

# *Hitler's Kampf Against Modern Art: A Retrospect*

By ALFRED WERNER

■ History, someone observed, is an excellent teacher—what a pity she so often has rather inattentive pupils! It is for the edification of these that attention must be drawn again to an event that took place about three decades ago: Nazism's prohibition of all individualistic art within its reach—art, that is, which freely expressed a painter's or sculptor's intentions with all the means at his disposal. The specific condition of the arts under totalitarianism is too large a topic to be dealt with here. Stalinist Russia would require a special chapter. Khrushchev told a group of artists that their works looked as if "daubed by the tail of a donkey," but he did not demand the arrest of these heretics, and after Khrushchev's fall artists (and writers) have been able to make increasing inroads into the stifling "Socialist Realism" that served as a roadblock to untrammelled expression. It is well known that recently in Yugoslavia and Poland artists have enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom to create in whatever manner they chose. Such modern dictators as Pilsudski, Franco, Salazar, Perón, and Castro did little to interfere in artistic matters, and Mussolini permitted modern art of all schools to be shown at the Biennales of Venice.

The German chapter has no exact parallel in history, yet it ought to be recalled as something that could happen again almost anywhere. During the past few years, responsible German educators have been raising a finger in a gesture of warning. They could do

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this in Western Germany, but not in the Eastern Communist-controlled part of the country, officially called the German Democratic Republic. On a recent visit to East Berlin I saw, in state-sponsored exhibitions—there are no private galleries—paintings that in style and technique reminded me sadly of the art encouraged by the Third Reich. Though works by fifty, or even a hundred, different artists might be shown, the differences in subject matter or execution were so slight that it seemed as if one person, with undeniable skill and indefatigable fanaticism, had produced, in the accepted blending of realism and idealism, all the various items on display. Nor can viewers who dislike the stuff publish their dissenting opinions. I am not convinced that the “thaw” has had much chance to melt the ice accumulated since the orthodox Marxists, Pieck and Ulbricht, managed in 1949 to proclaim the Deutsche Demokratische Republik.

In the Federal Republic of Germany the arts are free, and experimentation is favored by the preponderant majority of critics, museum directors, and collectors. Still there are pockets of “resistance.” In the controversy between the abstract painter Willi Baumeister and the art historian Hans Sedlmayr (who, after having supported Nazi tenets for years, became a champion of “sanity” and “morality” in art under a Christian camouflage) there were many, too many, who sided with the latter, too militant in his argumentation for a scholar. While his arguments were proffered on a high intellectual level, at least, several less scholarly writers have attacked all unconventional art of the last thirty or forty years with propositions seemingly lifted from the arsenal of Nazi writers.

Of course, conservatism has a legitimate place in art, as it has in politics, but the violent tone assumed by some of the German spokesmen for “sane” art makes one wonder whether, should they ever gain the upper hand, they might not try to apply methods used three decades ago. I detected an unwarranted innuendo in a speech made by a high government official who warned a group of architects against the use of the “un-German” flat roof that might do well in Tel Aviv, but not in Germany, where the Germanic gabled roof was appropriate. In Hamburg—internationally known for its democratic spirit—an exhibition of the painter Paul Wunderlich was closed by the police on a charge of obscenity, and some of the pictures were confiscated. (In New York City visitors might have uttered their

objections to this aspect of the prominent painter's work, but there would have been no interference on the part of the police.) In the same city I witnessed a heated discussion, in the course of which several men in the audience—composed mainly of middle-aged businessmen—demanded that certain pieces of abstract sculpture in public places be dynamited.

*Caveant consules!* But even such a respected leader as Chancellor Erhard recently assailed what he called "phenomena of degeneration in modern art." While he aimed at Günter Grass and other novelists, many were startled to hear a spokesman of the new democratic Germany use a phrase very common in the Nazis' vocabulary. So far, no pictures have been burned in West Germany, but members of a militantly Protestant youth organization publicly burned books by Günter Grass, Erich Kästner, Albert Camus, Françoise Sagan, and Vladimir Nabukov in disapproval of their contents. Time and again philistine anger has led to the removal of sculpture that is not strictly realistic portraiture from public buildings or public squares for which it had been commissioned.

Mostly for the enlightenment of West Germans who were too young to have experienced Hitler's war against modern art, or who were already adults in 1933 but had conveniently forgotten the horrors of life under a dictatorship, German scholars felt compelled to arrange the highly informative exhibition, *Entartete Kunst: Bildersturm vor 25 Jahren* (Degenerate Art: Destruction of Art 25 Years Ago). It was held in Munich in 1962—ironically in the same Haus der Kunst which, in 1937, as Haus der deutschen Kunst, had played host to the sort of things Hitler approved of. Though, by necessity, only a small fraction of the condemned and confiscated art could be shown, the lesson for the astute visitor was overwhelmingly clear. After all, the artists whose works had once been removed from German museums included Archipenko, Barlach, Beckmann, Braque, Chagall, Corinth, Ensor, Feininger, Gauguin, van Gogh, Grosz, Heckel, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Kirchner, Klee, Kokoschka, Laurencin, Lehmbrock, Liebermann, Marc, Masereel, Munch, Nolde, Pascin, Picasso, and Schmidt-Rottluff. This selected list alone reads like a "Who's Who in Modern Art."

The battle against progressive art in Germany reached a climax in 1937, but it started much earlier. Already in 1911 a group of more

than one hundred and twenty German artists, nearly all now deservedly forgotten, issued a *Protest deutscher Kuenstler*, a manifesto assailing Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, and their German disciples, and demanding their boycott. The fight went on. When, in 1930-1931, Nazis temporarily ruled the government in Thuringia (one of the states within the Weimar Republic), one of their official actions was to eliminate works by expressionists from the Schlossmuseum in Weimar. However, while under the Kaiser, and during the Weimar Republic, all kinds of groups of individuals could fume against modern art, they were not empowered to do physical harm either to artists or to works of art.

This changed when, with Hitler, the Babbitt came to power, the spokesman for the worst taste, the worst instincts in Germany's *Kleiner Mann*. Hitler was shockingly limited in his appreciation of art and spectacularly untalented as an artist. Yet, to the detriment of all German painters, sculptors, architects, critics, collectors, and just appreciators of art, Hitler considered himself above everything a born artist. As a teen-ager he infuriated his father by declaring that he wanted to be an artist. "Artist!" Aloys Hitler shouted: "Not as long as I live, never." In his autobiography, Hitler adds: "My father would not abandon his 'Never.' I became all the more consolidated in my 'Nevertheless.'"

In 1907 the young Hitler prepared himself to enter Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts. His first attempt was unsuccessful; "Test drawing unsatisfactory," was the verdict in the Academy's Classifications List. A year later, when he presented himself for the second time, he was not even admitted to the examination, for the drawings he submitted were too poor. (He never forgot this personal defeat, and as late as 1942 grimly recalled, before his assembled staff, the Viennese professors' lack of insight and discrimination.) He nevertheless continued to refer to himself as an artist. Legal documents drawn up only a year before the Nazis became Germany's second strongest party describe him as a "*Kunstmaler und Schriftsteller*" (professional painter and writer). He told Fritz Wiedemann, his consul in San Francisco, that had Germany not lost the First World War, he, Hitler, would have become a great architect, "such as Michelangelo." A few days before the outbreak of the Second World War, he explained to the British Ambassador, Sir Neville Hender-

son, that he was an artist by nature and that, if the Polish question were solved, he would retire to live his life as an artist rather than as a war lord.

All who have seen Hitler's paintings agree that he had not the slightest talent. His stiff, precise, angular vistas of Vienna were copied from postcards; his human figures stand like stuffed dolls in front of the palaces; he was unable to draw either a human body or a human face. His taste veered towards the sentimental in painting and sculpture, and towards imitations of Greek temples in architecture. He admired the pagan idylls of the nineteenth-century Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin, about whom the critic Julius Meier-Graefe has written:

The noisiness of his pictures challenges curiosity; they are fragments of pretentious phrases which at a distance sound like revelations and tempt us to come near. A great thing is being attempted; here is a man who is to speak to his contemporaries in the tongue of the Old Masters! Painful indeed is the disillusion when one realizes the paltry result of these clamorous preparations, the triviality of these bombastic splendors. We expect a philosophy of life and find nothing but a turgid melodrama.

Hitler's nostalgia for sleepy German provincial towns was gratified by another nineteenth-century master, Munich's Karl Spitzweg. Among the many pictures he admired, only a few were indisputable masterpieces, but all were "safe" art: for instance, Jan Vermeer's *Artist in His Studio*, which he pressured the Czernin family into selling to him for a song.

Hermann Goering also posed as a connoisseur and patron of the arts. Like Hitler, he appreciated only the safe, trustworthy art of the last century (and paid a fortune for a "Vermeer" that, after Goering had been hung at Nuremberg, turned out to be a forgery). Only twice did Goering enter the Kronprinzenpalast, which was Berlin's museum of modern art. He did not like a show of modern Italians, including Casorati, Carrá, Di Chirico, and Modigliani, he was irritated by the quiet and undemonstrative war memorial by Käthe Kollwitz (a sculpture of a kneeling couple), and the paintings of Edvard Munch disgusted him despite the counsel of those who pointed out their Nordic element.

Alfred Rosenberg, founder of the *Kampfbund fuer deutsche Kultur*, a militant organization that proclaimed the superiority of

all manifestations of Germanic culture, was the Nazi party's chief theoretician. He was himself the maker of tame and tedious little landscape paintings, and he had no understanding of modern expressionistic art. He attacked Nolde's oils as "Negroid" monstrosities and the figures in Barlach's war memorial at Magdeburg as "little half-idiots under Soviet helmets."

The only one in the Nazi hierarchy who had a more developed, more sophisticated taste was Goebbels. He is said to have owned works by Ernst Barlach. But he did not intercede with Hitler in behalf of the German expressionists, since his sole concern was winning over the German nation to National Socialism by clever exploitation of propaganda through the press and the movie industry.

The driving force behind the "purification" of art was Hitler. Ironically, no German, French, or American president, no European king ever devoted so much time and energy to art and architecture as did this frustrated ex-artist. At the same time, there never was a ruler who had such complete confidence in his own artistic judgment, and never (not even under Stalin) were artists and art scholars so unfree as they were in the Third Reich. As early as 1933 all museum directors who had encouraged modern art were ousted from their positions. To pursue their vocation and exhibit their works, German artists had to be "Aryans" and, in addition, to conform to Party-approved aesthetics; if they did, they could become members of the Reich Chamber of Art (a department of the general Reich Chamber of Culture, attached to the Propaganda Ministry).

Mediocrities, who in the twenties had often used a pseudo-modernistic vocabulary, quickly adopted the "Blood and Soil" aesthetics when Hitler came to power, choosing careers that guaranteed them a good living in return for certain services—the making of idealized official portraits, the carving of Reich eagles and of huge athletic types, the decoration of Party headquarters, and so on. But beside these opportunists (and the numerous sincere and simple traditionalists) there were scores of first-rate artists who could not silence their conscience, who refused to conform, and who suffered severely for their obstinacy.

The real *Kampf* was delayed for a little over three years, a time during which the Nazi regime consolidated its positions within, and tried—all too successfully—to win confidence abroad. The first

major blow was struck in the fall of 1936, soon after the departure of all foreign visitors to the Olympic Games that had been held in Berlin. The modern section of the Kronprinzenpalast was closed. Next came the purging of museums: all in all, 16,550 works of art were confiscated as undesirable. One thousand two hundred seventy-three items were removed from the Museum Folkwang in Essen, and the new director—a certain Count Baudissin—who rid himself of these treasures, including many works by Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, and Nolde, became “famous” for his astonishing assertion that the greatest work of art was the steel helmet worn by the German soldier. Another sufferer was the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, to the extent of nine hundred eighty-three objects.

The most “degenerate” of these objects were dispatched to Munich where the Nazis wished to confront these abominations with a demonstration of the sole healthy type of art. In July, 1937, this confrontation took place in Munich, which now received the honorary title of “City of German Art.” All of the Nazi hierarchy came to the openings of the two much-heralded exhibitions. While I did see the show of 1962, I confess that no curiosity could have provoked me in 1937 to leave the relative safety of my native Austria to view the gigantic shenanigans in Munich, only a few hours away. But I read avidly, and with horror, the reports that seeped from neighboring Germany into an Austria that was still free to publish objective descriptions by independent journalists of what they experienced during that long summer in Germany’s third-largest city, one that for a hundred years had been a capital of the arts in Central Europe.

Hitler was introduced by Goebbels, who eulogized the Fuehrer as the ideal combination of statesman and artist, describing him as a “master builder.” Not to be outdone, the Bavarian Minister of the Interior, Wagner, hailed Hitler as “the greatest of living artists.” Hitler then made a ninety-minute speech that drew attention to the “clean and healthy” art in the Haus der deutschen Kunst, and the filthy, subversive, and abominable things displayed, as a warning to all good Aryans, in several rooms in old buildings of the Hofgarten. Before the opening of the Haus der deutschen Kunst show, thirty thousand, packing the huge square on Prinzregentenstrasse, heard Hitler thunder against works of art that “cannot be understood but need a swollen set of instructions to prove their right to exist and

find their way to neurotics," and also against those "degenerate half-wits who on principle see blue fields, a green sky, and sulphurous clouds." True to form, he added a sharp warning: "If they really paint in this manner because they see things that way, then these unhappy persons should be dealt with in the department of the Ministry of the Interior, where we sterilize the insane. . . ." He contrasted this "conspiracy of Jews and Bolsheviks" with those noble Aryan artists who were "seeking after the true and genuine quality of our national being and after a sincere and upright expression of the inwardly-divined law of life."

The approved national art was shown in the Haus der deutschen Kunst, a dull, imitation Greek temple by Hitler's chief architect, Troost; solidly built, it was designed "to project like a cathedral of the past into the millenia of the future." (Renamed the Haus der Kunst, it is now filled with nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, most of which would have made Hitler squirm; disliked by many people of Munich, partly because its cornerstone had been laid by Hitler, and partly because it is such an uninspired piece of architecture, it is expected to be demolished in the near future.) This building and its contents, in that summer of 1937, caused one of the numerous foes of Hitlerite art to compose a quatrain that suddenly made the rounds:

*Kennst du das Haus, auf Saeulen ruht sein Dach,  
von Blut und Boden strotzet das Gemach,  
und Zieglers nackte Maedchen sehn dich an  
was hat man dir, du arme Kunst getan?*

This take-off on a well-known poem by Goethe can be freely translated: "That high-roofed columned mansion, long ago, today with Blood and Soil is all aglow, and Ziegler's naked wenches moon at you, O Art, poor thing, what have they done to you!"

The reference is to Professor Adolf Ziegler, head of the Reich Chamber of Art (with a membership of 42,000!), who was in charge of both exhibitions in Munich. In the Haus he was represented with his notorious pictures of blonde Aryan nudes. Ziegler's painting technique was flawless. He also professed a high standard of morality that made all the more ludicrous the distinctly pornographic undertones of his paintings, quite overlooked by his friends but not by his

foes, who dubbed them "masturbation pictures." The Zieglers were among the approximately one thousand works of art (culled from about eleven thousand entries) that had received the Fuehrer's approval and thus could be shown. As a foreign observer put it, the exhibition appealed to all feelings—religious, patriotic, racial—except to the aesthetic. Everything catered to Hitler's *spiesser* mentality: representations of the happy German family, motherhood, heroism, farm life, smiling landscapes, and female nudes. Everything was highly descriptive; the drawing and painting were tight and meticulous, since Hitler would not tolerate "unfinished" pictures; men and objects were photographically realistic, and there was little room for imagination. Two pictures were the stars in the show: *The Alarm*—two grim-faced SA men fastening their belts and caps, ready for the fray in the good cause of National Socialism, and, in particular, a portrait of Hitler clad in the armor of a medieval knight, carrying a swastika banner. The sculptures were on the level of the paintings.

From these vapid, characterless effigies the burgher could stroll to the Hofgarten Arcades and see the seven hundred and thirty objects condemned as "Bolshevistic atrocities" and "artificialities imposed by Jewish taste in art." The posters inviting to this show read as follows:

Tortured canvas—

Spiritual decay—

Sick visionaries—

Lunatic incompetents—

Awarded prizes by Jewish cliques, praised by literati, they are the products and producers of an "art" upon whom governmental and municipal institutions irresponsibly squandered millions of the German people's money while German artists were starving to death. Like the "state" [i.e., the Weimar Republic that had been destroyed by Hitler] was its "art."

Look at it!

Judge for yourself!

Somehow, though, the Nazis misjudged their nation's taste. While they did want the people to see the "Degenerate Art," they must have been alarmed upon noticing that three times as many people flocked to see it as came to see the desirable art. This despite the fact that critics bestowed glowing praise upon the latter. According to the *Berliner Boersen-Zeitung und Boersen-Courier*, the show

in the Haus produced a "new day for German art" and for the "German view of life in its entirety," while the influential *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* spoke of a "liberation of German art from the tyranny of sadism, and the creation through Hitler and the National Socialist regime of a truly German national art." (Did the writers mean what they wrote? I assume that most of them simply wrote what was expected of them in order to keep their jobs and to feed their families; some journalists, unwilling to function as soul-less tools of the Nazi propaganda, did quit their jobs and found employment in industry or trade, but they were rare exceptions.)

The setting in the Haus was as glamorous as that in the Hofgarten Arcades was dismal. The late Paul Ortwin Rave, in *Kunst-diktatur im Dritten Reich* (1949), thus described the latter:

All the pictures . . . were huddled together in these long, narrow galleries with the worst possible lighting, because the windows were partly obscured by the screens projecting in front of them in which there were gaps that dazzled the eyes. The pictures were hung as though by idiots or children, just as they came, as close together as possible, obstructed by pieces of sculpture on stands or on the ground, and provided with provocative descriptions and obscene gibes. . . ." (Quoted in *Art Plunder*, by Wilhelm Treue.)

*Entartete Kunst* was arranged in a series of departments. There were works, including those of Nolde, "deriding" religion—there is a bitter irony in the fact that the anti-Christian Nazis, who dispatched hundreds of priests and pastors to concentration camps, suddenly posed as defenders of a Christianity allegedly "defamed" by expressionist painters and sculptors. It is also ironic that the Nazis turned their wrath against pictures showing prostitutes and other personifications of urban vice, since the Storm Troopers and the so-called Elite Guards (SS) were notorious for a sexual depravity that went unchecked by the authorities. Singled out for scorn were, of course, works attacking militarism and chauvinism. A section was devoted to German art inspired by Africa and Oceania, the Nazi notion being that the only lawful canon of beauty was the one created by ancient Greece. Works by Jews, captioned with vicious anti-Semitic comments, were shown in a separate room. Among the displayed items was *Zeichnungen*, a book of drawings by Ernst Barlach that had been confiscated by the Gestapo on a law for "the Protection of the

German Reich"; the charge was that the contents of the book were "of such nature as to endanger public security and order." *Zeichnungen* was exhibited in a glass case, unopened, lest the public see one of the drawings and form an independent opinion.

Many came to jeer, but many also came to say good-by to pictures they had grown fond of, for it was feared that they might be destroyed after the show. Among these visitors was a German artist friend of mine who found it hard to repress his tears. He refused to be misled by Ziegler and his ilk who showed the creations of lunatics to prove that the "similarities" between their works and those of Nolde, Kirchner, and Dix justified the persecution of the entire expressionist group. He saw through the tricks of the Nazis who repeatedly called attention to the "vast" sum for which this or that "worthless" object had been purchased by a museum with the taxpayers' money, for in most cases this "vast" sum consisted of inflation marks and was the equivalent of the price of a pair of shoes or, at most, an overcoat. He did not allow himself to be fooled by the fact that, here and there, a picture or sculpture was included that was unsuccessful by any yardsticks of criticism—cunningly, the exhibitors had mixed the gold with the dross produced by untalented imitators of the great modern masters, in order to confuse the public.

This particular artist was still young, still unknown, and hence able to escape attention. It was different with the more than a thousand well-known artists whose work had been removed from the museums. Most of those who were Jewish managed to emigrate. (Emigration, however, was not always sufficient protection: in Italy, Rudolf Levy, a gifted pupil of Matisse, and in France the abstract sculptor and painter Otto Freundlich were caught by the Gestapo and suffered a martyr's death.) Paul Klee returned to his native Switzerland; Lyonel Feininger, who was born in New York, to the U.S.A.; Beckmann, Campendonk, and others emigrated. The majority, however, stayed on in Germany. Of these "inner emigrants," Ernst Barlach, Käthe Kollwitz, and Oskar Schlemmer did not live to see the end of the Nazi regime. Others did, but they were, in many instances, forbidden to exhibit, and even to work, until V-E Day restored full freedom to them.

The only major figure in German art to have been sympathetic to Nazism was the painter Emil Nolde. Naively he believed that the Nazi regime would honor him whose work was so deeply rooted in

*Blut und Boden*, in the tradition and soil of his native Schleswig-Holstein. Yet his bold expressionism was contrary to the philistine taste of Hitler and his cohorts, and no fewer than 1,052 of his works were confiscated. Notwithstanding his pro-Nazi leanings (his enthusiasm for the new regime declined rapidly) there is no trace of Nazism in any one of his works. On the other hand, the important sculptor, Georg Kolbe, was not a Nazi at all; yet he executed commissions he received from the new regime, and the athletic nudes he shaped after 1933 are far inferior to the charming little dancers he created as a younger man.

The opportunist Kolbe was the only important German artist exempted from the *Entartete Kunst*. Of the hundreds who got admitted to the Haus der deutschen Kunst, not a single one is remembered today (though, with the current readiness to "forgive and forget," an important artist would find no difficulty in reappearing in the Bonn Republic, whatever his past Nazi affiliations). The simple truth is: not a single painting or sculpture of significance was produced during the Third Reich apart from what was created by outlawed artists in the secrecy of their studios, often at the risk of imprisonment. For while the notion that the artist must be free in order to produce first-rate work is a relatively new one, during the past hundred and fifty years artists have gotten so used to this idea that they cannot tolerate any restrictions. Delacroix sounded the keynote for the modern artist by insisting that mankind would have to find beauty "where the artist puts it." In the recent past, artists defied rulers like Napoleon III or Wilhelm II, who could not grasp the significance of modern art but at least did not dare go very far in their endeavors to curb it.

Hitler did—and the results were disastrous for Germany. In this country, the late Franklin D. Roosevelt had little interest in, or feeling for, any of the arts, but he and his advisers knew how essential freedom was for every creative man. In 1939, at the opening of the new building of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he expressed a truth that was to remain hidden from Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels until their inglorious end, when he spoke these memorable words: "The arts cannot thrive except where men are free to be themselves and to be in charge of the discipline of their own energies and ardors. . . . What we call liberty in politics results in freedom in the arts. . . . Crush individuality in the arts and you crush art as well."