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GERMAN PAINTING UNDER NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Art, as everything else, was regimented. In the beginning the scope was greatly limited but later it was broadened thanks to the efforts of us, the good artists. Modern art was completely banned. Hitler constantly concerned himself with all these matters and even set himself up as a judge of the official exhibitions in the House of the German Art in Munich. These exhibitions set the standards for all other exhibitions.

The fundamental idea was to return to the period of the Renaissance, to make art useful to the needs of the State and to exclude the art for art's sake concept. The artist, thus, was able to work only on order or one could buy only that from him which pleased the government. As in this case the buyer knew nothing about art - in contrast to the Renaissance period - a development in the qualitative sense was not possible. Naturally, some good works could also make their way when they were well executed as these people could not differentiate between good and bad works.

All organizations of artists were dissolved and joined in one large central organization. That art which was accepted, was furthered very much and well paid.

For a close account I can only start out with details and describe my own experiences. I received the order to paint a picture of Hitler. As he never posed, I received a great number of photographs from which I had to paint the portrait. I painted him standing up full length, dressed in a field gray uniform with overcoat. One was pleased with the portrait and immediately I could have had so many orders that I would have had to paint only Hitlers. A painter, whose work Hitler rejected, would never again have any success. This happened to me with a large painting of Goering and his general staff, eighteen life-size portraits. This painting was rejected by Hitler in the House of the German Art. Goering rejected it immediately afterwards and it was never paid for. It rests rolled-up in the cellar of the House of the German Art in Munich, a work taking almost two years.

Subject matter, along with technique of painting, was the deciding criterion. Religious motives were completely excluded. Naturally all defeatist or social themes were excluded. The glorification of the Nordic race was especially popular as were all heroic subjects.

Exhibitions are the way to the public therefore the road to success for the artist. The leading exhibition was the one in the House of the German Art in Munich. Here art received its stamp. Hitler came and threw out everything that didn't suit him. The careers of the painters concerned were thus finished. The way in which the paintings were judged is illustrated by the following example. I had entered a portrait of an old colonel, a friend of mine. This was rejected because the colonel did not possess decorations from this war. No attention was paid to the painting itself.

The compulsion to exhibit was so great that a painter who once refused to exhibit his paintings because he feared bombings, immediately lost his position as a teacher at the academy, his name became extinct in the German art and was never to be mentioned again in the German Press.

The government made use of the leading artists, as same as it had ascended to power. I myself was well known all over Germany as well as in America as a portrait painter. Formerly I used to make portraits of the leading men of the state, of science, of business; for instance in the year 1929/30 of professor Einstein, Hindenburg, Reich Chancellor von Papen, Reich Chancellor von Schleicher, General Fieldmarshal von Mackensen, etc. I was president of the Munich Art Institute (Secession) the leading artist association of Germany, and as such had arranged all international exhibitions. In this capacity it was of advantage that I had studied 5 years in Paris and 2 years in Italy. After the seizure of power of the National Socialists, I remained in office as the head of the Art Institute (Secession), which I managed to keep going until the year 1938. Still during this time modern art always retained its rightful place. Then I had to dissolve the Institute. My connections and experiences were then no longer needed, and everything was handled by incompetent Party big-wigs.

We, the good artists, who were already known long ago, had tried, by our collaboration, to preserve the freedom of art as much as possible. However, we could not succeed, as our position was remote from National Socialism. There was nothing else left for us to do but to retard the decline by producing works of the best possible quality.

(Signed) Conrad Hemmel