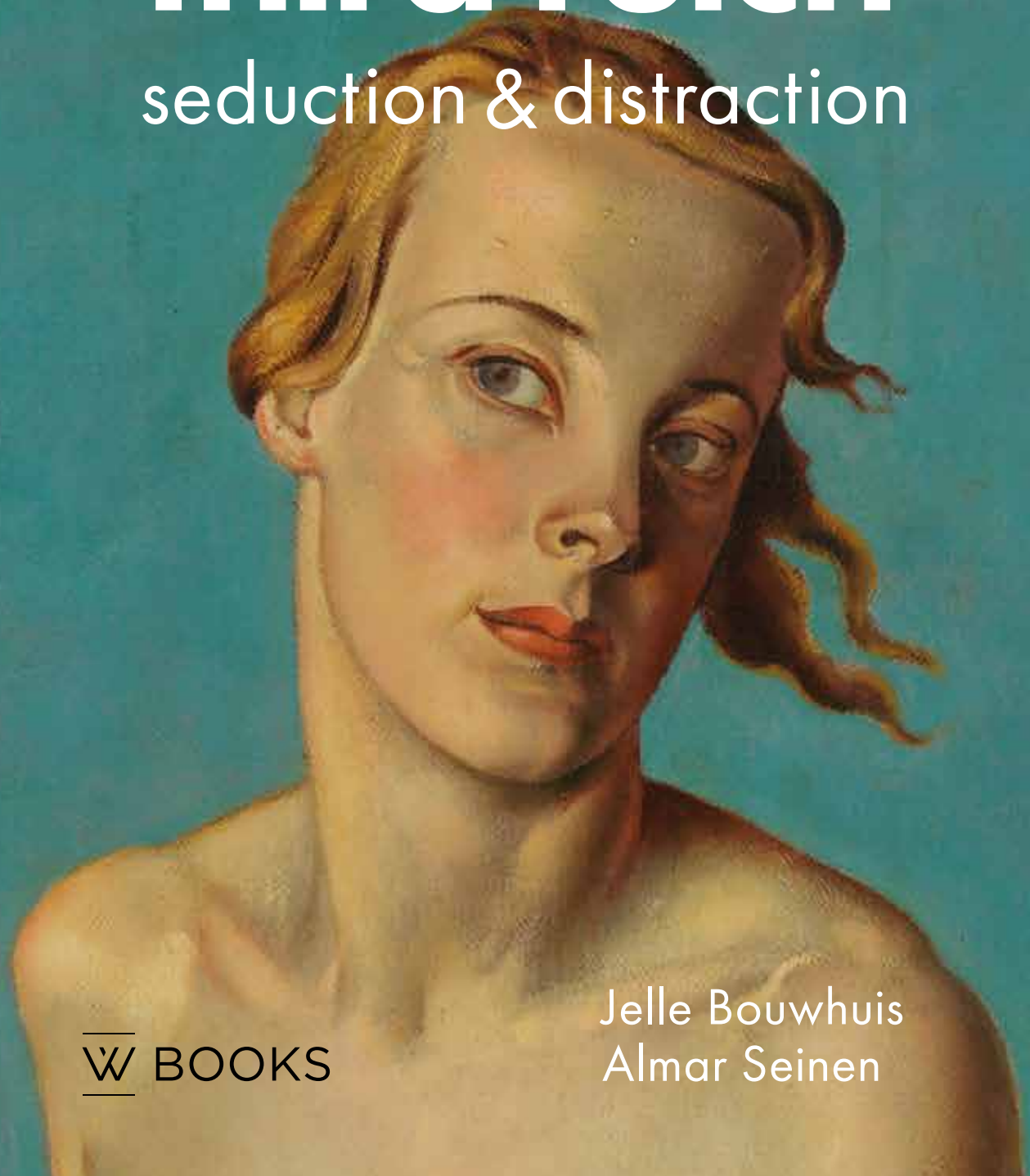


# art **in the** third reich

seduction & distraction



 BOOKS

Jelle Bouwhuis  
Almar Seinen



**Overview of sculpture gallery,  
Great German Art Exhibition, 1940**

Photo: Jaeger & Goergen / Zentralinstitut für  
Kunstgeschichte, Photothek



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Selecting the works for the Great German Art  
Exhibition of 1938 by Adolf Hitler and Karl Kolb  
(right), director of Haus der Deutschen Kunst

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich / Bildarchiv

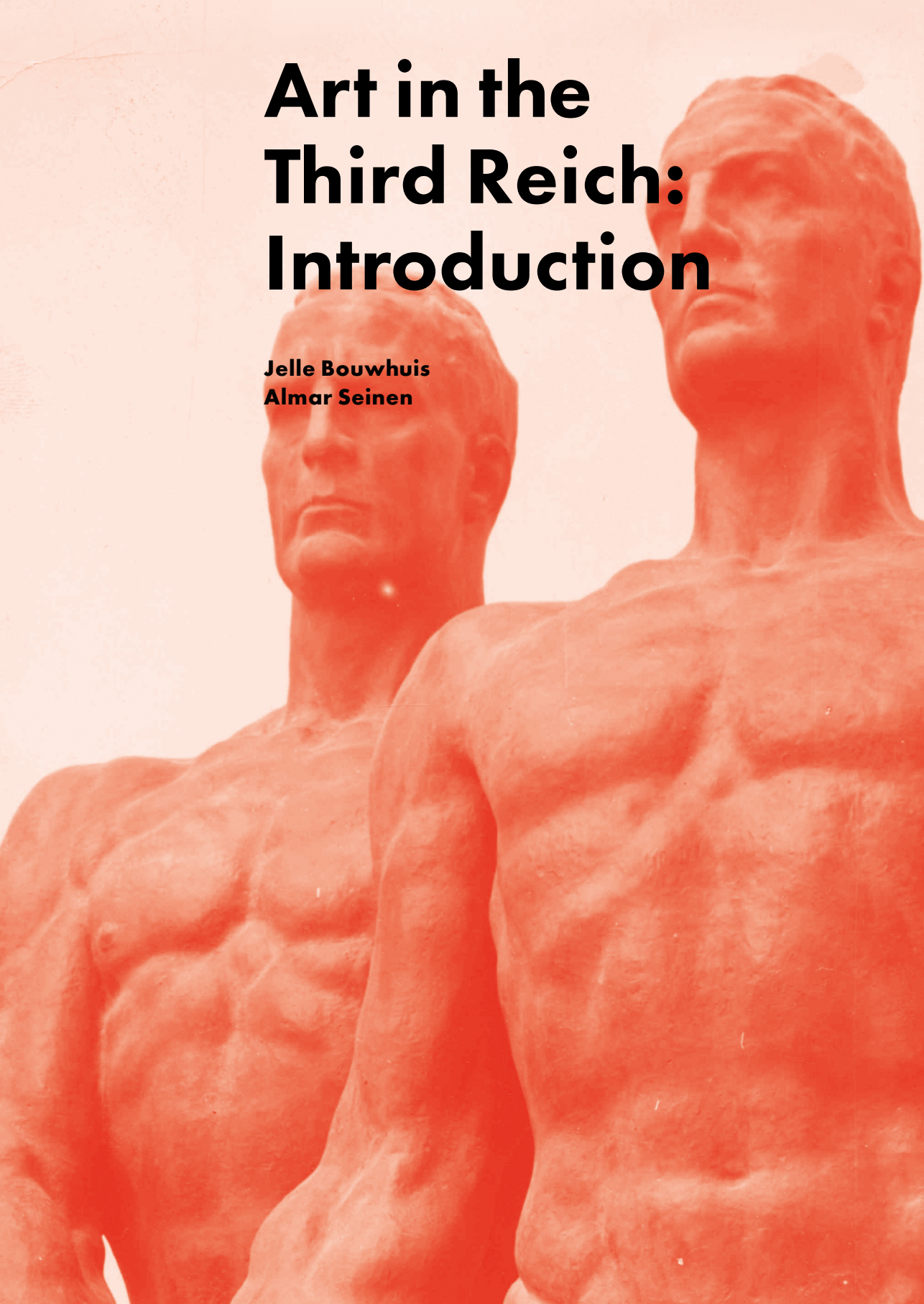



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# **Art in the Third Reich: Introduction**

**Jelle Bouwhuis  
Almar Seinen**





**This book concerns the art made and exhibited in Germany during the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1945. This art surfaced in the tainted social context of Germany's oppressive and aggressive domestic and foreign policy, under which Jews were methodically excluded from public life and killed, communism and socialism were silenced and their adherents persecuted, and millions of people lost their lives in the German expansionist project that resulted in World War II and the Holocaust. Adolf Hitler's Germany and the ideology of National Socialism were criminal and murderous, as has been duly shown by history books. *Art in the Third Reich* focusses on German art from this grim period.**

One might assume that this grim, negative context had no room for art, but the opposite is true. The German state under Hitler, who once had ambitions for a painting career himself, had a great deal of interest in the arts. Contemporary art, just like film and radio, became an important tool in spreading National Socialist ideology. Art was harnessed as propaganda in a variety of ways. One important means—and the best known within the context of post-war art history—by which contemporary art was made to work as Nazi propaganda was to slander and completely cancel modernist art, that is, any contemporaneous art that was expressionist, cubist, abstract, or which expressed social critique. For this purpose, the concept of “degenerate art” was introduced, a term intended to encompass all art that the Nazi regime dismissed on the grounds of formal criteria, mixed with antisemitism and hatred towards artists who openly showed left-wing political leanings. “Degenerate” art became the subject of large-scale slander exhibitions, and thousands of contemporary works of art that were labelled “degenerate” were removed from public collections. In contrast, art and artists who were not considered “degenerate” received ample government support. This concerned the vast majority of visual artists in Germany who were registered at the fine art department of the so-called *Reichskulturkammer* (State Cultural Chamber), an institute founded specifically for this purpose during the Hitler regime.

This volume specifically concerns a number of these artists whose work was shown at the annual *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (The Great German Art Exhibition) at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich (House of German Art), today known as the Haus der Kunst (House of Art). This was a national event which the German authorities organized every summer from 1937 through 1944 and which drew massive audiences. Parts of these exhibitions moved on to other locations in Germany after the seminal annual show in Munich. As an institution, the Great German Art Exhibition greatly boosted attention for contemporary art and kickstarted the careers of many artists of the period. Once selected by the jury and exhibited, the chances were good that included artists' work would be bought for large sums by private collectors, and even more likely, by the party leadership. In this way, art included in the Great German Art Exhibition



came to adorn the homes and buildings of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP, or Nazi party). Moreover, these works were included in the accompanying catalogs that were published in large quantities. They were often reproduced as popular postcards and were reviewed in the many art periodicals that flourished during the Nazi period. The Great German Art Exhibition acted as the pivot of a genuine art industry, as Christian Fuhrmeister argues in his contribution to this book. Thanks to government intervention at the highest level, hundreds of artists received great acclaim and achieved considerable commercial success. But this is a history that is not commonly known today, and that is why it is the subject of this book.

Why should critical attention be devoted to this subject though, and why now? This Nazi art, with its nostalgic pastoral and civilian scenes, muscular laborers, voluptuous naked women, and sickly sweet landscapes is all kitsch anyway, isn't it? We will answer this question from different points of view in the essays in this book. After all, kitsch is not a quality in itself, as Milan Kundera (1929-2023) argued in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but "the inability to admit that shit exists." The art of the Third Reich is in many respects nostalgic, romantic, and anecdotal, but in Kundera's view, it only becomes kitsch because the counter voices were eliminated. These counter voices could be styles of art other than the traditional ones. Or they could take the form of social criticism in their depictions of poverty or the oppressed proletariat, common practice among communist and socialist artists until 1933. And, of course, those artists who openly criticized National Socialism and its protagonists were among the first victims of the Hitler regime. The absence of such counter voices, however, says little about the quality of the work by the many artists who the Nazis deemed acceptable. Art in the Third Reich, as Gregory Maertz argues in his essay in this book, was by no means univocal but rather ambivalent and heterogeneous, as is also clearly illustrated by the works shown in this publication.

One aspect that is amply discussed in this book is the problematic nature of an objective consideration of art in the Third Reich. Before 1933, there were many different styles of art and views on art in Germany, which were usually all shown together at

## **National Socialism as a Permanent Break with Existing Views of Art**

Until the end of the interbellum, museum directors and curators hardly had any serious interest in modernist art. The German museums were an exception because they had been propagating it since the Weimar republic. But their effort came to an abrupt end under the National Socialist regime in the second half of the 1930s. It is, therefore, fair to say that the canonization of the so-called historical avant-gardes didn't occur internationally until after 1945. At least, this becomes evident from the museums' collection strategies after 1945, which are an important indicator of which particular artists and movements should be part of the canon—since museums grant them the highest institutional recognition.

The year 1937 constituted a turning point in German arts politics. Up until then, the Nazis had not taken up a univocal position in their art policy, despite their repressive measures against modernist art. But in 1937, the first *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition) of officially approved art opened at the newly built Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich. Shortly after, the notorious exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) at the archeological institute was a direct attack on modernist art. It consisted of over 600 works of art, confiscated from 32 German museums. In line with the *völkische* Nazi ideology and racial doctrine, these two exhibitions visualized the contrast between so-called *arteigene* ("German") art on the one hand and *entartete* ("degenerate") art on the other. After the opening of the exhibition, some 20,000 more works of modern art were confiscated from museums in Germany.

### **Alfred H. Barr Jr.**

Both exhibitions in Munich were also amply discussed outside of Germany. In my book *German Art in New York* (2015), I demonstrate that Alfred H. Barr Jr. played a decisive role in the confiscation of modern art from Germany as the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. From the second half of the 1930s, Barr largely determined the arts discourse in the United States. He defended modern art as a reaction to the changes in arts policy in Nazi Germany.



A good example of Barr's changed attitude towards modern art is a MoMA press release from August 1939 called "Exiled Art Purchased by Museum of Modern Art," in which recent acquisitions of works by André Derain, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, and Henri Matisse are mentioned. The modernist paintings and Lehmbruck's sculpture which originated from German museum collections were confiscated as "degenerate art" by the Nazis and sold off abroad. In the years following, the MoMA bought similar works, and subsequently, top pieces from German museums ended up in the United States.

**Storage in Berlin-Niederschönhausen with "degenerate" works of art, confiscated by the Nazis, featuring paintings by Braque, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso**

Photo bpk

In the aforementioned press release, Barr described Lehmbruck's *Kneeling Woman* (1911) as one of the greatest masterpieces of modern sculpture, and the painters as some of the greatest living artists. His previous doubts, which Barr had still expressed during the MoMA exhibition *German Painting and Sculpture* in 1931,



**Carl Bloss**  
**Schwarzwälderin**  
**(Woman from the Black**  
**Forest), 1940**

Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm

Deutsches Historisches Museum,

Gm 98/96



**Fritz Erler**

***Professor Josef Thorak, 1939***

Oil on canvas, 135 x 100 cm

Deutsches Historisches Museum,

Gm 98/147

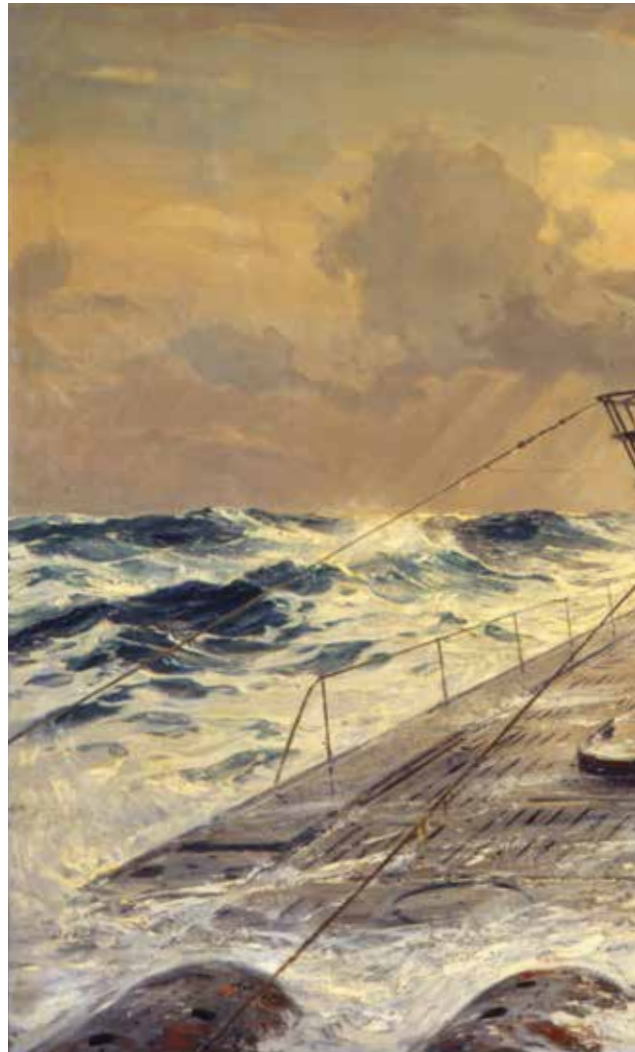
# Claus Bergen

**1885, Stuttgart – 1964, Lengries**

In 1909, Claus Bergen, son of an illustrator, made his breakthrough with an impressionist painting of the harbor of Polperro in Cornwall. After that, he focused on maritime subjects. In 1916 he was given the opportunity to participate in an exercise with a U-boat, the submarine that played an important role for Germany in WWI. This allowed him to make observations at sea himself; he recorded the battle of the Skagerrak and later other naval battles. In 1926 he sailed on the passenger ship *Columbus* from Bremerhaven to New York. The canvases on which he captured this journey made him financially independent. The painting style and subject choices of Bergen, a nationalist who became a member of the NSDAP at an early age, were popular with the Nazis. He participated in all editions of the Great German Art Exhibition in Munich with a total of 23 works, of which Adolf Hitler acquired 18. After WWII, Bergen took a less politically charged path with his art and painted landscapes and sailboats.

The focus of *Im Kampfgebiet des Atlantik* is on man's confrontation with the forces of nature, which can be controlled thanks to ultra-modern submarine technology. The submarine's tower, rusty and battered from continued exposure to salt water,

indicates that the vessel has long been far from home, on a mission in enemy territory, as the title indicates. This scene also contains a propagandistic message: braving the elements despite the harsh conditions symbolizes the determination of the German Empire to achieve the ultimate victory.



Bergen's enormous paintings became popular after the war in the United States, where they were brought as spoils of war. Works such as *Im Kampfgebiet des Atlantik* found their way onto the walls of the offices of the US Navy.

**Claus Bergen**  
***Im Kampfgebiet des Atlantik***  
**(In the Atlantic Battle Zone),**  
**1941**

Oil on canvas, 180 x 130 cm  
Deutsches Historisches Museum  
Gm 98/74; photo: A. Psille



# Leopold Schmutzler

1864, Vienna – 1941, Munich

Leopold Schmutzler's realistic works from the late nineteenth century deal with everyday subjects and high society. Around 1900 he was one of the most sought-after portrait painters in Germany. He received commissions from the royal family of Bavaria and painted famous actresses and dancers. His portrait of Lili Marberg (1878-1962) in her role as Salomé became famous. At the beginning of the twentieth century, his style changed in line with Art Nouveau and later Art Deco, before he began painting more realistically again under National Socialism.

Schmutzler's life-size painting *Arbeits-  
maiden vom Felde heimkehrend* is somewhat uncharacteristic of the art of the Third Reich. It corresponds to the stylistic and thematic preferences of various totalitarian regimes, such as Soviet Art and Nazi Art, which are often lumped together, sometimes even with the art of later Communist China and North Korea, under the term "Totalitarian Art." However, the art of the Third Reich leans more towards nineteenth-century Social Realism, which is not the same as Socialist Realism, the official art style of the former Soviet Union. The two movements share similar art historical sources and themes,

but Socialist Realism is a specific branch of Social Realism. The concept of Totalitarian Art suggests a uniformity that is not actually there. However, *Arbeitsmaiden vom Felde heimkehrend* does show stylistic similarities with Socialist Realism. The

**Leopold Schmutzler**  
***Arbeitsmaiden vom Felde***  
***heimkehrend***  
**(Women Workers Returning**  
**from the Fields), 1940**

Oil on canvas, 130 x 157 cm

Deutsches Historisches Museum,

Gm 98/500; photo: A. Psille





exuberant and cheerful young women returning from the fields could easily be on their way home from a kolkhoz. Under National Socialism, working women were generally depicted subdued and passive.

Schmutzler's work is ubiquitous in public collections in Germany, as well as in the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. The American art collector Charles Frye (1858-1940) was a great admirer of Schmutzler.



# Colophon

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