



**Peter Paret.** *An Artist against the Third Reich: Ernst Barlach, 1933-1938.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 248 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82138-4.



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Since the publication of his seminal *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany* in 1980, Peter Paret has written a number of elegant studies exploring the relations between art, politics, and history in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. This book represents the latest of these volumes, which have established the author—already known as one of the foremost military historians of his generation—as the pre-eminent authority on the political interpretation and reception of art in modern Germany. Paret brings to the subject a unique personal perspective. Paul Cassirer, one of the most prominent modern art dealers in Imperial and Weimar Germany, was Paret’s maternal grandfather. Thus, from an early age, the author was exposed to much of the art he discusses, including that of the sculptor and graphic artist Ernst Barlach, who is clearly a personal favorite and part of a pantheon that would include Max Liebermann, Adolph Menzel and Walter Leistikov, among others. Consequently Paret’s examination of Barlach’s sculpture and drawings as well as of his trials and tribulations in the Third Reich is more than just scholarly exercise; it is informed by the insight that comes from a lifelong interest.

As its title suggests, the book concentrates on Barlach’s struggle to continue to make a living as an artist during the Third Reich. Given his conception of his art

as both apolitical and deeply German, Barlach thought, at first, that the regime would allow him to work unmolested. But it soon became clear that he had misunderstood both the way in which his work offended Nazi conceptions of the role of fine art within the Third Reich and how deeply held these convictions were. Thus this short study raises much larger questions about the importance of culture, particularly the fine arts, within Nazi ideology and especially in Hitler’s worldview; the struggles within the higher ranks of the regime over artistic freedom; and decision-making in general in the Third Reich.

Paret begins with a summary of Hitler’s views on art that explains why the “cultural state” mattered so much to the Nazis—“no people outlives the documents of its culture,” Hitler once proclaimed (quoted on p. 119). He also shows why, at the beginning of the Third Reich, certain Nazis, most prominently Joseph Goebbels, could believe that there might be room for a “Nordic modernism.” Paret briefly discusses the opposition between the party ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, a dedicated opponent of all forms of modernism, and Goebbels and his allies who were willing to countenance non-Jewish modernists such as Emil Nolde and Barlach. This is well-known material for specialists but Paret’s discussion is both concise and authoritative. In the next chapter, based on extensive, original archival research, the author offers a nuanced

analysis of Barlach's art and politics. Barlach forged an inimitable style which, despite certain commonalities, is different from the expressionists with whom he is frequently classified. Much of his art can be identified as belonging to an older, northern German tradition going back to the sculptors of the late Gothic period, so much so that the French sculptor Aristide Maillol could tell him "Tu es Nordique-moi je suis MediterranÃ©" (quoted on p. 144). This clear affinity, plus Barlach's ability to disprove the accusation that he had Jewish ancestry, made it possible for some Nazi *Kunstpolitiker* to suggest that the artist's style might fit into an acceptable, racially certified, form of "Nordic modernism." Nor was there anything seriously compromising in Barlach's political views, which Paret characterizes as "moderately liberal, with conservative tendencies" (p. 36), that should have given him trouble in the Third Reich. In private Barlach did not conceal his contempt for the regime, but he never considered emigrating and he could not understand why he was singled out for persecution. In public he trimmed his sails, going so far as to sign, when asked a second time, the "appeal of the culturally productive," the notorious public declaration of loyalty to the regime on the part of artists and writers, the only serious misstep in Barlach's relations to the Nazis, according to the author.

Such a gesture was fruitless in the end because Barlach's art, however "Nordic," lacked an essential quality to be fully acceptable to the regime: it did not present a sufficiently heroic image of Nordic man and woman. Barlach's figures often seem to endure life stoically rather than to master it heroically. Their emotive power is too universal to be harnessed easily into a nationalist program, which, as it turned out, was the only acceptable style for Hitler, at least when it came to painting and sculpture. Even *The Avenger* (1914), depicting a nearly horizontal figure running with an enormous sword arched over his back, transfixed by anger, does not really lend itself to an unambiguously political message. One might consider this to be a rather forgivable sin of omission, were it not for the fact that Barlach was responsible for a number of war memorials. Neither his Guestrow Memorial (1927), a grieving woman hovering horizontally via iron chains from the local cathedral, nor the Magdeburg Memorial (1929), its six figures resigned, mute, and grief-stricken were acceptable to right-wing opinion because they did not mobilize the memory of the war in the service of German revenge for Versailles or hearken back to a mythic "spirit of August," when the nation was united as one in the face of its enemies. Rather Barlach's war memorials are bleakly powerful symbols of

the "pity of war;" their dominant feeling-tone is immeasurable and incomprehensible grief. When contrasted with clenched muscles and stern faces of the Nordic warriors in *The Stralsund Memorial* (1934) by Georg Kolbe, a gifted but more politically opportunist sculptor, Barlach's memorials could only be seen as woefully deficient of national feeling. This was the artist's great sin, the fault that would be constantly laid at his feet during the debate over his artistic stature. Other sins, such as the Slavic features some critics purported to detect in his figures and the tendency towards abstraction, paled beside Barlach's failure to produce a serviceably nationalist art on those occasions when he had had the opportunity.

But all of this was not immediately evident upon the seizure of power. Paret's third chapter on "Nordic Modernism" reminds us of how Hitler's public pronouncements were, up to this point, sufficiently ambivalent to permit some within the regime to believe that a kind of modern art would be tolerated, provided it were purged of any Jewish taint. If Hitler clearly despised the avant-garde, he also disparaged those of his followers, like Rosenberg, who "longed to return to the art of the early and mid-nineteenth century romantics, an art that might accommodate personal tempests and passions, but generally remained in the shelter of idyllic bourgeois passivity" (p. 19). This was sufficient wiggle room to allow proponents of Nordic modernism, such as Otto Andreas Schreiber and Hans Weidemann, to try and carve out a space for modern artists such as Barlach and Emil Nolde. In this endeavor, they were protected and supported for a while by their boss, Joseph Goebbels, partly for aesthetic reasons, but mostly as part of his political struggle against Rosenberg for control of Nazi cultural policy. As is well known, Goebbels would eventually succeed in marginalizing his rival, but in this particular field, he was forced to admit defeat and to abandon Nordic modernism. The reason is quite clear: Hitler may have been willing to concede limited freedom to literature, music, film, and some architecture (although, in truth, not much), yet when it came to the fine arts, where he felt himself especially qualified to judge, he could not permit any style not wholly committed to the service of Nazi ideology. He presented these views in a number of speeches in the mid-1930s, about the time of the opening of the first exhibition of "Degenerate Art." Paret sees this as part of the radicalization of the regime noted by historians of the Third Reich. In its aftermath, the way was clear for ideological thugs such as Hans Schweitzer, who was profiled in one of the author's earlier books, to persecute any and all of the modernists he loathed.

The objects of this persecution included Barlach, as Paret details in the last, sad chapters of his book. The artist's war memorials were removed from public display as a matter of course. Even an edition of fifty-six charcoal drawings, published by Reinhard Piper in November 1935, was eventually seized by the authorities. Commissions dried up, shows were closed, and nearly four hundred of his works were confiscated from various museums and galleries, some of them to be displayed as examples of "degenerate art." Had he not died in 1938, he might have eventually faced the same fate as Nolde, who was forced to desist entirely from making art. Still Barlach, a much more attractive figure personally and politically than Nolde, was able, before his death, to complete two sculptures of old women, *Freezing Crone* and *Laughing Crone*, that represented, in the view of the author, the strongest protest the artist could make against the regime and its desiccated view of art.

This book has all of the trademarks of Paret's earlier work: a thorough acquaintance with the archival material and the secondary sources, a sound judgment, and a lapidary, wonderfully readable style. Above all, one admires the author's evident commitment to fairness toward his subject. It is almost as if he lays the same importance as a painter or a sculptor on the *valeurs* of his subject, the shades and the tones. This reader feels that ev-

eryone of the individuals Paret discusses, including Barlach himself, receives his just desserts and is illuminated with just the right lighting. This scrupulous attention to "getting it right" pervades the entire book. The thirty-eight half-tones of sculptures and drawings provide adequate documentation to make sense of the author's arguments concerning Barlach's art. A further bonus is the author's "Note on the Literature," a bibliographic essay that would be helpful for any student of Nazi cultural policy. Indeed, it is to be hoped that Cambridge University Press will see fit to issue a paperback edition. Concise, authoritative, with a style accessible to undergraduates, the book would be a good choice to assign in courses on the Third Reich, both because of its clear and interesting discussion of the fate of modernism under the Nazis, but also because of its excellent illustration, from an unusual angle, of such important themes and topics as "working towards the Fuehrer" and the "polycratic state."

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