and photomontage makes use of a criticism implicit in the medium. By emphasising the fragmentation of her constructed bodies, the collages become an important early example for allowing difference, rather than striving for concepts of uniformity - a difficult and unpopular stance in a society geared towards the brutally repressive and totalising ideologies of National Socialism.

Abstraction and the 'Fantastic'

With the beginning of a new dawn in post-war western Europe, Hannah Höch's work underwent a stylistic shift. Previous years saw a preference for the creation of discernible figures and their placement in narrative settings. After 1945, many of her collages took a different approach. By cutting out, rotating or inverting elements of images, she obscured any originally representational function. Instead of legible narratives, she created an ambiguity of forms and meaning. Although she initially related these new works to the category of the 'fantastic', they differ from a surrealist or otherwise figurative tradition. Rather, they serve as a re-investigation of abstraction.

Höch's turn from figurative storytelling can be seen as a joyful exploration of new possibilities after a time of hardship. On the other hand, her interest in abstract art also takes place in the context of an international discourse on the role of art itself. Given the experiences of the war, artists from all over the world questioned the function and form of art, its tradition as well as its previous moral claims. Abstraction, long suppressed by totalitarian regimes during and after the war, became of renewed interest.

Looking back

Hannah Höch carried on working prolifically for over thirty years after the Second World War. Yet, whilst her collages remained varied in form and content until her death in 1978, they took a noticeable shift towards representing abstract forms.

On the one hand, these collages experimented with the abstract quality of the composition as a whole, with the subject of the primary source material becoming of secondary importance. On the other hand, they became retrospective in their outlook by re-examining the strategies and visual patterns of her earlier career, at times even reusing the same materials.

From the 1960s onward, Höch's work displays a renewed interest in figuration and representations of the body. In *Homage to Riza Abasi* (1963), an ironic commentary on the transience of female beauty and of the consuming post-war 'New Woman', is captured in 'miniature'. The *Lebensbild* (*Life Portrait*, 1972–73), one of Höch's last works, becomes a collage of collages, portraying an artist revisiting her own artistic achievements.