Pasatiempo

Political Propaganda and the Palette

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"Not all the mechanisms of repression in unfree societies are violent," writes David Satter for the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Satter worked as the Moscow correspondent for the *London Financial Times* in the 1970s and early 1980s, and later as special correspondent on Soviet affairs for *The Wall Street Journal*. During his time in the U.S.S.R., he collected in order to preserve accounts of stories about Soviet totalitarian rule and came to this conclusion:

"People can be conditioned to obey, and once the proper conditions have been put in place, the influence of mass conformity renders people powerless to resist even what they know intuitively is a false political ideology and a false interpretation of reality."

Authoritarian governments have many methods at their fingertips to bring about these "proper conditions" that lead to mass conformity. These methods include fear and ideological propaganda through visual arts, which regimes play with by celebrating or mandating art that reflects a regime's beliefs and values and, on the other side of the spectrum, by slurring and punishing artists whose work does not reflect what the government stands for.

The Socialist Realism (not to be confused with Social Realism) was a state-mandated art movement in Russia that took hold in 1924 after the death of Lenin and promoted idealized versions of Soviet life, focusing on the positive aspects of community work and glorifying the proletariat and Communist Party.

The current Trump administration is attempting to impact the arts in ways that are raising concerns regarding censorship and "anti-wokeness" in the arts, glorifying Manifest Destiny, American expansionism, white supremacy, and American "ideals" with posts on the X and Facebook accounts of the Department of Homeland Security that exhibit paintings that could be seen as embodying these tenets. And according to an August 12 letter from the Trump administration to the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, the government's vetting of exhibits and materials at the Smithsonian museums aims "to ensure alignment with the President's directive to celebrate

American exceptionalism, remove divisive or partisan narratives, and restore confidence in our shared cultural institutions."

An exhibition that opens Saturday, August 23, at the Albuquerque Museum explores visual arts under another authoritarian regime, this one under the Third Reich in Germany, and introduces the artistic movements in the two decades leading up to 1933. The goal is to show how the Nazi Party used art to promulgate Aryanism, or the Nazi racial supremacy ideology or racial dogma, and how it punished and humiliated artists whose work either went against the grain, who were Jewish or communists, or who simply opposed the Social Nationalist Party.

Modern Art and Politics in Germany 1910-1945 showcases 72 masterworks from the permanent collection at the Neue Nationalgalerie (New National Gallery) in Berlin, one of Germany's major art museums. The exhibition brings together representative works and artists, from Germany and beyond, whose work was deemed part of modernism and many of whom continued creating despite political oppression. Only five of the 73 artworks in the exhibition have ever been shown in the U.S.

The first part of the exhibition is dedicated to three major artistic movements in Germany, namely Expressionism (including the Die Brücke [The Bridge] group), New Objectivity, and Abstraction as well as to the works by avant garde artists from outside Germany whose artistic careers were linked to Germany.

The other part of *Modern Art and Politics in Germany* is dedicated to art made under Nazi rule, between 1933 and 1945, and to what became of it, as well as to art created before the Nazis took over but that was confiscated in 1937 by the Nazis from institutions like the Neue Nationalgalerie — confiscated for being, as the Nazis called it, "degenerate."

"We were interested in curating an entire show to really introduce our collection to an international public," says Irina Hiebert Grun, Ph.D., one of the show's co-curators and a key organizer. "We see this as our responsibility to share the history of Berlin, especially of those dark years under the National Socialist Dictatorship."

Only some of the art confiscated by the Nazis in 1937 from the Neue Nationalgalerie for being "degenerate" was returned to the museum since 1945, and the Nazi oppression is seen in the art that is still missing from the collection to this day.

The exhibition's catalogue that bears the same title as the exhibition is a meticulous account and history of each piece and of the brutality of the Nazi regime toward not only artists as a group, but toward Jewish people, communists, and other persecuted groups, including and especially those who opposed the Nazis. The authors and curators of the exhibition were very clear about not wanting to whitewash any of it.

"We are at our museum still dealing with this history," Hiebert Grun says. "We are still trying to fill some gaps that were created in this [Nazi confiscation] campaign [of 1937].

The Nazi era had such a great impact on our collection, a horrible impact, and that's still present."

She adds that a few of the artists in the show, like Max Beckmann (1884-1950) or George Grosz (1893-1959) — who drew caricatures of right-wing personalities in the late 1920s during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) — fled to New York before or during WWII, where they continued working on their art. Many of the other artists in the show who did not go into exile were prosecuted, shunned, and banned by the Nazi Party from pursuing their art.

Of the 72 artworks in the exhibition, the three earliest date to 1909: *Woman Sitting in an Armchair* by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), and two paintings by members of the Die Brücke group within the larger Expressionist movement, namely *Portrait of Adolf Loos* by Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980) and *Pentecost* by Emil Nolde (1867-1956).

The two most recent artworks in the show include *The Orator No. II Otto Rühle*, a 1946 reproduction by the same artist, Conrad Felixmüller (1897-1977), of a painting of the same title that Felixmüller painted in 1929 and ripped to pieces from fear of political backlash, and 1950's *Flanders (Where to in This World?)* by Franz Radziwill (1895-1983).

The other artists represented in the exhibition, most of them German, include Max Pechstein (1881-1955), whose art materials were confiscated by the Nazis who also banned Pechstein from ever producing art again; Otto Mueller (1874-1930), whose work after his death was later confiscated by the Nazi Party and deemed "degenerate"; Erns Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), who is said to have taken his own life after he moved abroad to Switzerland to escape prosecution.

Kate Diehn-Bitt (1900-1978), a lesser-known artist in the exhibition, had a Jewish stepfather and refused to join the Reich Chamber of Culture. Soon after her first solo show opened in 1935, the Nazi Party declared Diehn-Bitt's work "artfremd" (alien to the species), and she was subsequently not allowed to exhibit her work.

By contrast, Franz Lenk (1898-1968), who belonged to the New Objectivity movement and had adopted a more classical style, was well accepted by the Nazis and between 1933 and 1936; he was a member of the Presidential Council of the Reichskammer der bildenden Künste (RKdbK) or the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts, one of the seven subdivisions of the Reichskulturkammer (RKK) or the Reich Chamber of Culture.

The RKK had at its helm Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945), a German Nazi politician, the Gauleiter (district leader) of Berlin, the chief propagandist of the Nazi Party, and the Reich Minister of Propaganda from 1933 to 1945. Goebbels' role within the RKK was to warrant that no artistic creation in Germany deviated from Nazi ideaology and values. Lenk, whose art pleased Goebbels and other Nazis, used his position within the RKdbK to help artists like Otto Dix, who had been shunned by the Social Nationalist Party, before going into what he called "inner exile" in 1935 in the German countryside.

In 1937, the Nazi party began its “degenerate art” campaign by confiscating what it deemed “degenerate art,” and organized two simultaneous touring exhibitions to show Germans what “good art” was and what its opposite looked like.

One of the two exhibitions was titled *Entartete Kunst*(*Degenerate Art*), a show meant to mock artists who did not abide by the Nazi aesthetics and/or values, or who were Jewish or communists. Several of the artworks in the new exhibition at the Albuquerque Museum were part of the *Entartete Kunst*show — and were at the time ridiculed by hundreds of thousands of visitors in Munich and other towns. Among these artworks was a bust by Rudolf Belling (1886-1972), *Head in Brass* (1925), that depicted the spirit of Art Deco and New Objectivity.

The other 1937 exhibition, titled *The Great German Art Exhibition*, exemplified everything that the Nazi party stood for: perfect Aryan bodies, strong peasant women, classical paintings.

Thanks to his belonging to the New Objectivity movement, Lenk was invited to participate in *The Great German Art Exhibition*. He refused in solidarity with artists whose work was in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition; he also resigned around that time from his teaching position at the United State Schools for Fine and Applied Art in Berlin.

Curiously, *The Great German Art Exhibition* included a work by Belling that the Nazi Party did not think of as degenerate: a 1929 bronze of boxer Max Schmeling (1905-2005), a European light heavyweight champion and German heavyweight champion. Upon realizing their “mistake,” the authorities removed Belling’s *Head in Brass* from the *Entartete Kunst* show.

Both sculptures are now part of the exhibition at the Albuquerque exhibition. “It’s interesting to show both works in the same exhibition to exemplify how arbitrary the [Nazi Party’s] decisions were,” Hiebert Grun says.

Belling wasn’t allowed to work in the country after 1933 and saw many of his works destroyed or even melted. His political opinions also led to him being stripped of his membership at the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin. He traveled to New York, where he taught and exhibited his work for just less than a year, returned to rescue his son — whose mother was Jewish — and moved to Istanbul where he remained for decades.

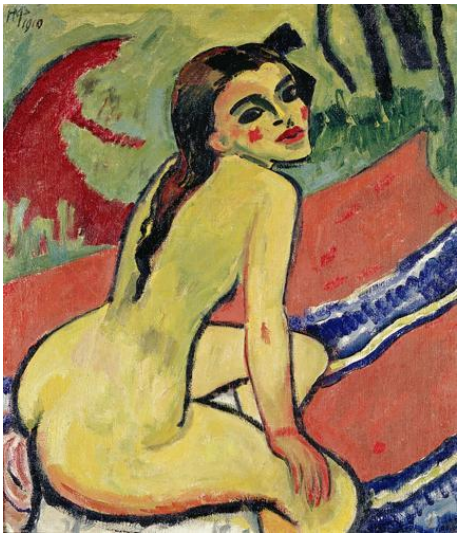
“In our age, there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics,’” writes George Orwell (1903-1950) in *All Art Is Propaganda — Critical Essays* (1941). “All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find — this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify — that the German, Russian, and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years [1926 to 1941], as a result of dictatorship.”

However, some of the art world's most poignant artwork, as the Albuquerque Museum exhibition exemplifies, comes during times of oppression and exile — something about the human spirit prevails and screams for creative freedom.

Armando Villardes, who wrote heartbreaking poetry on onion skins with his own blood while imprisoned for 22 years by Fidel Castro's regime, offered a glimmer of hope when he wrote, "There's nothing more that dictators fear than artists."

George Grosz (*Pillars of Society*, 1926, oil on canvas), known for his caricatures of right-wing personalities in the late 1920s during the Weimar Republic, said of his work: "My drawings expressed my despair, hate and disillusionment …" Kai Anette Becker/Neue Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Modern Art in Germany 1910-1945 juxtaposes major German artists of the time against works of other experimental European artists, including Salvador Dalí (*Portrait of Mrs. Isabel Styler-Tas,* 1945, oil on canvas). Jörg P. Anders/Neue Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin



Modern Art in Germany 1910-1945 at the Albuquerque Museum explores visual arts created under the Third Reich in Germany, showcasing works that include Max Pechstein's *Seated Girl* (above, 1910, oil on canvas). Klaus Göken/Neue Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Kurt Günther's *Portrait of a Boy,* 1928, tempera on wood. Neue Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Works by German artist Christian Schad (*Sonja*, 1928, oil on canvas) were not deemed "degenerate art" but were actually included in *The Great German Art Exhibition*, which showcased art that exemplified everything that the Nazi party stood for. Jörg P. Anders/Neue Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin