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Ernst Barlach, sculpture, and the ‘terrible year’ 1937

A poignant sculpture, carved in oak by the German artist and dramatist Ernst Barlach (1870-1938) stands today in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh (Fig. 1). Made in 1936-37, it consists simply of the slight, composed figure of a woman, shrouded in a robe. Her posture and facial expression are dignified but sombre, suggestive of silent contemplation, despair, or quiet grief. Her face bears a strong resemblance to that of Barlach’s close friend, fellow sculptor and printmaker, Käthe Kollwitz. The figure personifies *The Terrible Year 1937*. The title, given after the work’s completion, was a personal and political response to Barlach’s own persecution and to the oppression of modern, progressive German culture under National Socialism. Just before he died in 1938, Barlach said: ‘The year 1937 destroyed a great deal, within and outside my own presence, probably more than can be re-built.’¹

Barlach was just one of the many modern artists, Expressionists, especially, who were ridiculed, disempowered and denounced by the Nazis’ escalation in 1937 of the campaign against so-called ‘Degenerate Art’ (*Entartete Kunst*). Considered in the face of the terror and genocide perpetrated in the name of National Socialist ideology, his fate was not the worst. His case is worth sketching though, for the sense it provides of the shifting and often contradictory terrain of German cultural and ideological politics in the 1930s and of the myriad forms that the political instrumentalisation of art could take.

Barlach was a prolific artistic polymath, equally influential as a sculptor, printmaker and dramatist. He lived and worked from 1910 in the small provincial town of Güstrow, in the flat landscape of Mecklenburg, between Berlin and the Baltic coast to the North. It was a region to which he was profoundly attached. Much of Barlach’s early reception in Germany – particularly among his more conservative admirers – emphasised his apparent ‘authenticity’ and rootedness in that region and its traditions. Barlach himself contributed readily to this earthy image, insisting he wanted to be nothing but a ‘*plattdeutscher Bildhauer*’ – a Low German carver.² He was neither a socialist nor a fascist, but like others of his generation, he was at times attracted to some of the thinking of the so-called ‘conservative revolution’ in 1920s Germany.³

His was a distinctive form of Expressionism, though he did not associate himself with the term. It is characterised by bold, sweeping, simplified forms and by a deep, humane, engagement with spiritual, religious and social themes. In spite of his image as a quintessentially ‘German’ artist, his work came under attack from the nationalist Right from 1929 onwards. They stirred up animosity by denouncing the pacifism of Barlach’s works and ‘slavic’ faces of his figures. Works by Barlach were among the

¹ Ernst Barlach, letter to Ludwig Carrière, 28.6.1938 in: Ernst Barlach, *Die Briefe II. 1925-1938*, ed. Friedrich Dross, (Munich: Piper, 1969), pp. 778-779, p. 778.

² Alfred Werner, ‘The Letters of Ernst Barlach’, *Art Journal*, vol. 29, no. 2, Winter 1969-1970, pp. 200-201, p. 200.

³ See James Van Dyke, ‘Ernst Barlach and the Conservative Revolution’, *German Studies Review*, vol. 36, no. 2, May 2013, pp. 281-305.

many removed in a ‘cleansing action’ from the regional museum in Weimar in 1930, for example, where the NSDAP (the National Socialist German Workers’ Party) had already established local power. Yet this is one of many cases illuminating the paradoxes and inconsistencies of the era. Some nationalists approved of what they saw as the ‘Nordic’ qualities of some Expressionism, most notably Barlach’s, as well as that of Emil Nolde. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Propaganda Minister, had long expressed admiration for the Barlach’s work. After a visit to the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne in 1924, Goebbels had noted in his diary that he was ‘gripped by a sculpture, Barlach’s *The Beserker*. The true spirit of expressionism! Brevity raised to the level of grandiose interpretation’.⁴ He was said to keep a Barlach sculpture in his study. The artist himself believed the Propaganda Minister owned two of his works.⁵ In June 1933, Barlach was asked to become President of a ‘ring’ of artists associated with the National Socialist German Student League. In November, he was invited by Goebbels along with other prominent modernist artists to attend the opening ceremony of the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*). He declined both invitations.⁶ In the light of Barlach’s later fate and persecution, such details show how National Socialist thought and policy with regard to modern art in Germany was neither unanimous nor consistent.

In 1934 and 1935, Barlach attracted the aggressive attention of the NSDAP head in Mecklenburg, Friedrich Hildebrandt. He publicly insisted that ‘German nature’ was ‘alien’ to the region’s most famous artist.⁷ A particular focus of the attack on Barlach’s work across Germany was the artist’s major monuments and memorials. Several were made in memory of those who fell in the First World War. In 1929, Barlach had carved in oak a solemn, moving, and resolutely anti-heroic memorial to the dead of the First World War for the Cathedral of Magdeburg. (Fig. 2) It was a large work (2.55m high), showing a group of mourners and victims – the dead and the shattered – around a cross inscribed with each of the war years. The Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg dismissed it as ‘half-idiotic introspective Miró variations of undefined human sorts with Soviet helmets.’⁸ It was the first of a series of major sculptures by Barlach to be removed, followed by others in Kiel, Lübeck and Güstrow in the ‘terrible year’ of 1937. The Güstrow memorial, a distinctive ‘floating’ figure with crossed arms (sometimes known as the ‘Hovering Angel’), hanging from a dark chain within the North transept of the cathedral there, was sold for scrap metal and melted down.⁹ (Fig. 3) The few hundred marks it raised were transferred to the funding of a Nazi ‘hall of honour’.¹⁰ A large relief depicting a mourning mother with a child clinging to her in Hamburg was removed in 1938 and replaced with an approved monument intended to communicate triumph, power and by extension, enthusiasm for war – in the form of a large phoenix-like eagle rising from the ashes.

⁴ Quoted in Peter Paret, *An Artist Against the Third Reich: Ernst Barlach 1933-1938*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 17.

⁵ Barlach, letter to Karl Barlach 11.1.1936 in: Barlach, *Die Briefe II*, pp. 605-607, p. 605.

⁶ Paret, *An Artist Against the Third Reich*, p. 59.

⁷ Paret, *An Artist Against the Third Reich*, p. 81, 94.

⁸ Alfred Rosenberg, ‘Revolution der bildenden Kunst, 1933’ (first published in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7.7.1933) in Uwe Fleckner and Maike Steinkamp eds., *Gauklerfest Unterm Galgen. Expressionismus Zwischen “Nordischer” moderne und “Entarteter” Kunst*, (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 204-207, p. 206.

⁹ A second cast made from the original model has hung since 1952 in the Antonine church in Cologne.

¹⁰ Naomi Jackson Groves, *Ernst Barlach. Leben im Werk*, (Königstein im Taunus: Langwiesche, 1972), p. 101

In total, 381 works by Barlach were removed from German museums. Barlach commented ruefully on his status as a '*Kulturschänder*' – a 'defiler of culture'.¹¹ Among the hundreds of works crammed in to the notorious exhibition of '*Entartete Kunst*' ('Degenerate Art') in Munich in 1937, visitors would have seen a small sculpture of two men in long robes, embracing. It was a 1926 representation of Christ and the disciple Thomas. Known under the title *The Reunion* (and sometimes as *Christ and John*), its simple, powerful forms suggest the intimacy and the emotion in their meeting. The disciple is slightly bowed as he is both embraced and supported by Christ, into whose face he gazes. A version in mahogany was shown in an 'anti-bolshevist' exhibition in Nürnberg in 1937. The bronze version exhibited for public derision in Munich was one of three recently 'purged' from museums in Kiel, Hannover and Frankfurt.¹² Vulnerability and compassion had no place in the visual language of a fascist culture that prized conformity, strength and unquestioning military readiness.

Barlach spent his final years in what became known by the diffuse term 'inner emigration', staying in Germany at a time when almost all the other major surviving artists whose work was pronounced 'degenerate' had long since gone into exile in Spain, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Palestine or the USA and to Britain. He died in a clinic in Rostock of a heart attack in 1938. He had been just one of countless victims of the destruction of modern art by the Nazis. More than just a question of censorship, this wholesale assault represented a brutal instrumentalisation of German art and wider culture. It was to have ramifications for generations after 1945, on both sides of the Cold War divide and afterwards.

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Illustrations:

Fig. 1: *Ernst Barlach, The Terrible Year 1937, 1936. Oak, 142.00 x 31.00 x 28.50 cm. © National Galleries of Scotland. Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (William Leng Bequest) 1987*

Fig. 2: *Ernst Barlach, The Magdeburg Cenotaph, 1929. Oak, Magdeburg Cathedral*

Fig. 3: *Ernst Barlach, Güstrow Angel / The Hovering One, cast replacing the lost 1927 original, Güstrow Cathedral*

¹¹ Barlach, letter to Alfred Heuer 11.8.1937 in: Barlach, *Die Briefe II*, p. 718.

¹² For research on all objects confiscated as 'Entartete Kunst', including the three bronzes and one wood version of this work by Barlach, see the online *Datenbank zum Beschlagnahmeinventar der Aktion "Entartete Kunst"*, Forschungsstelle "Entartete Kunst" at www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/db_entart_kunst.