

Ernst Barlach – the blessing of being a »degenerate« artist

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Every two years, Lempertz awards the 5,000-euro Lempertz Preis for an outstanding dissertation at the Bonner Kunsthistorisches Institute. This academic prize was established by Lempertz on the occasion of its 150th jubilee to promote great art historical research.

In its 175th year, the prize was awarded by Lempertz to Dr des. Isgard Kracht. Her dissertation concerned the RECEPTION OF EXPRESSIONISM IN THE NAZI STATE WITH THE EXAMPLE OF ERNST BARLACH, FRANZ MARC AND EMIL NOLDE. We would have liked to have presented the award more ceremoniously – hopefully we can do this at a later date!

The dissertation will be published this year by De Gruyter Verlag in the series by the Forschungsstelle ENTARTETE KUNST. Here you can read a short feature about an artwork by Ernst Barlach which was shown in 1937 in the exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST.

When the exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST opened not far from the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich in 1937, and, with hundreds of artworks specifically confiscated from German museums, purported to illustrate the social decline under the yoke of the “Jewish racial soul” (fig. 1), there was one work that threatened to be lost in the sensationalist flood of pictures and sculptures: DAS WIEDERSEHEN by Ernst Barlach.

Pushed up against the wall, almost crushed by Max Ernst’s painting DIE SCHÖNE GÄRTNERIN (formerly Städtische Kunstsammlungen, Düsseldorf) hanging behind, and FRAU MIT ERHOBENEM ROCK by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner from the Moritzburgermuseum, Halle, the small bronze seemed rather more insignificant than pilloried (fig. 2) – and yet, completely in the essence of Hitler’s tirades, it was thought to bear testimony to the “art and cultural stuttering” that allegedly wanted nothing



Fig.1: View of the exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST in the Hofgarten, Munich, 1937

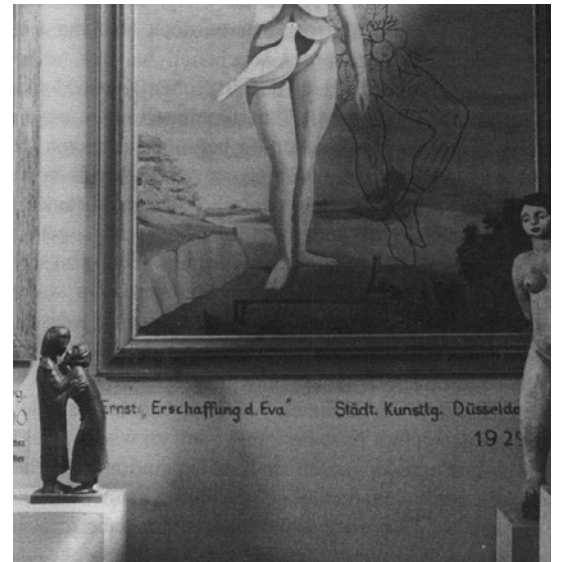


Fig.2: Exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST with ERNST BARLACHS Bronze Das Wiedersehen (1930)

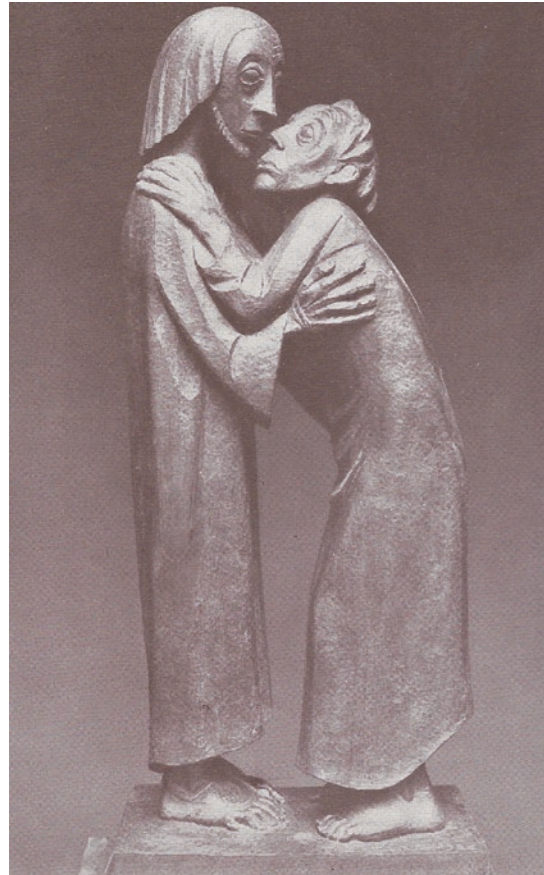


Fig. 3:
ERNST BARLACH, Das Wiedersehen
(1926, wood)

Lempertz auctions off a bronze copy of
Das Wiedersehen on 4. June 2021



Fig. 4: Reproduction for the Chicago World's Fair,
1933/34, with Der Sänger (1931) and Lesender
Klosterschüler (1930) by ERNST BARLACH

more than racial “dilution” and political “destruction”. For Barlach, who followed the events from Güstrow, Mecklenburg with deep sorrow, there was no doubt: “Enough. I am ostracised”, wrote the artist resignedly, just a few weeks before his death in October 1938.

And how could he not have been swayed by the abrupt irrevocability of the judgement that decisively shapes the reception of his person and works still today? A total of 667 works by Barlach were seized in the course of the “degenerate art” campaign, which also resulted in the removal of his monuments. Barlach had unquestionably become a victim of National Socialist art policy. And yet the decision makers struggled with his work in particular, as exemplified in the exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST.

The bronze DAS WIEDERSEHEN from the Kunsthalle Kiel was the only sculpture by the artist that was confiscated for presentation in the vilifying exhibition of 1937. Further casts were by then found in Frankfurt or Hannover, and, like so many museum pieces from Barlach's hand, sometimes controversial, yet always acknowledged – in this case as a timeless and intimate interpretation of the encounter between the Christ resurrected and his young doubting disciple Thomas. Although only half the size of the 1926 wooden version (Fig. 3 and Fig. 8), immediately secured by the Schwerin Landesmuseum, the bronze could once claim to be among the “most poignant, but also the most complete” of works created by Barlach.

The work was acquired by the Friends of the Kunsthalle Kiel for the museum in 1930 – for they, too, wished to finally have a representative work in their collection by this sculptor who had long enjoyed an international reputation for the unique reimagining and redesign of the Gothic. So highly regarded, his work made Barlach one of the most popular figureheads of an Expressionism celebrated as decidedly German in the Weimar Republic. Even if nationalistic protest storms were brewing in some places, primarily in opposition of his monuments, Barlach continued to be considered as German as only a few of his artistic contemporaries. Not even the National Socialist press could therefore avoid congratulating the sculptor on his 60th birthday in January 1930, thanking him for his work in the name of the “National Socialists and the people of the German future”.

That German future was finally heralded just three years later when Hitler came to power. And it almost seemed as if Barlach would become a part of it. For although Expressionism was by now the subject of an embittered clash of opinions, carried by ever louder calls for a new German art, the young state initially consciously remained open – especially with res-

pect to Barlach's work with which the “Third Reich” was able to showcase itself at the Chicago World's Fair (fig. 4) or at the Venice Biennale, whilst at home it promoted the Winter Relief Organisation of the German people (fig. 5). The sculptor's creations were equally in demand from museums, exhibitions or on the book and art market. Even the Reich's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels appeared completely taken by the purchased bronze RUSSISCHE BETTLERIN II in 1934 (fig. 6).

Although Barlach had already voiced audible criticism of the National Socialists' rise to power in 1933 and felt seriously threatened by attacks on his person and some of his prominent works, he still enjoyed political protection. In the early years at least, this official protection was blatantly and self-servingly demonstrated by the state – before the politically stabilised Nazi regime distanced itself ever more distinctly from Expressionism, giving free reign to the arbitrary confiscation of pictures and books, and finally reaching a crescendo with the “degenerate art” campaign.

There were reasons why the work of Barlach in particular, one of the leading representatives of the now officially denounced Expressionism, was hardly shown in Munich: Barlach was not wanted in the exhibition. First and foremost, the initiator of the vilifying exhibition – the Reich's propaganda minister – was intent on removing his name and his work from the public line of fire. Internally, the artist was classed as a “tragic case”. The fact that DAS WIEDERSEHEN had been exposed to public mockery in Munich even drew a rebuke from the Reich Culture Senate, and in actual fact, the bronze was swapped with a sculpture by Theo Brün shortly before the opening (Fig. 7). It was to disappear from the travelling show touring throughout the Reich until 1941, increasingly mobilised for the coming war, just like Barlach's book ZEICHNUNGEN and accompanying charcoal drawings which was initially still on display and confiscated in 1936. Barlach was not, however, freed from the verdict “degenerate”. By at least the second wave of confiscation in the summer of 1937, the museums had to hand over the majority of their works by the artist. They nevertheless hoped for their return – probably not least because of the tolerant handling of the artist in the exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST (Fig. 8).

In the years that followed, those close to Barlach, including politically connected sponsors and patrons, believed in, and worked towards the fact that rehabilitation seemed possible. They were both prepared and willing to help Barlach regain his undisputed recognition as a German artist, at least posthumously, even if this meant that his work would be willingly



Fig. 5: Advertisement for the Winter Relief Organisation with BARLACH'S Frierendes Mädchen (1917)



Fig. 6: ERNST BARLACH, Russische Bettlerin II (1932), Ernst Barlach Haus, Hermann F. Reemtsma Foundation; the location of the specimen, former Joseph Goebbels, is unknown



Fig. 7: Exhibition ENTARTETE KUNST with THEO BRÜN, Der Schauspieler (1927)



Fig. 8: Depot »Entartete Kunst«, Schloss Schönhausen, with *Das Wiedersehen* (1926) and *Magdeburger Ehrenmal* (1928/29) by ERNST BARLACH

placed in the service of the Nazi regime. That these efforts did not lead to the longed-for breakthrough is in hindsight undoubtedly a blessing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isgard Kracht, born in 1974, works as a freelance art historian and provenance researcher in Düsseldorf. She studied art history and modern German literature in Münster, Oldenburg and Berlin, was a fellow of the Gerda-Henkel Foundation and worked a.o. as well as provenance researcher for the state capital of Düsseldorf and the Stiftung Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Art Collection North Rhine-Westphalia Foundation). She completed her doctorate in 2020 under Prof. Dr Christoph Zuschlag (Bonn) and Prof. Dr Uwe Fleckner (Hamburg).

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