

HITLER CALLS IT ART

Louis Lozowick reports on the "Weltanschauung" of Nazi art. The verisimilitude of the Wax Works. The theories of Willrich, Schultze-Naumberg, Rosenberg.

AT THE well advertised exhibition of Nazi art held in the newly erected *Haus Der Deutschen Kunst* and opened by Hitler himself (another exhibition of "degenerate art" was held nearby as a horrible example, by contrast), a certain picture by Lanzinger attracted attention and received the highest plaudits possible by being purchased for the fuhrer's own collection. By a peculiar coincidence the painting represented the fuhrer as a knight in shining armor. It showed handsome Adolph encased in a brand new coat of medieval armor, astride a prancing Rosinante and with his strong right arm unfurling the swastika banner to the Wagnerian storm.

This "masterpiece" brings us right into the very heart of Nazi art—its mission and meaning, its style, its overt theme, and implicit content. The picture represents the "heroic," one of the indispensable elements in the *Weltanschauung* of Nazi art and life. It represents the "leadership principle," the glorification of the military life. It represents the "racial purity" supposed to be evident in the features and character. And last but not least, it shows us graphically (though that was not the intention of the artist) the Great Lie which the Nazis try to foist on the German people and the world as the Great Truth by stuffing it, dressing it up, and painting it with the verisimilitude of the figures from the Wax Works.

At the base of the Nazi theories in art, as in politics, is the conception of race purity, of the unsullied blood stream. Willrich, Schultze-Naumberg, Rosenberg, et al., with Hitler leading the pack, seek to show the importance of race consciousness for the endowment of the artists as well as the content of art.

Here is a greatly abridged paraphrasing of Willrich's Nazi art conception taken from his *Cleansing of the Temple of Art*:

Race consciousness seeks folk health; racial purity consequently excludes the mixture with Jewish, Negro, and other inferior blood. Art can show this ideal in imagery better than mere words. Race consciousness stresses the right choice of mate, not on the basis of religious identity or the sanction of parents but on purity of blood. It is an exalted ideal for the artist to picture these relations. Race consciousness requires that a healthy German race be bolstered by the new creation of a German nobility which would lead the people forward by force of example. Race consciousness and the peasantry. . . . Race consciousness and large families. . . . Race consciousness and freedom. . . . Race consciousness and God. . . .

And so for pages and pages. All this as an ideal for art—to preach racial purity, the

nobility of the Nordic blood, to make visible the "heroic" aspirations of the German folk, etc. Or as Hitler puts it: "We gave art new great aims."

So much for one side of the swastika. Any one who has listened to speeches by Hitler will remember that before or after taking steps of aggression he invariably states or, more correctly, raves about his grievances against the "plutocratic democracies" or the Marxist "menace" or the "Jewish plot," etc., and that precisely is the technique employed by Nazi writers on art.

The very first sentence of Hitler's speech at the opening of the *Haus Der Deutschen Kunst* was: "The collapse of Germany was not alone political or industrial but perhaps even in greater measure cultural as well." And he is off on his old tack.

WILLRICH names literally dozens of pre-Nazi artists, dealers, critics, museum directors, quotes from scores of manifestos, articles, books, in order to ferret out the Marxist, Jewish, Bolshevistic, liberal plot to corrupt German blood and soil—and art for good measure.

Here in a few words is a synthetic picture that emerges from the numerous attacks on the liberal age which the Nazis variously label as Bolshevistic, plutocratic, pacifist, international, Jewish, Marxist, democratic. They use the terms interchangeably, often for no more logical reason than avoiding repetition. I shall use them the same way.

It seems that in that dreadful liberal age the Jews tried to corrupt Germany by a joint attack carried out on the one hand by Jewish capitalists or plutocrats, and on the other hand by Jewish Bolsheviks or democrats. Take your choice.



George Grosz

Before the era of liberalism Jews had no relation to or influence on art. Suddenly they are granted emancipation and civil rights. Now, everyone is German merely by virtue of citizenship, consequently also the Jew. Such was the result of the "crazy dogma—all men are equal" (Willrich). The Weimar Republic which brought this tendency to a head ruined Germany's capacity for defense and was responsible for the destruction of the community interest by sanctioning the class struggle.

THE ART nurtured in such a system sought out for treatment everything ugly and mean. Instead of raising the people to higher levels, this art dragged it into the gutter; instead of representing the noble, it preferred the reverse. The real German artist was persecuted. And the people? The people were outside of art. The rich bought what the Jew advised them to buy. Museum directors, state officials followed along. The aim of the whole business was to sharpen the weapon against the soul of the German people. And the people paid for it by hundreds of thousands of hard-earned marks.

Against anyone who still had a glimmering of doubt—to summarize Hitler's description of the process—the surest means was to emphasize that the art work in question was too difficult to understand, and then to raise the price. For a rich man to admit that he was ignorant or could not afford the price was to admit inferiority. You could brag to your neighbors or business associates about the sum paid, and you had the satisfaction of knowing that your neighbor would understand the masterpiece even less than you did. But in any case you must never show any sign of ignorance. On the other hand, just because the thing seems so difficult to understand, what an intellect you must have to understand it. Yes, the Jews got you coming and going.

Versailles made the Germans "a people without space or defense." The Jews tried to make the Germans also "a people without art."

The attack on the art of the liberal age was in two main directions; against social art, and against post-impressionism. We hear a good deal more about the Nazi attack on all schools of post-impressionism than on social art. But the attack on social art was not less, in fact far more, vicious. The Nazis attacked social art because it showed what they did not like to see, because it spoke out loud and clear against militarism, exploitation, poverty. The Nazis attacked post-impressionism because it did not show what they would like to see in art, because it was aloof and contained. Schultze-Naumberg summarizes his attack on

both tendencies in this manner: "Where can we find a world which corresponds to contemporary pictures? In houses for the mentally unbalanced . . . in asylums for lepers . . . at the lowest depths of human misery . . . in slums among the dregs of society. . ."

To make his meaning more emphatic, the fuhrer declared it as his "unalterable resolve" to see that such art "will never find its way to the people" and that those who persist in their folly would be *beseitigt*, liquidated.

Even before the Reichstag fire and the burning of books, the Nazis launched their attack on social art, as the following examples will show. At one of the great Berlin art shows (Grosse Berliner, 1932) at which all schools used to be represented, there were a number of pictures against imperialist war. This was nothing new, and could in fact have been observed every year where such pictures hung along with academic still life and Dada experiments. But now the Nazis were becoming a power and so Goebbels' *Angriff* lashed out against the entire exhibition as a Communist show, as an "artistic cell of Moscow placed there for catching simple souls into the Soviet net." If you know the history of the Weimar Republic, you will not be surprised to learn that the liberal government immediately took the hint and removed the offending pictures from the show. Shortly thereafter the Association of Revolutionary Artists had an exhibition more frankly radical. Once more the Nazis attacked and once more the liberal government obliged. The "Association" was disbanded. And this was the same liberal government which was accused by the Nazis of coddling Bolsheviks and was reviled by them without measure or restraint. One more example of how appeasement works—and does not.

Thus when the Nazis actually took power, with some artists in exile, some in concentration camps, and still others silenced, there was hardly any social art to fight. The Nazis then took to tackling the post-impressionists. They employed the argument, by now familiar, which consisted mostly of epithets, such as schizophrenic, Jewish, Negroid, etc., all tending to defile and corrupt the pure Nordic, Germanic, Aryan soul. Perhaps the sentence of utter finality was delivered, as was to be expected, by Hitler himself with the following logic: If the work of the modern artists is a true expression of their inner experience, they represent a danger for the health of the German people and should be placed under the observation of physicians. If, on the other hand, their work is fraud and speculation then they should be brought to court for embezzlement and placed in appropriate penal institutions.

At last the temple of art was cleansed. The Nazis had gotten rid of, abolished, destroyed the art they did not like just as they had destroyed the labor unions, civil liberties, and all the social gains of the republic. And they were at their favorite game of creating *ersatz*. To quote the final authority in everything:

"... as I believe in the eternity of this Reich . . . so also do I believe and work for an eternal German art."

Let us look at some of the results. They can be easily classified into categories. In the first place there are the military themes. Here is one of Eber's pictures, "The Call of February 23, 1933." Two Nazis are hurriedly dressing to answer the fuhrer's call for the Nazi uprising—erect, resolute, and dressed more for a parade than a battle. Glamour, I think, is the word for it. You will find in none of these many military "heroic" pictures anything of the maimed and torn victims that you find in the pictures of Dix. No, Dix's pictures are infinitely truer than this *ersatz*, and for that very reason were placed by the Nazis in the exhibit of "degenerate art," by way of example of what is "Jewish." Dix is not a Jew, but that is nothing to disturb a Nazi.

The next most popular category is the peasantry. The following are a number of titles:

"The Peasant at Prayer" by Hoeck; "The Peasant Women" by Eichhorst; "Peasant" by Tiebert; "Peasant at Meal" by Baumgartner; "Young Peasant Women" by Wissel.

Nice, clean, washed, and combed, with no grime of labor anywhere about them, with no sign that these people earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, or in fact that they have to sweat blood to earn it.

Then, of course, there are portraits of young girls and women, such for example as "Moni" by Haider, "Herta" by Zeigler.

Not with any of your fancy hair-do or lipstick—God forbid—but always with generous proportions of bosom and pelvic region, showing that they can breed and feed swarms of babies and serve as the guardian of the family tree. The last, by the way, is the title of a picture by Willrich. It shows an attractive young pregnant blonde, her hands folded ever so lightly over her abdomen, which bulges just a wee bit to show what is meant, but not enough to make it unattractive. Nazi pictures must show only the beautiful side of life.

Then there are the pictures of the young, generally in uniforms belonging to various goose-stepping organizations; Nazi heroes, etc., etc. All the pictures have a family resemblance as if one stolid, prolific Nazi mother bore them. Every canvas is vacuum cleaned, each object is painted with a cringing, inch by inch pseudo naturalism, as if the artist were trying desperately to convince you that what he is telling you is the very truth, whereat it is nothing but wish fulfillment.

I could go on endlessly, but what does it all add up to? It adds up to a system of permanent militarization, subordination of women to the triple virtues of *Kinder, Kirche, Kuche*, the total regimentation of youth, unity between exploiter and exploited. Nazi art is mask and costume over a face ugly and cruel, and a body vengeful, fearsome, but not invincible. The Nazis apparently believe or want others to believe, that by ignoring their presence they can get rid of all the accumulated underlying social contradictions and conflicts

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which sooner or later are bound to explode.

Does this mean anything to us? I think so. I think it spells a grave warning. I visited Germany in 1924 and again in 1927. Every once in a while I would pick up some Nazi literature and shrug my shoulders at its crudity and vulgarity. I would gather with my friends at the Bohemian "Romanisches Kafe" and we would all have a good laugh over it. To me the whole stupid anti-Semitic, anti-socialist, anti-liberal trash was familiar through my acquaintance with the same kind of "literature" of Russian czarist days, which often used the same arguments, sometimes even the same wording and often the same illustrations. We used to sit in the cafe, lost in a haze of smoke (ah! those good old days!) and while sipping peacefully our beer, or coffee, or *aperitif*, we would laugh at Nazi propaganda and say, "But, of course, after all Germany is not czarist Russia." As we now know, Germany turned out to be worse than czarist Russia.

And now, they tell me that America is not Germany, it can't happen here. Well, I wonder why they should be telling this to me now. I only know what I read in the papers, and if that doesn't enlighten me enough, I am beginning to see a special literature which resembles and is at times identical with the Nazi brand, as the latter resembled and was similarly identical with the czarist brand. Even in the field of art, which after all is a surface manifestation of forces at work in the depth of our society, we are beginning to see more and more often attacks on the foreigner, on the artist who chooses the unpleasant aspects of American life; and more and more frequently the note of racialism is sounded. At a symposium held by the American Artists Congress last year, a closeness to Nazi ideology was shown to exist in the work of a number of American critics.

Hitler has a set pattern of ideas that are contagious. He did not distribute his medals to certain Americans for their beautiful eyes alone. And how many more who did not receive their medals, but who deserve them. Just give them half a chance. The example of fascist countries shows us what this would mean in society and art. I do not think I need to tell you what our choice must be.

LOUIS LOZOWICK.

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