Processed Art Essay, Research Paper

The Nazi and Soviet political movements were undoubtedly among the vilest developments of the 20th century. More than three million works of art were plundered by the Nazi regime during its reign. Their ambitions as art collectors were motivated by show of power as they confiscated all of the art in the Reich that conflicted with the Party’s ideology and concept of art. They inspired works of art, which have the ability to expose some of the best and worst that art can achieve. Because they involved such stark contrasts of good and evil, they offer excellent opportunities to discuss what aspects of art are good and bad, what art can achieve at its best and what it can destroy at its worst. My goal in this paper is not so much to present all of the best or worst of the art from these movements, but to provide concrete material for discussions regarding the nature and purpose of art.

Arno Breker, Nazi, was, in a certain sense, both the best and the worst of the Nazi artists. His technique was excellent, and his choice of subjects, poses and theme were outstanding. On the other hand, he was much more directly and effectively a supporter of the Nazi cause. Had his sculpture been ugly, ambiguous in meaning, poorly executed or less directly associated with Nazi militarism, the negative effects on the world of his sculpture would have been considerably lessened. In a certain sense, Breker uses his numerous “naked men with swords” to unite the notions of health, strength, competition, collective action and willingness to sacrifice the self for the common good seen in many other Nazi works with explicit glorification of militarism. The pair of statures The Party and The Army stood outside the entrance of Hitler’s Reich Chancellery. Like Breker’s other sculptures, they are both strongly and clearly expressive, and are also an idealization of some of the most aggressive and totalitarian themes in Nazi art.

Another Nazi, Adolf Wissel, painted in a certain class of folk art. The themes running through such works of art as Farm Family from Kahlenberg are the virtues of the simple, natural life, living close to the land, and using muscular power to turn the land into a healthy living. This theme is often portrayed in the more recent primitivist art of the environmentalist movement except that it tends to promote a more ethereal or surreal notion of what the “simple life” might entail. More likely than not because rural Germans had some experience with that lifestyle, they are able to idealize it a bit more.

The artists of this time were in essence coming down to the level of the peasants, and telling them that they were better than the fancy intellectuals with their idealistic theories and sky-high ideals. Their goal was to associate the ideals of health, family, motherhood and so on with the land rather than some kind of rational evaluation of the situation which wouldn’t have favored either the Nazis or the Communists. Such folk art is easy to produce and the Nazis created and displayed a lot of it. Since it was seen by many as a more genuine expression of political will than the work of some painter educated in France who painted blobs or stick-men, it did double-duty as both propaganda for “blood and soil” among the rural poor and as a boost for the general consensus that the Nazis were well-liked in the rural areas.

A good example of the rather inferior art, which was acquired after the Nazis cleared the museums of degenerate art, is Relay Runners by Karl Albiker. The only way to fill all of the newly open old museums and the new ones being built was to lower standards for quality and in many cases substitute ideological viewpoint as the standard for quality. The forms in this sculpture are blunted and imprecise and obviously cannot stand on their own without the supports attached to the legs. Still, the themes of athletic prowess, health, and collective action seen in so much other Nazi art are present in such botched attempts.

Much German sculpture of this era is criticized for amateurish workmanship and rightly so in cases like this. Such works were popular even though the degenerate art of the Weimar era was so despised. It is clear that past the lack of talent or care, there is a desire to portray something, and for it to be something good. In that sense, this piece can be viewed from several perspectives. On the one hand, it is aimed at the notion of health and achievement that people did and should have found appealing. On the other hand, it served to unite the idea of the Nazi party with such positive ideas.

It was the union of the yearning of the public for something “good and wholesome” along with the Nazi’s desire to package a deal for their political program with such ideals that caused this piece to be displayed in a public museum rather than being relegated to some dusty cellar, and it did its part in promoting the Nazi cause.

Albert Janesh’s Water Sports is another excellent example of the common theme of athletic prowess in Nazi artworks. It is particularly effective in conveying a sense of motion because of the lines of rowers acting like frames of movie film as the eye passes over them. Certainly the theme and technique of this painting are excellent, and there is certainly nothing especially overtly Nazi-oriented about the portrayal, but given the era in which it was created, themes like health, athletic prowess, collective action and competition are unmistakably intended to promulgate this view of German society and what kind of world the Nazis wanted to be thought of creating.

It is unfortunate that today so many artists have not taken home the wrong lesson from such works. Of course the end toward which they agitated was evil, but we must reject the idea of meaningful art promoting true virtues on the grounds that some artists in some eras have used their power to portray good ideals in association with evil political movements. By abandoning the idea that art can portray good, meaningful and true notions, such people leave the door open to some evil ideology to align itself with the virtue art can express.

In Ernst Liebermann’s By the Water, we again see a vivid example of the Nazis associating themselves with health, strength and beauty through well-executed art. While his technique couldn’t stand up to Leighton or Alma-Tadema, it is fairly good and is directed toward portraying a very specific kind of ideal, and was just the kind of thing the Nazis wanted to use as a cover for their otherwise despicable platform.

Vladamir Tatlin used his piece Monument to the Third International as a purely abstract form to represent a sort of upward and onward theme to describe the Third International. Unlike many abstract pieces in the west and in later times, this clearly expresses that theme through clear and unsubtle means. A second blunt simplistic propaganda plot was Revolutionary Poster, by Vladamir Mayakovsky. The use of folk art styles involved a certain sort of cynical down-talking to the people they considered to be poor dumb peasants who were unaware of their class interests and had to be fixed by exposure to crude and blunt messages like this. In some was this resembles the simple art the Nazis used to appeal to their own dumb peasants. It is as though both groups were under the impression that people are unable to comprehend art not similar to that their social class generally has the skills to produce.

Nazi influence and control classified art into it’s own themes, confiscating art not directed at creating a positive theme for their regime. Many works of art seen in that time period were created through precise and accurate planning to exhibit how strong, good and sane the Nazi party wanted people to think they were. Many artists of that time, such as Pablo Picasso, were hidden from the public view, because their messages were not of athletic prowess or collective action. The Nazis controlled art and presented the world with an image they created for themselves, giving society a false image of who they really were.