


Spring 5-10-2017

Freed from Fascism: Berlin's Gallery Culture in the Aftermath of World War II

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Recommended Citation

Fessler, Brooke, "Freed from Fascism: Berlin's Gallery Culture in the Aftermath of World War II" (2017). *Student Research Day Abstracts and Posters*. 245.

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Freed from Fascism: Berlin's Gallery Culture in the Aftermath of World War II

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Abstract

In post-World War II Germany, the city of Berlin was left in ruin after six years of war. A nation ripped apart both physically and at its governmental core was finally freed from Nazi fascism in 1945, and the German people were able to reconstruct their culture. After years of strict regulation of the German art world, art that was personal and experimental was once more put on display. The Galerie Gerd Rosen was created with this goal in mind, and featured exhibitions that displayed modern art that was banned during the years of Hitler's power. My project explores the cultural impact of the Galerie Gerd Rosen's activities in the period between 1945 and 1951. This was a time of artistic exploration in Berlin, when the city's galleries replaced the Nazi ideals that had haunted the nation for so many years with exhibitions that promoted freedom of expression in the arts.

The Nazi Aesthetic

From 1937 until 1945 in Germany, Hitler and his associates carefully censored the art that was able to be viewed by the public. Hitler believed that true beauty could be found in Greek classicism, and in 1937 he instated laws that demanded all art produced in Germany should embody the proportion and unity found in classical Greek art. Modern art was marked as "degenerate," meaning that until the end of the war, Expressionist, Dada, Surrealist, Cubist, and Fauvist art was all banned. Hitler took great care to associate himself with the classical Greek aesthetic, first by holding a Great German Art Exhibition in 1937-1938 that showcased large classical sculptures of the male form. In contrast, the Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibition of 1937 displayed over 650 works that were categorized as markers of social decline. This show was carefully coordinated by the Reich Propaganda Directorate with the purpose of convincing the public that such art had infected their population, and needed to be totally censored.



Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibition, catalogue cover, 1937



Poster of the exhibition Junge Kunst (Young Art), Galerie Rosen, Berlin



Poster of the exhibition Moderne Graphik (Modern Graphic), Galerie Gerd Rosen, Berlin, 1945

The Aftermath of the War

In the aftermath of the war, Berlin was left in ruins, and with the death of Hitler the restrictions on art were lifted. Thus, the Galerie Gerd Rosen was born. This was the first commercial gallery to open in postwar Berlin at the Kurfürstendamm, in August of 1945. The exhibitions put on by the gallery gave the people of Berlin access to the art of their time, and provided a new cultural center for the city. Exhibitions had themes ranging from "Fantasten" (Fantasms) which called for Surrealist pieces, to "From Photomontage from Dada to Today." Although the gallery was not in operation for long (1945-51), it marked the start of artistic freedom being brought back into Berlin. Additionally, since this part of Berlin was occupied by the Americans during the postwar years, modern art was encouraged by officials who believed that modern art connected the people of Berlin to their pre-Nazi past, and would allow for an easy transition into interactions with their new Western allies.

her Dada photomontage pieces that critiqued political issues in Germany. When the Galerie Gerd Rosen opened in 1945, she was among the first artists to show her work there. Before the war, Hoch's work was primarily photomontage pieces created using dark, sepia tones. In the years following the war, she began using brighter colors and moved towards an abstract style of painting. Similarly, Hans Uhlmann's pre-war artwork was modernist and abstracted, and as a result was deemed "degenerate" by the Nazis. After the war, he started to create abstract sculptures, which were put on display in the Galerie Gerd Rosen. Both of these artists faced extreme censorship during the war years, but as soon as the laws were lifted, the gallery provided them with a space to explore their place in society as an artist again.

Conclusion

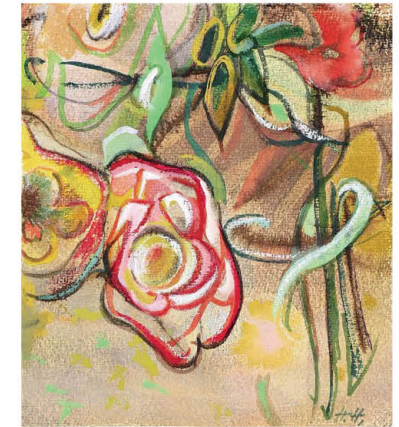
In the years after the war when the city of Berlin was left in almost total ruin, the Galerie Gerd Rosen functioned as a focal point of art and culture. The art put on display marked a cultural shift towards the freedom of expression in the arts that the people of Germany had been denied during Nazi rule. The galleries that functioned during the years after the war show that even in dark times, artistic freedom is viewed as crucial to a society's way of life.

Key Artists

The Galerie Gerd Rosen, in its attempts to display modern art, exhibited the works of artists such as Hannah Höch and Hans Uhlmann. Both of these artists were at the forefront of reestablishing a thriving German art scene in Berlin, and creating works that marked a major movement towards the avant-garde. Before the war, Höch was best known for



Hans Uhlmann, Weibliche Gruppe, 1947



Hannah Höch, Hängeblüten, 1950



Great Exhibition of German Art, catalogue cover, 1938

"The art put on display marked a cultural shift towards freedom of expression in the arts that the people of Germany had been denied during Nazi rule."