An Artist against the Third Reich

Ernst Barlach, 1933–1938

The conflict between Ernst Barlach, the most important German sculptor of the time, and the Third Reich is a remarkable episode in Hitler’s war against modern art. Rather than accept repression passively, Barlach denounced the confiscation and destruction of his work as ideologically inspired and continued on his independent course. The author’s discussion of Barlach’s art and of his insistence on creative freedom is joined to an analysis of his opponents’ motives and tactics. Hitler’s ill-informed rantings against modernism in German art were nevertheless an internally consistent and politically effective critique of liberal culture. That despite Hitler’s strictures some National Socialists advocated a “Nordic modernism” and tried to win Barlach to their cause exemplifies the cultural crosscurrents running through the Third Reich. Peter Paret’s closely focused study of an artist in a time of crisis seamlessly combines the history of modern Germany and the history of modern art.

Peter Paret is Mellon Professor in the Humanities Emeritus of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and Spruance Professor of International History Emeritus of Stanford University. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the American Philosophical Society, and recipient of the Society’s Thomas Jefferson Medal. The German government has awarded him the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit. His research is divided between two fields: the role of war in history, on which, among other works, he has written the well-known intellectual biography Clausewitz and the State (1976); and the relationship between art and society. He is the author of The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany (1980); a study of the decline of German liberalism as seen through art, Art as History (1988); and a collection of essays, German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945 (2001). He combined his two areas of research in Imagined Battles: Reflections of War in European Art (1997).
Those who created the Third Reich [will] determine not only its political but also its cultural development.

– Adolf Hitler, speech at the Reich party rally, 1934

Nothing can be more certain than that art is not subject to the strictures of a political view of the world.

– Ernst Barlach to the sculptor Adolf Wamper, 1934
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1 Ernst Barlach before the Chapel of St. Gertrude in Güstrow, 1934. Photo: Berthold Kegebein. © Ernst und Hans Barlach GbR Lizenzverwaltung Ratzeburg.
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Barlach GbR Lizenzverwaltung Ratzeburg. © Ernst und Hans Barlach GbR Lizenzverwaltung Ratzeburg.


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