

Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s on view in New York City

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Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s is a riveting and thought-provoking exhibition on view through May 28 at New York City's Neue Galerie, the small but important museum that is a fairly recent (2001) addition to New York's "Museum Mile" on Fifth Avenue, home to the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim and numerous other world-renowned institutions.

The current show is the last in a trilogy that began at the Neue Galerie several years ago with two other, equally fascinating exhibitions, the first one entitled, *Degenerate Art: the Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany*, which was followed by *Berlin Metropolis: 1918-1933*. All three shows have been curated by Olaf Peters, a professor at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle, Germany.

The current exhibition includes the work of some less well-known artists compared to its predecessors. It also features work from a somewhat later period than the earlier shows—paintings, prints and photographs from either just prior to or during the era of the Third Reich.

A few of these artists could perhaps be placed in a category similar to the "forgotten composers" who lost their lives or whose careers suffered because of the Holocaust. Most included in this exhibition, however, survived the war, and only a few were Jewish. In fact, there are a handful of artists here who were Nazis themselves, or at any rate joined the Nazi Party. Even among some who opposed fascism, however, their prospects for an international reputation suffered as a result of the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s.

The timeliness of this work, produced as it was in the shadow of Hitler's dictatorship, hardly needs restating in the context of the current social and political crisis on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, the Neue Galerie exhibitions are only a few of many devoted to art in or affected by the Nazi era in the last few years. There is also a show currently on view in the Harvard Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts dealing with art in Germany in the immediate post-World War II period.

The roughly 150 works at the Neue Galerie are grouped primarily by genre, with separate sections devoted to still

lives, individuals and portraiture, society, and landscapes. There are other sections of photographs and works on paper.

The well-known names include Max Beckmann, Oskar Kokoschka and Otto Dix, anti-Nazis who survived the war, Beckmann and Kokoschka in exile and Dix inside Germany. Beckmann (1884-1950) is represented by, among several works, his famous *Self-Portrait with Horn*, from 1938, a year after he had gone into exile in Amsterdam. The artist had been labeled a "cultural Bolshevik" by the Nazis, and was dismissed from his teaching position in 1933. In this, one of many of his self-portraits, Beckmann looks out at the viewer with a lonely and depressed expression, having just issued a call, apparently with no response, on his horn. He is clearly thinking of the circumstances that led to his departure from the land of his birth. The premonition of disaster is unmistakable, and not only in retrospect.

Otto Dix (1891-1969) remained in Germany throughout the period in question. A devoted Nietzschean initially enthused by the prospect of war, Dix enlisted in the German army in World War I. He took part in the Battle of the Somme and experienced other horrors that left him traumatized. In the 1920s his name was often linked to that of George Grosz, the equally famous painter whose work depicted the corruption, crisis and inequality of the Weimar years.

The Nazis labeled Dix a "degenerate artist" and are later thought to have burned or otherwise destroyed some of his paintings. He survived the period largely by adapting and softening his earlier style without completely abandoning it. One of several paintings of his in the current exhibition is *Mother and Eva*, from 1935. It depicts Dix's mother and his niece, in a moving scene summoning up the cycle of life itself. The mother's aged features resemble the tree she sits in front of, while the blond girl sits at her feet. The somber quality of the mother, in particular, certainly did not mesh with the aesthetic values of the Nazi regime.

There are numerous lesser-known artists in the exhibit. Some of their work is interesting from a historical or art-historical standpoint, and some deserves to be far better

known. The artists include some who, although opposed to the fascists, chose not to go into exile. Some, like Dix during this period, sought to survive without openly accommodating themselves to the regime.

Among others who tried to adapt somewhat was Karl Volker (1889-1962). After being labeled “degenerate,” Volker did little work until after the war. The Neue Galerie exhibition does include his *Autumn Landscape*, however, dealing with what the curator calls a “safe subject,” compared to his work during the 1920s, which focused more on industrial and urban scenes.

Among many other artists represented are Rudolf Wacker (1893-1939), Karl Hubbuch (1891-1979) and Hanns Ludwig Katz (1882-1940). Wacker’s *Damaged Head*, from 1934, evokes the dislocation, chaos and tragedy in the year after Hitler became Chancellor. Like many of the other artists, Wacker began his career as an expressionist but later turned away from what was regarded as the too-inward looking character of that school. Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) instead looked to a revived realism and the need for political and social engagement. Wacker was arrested and brutally tortured in 1938. He was subsequently released, but died a year later.

Hubbuch was known for his left-wing views. He was one of the artists included in a 1925 exhibition that marked the unofficial launching of Neue Sachlichkeit. His 1934 painting, *Children Under the Stones*, is remarkable for its depiction of the virtual state of barbarism descending on Germany. One of the children in this work, at the very center, bears a resemblance to Hitler himself. Hubbuch was also dismissed from his teaching post, and this painting was done in secret.

Hanns Ludwig Katz is one of the few Jewish artists represented in the exhibit. Katz emigrated to South Africa as the Holocaust loomed, but died soon after. His painting, *Eye Operation* (1929), is an unusual self-portrait, in which ocular surgery also evokes the agony of the current political moment.

There are many other works of note on display. Among them is *Wien*, a series of 22 linocuts by the Austrian artist Wilhelm Traeger (1907-1980). This work, done when the artist was only 25, shows a series of street scenes in the Viennese capital during the Depression and shortly before the victory of the Nazis in Germany. In *Wien* we see the world of the unemployed and the lumpenproletariat, the prostitutes, war wounded, and beggars. The depictions of abject poverty alongside the conspicuous display of wealth are reminiscent of the work of Grosz and other ruthless realists of the time.

The small room in the exhibition devoted to works on paper is a high point. Here we see the work of some of the

most politically committed of the artists, including a number who died in Auschwitz. Felix Nussbaum (1904-44) went into exile after Hitler came to power, but was arrested in Belgium in 1940. After escaping, he went back into hiding but was rearrested along with his wife, and murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. Nussbaum is represented in the exhibition by *Self-Portrait in the Camp*, a hauntingly expressive painting from 1940. The artist stares defiantly from the canvas, his expression somber but not defeated. Much of Nussbaum’s surviving work is exhibited in the Felix Nussbaum Haus in Osnabrück, Germany, his hometown.

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898-1944) was a Communist Party member whose painting *Interrogation II* (1934-35) combines figuration and abstraction to convey the horror and brutality of her torture at the hands of the Nazis in 1933. Born in Vienna, Dicker-Brandeis taught at the Weimar Bauhaus from 1919-1923. She later worked in Berlin and Prague. She was arrested in Prague and sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in late 1942, and later to Auschwitz, where she also perished.

Other valuable work in this section of the exhibition includes *The End of the Song*, a print by A. Paul Weber, in which a human skeleton playing the cello appropriately signifies the impact of fascist barbarism on culture and on life. Erwin Blumenfeld’s gelatin silver print, *Hitler*, from 1932, depicts the Führer with blood oozing from his mouth and eyes.

The artists reacted in different ways to the catastrophe facing culture and society. Some were forced into silence. The most courageous among them sought to continue to influence the world around them. The Neue Galerie’s *Before the Fall* focuses attention on the unresolved questions of the 20th century, and the dangers of chauvinism, xenophobia and fascism. There is a tragic element to this exhibition, but it also pressingly points toward the need for a deeper engagement by the artists, and not only the artists, with historical questions and social life.



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