Adolf Dehn:
Life and work of a German-American Artist on both Sides of the Atlantic

Making a living as an artist has never been an easy task, but one who did so successfully was Adolf Dehn (1895–1968), a German-American artist from Minnesota whose career as a painter, drawer, and lithographer took him from Minneapolis to New York and from there to Berlin and Vienna and then back to America. Dehn was born in Waterville, Minnesota, a region in the southern part of the state settled by German immigrants in the nineteenth century. His grandparents immigrated in 1843 from Bahn, a town in what was then the Prussian province of Pomerania. They were part of a wave of German immigration known as the *Altlutherische Auswanderung*, which had been provoked by the Prussian Union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in 1817.[1]

Like many Pomeranians, Dehn's grandparents headed for Wisconsin, first settling in Theresa in Dodge County. In 1857, they moved with a small group of Pomeranians to Minnesota, where they established what became known as the German Lake settlement in Elysian Township in Le Sueur County.[2] In the ensuing years, more Pomeranians came to the area, including brothers, sisters, and cousins of the first immigrants. Even today, one can find third- and fourth-generation descendants who learned German at home.[3] The landscape there is reminiscent of Pomerania with its lakes, woodlands, and farms. Everywhere there are fields of grain, corn and alfalfa, as well as pastures filled with Holstein and Guernsey cows.

Dehn's mother belonged to St. Paul's Lutheran Church at German Lake and was known for her pacifist beliefs, while his father was a freethinker who made a living as a hunter and trapper, not wanting to depend on anyone. Given this background, it is not surprising that Dehn became known for his social conscience and independent-mindedness as an artist. An excellent student, he won a scholarship to the University of Minnesota, but decided on art school instead because of his talent for drawing. In 1914 Dehn enrolled in the Minneapolis School of Art. Some of his early works show the influence of German Expressionism, demonstrating his awareness of the latest trends in European art. He enjoyed the many events and activities that Minneapolis had to offer, as well as par-

tying. Fellow student Harry Gottlieb wrote: "We went downtown to work, drink, and hear political speeches, not to look for art."[4]

Most important was his newly found friendship with fellow student Wanda Gág (1893–1946) who later became a best-selling author of children's books, such as *Millions of Cats*. The two had much in common: both had grown up in German-speaking families and both were artists interested in the social and political issues of the day. She came from New Ulm, Minnesota, and was the daughter of the well-known German-Bohemian artist Anton Gág (1859–1908).[5] They attended lectures on a wide range of social, cultural, and political topics. She wrote of Dehn, "I like to talk to him because he does not agree with everything I say, because he has ideas of his own to put into a discussion, and because he is broad-minded enough to look at another person's point of view." After going to a movie, she wrote: "We had a Sundae and we talked about Theosophy, Atheism and Orthodox Christianity, so you see we covered the entire field of religion." Enamored with Dehn, she also wrote "that everyone seems to like him very much."[6]

Both Gág and Dehn won scholarships to the Art Students League of New York and were off to the Big Apple in 1917, but Dehn's plans were shattered by the United States' declaration of war against Germany. As a German-American, Dehn was opposed to the war, but claiming German ancestry was out of the question, as that would brand him as pro-German. Moreover, he could not oppose the war on the grounds that it was a capitalist plot, something he actually believed was the cause of the war, as he would then be attacked as a Bolshevik.

When drafted in 1918, Dehn stated that he was a conscientious objector, drawing on the pacifist views of his mother and the freethinking stance of his father.[7] That claim landed him in the army guardhouse for five months. Upon his release from the guardhouse Dehn was assigned KP duty, spending much of his time in the army peeling potatoes. Fortunately, his congenial nature saved him from the harassment suffered by other COs. At the same time, his family got the cold shoulder due to his outspoken anti-war views. A picture of him during his army days shows him calmly, but defiantly, reading a German newspaper. However, he was honorably discharged in 1919 and returned to New York to focus on learning the printmaking techniques of lithography. Although his

ADOLF DEHN AND BERLIN PRINTER MEISTER SCHULZ WITH *NEW YORK NIGHTS*, 1930

BY PERMISSION, MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ADOLF DEHN, JAZZ IN WIEN
INK, 12 ¼ X 17 ½ , 1926

ADOLF DEHN
LANDSCAPE WITH FARM
WATERCOLOR, 1947

prints sold, profits were not great, but fortunately Gág was there providing him with much needed moral support.

Gág and Dehn decided to head for Europe to see if they could make a go of it there, just as their ancestors had come to America in search of a better life. Gág, however, couldn't make the trip, so Dehn left for Europe in 1921, traveling widely on arrival, but then making Berlin and Vienna his two favorite places to live. His drawings and lithographs, which satirized the high society of Germany and the decadence of the Twenties, sold fairly well. And he also came into contact with kindred spirits who were part of the so-called "Lost Generation" that flocked to Europe after World War I, as well as German artists and intellectuals, and he greatly enjoyed the Bohemian lifestyle as an artist in Europe.

One of his newly made friends was George Grosz (1893–1959), who shared a similar background. Grosz came from a Lutheran family in Pomerania, as had Dehn's grandparents, and they both were about the same age, with Dehn being two years older. They found that they shared artistic and political views as well. The satirical drawings and caricatures of Grosz conveyed a biting critique of high society in Germany and greatly influenced the young German-American artist from Minnesota.[9] The only difference between the two was that Dehn's works had a humorous dimension, while those of Grosz were serious in nature. But both took a critical view of German high society. Dehn wrote, for example, of a visit to a spa in Karlsbad: "I really can't think of a more disgusting place," which he described as filled with "fat toads and jaundiced ladies trying to get back their beauty and health."[9]

In 1926 Dehn met and married a Russian exile in Vienna, Mura Ziperovitch, a beautiful dancer. But the economic collapse caused by the Great Depression made it extremely difficult for an artist and a dancer to eke out a living in Europe, and they decided to move to the United States in 1929. In 1932 they spent the summer in Waterville, but the hard times took their toll on the marriage, which ended in divorce that year.

In 1933, Dehn's friend Grosz immigrated to America fearing the Nazi rise to power in Germany. He found a position at the Art Students League in New York and moved away from his earlier satirical work. Dehn's return to the U.S. also marked a break from his satirical work of the 1920s, as he now turned to the American landscape for inspiration,

often producing watercolor scenes of rural Minnesota. The transformation was remarkable, resulting in there being two periods of Dehn's artistic career, the first covering his life in Germany and the second his life in America. In Germany he connected with German cultural life, but his social conscience prompted a satirical critique of German society. In America he re-connected with his birthplace, causing him to create romantic, often nostalgic treatments of land- and cityscapes.

Dehn's works appeared in magazines like the *New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*. The former social critic now produced popular lithographs and paintings of American urban and rural life. He also received fellowships and teaching assignments, earning recognition and financial security. During World War II, he completed seventeen paintings for the U.S. Navy, demonstrating his support for the war effort, which stood in sharp contrast to the pacifist position he took during World War I. In the 1940s, he also was commissioned by Standard Oil Co. to produce fourteen paintings of its facilities in Louisiana, Mexico and Venezuela. Further commercial success came with commissions to provide twenty paintings for department stores (Gimbel's and Hudson's).

In 1947 Dehn married Virginia Engleman, a young artist and printmaker (1922–2005). They made their home in New York City on West Twenty-First Street, which became a popular meeting-place for artists and friends. In 1951, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship for the second time (the first was in 1939) and he was awarded prizes in a number of art shows as well. Dehn continued to produce lithographs and watercolors and was honored by election to the National Academy of Design in 1961.

By the time of Dehn's death in 1968, much of his early work had been forgotten, as it focused on German society in the 1920s. His later work was not in vogue due to the emergence of abstract and pop art. Nevertheless, in his home state of Minnesota his works depicting its rural landscape have always been popular and can be found today in many museums, galleries, and homes; the Le Sueur County Historical Museum in Elysian, Minnesota, once featured a display of his works. His works can also be found in museums across the country and in Europe, including the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Chicago Art Institute, the British Museum, and the Albertina Museum in Vienna.

Dehn published several books dealing with painting and lithography. His first book was *Water Color Painting*. (New York: The Studio, 1945). This was followed by two more works: *How to Draw and Print Lithographs* (New York: American Artists groups, Inc., 1950), with Lawrence Barrett; and *Watercolor, Gouache and Casein Painting*. (New York: Studio Publications, Thomas Crowell, 1955). In 1957 Dehn published an article on watercolor painting for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In addition to these publications Dehn also provided the lithographs and illustrations for a number of books, such as: Guy de Maupassant's *Selected Tales of Guy de Maupassant*. (New York: Random House, 1950).

Two books have contributed to a growing appreciation of his works: *Adolf Dehn Drawings*, selected by Virginia Dehn, with an introduction by Carl Zigrosser and *The Prints of Adolf Dehn: A Catalogue Raisonné*, compiled by Jocelyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O'Sullivan, with essays by Richard W. Cox and Clinton Adams. Both cover works he produced in Germany and America. His early works are artistically as well as historically important, since they document social life in Germany in the 1920s, while his later works vividly portray scenes drawn from American urban and rural life.[10]

Also contributing to an appreciation of the works of Dehn is the Adolf and Virginia Dehn Gallery, which opened in 2012 at the Arts and Education Center of Manchester Community College in Manchester, Connecticut. The gallery was funded by the Dehn Foundation, which aims to promote and support the arts. Dehn's wife, Virginia Engleman Dehn was from Connecticut and her brother served as the first president of the college. The gallery's website notes: "The gallery presents contemporary art created by both established and emerging artists. Its exhibition schedule has been developed to showcase a wide range of art forms —painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, video, installation and performance art—and to feature the work of regional and Connecticut artists."[11]

Art historian Carl Zigrosser, one of the most perceptive commentators of Dehn's work, wrote of Dehn:

> He was primarily an artist, not a propagandist or revolutionary activist, despite his radical leaning and his contribution of drawings to The Masses and other such publications.... In sum, Dehn was par

> excellence a graphic commentator of integrity and, later, a landscape watercolorist. His contribution, indeed, his significance is that he was an independent, honest man. His two dominant themes—nature and human nature—are ever evident in his work. His variations on the themes are near endless, and all were executed with great facility.[12]

Nature and human nature—these are the themes Dehn depicted in his works. Several other artists have attained success on both sides of the Atlantic, but none perhaps in such difficult times as during the world wars and the Great Depression as did Dehn, a German-American artist from Minnesota who portrayed life in Germany and America as he saw and experienced it.

— Don Heinrich Tolzmann
Cleves, Ohio

VIRGINIA & ADOLF DEHN

NOTES

1. Regarding the Old Lutheran immigration, see: Hans A. Pohlsander, "Old Lutherans from Prussia to America," *The Report: A Journal of German-American History* 46 (2011), 59–77. Also, see: Lieselotte Clemens, *Old Lutheran Emigration to the U.S.A.: History and Motivation, 1839–1843.* (Hamburg: Pomeranian Society, Hamburg, & Pomeranian Foundation, Kiel, 1976) and: Clifford Neal Smith, *Nineteenth Century Emigration of Old Lutherans from Eastern Germany (Mainly Pomerania and Lower Silesia) to Australia, Canada, and the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Clearfield Co., Inc., 2004).

2. A file on the Dehn family can be found at the Elysian Genealogical Research Center of the Le Sueur County Historical Museum in Elysian, Minnesota. The file reports on what the Dehn family found when it arrived at what became Elysian Township: "This place was called the end of civilization at that time. It took six weeks to cut a road through to German Lake…. Indian children were the Dehn chldren's playmates and the friendly Chippewas warned them (not) to go to the island in German Lake as the Sioux were coming to fight, but the Sioux got only as far as Mankato and did not come on to German Lake." The Dehn family arrived in Minnesota several years before the Sioux Uprising of 1862, which did not affect the German Lake area, but did affect the area further to the northwest where New Ulm is located. For information on the frontier conditions at that time, see: Jacob Nix, *The Sioux Uprising in Minnesota, 1862: Jacob Nix's Eyewitness History*. Translated by Gretchen Steinhauser, Don Heinrich Tolzmann and Eberhard Reichmann and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Indianapolis, IN: Max Kade German-American Center, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis & Indiana German Heritage Society, 1994).

3. Regarding German immigration to Minnesota, see: Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Germans in Minnesota*. (St. Paul: Minnesota State Historical Society Press, 2003) and Bryce O. Stenzel, *German Immigration to the Minnesota River Valley Frontier, 1852–1865*. (Mankato, Minnesota: Minnesota Heritage Publishing, 2002). See also my essay on "Minnesota's German Heritage" in my *German-Americana: Selected Essays* (Milford, OH: Little Miami Pub. Co., 2009), 73–78.

4. Richard W. Cox, "Adolf Dehn: The Minnesota Connection," *Minnesota History* 45:5 (1977), 168.

5. For biographical information on the Gág family, see: Julie L'Enfant, *The Gág Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America*. (Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002). For information on her hometown, New Ulm, Minnesota, see: Daniel J. Hoisington, *A German*

Town: A History of New Ulm, Minnesota. (Roseville, Minnesota: Edinborough Press, 2004).

6. Wanda Gág, *Growing Pains: Diaries and Drawings for the Years 1908–1917*. (St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), pp. 330, 375, and 402. For a biography of Gág, see Karen Nelson Hoyle, *Wanda Gág: A Life of Art and Stories* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2010). Further information about her is available at the Wanda Gág House Interpretive Center in New Ulm, Minnesota (http://wandagaghouse.org/#.

7. The local newspaper editor in Waterville, Minnesota, wrote that many young men were going off to war and that it was "humiliating and enraging to have this record of the community marred by an ignoble scion of a socialist family here who… has been reported to be in the guard house since arriving at camp for refusing to obey orders. Persistence in such a treasonable course will undoubtedly mean a long prison term. It is to be hoped that the misguided youth will come to his senses in time to avoid such a result, but he will be entitled to no sympathy in case he bring upon himself such a fate" (Cox, "Adolf Dehn," 172).

8. For information on Grosz, see: George Grosz, *The Autobiography of George Grosz: A Small Yes and a Big No* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982). For bio-bibliographical information on him, see John M. Spalek et al., *Guide to the Archival Materials of the German-speaking Emigration to the United States after 1933*. (Charlottesville, VA: Published for the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia by the UP of Virginia, 1978), 359–362, and also John M. Spalek and Sandra H. Hawrylchak, *Guide to the Archival Materials of the German-speaking Emigration to the United States after 1933* (Bern: K.G. Saur Verlag, 1997), Vol. 3/Teil I, 187–192. For a discussion of Dehn's satirical work in the 1920s and his relationship with Grosz, see Richard W. Cox, "Adolf Dehn: Satirist of the Jazz Age," *Archives of American Art Journal* 18:2 (1978), 11–18.

9. Cox, "Adolf Dehn," 174.

10. See *Adolf Dehn Drawings*, selected by Virginia Dehn, with an introduction by Carl Zigrosser (Columbia, MS: U of Missouri Press, 1971) and *The Prints of Adolf Dehn: A Catalogue Raisonné*, compiled by Jocelyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O'Sullivan, with essays by Richard W. Cox and Clinton Adams (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987).

11. See http://www.mcc.commnet.edu/mcc-on-main/dehn-gallery.php.

12. *Adolf Dehn Drawings*, 7–8.