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Visual Arts

Art in Nazism's shadow: Before the Fall at the Neue Galerie, New York

A marvellously disquieting show illustrating how German and Austrian artists negotiated the extremes of the 1930s

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Vegetables come undead in Karl Völker's "Autumnal Still-Life", a graveyard of spiky cabbages, gnarled pomegranates, sallow squash and thorny blossoms. This portrait of vibrant, proliferating rot gives us nature at its most morbid, not as a lush foretelling of death, but as a signal that the end has already arrived. In 1934, it had. No sooner did the Nazis take power than they deemed the communist, constructivist Völker a degenerate artist. He survived by switching to subtler forms of resistance, hiding his disgust amid drooping plants and flowers.

Völker's shrivelling flora appear in *Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s*, a marvellously disquieting show at the Neue Galerie in New York. Today, Völker is an art-historical afterthought, a member of the forgotten generation of realist painters corralled under the heading *Neue Sachlichkeit*. But curator Olaf Peters isn't interested in familiar names or the usual isms. Instead, he explores the ambiguous middle in an era dominated by screaming extremes.

We know the period between the stock market crash and the second world war by its political opposites: outraged Expressionists (who often ended up in exile or in prison) versus the sentimental classicists cultivated by Hitler's regime. Yet artists also responded to the darkening horizon in more evasive ways. The Neue Galerie's un-didactic exhibition may be short on masterpieces, but it has two great virtues. It revives some works that never deserved to be forgotten, and allows us to interpret their political valence.

It's not always easy to guess how individual painters fared. Like Völker, the Austrian Rudolf Wacker hid alienation and foreboding behind rigorous realism. The strategy did not save him. After Germany annexed his country, the Gestapo arrested and tortured him so severely that he died six months later. Among his final works was a seasonal still life, "Autumn Bouquet with (Pinned) Butterfly", a tragic self-portrait in the guise of crumpled leaves, shrivelled petals and a bright-winged lepidopteron, forever stilled.

Before the Fall is the final show of a trilogy. Peters also curated the first two, *Degenerate Art: the Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany*, and *Berlin Metropolis, 1918-1933*, both of which focused on modernist trends. Act 3 deals with



Karl Völker's 'Autumnal Still-Life' (1934).

Realism, then a dominant force that has since been demoted to a historical footnote. That rubric covers artists who have usually been assigned to other movements: Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and Oscar Kokoschka get lumped with Expressionism, Max Ernst with Surrealism, and Alfred Kubin with Symbolism.

Here, though, paintings and photos are divided by genre rather than school, mixing the conventional with the wild, the renowned and the obscure. Grouping landscapes, portraits and still lifes in separate rooms gives sudden meaning to seemingly small variations. We can see how different personalities navigated the churning riptides of the 1930s — who swam in sync and who floundered against the political current. Berlin recedes; this is a show about the scattered towns where painters laboured away from the censors' glare.



Rudolf Wacker's 'Two Heads' (1932)

The example of Franz Radziwill demonstrates that even an era of absolutes allowed for nimbleness and flexibility (or, more precisely, opportunism). A landscape painter in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich, he churned out picturesque German farms with a soupçon of Dutch snugness. Yet in 1937, he also produced “The Dangaster Bush with Spa House in Winter”, where a stand of dark pines bursts like a black hole between steely sky and frozen fields. Uncharacteristically gloomy, it’s a picture that speaks of an isolated spirit, battered by bleakness and tumult.

Radziwill vacillated, both politically and aesthetically. He was at once repulsed and seduced by modernity. For a while he fell in with socialists, then was absorbed into the New German Romanticism, and found himself popular among nationalists. The Nazis celebrated him as a true German, then denounced him as degenerate, and, after he joined the party, welcomed him back into the fold. After the war, he “revised” his work, rewrote his history, and salvaged his reputation.

The text panels allude only vaguely to all these dodges and swerves, and in other cases they fall silent. But the pictures have their own reticent eloquence, amplified by clever pairings. A black-and-white photographic landscape by Albert Renger-Patzsch, “Beech

Forest in Autumn” (1936), hangs near another by August Sander, “Footpath in the Siebengebirge” (1934). Both lead us deep inside dramatic, distinctively northern terrain, so that the viewer can feel like Siegfried, wandering in the woods.

Renger-Patzsch finds harmonies in nature’s repeating patterns. Tall, quasi-human trunks stand arrayed in martial rows, and the space between them recedes into an elegant latticework of branches and fog. It’s the forest that matters, not the trees. Renger-Patzsch saw objectivity as a delivery system for pure beauty, which made him a target of leftists angered by his refusal to confront social realities. Those criticisms affected him not at all. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, he accepted lucrative assignments from pen manufacturers, coffee brands and the pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim, Germany’s largest supplier of morphine during the second world war.

Sander, by contrast, shot a portrait of a single sapling that dances across a background of foliage and mottled light. Where Renger-Patzsch made the woods collective and monumental, Sander fills them with motion and expressive effect. “Footpath” is the botanical equivalent of the portraits he amassed over two decades. At a time when the tsunamis of history overwhelmed personal stories, he compiled an indispensable archive of

individuals. That was not, initially, his intent: he divided people into groups and subgroups, only to discover that each person inhabits a tangle of overlapping categories. He collected specimens of the human soul.

(The Nazis did not approve. If his ordering of the German people included Gypsies, circus workers, blind people and vagrants, then evidently his approach was flawed. In 1936 they confiscated copies of his book *Faces of Our Time* (1929) and destroyed the printing plates.)

There’s something terribly sad about seeing such a varied collection of artists telling their unruly stories through a veil of metaphor, evasion and hints. The Nazis divided them with a clever, expunging subtlety along with outright defiance. *Before the Fall* returns us to the doomed moment when ambiguity was not just possible but essential

To May 28, neuegalerie.org

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August Sander's 'Footpath in the Siebengebirge' (1934)