

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN | Art Review

Walk Through This Exhibition With Dread. You Know Where It Leads.

BEFORE THE FALL: GERMAN AND AUSTRIAN ART OF THE 1930s

 NYT Critic's Pick

By JASON FARAGO APRIL 5, 2018

“Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s,” at the Neue Galerie, is an exhibition that steadily tightens its chokehold. You know where the show will lead, and yet you walk through its galleries bewildered, helpless. Anodyne still-lives and depopulated landscapes curdle into premonitions of disaster. Graffiti in street scenes appears as ominous as the writing on the wall in the Book of Daniel. Acts that once seemed implausible, absurd — media pronouncements full of

hatred and lies; young men marching with flags and torches — become everyday occurrences. The worst, the very worst, is coming. But getting there will take years, and life must be lived every day.

This is only the latest of many exhibitions over the last 18 months that have plumbed European art of the 1930s and the resistance, complicity or indifference of artists as democracy collapsed, and the continent tumbled into atrocity. The notorious Gurlitt collection, assembled by one of Hitler’s art dealers and poached partly from Jewish collectors, went on view last autumn in Bonn and Bern and reopens in Berlin in September. The Fondazione Prada in Milan is now presenting a titanic exhibition of Italian Fascist art; the gallery Modern Art Oxford has displayed the anti-Fascist tapestries of the Norwegian artist Hannah Ryggen; the National Gallery of Ireland is showing the Nazi painter Emil Nolde; and the Picasso Museum in Paris and the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid have partnered on a new show exploring “Guernica,” Picasso’s cry of rage against Franco and the Luftwaffe.

A few weeks ago, some 500 leading figures in the Polish art world published an open letter that called on that country’s national museum to stage an urgent exhibition on the history of art and Fascism. And American institutions, too, have turned their gaze on the Nazi catastrophe: The New-York Historical Society recently presented an archival show on the rise of German anti-Semitism, while the Harvard Art Museums are displaying a survey of German art in the wake of the Holocaust.

The nearly 150 works in “Before the Fall” include paintings by Otto Dix, Oskar Kokoschka, Max Beckmann and other artists deemed “degenerate” by the Nazis. But there are also quieter works by far less familiar names. The show is the third in a series of Neue exhibitions on art and German politics that have been curated by Olaf Peters, an art history professor at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle, Germany. (Preceding it were “Degenerate Art,” a surprise blockbuster on Nazi art policy, and “Berlin Metropolis,” a multimedia extravaganza on the doomed burlesque of the Weimar capital.) Like those shows, this one is somewhat hamstrung by the Neue Galerie’s limited space — and yet the claustrophobia of “Before the Fall”



“Self-Portrait in the Camp” (1940), by Felix Nussbaum, is one of the most haunting images in “Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s,” at the Neue Galerie. 2018 Felix Nussbaum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York — VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, via Neue Galerie New York



"Paris Society" (1931), by Max Beckmann, one of the artists the Nazis called "degenerate." 2018 Max Beckmann/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York — VG Bild-Kunst; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, via Art Resource, N.Y.

he was dead. Wacker's "Autumn Bouquet With Butterfly," a morose, macabre still life from 1938, could serve as his epitaph.

A showcase of portraits also mingles paintings by artists deemed "degenerate" with those by artists in line with the new regime. Stylistically, the two can be hard to distinguish. A 1929 portrait of a printer by Dix, whose art would be purged from German

museums, sits uncomfortably close to a society portrait by Herbert von Reyl-Hanisch, who would go on to paint idealized Aryans to promote the 1936 Olympics. Photographic portraits by August Sander from his epochal series "People of the Twentieth Century" include both Nazis in uniform and Jewish men and woman preparing to leave the country. (Also on view are Sander's images of those he called "the last people": disabled men and children whom the Nazis would soon deem unfit to live.)

Such was the reality of German and Austrian art, and German and Austrian society, in the initial years of Nazi rule: the awkward coexistence of fascists, democrats and Communists, who heard the rhetoric, who witnessed the hatred, but who still could not see how much horror lay ahead. One of the high points of "Before the Fall" is a suite of woodcuts by Wilhelm Traeger, whose street scenes of Vienna in 1932 seem like an X-ray of a society on the edge. In these thickly inked, brashly contoured prints, made when Traeger was just 25, a hunchback shuffles past a brick wall plastered with a call to "Vote Red," while a skeletal veteran on crutches begs for change as women in furs strut past. Newspaper salesmen, taxi drivers, chain smokers in the coffee house: All are living on the brink.

Was it even possible for painters who opposed the Nazis, but who did not follow Beckmann and other "degenerate" artists into exile or dissidence, to make meaningful art in Germany in the late 1930s? "Before the Fall" answers this question equivocally — but it comes closest with the art of a Jewish painter who, it goes without saying, could not treat that question academically. That artist, Felix Nussbaum, was in Rome in 1933, having been awarded Germany's

most prestigious art scholarship to study there, when Hitler took power in Berlin. His scholarship was quickly withdrawn, and he lived and painted in exile — in Italy, Paris, Ostend, Brussels — before the Nazis arrested him and sent him to an internment camp in southern France in 1940.

Nussbaum escaped, and later that year, he painted "Self-Portrait in the Camp": a harsh, indelible artwork that puts all the other portraits in this show in their full, brutal context. Nussbaum appears in three-quarter profile, his left eye in shadow, his right eye sunken but locked upon us. He has grown a goatee, and his drab brown uniform has a frayed collar and a hasty patch on its right shoulder. Behind him, past scavenging and defecating prisoners, is a fence of barbed wire, and beyond it, a sky of ferrous gray. Nussbaum appears wearied. But his gaze is defiant, asserting an individuality that serves as proof of a continuing, unspeakable crime.

Nussbaum, hiding in Brussels, continued to paint for several years after completing "Self-Portrait in the Camp," but soon the Nazis came again. This time his destination was Auschwitz, where he was murdered in 1944. There were six million more.

We know that history can't be fathomed while it's still being lived. We know that not all art made in the first years of the Reich can be easily classified into approved and "degenerate." We want, therefore, to face these paintings and photographs as things that are never free of their circumstances, but still more than mere evidence of barbarity. We want to be reassured, we comfortable museumgoing types, that people who compromise, people who lack absolute moral courage, are not wholly lost to humanity.

But in the face of Nussbaum's "Self-Portrait in the Camp," that stance rings hollow. That is the central lesson of "Before the Fall" and the other recent 1930s shows: There are no individual pardons for collective guilt.



"Self-Portrait With Horn" (1938), another work by Beckmann. 2018 Max Beckmann/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York — VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, via Neue Galerie New York and Private Collection

"Before the Fall: German and Austrian Art of the 1930s" Through May 28 at the Neue Galerie, 1048 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; 212-994-9493, neuegalerie.org.

A version of this review appears in print on April 6, 2018, on Page C13 of the New York edition with the headline: Disquieting Works of Nazi Era.