

Hitler's “*Divinely Gifted*” artists and *documenta: Politics and Art*: Two important exhibitions in Berlin

Stefan Steinberg and Sybille Fuchs
18 October 2021

Two important exhibitions are currently running at the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM, German Historical Museum) in Berlin. They shed light in particular on a select group of artists, academics and curators who rose to prominence with the support of the Nazi regime, provided key propaganda works to bolster Hitler's dictatorship and were then able to continue their careers virtually unhindered in post-war West Germany.

The first show is entitled “*Divinely Gifted*”: *National Socialism's Favoured Artists in the Federal Republic* and runs until December 5. The second, *documenta: Politics and Art*, will be on display until January 9, 2022.

The “Favoured Artists” exhibition comprises over 300 works of art, including paintings, sculptures, busts, tapestries and murals created by what the Nazis described as “Divinely Gifted” artists. One of the first items to be viewed is a yellowed copy of the original list of the “Divinely Gifted.” The list was drawn up in 1944 on the instructions of Hitler and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and named some 400 artists, including 114 painters and sculptors.

This group of “indispensables” were relieved from all military duties or work in the armaments industry, as was expected of members of other professions. They were largely freed from the hardships and rationing imposed on most members of German society during the last months of the war and could rely already at an early stage of fascist rule on generous benefactors and lucrative official commissions.

Among the “indispensables” were a number of well-known and talented artists who served the Nazis out of either conviction or opportunism, or both, including actor Gustav Gründgens, composer Richard Strauss and conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The two exhibitions—and therein lies their principal significance—also highlight numerous lesser-known figures who were able to simply continue their work after the war or—as the *documenta* exhibition shows—reinvented themselves without ever addressing their past under the Nazi regime.

After the war a number of artists on the list were subjected to a “denazification” process. Most were assigned to category 4 or 5, i.e., characterised as a fellow traveller (*Mitläufer*) and expected to pay a small fine of just 100 deutschmarks. Most of those with positions in academic institutions were reinstated in their old posts within the space of a few months.

According to the exhibition's curator, Wolfgang Brauneis, such artists were able to pursue their careers because of close ties with the West German cultural-political establishment, which in turn consisted of many leading figures from the Hitler regime. In this respect, the cultural sector was no different from the academic and political spheres.

Perhaps the most prominent of the artists on the list—in fact, he is named

first—was the sculptor Arno Breker, who joined the Nazi party in 1937. Having paid his small fine, Breker was able to continue his career after the war and travel in elevated social and political circles. We have dealt extensively with Breker in previous articles.

The exhibition features the work of—and provides brief commentaries on—artists such as:

Hermann Kaspar (1904-1986)

In 1933, painter Hermann Kaspar was a signatory, along with a number of other artists in Munich, to an appeal, “German art is in danger,” published in the Nazi paper, the *Völkische Beobachter*. Kaspar attracted the support of prominent figures in the Third Reich. He was one of the organisers of the marches and pageants held on the “Day of German Art” in Munich in 1937 and 1938. The exhibition in Berlin features a video of the floats carrying grotesque, mythical figures supposedly linked to the history of “Aryan Germany.” In between the floats, columns of soldiers in medieval military garb march past the podium. Kaspar was allowed to sit directly next to Hitler, who gives the fascist salute as his minions march by.

Kaspar was appointed professor of monumental painting at the Munich Art Academy in 1938. He was able to take up the post after his main rival, Karl Caspar, had been labelled “degenerate” by the Nazi establishment and forced to retire. “Degenerate” was the designation adopted by Goebbels and company to hound and censor many of the leading modernist artists in Germany and Europe.

One year before Kaspar's appointment, the Nazis had organised their own exhibition of “Degenerate Art” in Munich to display the alleged cultural decline of the Weimar Republic and put an end to what they described as “cultural bolshevism.”

Initially, high-ranking Nazi officials sought to place modernist movements at the service of the regime. The Expressionist painter Emil Nolde, whose pictures were ultimately included in the “Degenerate Art” exhibition, was in fact a convinced anti-Semite and National Socialist. When Hitler saw a Nolde painting in Goebbels' house, however, the Führer ordered his propaganda minister to take it down. In sculpture, but also in painting, the monumentalist and banal artistic inclination of Hitler and his followers, glorifying blood and soil, war and heroism, prevailed. The aim was to demonstrate the nation's martial determination, for example, against the ignominy of the Treaty of Versailles. Flawless bodies were meant to show the superiority of the Nordic race.

In his speech at the exhibition's opening in Munich, Hitler declared: “I

swore that if Providence made me your leader, I'd make short work of this degeneration. The German people deserve to be protected from these sick minds. These abusers of beauty and art should be confined to secure asylums for the insane until they re-learn how to think as Germans."

Hermann Kaspar's own conception of "beauty and art" found favour with the Nazis and his career flourished. He received commissions from his friend Albert Speer (Hitler's leading architect and later war production minister) and specialised in producing mosaics bearing swastikas, such as those decorating the ceiling of the colonnade at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art) and the Nazi party grandstand at the infamous Nuremberg rally.

Works by Kaspar were also shown in 1944 at an art exhibition "German Artists and the SS," organised by Heinrich Himmler, the head of Hitler's murderous SS paramilitary.

After the war, virtually all the Munich artists on the Nazi list of favourites were able to continue their careers. Kaspar was eventually reinstated as professor at the Munich Academy and received major commissions from both the German and Bavarian governments.

Kaspar was even able to complete his huge wall mosaic for the Congress Hall of Munich's German Museum which he had begun in 1935. His tapestry *Die Frau Musica* still hangs today in the Meistersingerhalle in Nuremberg.

The only serious critical response to Kaspar's work and career came in the summer of 1968 when a student committee at the Munich Arts Academy organised its own exhibition, "The case of Herman Kaspar." This was the first major public event to draw attention to Kaspar's role during the Hitler period.

Willy Meller (1887-1974)

Another on the list of the "Divinely Gifted," Willy Meller came to prominence in the 1920s and '30s producing sculptures to commemorate the dead in the First World War. Meller completed work on one memorial in Lüdenscheid that was officially unveiled in 1935. A right-wing comment on the memorial from 1936 praised Meller for portraying a figure who is "no longer a victim of war, no longer merely preserving his suffering and hardship for posterity, but seeking to express the hope that this great test of fate must be followed by a resurrection of our people [unseres Volkes]."

Working together with the architect Clemens Klotz, Meller went on to provide sculptures in the 1930s for Nazi party offices and buildings and its German Labour Front. He also produced works for the Olympic stadium built for the 1936 games, such as the victory goddess, the "German Nike."

Commenting on the types of sculpture designed for the Olympic stadium by Breker, Meller and others, the author Joachim Petsch writes: "The bodies are self-representations—they are posing. The diminution of classical forms to polished surfaces made possible the transformation of the beautiful bodies into sculptures embodying the beauty of the Nordic 'racial body,' the complete opposite to the 'degenerate body.' ...The beautiful athletic, and warlike body stood for the superiority and victory of the 'race.'"

Meller joined Hitler's party in 1937 and was awarded a professorship two years later. He was entrusted with works for the Ordensburg Vogelsang [a Nazi educational centre], as well as for the Prora seaside resort on the island of Rügen.

Meller was able to continue his career after the war with a series of commissions including sculpting an eagle for the Palais Schaumburg in Bonn, the official residence of the German chancellor and, grotesquely, a memorial for war victims at the Apostelkirche in Gütersloh in 1955.

In Lüdenscheid, Nazi insignia were removed from his monument after the war, but the sculpture remained in place and without commentary. In 2003, the sculpture was even officially listed as a protected monument.

Meller received a commission in post-war West Germany to create a sculpture for a centre devoted to recording the crimes of the Nazis. His *The Mourning Woman* in the Oberhausen Memorial Hall for the victims of National Socialism was unveiled in 1962.

The Berlin exhibition deals with many artists on the fascist list, but one other is especially worth singling out:

Richard Scheibe (1879-1964)

Sculptor Richard Scheibe was a professor at the Städel Art School in Frankfurt-Main from 1925 to 1935, when he was called to the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin. Scheibe received numerous commissions during the Nazi period, including a sculpture of considerable political symbolism, *The Liberation of the Saar*, which he produced in 1935 on behalf of AG Farben. The sculpture marked the reintegration of the Saar region into the German Reich. Scheibe also designed various works on behalf of fascist Germany's military, the Wehrmacht. Among Scheibe's clients were Hitler and Goebbels.

On April 14, 1945, three weeks before the end of the Second World War, Scheibe expressly declared his support for "his fatherland and its struggle," and declared, "I will stay in my place and create whatever I can. I believe that German art will rise again and live on despite all persecutions and remain what it has been for centuries, the cultural bearer of the Occident."

Shortly after the war, Scheibe was appointed professor at the newly founded art school, the Hochschule für bildende Künste Berlin (West), and received prestigious commissions until his death. He became an honorary doctor of the Free University in Berlin and received numerous honours, including the Federal Cross of Merit and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. Amongst Scheibe's commissions was a memorial for the group of disaffected Nazis led by Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg who made an unsuccessful assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944.

Stauffenberg and four others involved in the assassination attempt were shot in the courtyard of the Bendlerblock in Berlin. Commissioned by the Berlin Senate, Scheibe's sculpture of a naked young man with his hands bound was unveiled during a commemorative ceremony on July 19, 1953, attended by the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer (Christian Democratic Union) and Berlin's mayor, Ernst Reuter (Social Democratic Party).

Referring to Scheibe's sculpture, the DHM exhibition notes that its "formal expression resembles earlier works by Scheibe such as *The Archer* (1937) which he had designed for the airfield in Neuruppin."

As was the case with the majority of artists on the "Divinely Gifted" list, not only were Scheibe, Meller and Kaspar able to continue their artistic activities virtually unhindered after the war, they also remained faithful to the aesthetic conceptions they had learnt and adopted under National Socialism. While not so bombastically huge, their human figures remain heroic, defiant and unblemished—significantly, the figures in the war memorials are invariably German victims, not perpetrators.

In light of the broad shift to the right in current official German politics, the DHM exhibition is very timely, as right-wing radicals and circles around the Alternative for Germany (AfD) are echoing Nazi cultural policy, i.e., for art and culture to reflect "German identity." These forces vehemently denounce any art that is critical of their ideology and, where they share power, have demonised or criminalised leftist, socially critical

art. This was the basis for the recent decision by the authorities to place the artists' group Peng! on the list of terrorist organisations.

documenta: Politics and Art

The second exhibition at the DHM, *documenta: Politics and Art*, complements the "Divinely Gifted" show.

documenta, an exhibition of contemporary art that takes place every five years, was first held in Kassel in 1955. From the start, the event was portrayed as a showcase for modern art, i.e., the type of art the Nazis had pilloried in their "Degenerate Art" shows.

documenta regarded itself, and still does, as an art exhibition with political, cosmopolitan aims. The DHM exhibition deals with *documenta* 1 (1955) to 10 (1997). The first *documenta* focused on German modernist painting and abstraction and was held in the ruins of the Friedericianum, which had been bombed during the war.

Its aim was to reintegrate German art into the Western mainstream. The first *documenta* curator, Werner Haftmann, coined the term "abstraction as a world language" as a deliberate contrast to the Nazi doctrine of representational art.

At the same time, many of those involved in *documenta* at its inception had been active culturally during the Nazi period. Of the 21 people involved in creating the first *documenta* exhibition, ten had been members of the Nazi party, the SA [the Nazi Party's original paramilitary wing] or the SS.

Together they created the myth of a new beginning, a "zero hour" for German art. The propagation of modernist Western art, such as that of Pablo Picasso or the American Jackson Pollock, was also consciously used to contrast the "free art" of the West against the artistic products of the Stalinised Eastern Bloc, sweepingly demonised as "state art."

The two main figures for the initial decades of the *documenta* were Arnold Bode, a Social Democrat and opponent of the Nazis, and Werner Haftmann, a former Nazi party member. Haftmann joined the SA in 1933 and the Nazis in 1937. In 1944, he led a squad that hunted down partisans in Italy, took part in war crimes and received a decoration from the Wehrmacht for his deeds.

As an art historian, Haftmann joined the team for the first *documenta* and quickly became its main source of ideas alongside Bode. Early in 1955 Haftmann wrote the synopsis for the first *documenta*: "Art of the XXth century." From the start he played down the significance of the Nazi's own art policy, depicting National Socialism as an anomaly in the course of German history.

He focused on modernism that the Nazis had condemned but omitted artists who had been murdered or persecuted on racial or political grounds, such as the Expressionist painter Rudolf Levy, and their works were not exhibited.

Haftmann also transformed the Futurists into opponents of fascism, although as an art historian he knew that this was not the case (certainly in the case of the Italian Futurists). The gaps in his presentation of art history were mirrored by his refusal to acknowledge his own past and deeds during the Nazi regime.

As the *documenta* exhibition in the DHM explains, the first genuine criticism of the origins of the *documenta* and its initiators only took place on the occasion of *documenta* 6 in 1977.

Just last year it was revealed that, contrary to his own earlier account, the first director of the post-war Berlin film festival, Alfred Bauer (1911-1986), was neither a low-level employee nor a semi-opponent of the Hitler regime, but rather the deputy head of the Reich Film Directorate and Goebbels' right-hand man.

The DHM exhibition effectively presents the latest research detailing continuities in post-war art history and supplements it with its own research. It makes clear that the *documenta*, despite its pioneering character, reflected the tendency on the part of the German ruling elite to conceal its reactionary past.

More than 75 years after the end of World War II, the two DHM exhibitions provide further crucial material to account for the widespread influence of Nazi collaborators, their political role and their conceptions in post-war German cultural life.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact