

The photomontages of Hannah Höch : February 27 through May 20, 1997, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Author

Höch, Hannah, 1889-1978

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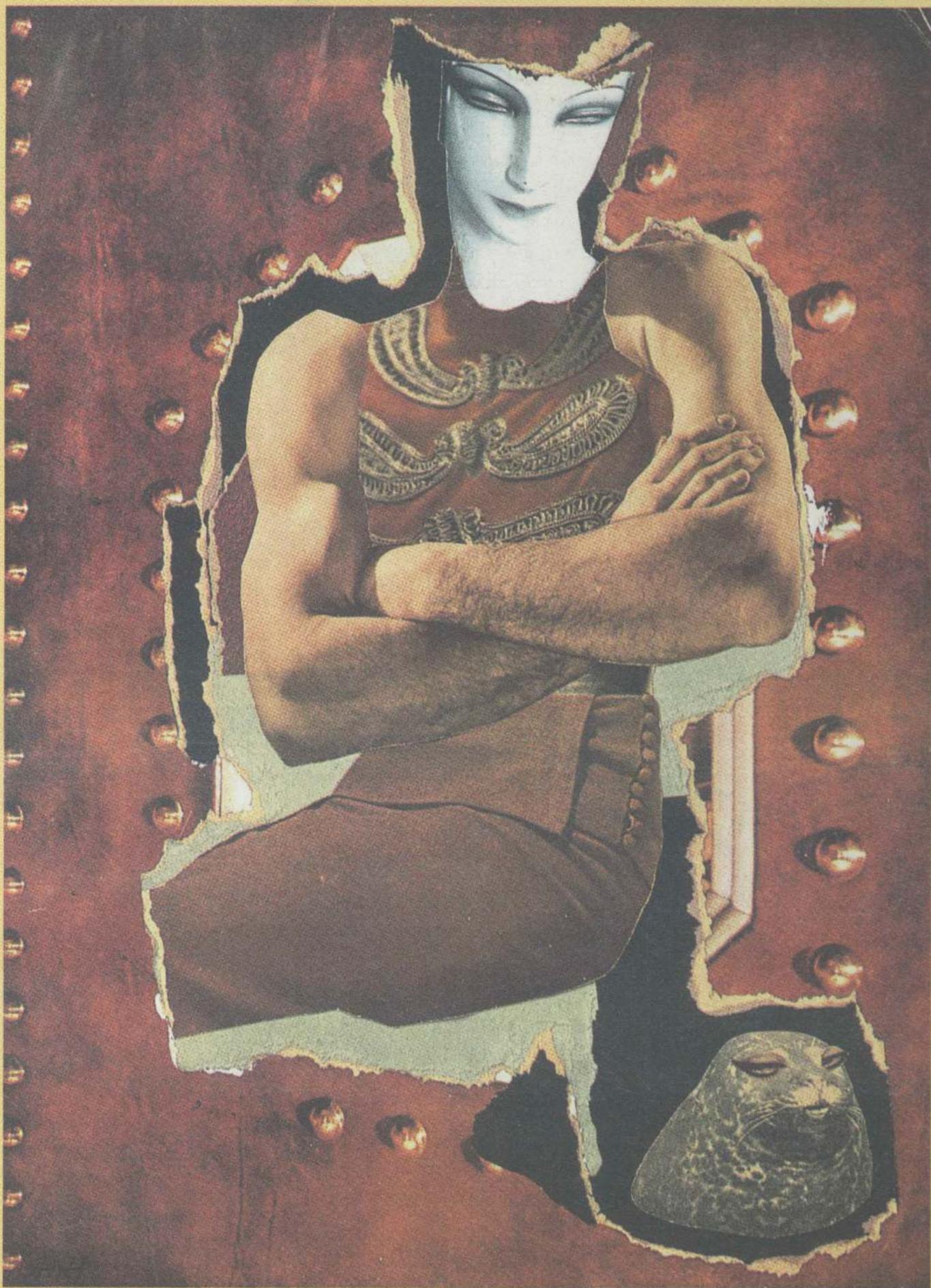
The Museum of Modern Art

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primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

THE PHOTOMONTAGES OF
HANNAH HÖCH



Dompteuse (Tamer), c. 1930. Photomontage with collage, 14 x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (35.5 x 26 cm). Kunsthau Zürich

February 27 through May 20, 1997

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HANNAH HÖCH WAS A PIONEER in the development of twentieth-century photomontage, and her lifelong experiments in the medium made her one of its most adventuresome and adept practitioners. Her basic technique remained the same for more than half a century, consisting of cutting elements out of the vast array of illustrations to be found in the mass-media press and assembling them into montages. During the five decades in which she practiced this method, however, Höch's work exhibited dramatic formal and thematic changes ranging from mordant social commentary to surrealist fantasy to outright abstraction. Despite the variety and innovation Höch's art displays overall, she remains known primarily for the photomontages produced during the early, brief period when she was the only woman among the legendary Dada circle of artists in Berlin. This exhibition, the first in this country to show the full scope of Höch's work in photomontage, allows a new assessment of the artist's accomplishment and examines the impact on her artistic development of the social changes that racked German society through much of this century.

Born in 1889, Höch became part of the Berlin art scene when both World War I and the art movement known as Expressionism were in full swing. She arrived in Berlin from her home in the German province of Thuringia at the age of twenty-two to study the applied arts, which included the creation of designs for wallpaper, embroidery, textiles, and glass. By 1915 she had met the Czech émigré artist Raoul Hausmann, with whom she would live until 1922; Hausmann drew her into the group around Der Sturm gallery—the leading enclave of Expressionist and avant-garde artists and writers in Berlin.

From the mid-teens on, Höch maintained a balance between two seemingly contradictory realms: the world of the avant-garde, whose exhibitions and poetry readings she attended with Hausmann; and the commercial sector, where she worked as a designer of embroidery and lace from 1916 to 1926 at the large Ullstein Publishing Company, creators of popular magazines and

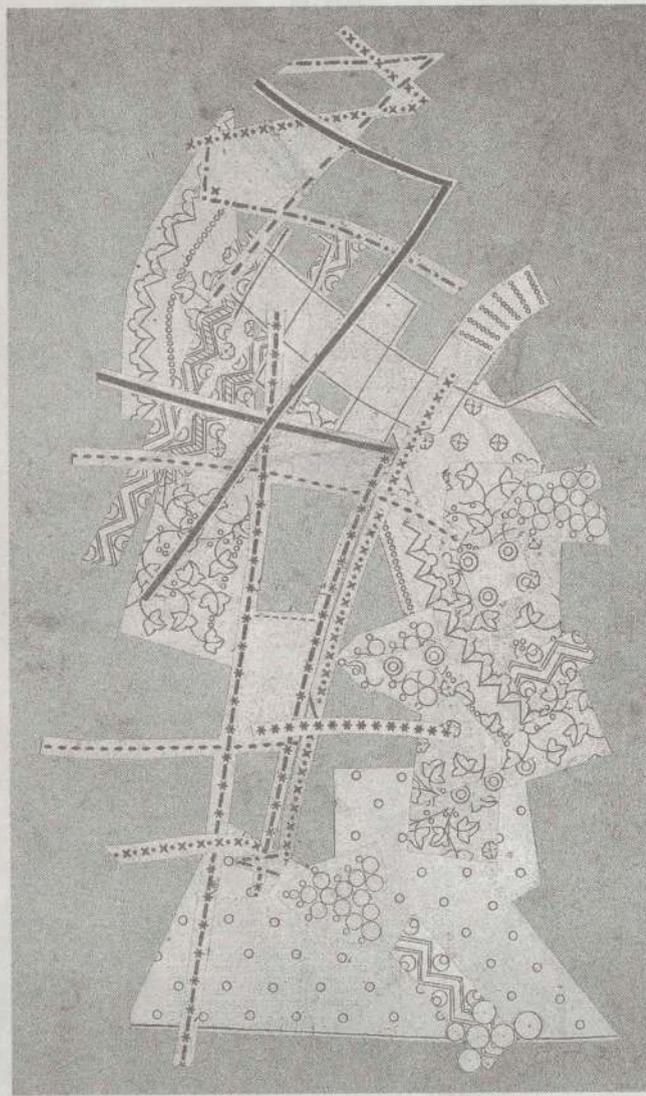
newspapers such as the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* and *Die Dame*. The pattern designs Höch created for Ullstein's women's magazines and her early experiments with modernist abstraction were integrally related, blurring the boundaries between traditionally feminine and masculine modes of form and expression.

BY 1918, A GROUP OF YOUNG Berlin artists disillusioned with war and politics came together under the name "Dada," a random word that reflected their deep mistrust of traditional value systems, whether aesthetic or cultural. Through new approaches to art, poetry, performance, and criticism, Dadaists such as Höch,

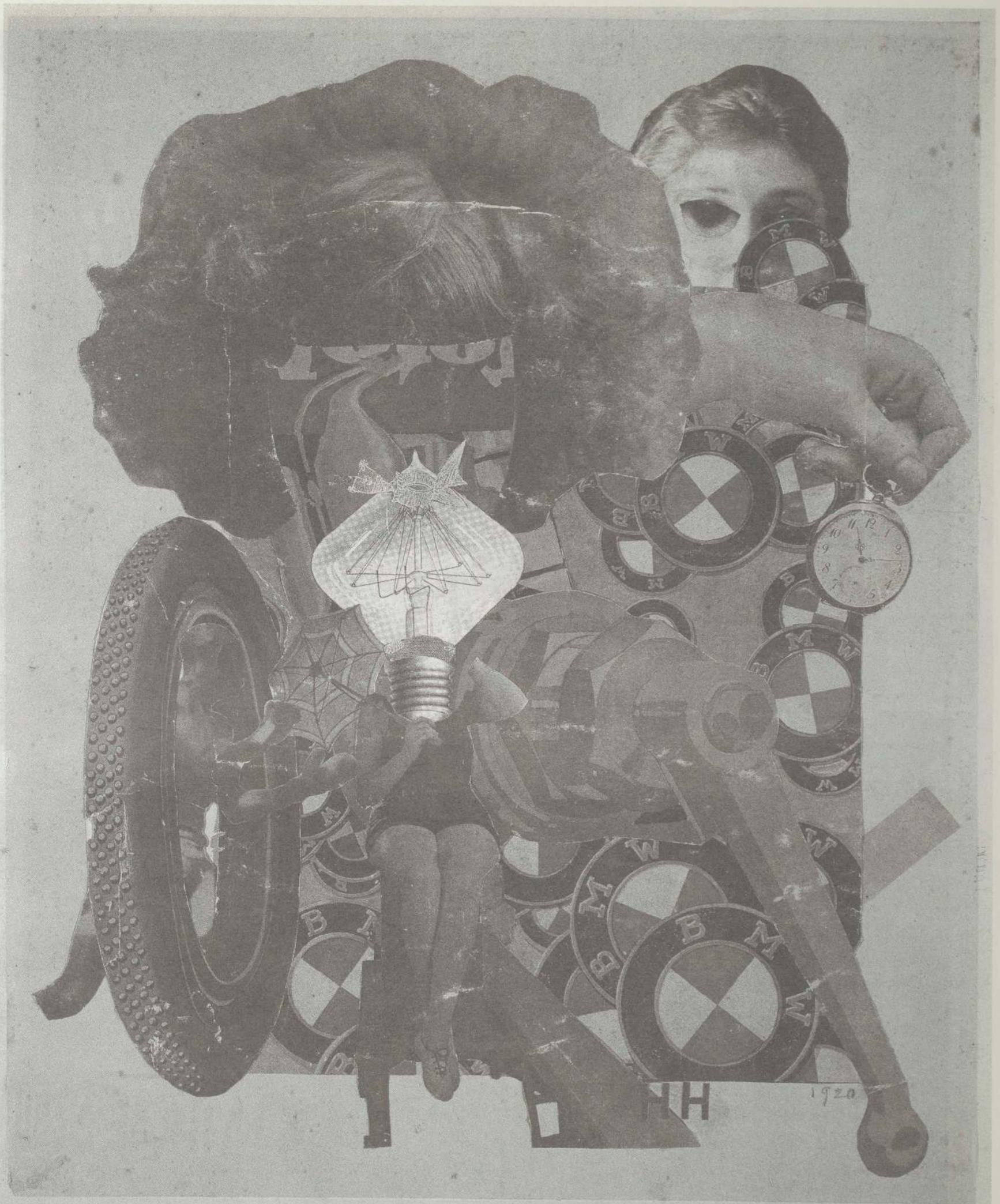
Hausmann, George Grosz, and John Heartfield expressed the turmoil of life in post-World War I Berlin. The instability brought about by the November 1918 revolution and the formation of Germany's controversial Weimar Republic with its economic and social inequalities, the widespread fascination with new technologies, and the proliferation of mass-media forms were all forces in shaping the work of the young Dadaists. In photomontage they found a most effective tool. Cutting photographs and words out of their initial contexts in popular magazines and pamphlets and constructing new contexts for them, Höch and other Dada artists turned clichéd representations of daily life into works whose content questioned society's norms and whose structure echoed its hectic urban pace.

Höch engaged the world of contemporary politics and political figures in photomontages such as *Dada Panorama* and *Cut*

with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany, both of which were exhibited in the controversial First International Dada Fair of 1920. Each presents recognizable figures such as the German Reich President Friedrich Ebert and the deposed Kaiser Wilhelm absorbed within a teeming display of media imagery. In *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Höch puts a proto-feminist spin on the image by metaphorically equating her scissors with a kitchen knife cutting through the traditionally masculine domains of politics and public life. Machine



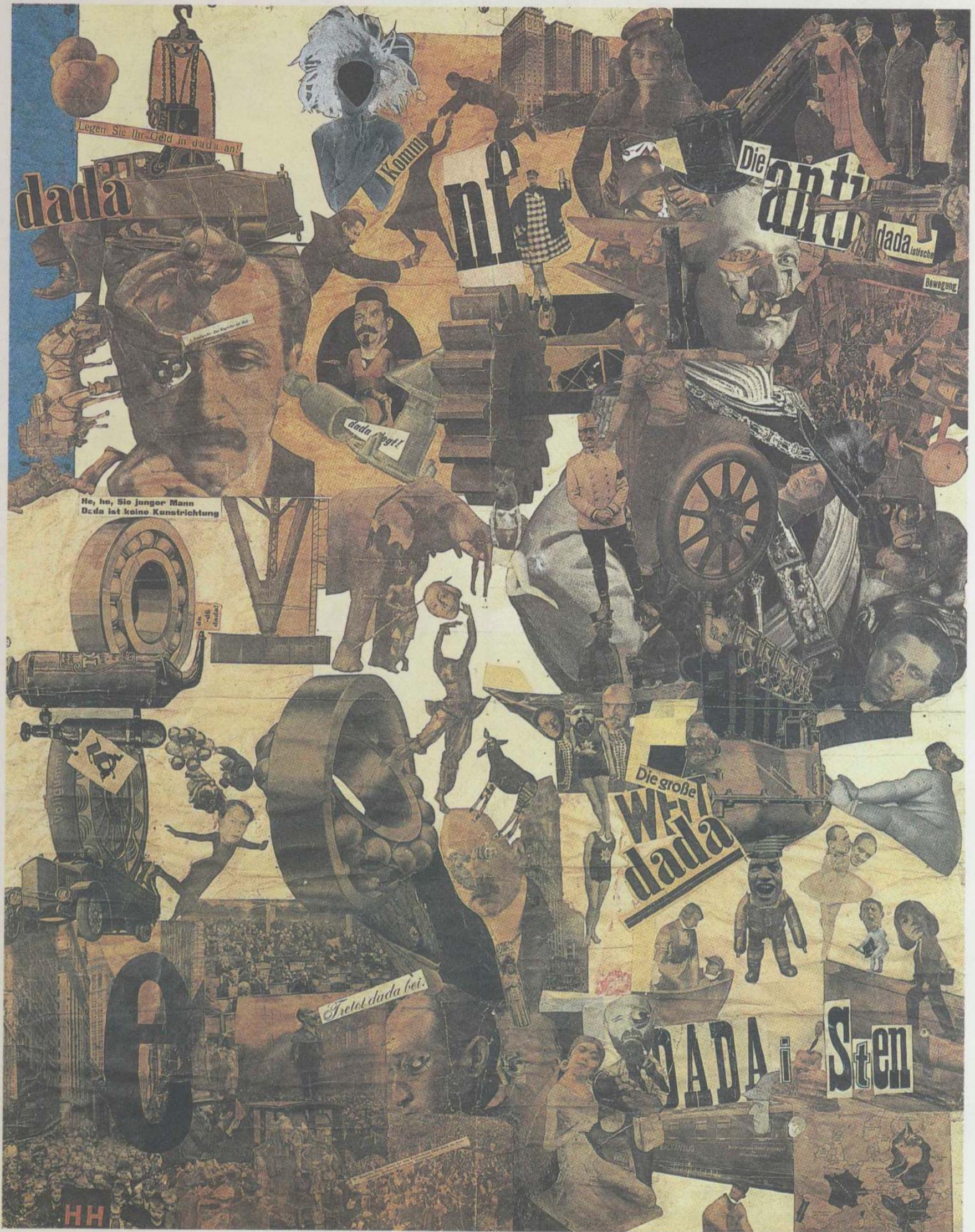
Entwurf für das Denkmal eines bedeutenden Spitzenhemdes (Design for the Memorial to an Important Lace Shirt), 1922. Collage, 10 1/4 x 7 1/16" (26 x 19.5 cm). Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg. Photo ©Elke Wälford, Hamburg



DAS SCHÖNE MÄDCHEN

HANNAH HÖCH 20/

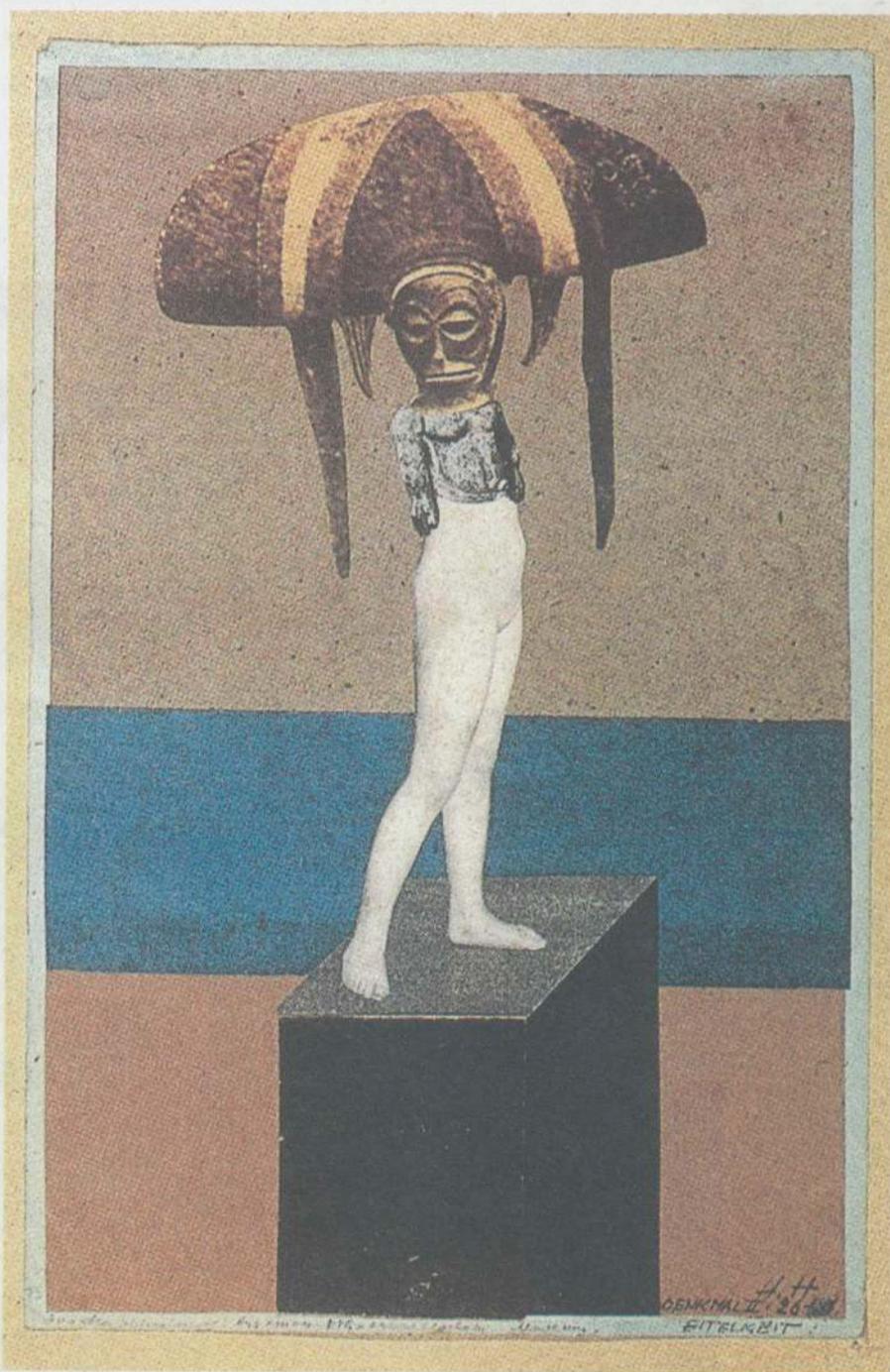
Das schöne Mädchen (The Beautiful Girl). 1919-20. Photomontage, 13 3/4 x 11 1/2" (35 x 29 cm). Private collection. Photo Karlheinz Grünke, Hamburg



Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany). 1919–20. Photomontage, 44 3/4 x 35 3/8" (114 x 90 cm). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie. Photo Jörg P. Anders, courtesy Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

parts and mass demonstrations connect the images of scientists, film stars, dancers, political pundits, and even the Dada artists themselves in a vertiginous composition that became one of the icons of the Dada movement.

Along with the kitchen knife, Höch used media stereotypes of modern femininity, especially the sensational "New Woman," to point at the complicated relationship between the sexes in post-World War I Germany. With her bobbed hair, sleek new fashions, and increasingly frequent appearance on the streets and in the workplace, this so-called New Woman emerged in Europe in the 1920s as a symbol for all that was fashionable and up-to-date in the metropolis. In many of her photomontages, Höch juxtaposes these sporty, active women with modern technology and domestic appliances, creating ironic statements on the ambiguities and deep conflicts that accompanied the new female presence in the public realm.



Denkmal ii: Eitelkeit (Monument ii: Vanity), from the series *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum (From an Ethnographic Museum)*, 1926. Photomontage with collage, 10 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 6 $\frac{5}{16}$ " (25.8 x 16.7 cm). Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg (on loan from private collection)

WITH THE GRADUAL DISPERSAL OF the Dada artists in the early 1920s and her breakup with Hausmann in 1922, Höch entered an increasingly exciting period of experimentation. Her friendships with artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, László Moholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian, and Theo and Nelly van Doesburg expanded her contact with the international avant-garde. Her collages of colored papers and embroidery patterns are related to the abstract clarity and geometric formality of the international Constructivist and de Stijl movements.

From the late 1920s into the mid-1930s, Höch was involved in a lesbian relationship with Dutch poet Til Brugman. During these years her work often treated the equivocal nature of individual identity—particularly female—within the constraints of bourgeois society. One of the most provocative and challenging

of Höch's several series of photomontages is the one created between 1925 and 1930, collectively titled *From an Ethnographic Museum*. Each of these conjoins photographs of Caucasian body parts—usually female—with "primitive" sculptures from non-Western societies. Often set on pedestals, these sometimes sinister, sometimes comic hybrids draw a parallel between Western attitudes toward both women and the "primitive," even as they caustically comment on woman's complicity in her societally imposed definition. Frequently using one sort of prejudice to locate another, the *Ethnographic Museum* series equates woman with the underdeveloped, the foreign, and perhaps the feared, while at the same time mocking Western fetishisms of makeup, fashion, and behavior.

By the end of the 1920s, Höch began to profit from a broadening acceptance of photomontage. Her work was included in several international exhibitions, including the 1929 *Film und Foto* show in Stuttgart, the most comprehensive exhibition to date of both commercial and avant-garde photography and film.

ALL OF THIS CAME TO a halt when Adolf Hitler assumed power in January 1933. Höch and much of the avant-garde were branded "Cultural Bolshevists" and were forbidden to exhibit their work publicly. Many of her friends, including Schwitters and Hausmann, left Germany. Those who stayed behind, like Höch, lived in a state of alienation and fear.

Höch's purchase of a house and garden in a rural suburb of Berlin in 1939, and her brief marriage, from 1938 to 1944, to a German businessman named Kurt Matthies allowed her to establish a distance between her personal life and the cultural and political terrorism of the Nazis. Photomontages such as *Resignation* and *Flight*



Flucht (Flight). 1931. Photomontage, 9 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (23 x 18.4 cm). Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart

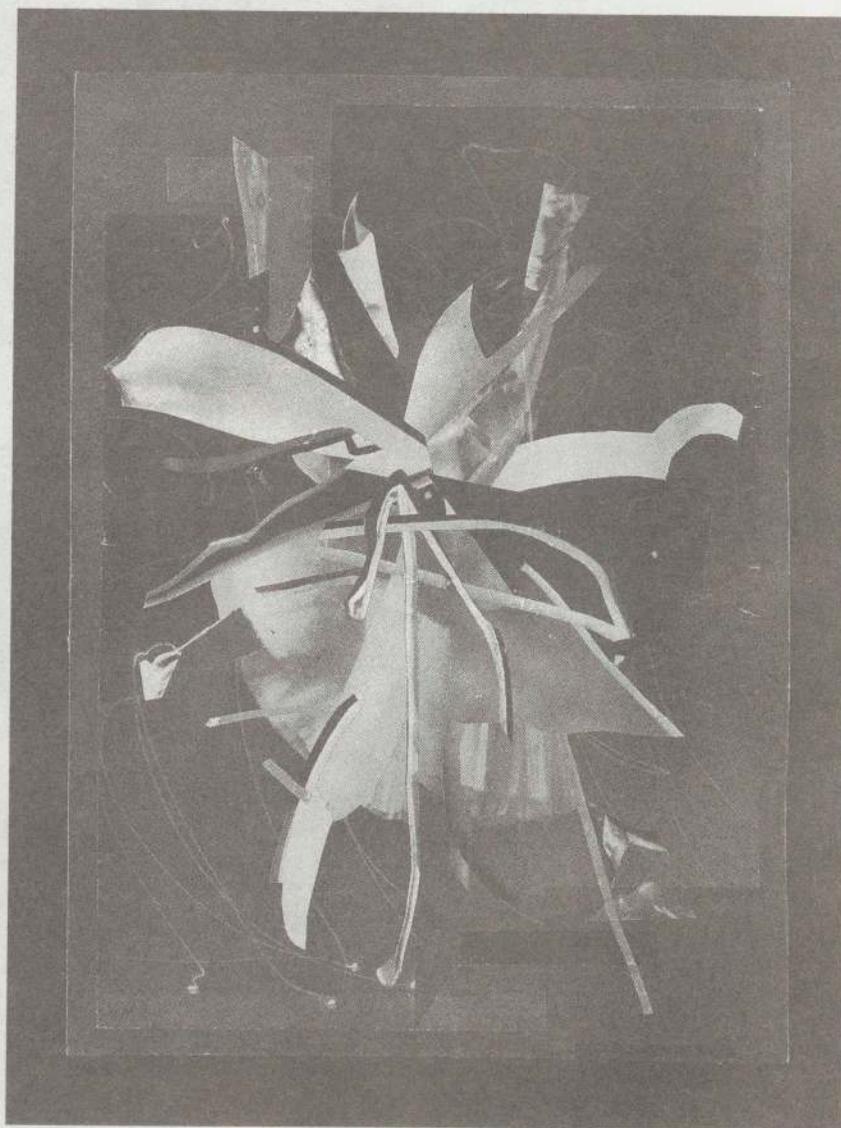
convey Höch's growing concerns for her safety under the fascist regime. Ironically, the constraints imposed by the Nazis forced Höch to find a new freedom in photomontage. No longer able to take aim at accepted social values, she redirected her practice toward creating works that reflect an inner world of fantasy and imagination.

IN 1945 THE END OF THE WAR destroyed Hitler's dreams of a Third Reich. Amidst the rubble of Berlin, artists were anxious to rebuild the sense of culture and community lost under Nazi dictatorship. This restoration was not, however, without political consequences. Divided into four zones by the Occupation forces of England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, Berlin quickly became the site of intense Cold War politics. Art became a symbol of the ideological split between East and West, with abstraction standing for freedom of expression in the capitalist zones and Socialist Realism not only representing the ideal of a worker's state in the Soviet sector, but also perniciously recalling the similar style that had been sanctioned by National Socialism.

Höch's political and aesthetic sympathies were with the faction for whom freedom of expression largely meant abstraction. Unable since the mid-1930s to use photomontage as social commentary, Höch had been experimenting

with its expressive potential, and by the early 1950s she had become capable of producing abstract works whose apparent gestural freedom challenged painting. Höch's technical skill in bending photomontage to the alien task of lyrical abstraction was much enhanced by the proliferation of vividly colored images in the popular press around 1950. During that decade, Höch's work tended to oscillate between two modes. In the first, emphatically colored pictures are arranged in a composition so abstract that no hint of its origins in photography is given, as, for instance, in *Burst Unity*. The second, smaller group comprises works of extreme structural finesse and tonal modulation, such as *Moonfish*; works of this type loudly proclaim their photographic sources yet because they make it virtually impossible for the viewer to name what it is the camera has recorded, they retain a perverse abstraction.

With a renewal of interest in Berlin Dada and the inclusion of her work in major Dada retrospectives in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Höch returned to a subject rarely treated since before the War: media representations of women. Spurred on by the women's movement of the 1960s and anti-high art movements such as Fluxus, neo-Dada, and Pop, Höch once again felt herself part of an international art community employing the

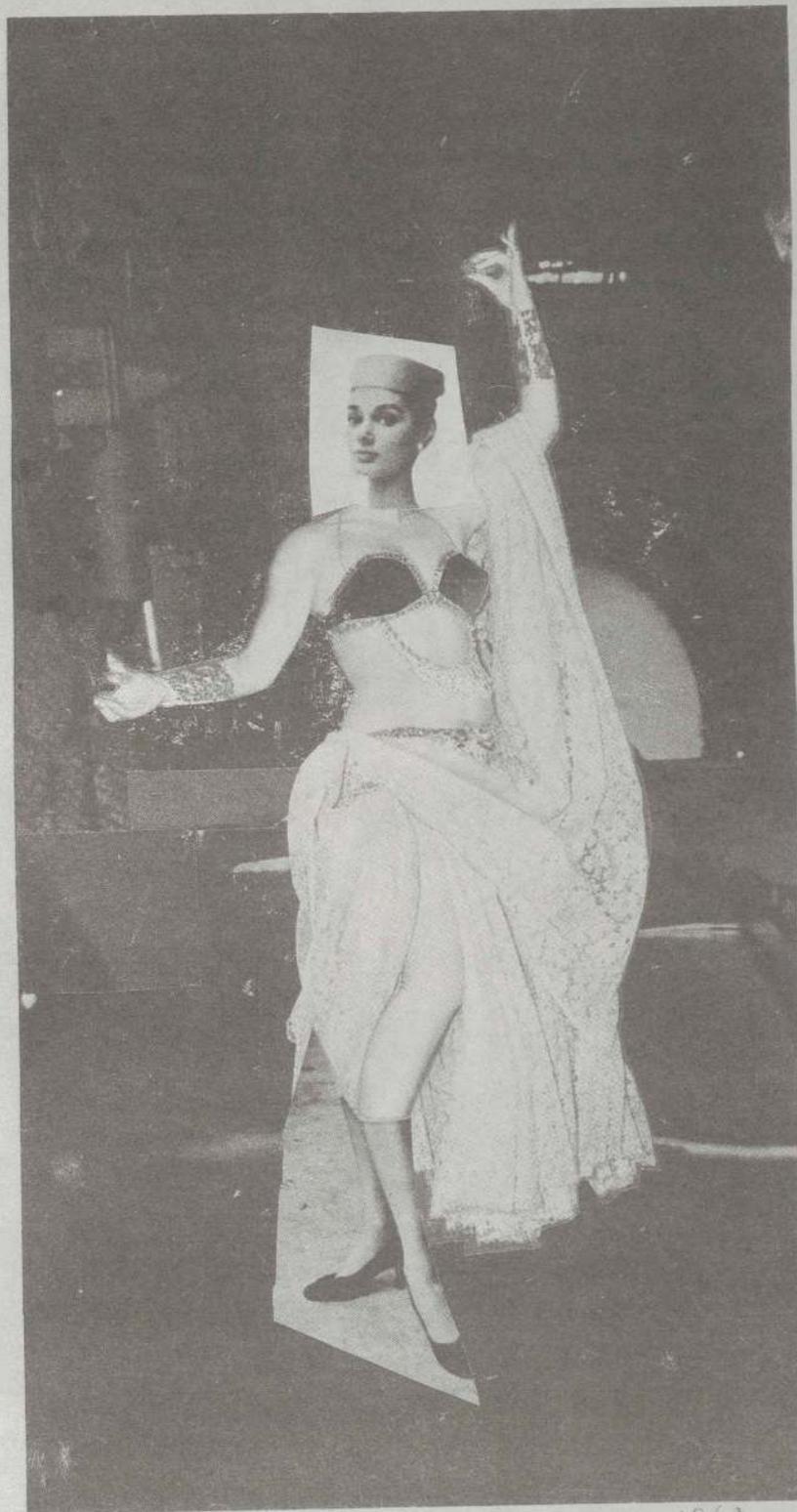


Gesprengte Einheit (Burst Unity). 1955. Photomontage, 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (40 x 29.5 cm). Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart. Photo Glenn Halvorson, courtesy Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

images and materials of popular culture to create ironic commentaries on contemporary social attitudes.

The titles of many of Höch's photomontages from this period, such as *Strange Beauty II*, *Sadness II*, *The Eternal Feminine II*, *On with the Party*, and *Homage to Riza Abasi*, intentionally recall her work from the 1920s and 1930s while focusing on the latest New Woman. As part of that first generation of women forced to come of age with the promise and disruption of the modern, Höch had in her earlier work seen the female subject in a more complex and intimate manner. Her representations of the New Woman of the 1960s tend to be compositionally simpler and less charged than those of forty years earlier. Höch used the new New Woman much more obviously and consistently to target the female's acculturated strategies of seductiveness. Her figures are often endowed with such high camp allure that the acquired mannerisms of male response are as much satirized as the siren come-on. These high-spirited works are some of the last Höch was to make as her eyesight and health failed in the decade before her death in 1978.

IN HER PHOTOMONTAGES, Hannah Höch left a rich legacy. That she never ceased to work in the technique, despite long periods deprived of public validation, is a tribute not only to her abiding love for the medium, but to her strength of purpose. Against all odds, she kept faith in herself and in her medium of choice, and only thus was able to craft a body of work unique in both form and content.



Hannah Höch

Homage à Riza Abasi (Homage to Riza Abasi). 1963. Photomontage, 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{16}$ in. (35.2 x 18.3 cm).
Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Stuttgart

THE PHOTOMONTAGES OF
HANNAH HÖCH

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The following programs will be held in conjunction with this exhibition:

Tuesday, March 18, 1997

Photomontage: The Nasty Pastime of Dada's Good Girl

A lecture by Amelia Arenas, independent lecturer and writer on art

Tuesday, April 8, 1997

Eating Well: Consuming the Old and the New in Hannah Höch's Photomontages

A lecture by Maud Lavin, cultural historian and author of *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: The Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch* (Yale University Press, 1993)

All talks begin at 7:00 p.m.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2

Tickets: \$8.00; members \$7.00;

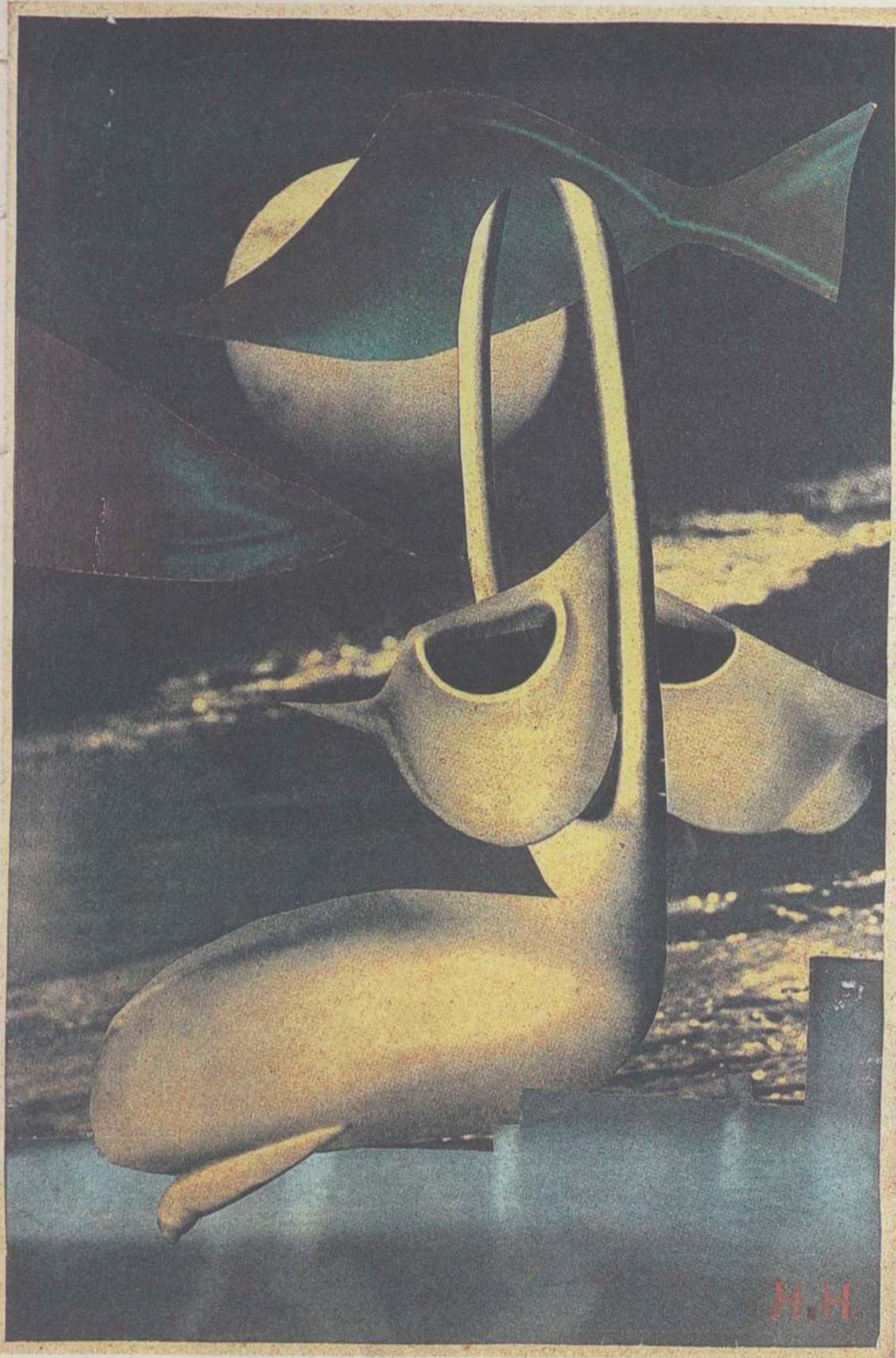
students and seniors \$5.00

Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk.

For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9781.

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Mondfische (Moonfish). 1936. Photomontage on cardboard, 11 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (28.8 x 19.8 cm). Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Photographie und Architektur, Berlin. Photo Hermann Kiessling, Berlin

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