# Hitler’s favourite sculptor: New exhibition displays the work of Arno Breker

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A new exhibition in the north German city of Schwerin, *Up for discussion: The sculptor Arno Breker*, is the first extensive public display of the works of Hitler’s favourite sculptor, Arno Breker (1900-91), to be held since the Second World War.

Anyone who has made a study of Hitlerite fascism, its public image, its preferred forms of art and its propaganda, will be familiar with Breker’s sculptures. From the early thirties, Breker enjoyed the closest relations with the Nazi elite and played a crucial role in the development of fascist “aesthetics.”

His bombastic sculptures of muscular German warriors and athletes dominated a number of the Third Reich’s most important buildings, including the Reich chancellery. His sculptures are still visible today at the entrance to the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, which was recently refurbished for the football (soccer) World Cup.

Set in an appropriate context, an exhibition of National Socialist art and sculpture could be a serious means of determining how a wide range of artists, including some major figures, succumbed to the noxious ideology of fascism and played a significant role in constructing the public façade behind which the regime covered up many of its crimes.

Unfortunately, an approach that would provide a comprehensive social and political background to Breker’s development is entirely lacking at the exhibition in the Schleswig-Holstein House. Instead the exhibition presents 70 sculptures by Breker from different periods of his career displayed in chronological fashion, but evades any real exploration of Breker’s embrace of National Socialism. Instead we are treated to a portrayal, which emphasises the “contradictions” of the artist. Short texts accompanying the sculptures on view provide brief explanations, which take the general form of “on the one hand ... and on the other.” “On the one hand it is true that Breker worked closely with the National Socialist elite, on the other hand he had some Jewish friends” etc., etc.

The catalogue for the Schwerin exhibition deals in one section with the relations between Breker and the Third Reich, and largely concludes that his subordination to the National Socialist regime resulted from a variety of character flaws, combined with opportunism on the part of a politically naïve artist. At the same time the catalogue uses responses to an exhibition held in Leeds, in Great Britain, in 2002, *Taking Positions: Figurative Sculpture and the Third Reich*, to argue for a new appreciation of Breker.

The *Taking Positions* exhibition, which showed a handful of Breker sculptures, avoided saying anything about Breker’s extensive relationship with the Nazi Party—including the fact that he was a prominent party member from 1937. But citing the Leeds show as a breakthrough for Breker’s art, the Schwerin catalogue quotes American art critic Phyllis Tuchman, who praised Breker’s work in the pages of *Art in America*: “This show of bronzes by Arno Breker and nine of his contemporaries ... filled a significant gap in the history of 20th century art and provided a rare opportunity to assess the merits of this maligned German period. Breker stole the show ... He turned out to be a four star, albeit conservative, talent, as gifted in his field as filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl was in hers.” (*Art in America* July 2002)

On viewing the exhibition in Schwerin, one has the unmistakable impression that here also a certain attempt is being made to rehabilitate and reassess this “maligned German period,” as well as its “maligned” artists such as Breker.

The career of Arno Breker has been well documented, in particular by Jonathan Petropoulos in his valuable book *The Faustian Bargain*. Petropoulos makes clear that Breker’s career had nothing to do with the “exploitation of gaps and niches” or the exploitation of “contradictions” within the fascist system; Breker devoted and prostituted his artistic talents unflinchingly to the Nazi cause. The following brief sketch of Breker is largely drawn from the book and lecture notes by Petropolous.

Born in 1900, Breker travelled to France as an aspiring artist in 1927 and lived there until 1932. That year he won the Rome Prize awarded by the Prussian Academy of Arts, which entailed a fellowship in Rome. During his stay in Rome he had his first introduction to the future Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, who visited the German colony during a trip south in early 1933 and, according to Breker, encouraged the “artists to return to Germany where a great future was awaiting them.”

After short visits to Munich and Berlin, Breker returned to Paris in 1933, but he soon left for Germany. By this time Hitler had ascended to power. Breker’s transformation into an official Nazi sculptor was gradual and complicated. For inspiration he drew heavily from classical Greek sculpture. One critic comments: “He believed that the resulting works, massive figures built upon timeless Hellenic precedents, would define the aesthetic idiom both domestically and abroad.”

The scale of Breker’s work—some of his figures were 30 metres high—required the introduction of mass forced labour for the quarrying of the stone necessary for the commissions. In addition to “monumentalising” his figures, Breker was also required to alter his style. After the war, Dr. Victor Dirksen of the Stadtisches Museum in Wuppertal-Elberfeld observed, “that his artistic style went through a change after 1933 is not to be disputed. ... He became a state sculptor.” He preserved certain elements of his pre-1933 work—above all the Hellenic and mythical motifs—while adding monumentality and frequent political allegory to suit the taste of the regime.

Breker met Hitler for the first time in 1936, and in February 1938 he wrote to architect Emil Fahrenkamp, the director of the State Art Academy in Düsseldorf: “Thank God I had the luck again recently to see and speak with the *Führer*.” Breker joined the Nazi party (NSDAP) in 1937 and became a “political leader”—a position that entitled him to wear the brown Nazi uniform as official dress. As a sign of his respect for the artist, Hitler awarded Breker a party card with a low membership number.

From 1938 onwards Breker worked closely with the Nazi architect Albert Speer. The latter promised him complete “artistic freedom” in his endeavours. Breker’ first two works were *Sword Bearer*, renamed *Wehrmacht* by Hitler, and *Torch Bearer*, otherwise known as *The Party*, which adorned the New Reich Chancellery. This work was the beginning

of a close collaboration and friendship between Breker and Speer. Together they paid a number of visits to Hitler, who explicitly identified Breker as his favourite sculptor.

As a result of commissions, salaries from his various posts and gifts from Hitler, Goering, Himmler and other Nazi leaders, Breker became extraordinarily wealthy. Hitler told his inner circle that Breker should be guaranteed an income of at least a million marks per year and be afforded tax relief to avoid cutting into the sculptor's income.

A total of forty-two of Breker's works were featured in the eight *Great German Art* exhibitions held annually in Munich, where the regime displayed officially sanctioned art. At the same time Breker was the only German artist to have an exhibition in Nazi-occupied France.

Joseph Stalin also admired Breker's works after their appearance in the German pavilion at the 1937 World Exposition in Paris, and expressed an eagerness to engage Breker. The offer was repeated in 1946, but Breker demurred. In an interview with Andre Müller in 1979 Breker referred to the incident: "I had a series of offers from abroad. When the war was over I immediately received invitations from Peron, Franco and Stalin. After Stalin expressed his interest, an American NATO general came personally to Bavaria to take me to Russia."

In the event, Breker stayed in Germany and at the end of the war was one of the few Nazi sculptors to be tried by the denazification courts. In the end, he was classified as a mere "fellow traveler"—a category that allowed him to work again. He was fined DM 100, plus costs. The additional costs amounted to DM 33,179—a sum that Breker refused to pay.

The denazification board portrayed him as more of a victim than an opportunist. They noted that the statues *Torch Bearer* and *Sword Bearer* had been renamed by Hitler, thereby giving them a political significance that the artist had not intended. The judges' astonishing verdict was based on arguments that Breker had tried to behave in a scrupulous and modest manner, even though the Nazi leaders had made this difficult. The court declared, "according to the measure of his power [he] managed to resist the National Socialist rule of violence."

After the war Breker was unrepentant about his behaviour and continued to consort with former Nazi figures. His contacts with colleagues from the Third Reich served him well in the post-war period and he was able to play a leading role in German artistic circles. He was commissioned by the architects Friedrich Tamms and Rudolf Wolters to create sculptures for buildings in Düsseldorf and at the beginning of the 1950s he was appointed chief architect to the Gerling corporate group.

In 1954, one critic described Breker as "officially scorned, unofficially working at full capacity." His flattering sculptures were so successful that he gradually emerged as one of the most frequently requested portraitists of the post-war period. On show at Schwerin were busts completed by Breker of two post-war German chancellors, Ludwig Erhard and Konrad Adenauer, the right-wing author Ernst Jünger, and the artist Salvador Dali, who made his own accommodation to the fascist regime of General Franco in Spain.

A more detailed exploration of Breker's career has been complicated by the refusal of his widow to make public many documents, notes and files she has in her possession. But Breker maintained links to extreme right organisations until his death. *Stern* magazine recently made public the fact that in the post-war period, Breker was awarded the Golden Ring of Honour by the German Cultural Organisation for the European Spirit. The latter organisation was founded in 1950 by former SA and NSDAP functionaries to promote the work in post-war Germany of former leading Nazis. In 1980 Breker was awarded the "Ulrich-von-Hutten-Medallion" by another cultural organisation set up by former leading NSDAP and SS officials. Following his death, a glowing obituary of Breker appeared in the magazine *Die Bauernschaft*, published by Thies Christopherson, a former SS special officer in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Breker exhibition in Schwerin is housed in a building, the Schleswig-Holstein House, which has low ceilings and excludes the possibility of displaying Breker's most distinctive and bombastic works created for official display during the Third Reich.

As one enters the first room of the exhibition, one encounters a handful of Breker's earlier pieces. The artist has made his own small copy of Michelangelo's *Pietà* and another piece from the same period is a small sculpture entitled *Great suffering* (1930), depicting a woman in grief with her head thrown back. The figure stands out for its prominent physical characteristics, its muscular arms and shoulders, but there is little sense of real grief to be read on the figure's face. Even at this relatively early stage Breker's concentration on the purely physical characteristics of his figures, avoiding any evident attempt to probe and bring out the psyche of his subjects, is striking.

In the interview he gave in 1979, Breker spoke of some of the influences in his work. "The origin of my sculpture is the beauty of the human body. My image of humanity is always one which is intact. I come from an extremely healthy, on my mother's side, very Christian family." He continues: "I have come to realise that the person who is externally complete is always internally beautiful. I have always had such complete persons at my disposal ... for example the decathlete Gustav Stührk."

The direct association between outward and inward completeness and beauty—an association, which automatically excludes any real examination of the complexity of human nature, is a recurring feature in Breker's work and is very evidently on display in the pieces he finished based on commissions for the National Socialists.

One of Breker's most well known works from this period is *The Wounded.* The original is not included in the exhibition because of its size, but there is a bust of the figure and photos of the original, completed in 1942. The original sculpture presents a larger than life-size muscular and naked seated figure, with his head in the crook of an arm propped on a knee.

Breker has devoted all his efforts to producing the sort of super-physically developed and evidently mentally vacuous figure so favoured by the entourage around Hitler—unthinking flesh, which can be hurled into battle as needed. A closer look at the piece reveals that the physical state of the figure is starkly at odds with the condition implied by its title. There is no trace in the figure of any sort of wound, either of a physical or spiritual nature. The muscles of the man are tensed. The right hand of the figure is flexed and hangs like a claw. This is not a wounded man, physically limp and mentally reflective, seeking to recover his powers and perhaps contemplating the reason for his injury. Breker's *The Wounded* is a coiled spring, a warrior waiting to pounce and exact revenge. (It was, appropriately enough, a favourite of Andy Warhol, the American pop artist.)

*The Wounded* is a bland, bombastic work, a cartoonish response to the Greek ideal. All one has to do is compare the Breker work with similar subjects treated by the great French sculptor Rodin. The latter's sculpture reveals—indeed embodies—the process of immense intellectual and moral struggle. Breker's work speaks of self-delusion and delusions of grandeur. Every muscle is blown up out of proportion, yet there is no hint of inner conflict or turmoil. The man's brow is unfurrowed. He is the epitome of the frustrated petty-bourgeois' fantasy of himself as the *Übermensch* (superman). It is a pitiful piece of work.

Other pieces on display in Schwerin—*Comrades* (1939/40), *Horse Tamer* (1940), *The Banner Bearer* (1942), *Destruction* (1943)—take up and develop the basic traits of *The Wounded*. Any genuine individuality on the part of the subject has been excluded in a series of sculptures and reliefs in which Breker increasingly developed the characteristics of the Aryan superman along the Hellenic lines suggested by Hitler—the fair, unblemished skin, curly locks, a body made of the same steel which coated German tanks (*wie Kruppstahl*) and an autocratic, pitiless,

unblinking expression.

It would be very wrong to think that Breker was given precise commissions by his Nazi employers for such works; the fantasy involved in creating such utterly false figures came from Breker himself—including the considerable physical distortions exacted on his figures to correspond to the artist's own vision of Aryan beauty. When asked in the 1979 interview: "Did Hitler urge you to hurry?" Breker replies: "No, never. He never exerted pressure and never gave me any sort of directions. Everything I did I did in complete freedom and on my own authority."

One interesting development takes place in the course of Breker's work during the forties. As the war progresses and Nazi Germany's fortunes begin to falter—in particular after the defeat at Stalingrad—his figures' faces change. Compassion, regret, doubts—these are emotions that never find a place in Breker's oeuvre. Instead we witness the impassive, steely, robotic gaze of the faces on his male sculptures at the start of the war twisting into vicious sneers, faces full of bitterness, rage and the urge for vengeance. For example, Breker's relief, *Revenge*, featured on the front page of an edition of the Nazi paper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, announcing the defeat of German armies in Stalingrad and calling on Germans to fight on.

Towards the end of the exhibition a number of Breker's post war busts are on display—political leaders such as the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat, German chancellors Erhard and Adenauer, the right-wing German writer Jünger, and the artists Salvador Dali and Cocteau. The busts are accurate physical reproductions of their subjects, and indicate Breker's basic handicraft skills, but no real depth of emotion can be read in their faces. Breker's maxim—show no weakness or conflict—is equally at work here as in his commissions for Hitler, Goebbels and Goering: Breker's busts have more in common with death mask facsimiles than with living people.

A deplorable deficiency of the exhibition in Schwerin is its failure to deal with or even mention the effective antipode to Breker's work—what the Nazis called "degenerate art," i.e. much of the outstanding art to emerge in Germany and other European countries in the course of the first third of the twentieth century—Picasso, Ernst, Dix, Klee, Kirchner, Marc and many more.

The proliferation of Breker's works in Germany and his ascendancy to the post of favoured court artist under National Socialism was accompanied by the most ruthless censorship of art to take place in modern times. Hitler helped personally supervise the exhibition of *Degenerate Art* held in 1937, which declared war on virtually all the prevailing schools of modern European art.

Hitler and his propaganda chief Goebbels were very conscious of the necessity of manipulating not just film, but also architecture and the fine arts to create the conditions for implementing their political and military plans. Breker, who at one earlier point in his career had also been denounced as a degenerate artist by a Nazi fanatic, noted in the early thirties: "[Hitler] told me it was my duty to get rid of degenerate artists and that I should be the intermediary between the government and the artists."

For Hitler and his cultural adjutants the adjective "degenerate" was used to describe all those, artists and non artists, who adhered to socialist or Bolshevik ideology, along with Jews, blacks and other 'inferior races.' As one scholar has noted, "While it was the function of [Nazi] cartoonists to circulate a negative picture of 'inferior' races, the art of Breker and Thorak provided, perfected and emphasised a positive image of a Nordic super-race within a scheme of classicizing representation. *Sturmer*-caricature and Breker sculpture cannot be separated from one another. They were both equally and simultaneously promoted because they endorsed and illustrated racist policy" (Grasskamp: *Denazification of Nazi Art*).

A few years after the banning of "degenerates" from the world of art, the Nazis proceeded to implement the physical elimination of "superfluous" and "degenerate" social layers, i.e. the mentally and physically handicapped, Jews and Communists. It remains unclear to what extent Breker was informed about such crimes, (although it is certain that he used forced labour in his studios), but the fact remains that it was his own work based on a thoroughly crippled vision of beauty, which helped erect the public propaganda façade for such atrocities.

Regrettably all of these issues, raising the relationship of art to social and political development, remain unaddressed by the new Breker show in Schwerin. In his book *Old Dreams of the New Reich*, Jost Hermand delivered his own withering riposte to the thoroughly pernicious notion of art and the pursuit of beauty espoused by Breker: "National Socialist art is thus not unproblematically 'beautiful,' not merely devoted to perfect forms and empty content; it is also imminently brutal, an art based on convictions which, when realised, literally left corpses in their wake."