America in the Eyes of Weimar Germany

The German House in Ashton Center looks at the influence of American culture on Germany in the 1920s

The German House in Ashton Center on the Bloomington campus is hosting an exhibition titled “Looking to America: Americanism in the Art and Culture of Weimar Germany, 1918-1933.”

The free exhibit was designed and produced by the Goethe-Institut Boston to serve as an educational exhibition for colleges, libraries, or conference locations.

The exhibit introduces American audiences to the enormous impact of America on the art and culture of Germany between the two world wars. The rage for jazz and skyscrapers, the romance with American modernity swept all of Europe after World War I. But nowhere was America’s influence as profound as in Germany, and nowhere was it as hotly debated. The Weimar Republic looked to the United States as a model for both industrial and cultural modernization.

Focusing on art of the 1920s, the exhibition offers a cultural-historical documentation of Germany’s Amerikanismus. The individual topics—ranging from German visions of the Far West to skyscrapers, and the passion for jazz and American movies—are surveyed in brief texts and illustrated by color reproductions of works of art, period photographs, and by quotations from literary sources. The artists featured include George Grosz, Otto Dix, Hannah Höch, Rudolf Schlichter, Max Beckmann, and photographs form the Bauhaus.

In documenting the “Americanization” of German culture and society following World War I, the exhibition provides a historical background for present-day American influence in Europe. This exhibition is of interest to both the students and faculty of German literature, history, art, and film at Indiana University and to the larger community of high-school students and teachers of German in South Central Indiana.

The German House has been hosting the exhibition in Ashton Center’s Griggs Lounge which is located next to the three language houses (French, German, and Spanish) in Ashton Vos. The residents of the German House have been actively involved in setting up the exhibition, organizing the opening weekend activities, and staffing Griggs Lounge while visitors are present.

The opening weekend activities on March 29 and 30 included presentations by undergraduate and graduate students on topics related to the exhibition such as “Envisioning the Foreign: The Exotic in American Movies 1914-1921,” “Popular Dance in the 1920s,” “Women’s New Hair-styles,” “Fordism,” and “1920s German Fashion.” Graduate student Leslie Ortqust-Ahrens (Comparative Literature) introduced the exhibit. In the afternoon, the silent films Sunrise by F.W. Murnau and City Lights by Charlie Chaplin were shown.

Hosting this exhibit and the student conference, the German House has revived its role at Indiana University as the center for things German on the Bloomington campus. The Office of International Programs, the Goethe-Institut in Boston, and the Department of Germanic Studies have supported this effort financially and logistically.

This year the German House has also hosted a weekly dinner table in the Ashton cafeteria, shown a series of German films, hosted a large Oktoberfest, and—in coordination with the other language houses and with the financial support of International Programs—initiated a publicity campaign in Indiana high schools to heighten awareness of Indiana University’s offerings in foreign languages and cultures.

Astrid Klocke
Director of the German House

Astrid Klocke (right), organizer of the exhibit, poses in front of the panels with John Moses, doctoral student in French, and Nancy Lorenz, associate director of Residence Life.