

THE CULTURE

Underground resistance

Uta Kornmeier muses on the unexpected unearthing in Berlin of some remarkable survivors of Nazi cultural vandalism

When, last year, construction workers began digging up the ground in front of Berlin's city hall for a new underground line, they had no idea they would unearth a most unusual hoard of sculptures.

In the rubble filling the basements of what was, before the Second World War, a busy shopping street in the city centre, a small, almost unrecognisable bronze sculpture was recovered. The piece was later identified as Edwin Scharff's 1921 portrait of the actress Anni Mewes. It belonged to a large number of artworks that the Nazis termed "degenerate art" and removed from public museums in the 1930s.

And there was more.

By October 2010, from the debris that used to be the building at 50 Königstrasse, builders and archaeologists had retrieved 11 sculptures

by better- and lesser-known artists who were active in the 1920s and 1930s. The works are presently on display in the city's New Museum.

Usually the story of a piece of art begins with the artist and ends in a museum; but with these pieces, their most compelling tales begin in one museum and end in another. Eight sculptures found in Königstrasse have been traced to pre-Second World War public art collections at institutions including the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg and Berlin's National Gallery – museums whose directors were particularly interested in collecting modern, avant-garde art.

The avant-garde, especially Expressionism, was seen by the Nazis as an affront to "good taste" and an expression of cultural decline brought about by "racially and mentally inferior" practitioners. Beginning in the early 1930s, Nazi-led denunciations of avant-garde artists portrayed them as sick, criminal or degenerate, and their work was exhibited in separate museum galleries nicknamed "chambers of horrors".

In 1937, the Nazis confiscated hundreds

of paintings, drawings and sculptures from public museums and put them in a propaganda exhibition, *Degenerate Art*, in Munich. By using crowded and lopsided arrangements and juxtaposing artworks with photographs of disabled people or drawings by the mentally ill, and through suggestive captions and decontextualised quotes from artists' manifestos, the exhibition "exposed" the art as a sham, a deliberate insult to the viewer and a terrible waste of public money.

The majority of these items were paintings. Only 25 were sculptures, four of which were found last year in Königstrasse: Marg Moll's *Female Dancer*, confiscated from the Silesian Museum of Fine Art in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland), Karl Knappe's *Hagar* from the State Gallery in Stuttgart, Otto Baum's *Standing Girl*, from the National Gallery in Berlin, and a fragment of the head of Emy Roeder's *Pregnant Woman*, originally found in the collection of the State Art Gallery in Karlsruhe.

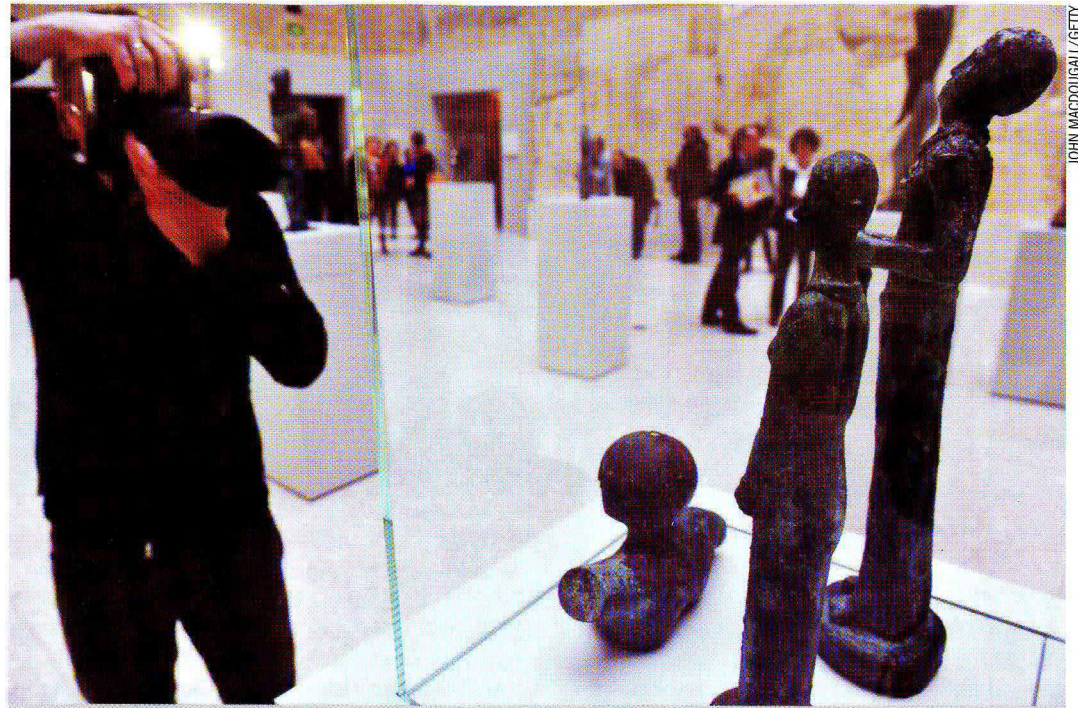
Today, none of these works would raise an eyebrow in any museum. Despite their diverse subjects and styles, a shared stern expression



Regenerate art Modernist works seized by the Nazis were rediscovered during excavations in Berlin's city centre in 2010 and put on display at the New Museum



Unveiled a study in rubble



Back on show 'these 20th-century sculptures have the appearance of ancient artefacts'

JOHN MACDOUGALL/GETTY

makes them all look beautifully classical. In the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition, however, Roeder's *Pregnant Woman* was accompanied by the scathing words of Adolf Hitler: "It is not the point of art...to paint human beings only in a state of decay, draw cretins as symbols of motherhood, and show warped idiots as representatives of male vigour."

The point of art, according to Nazi ideology, could be seen in the *Great German Art Exhibition*, which opened in Munich one day before and in a building opposite the venue housing *Degenerate Art*. In the Nazi-approved exhibition, the sculpture ranged from heroic portrait heads and figures of almost pornographically well-built male figures to kitschily cute images of deer and ducks.

While the *Great German Art Exhibition* was conceived as a recurring event, its supposed "evil twin" toured the country until 1941, when it was stopped owing to the constraints of the war. The artworks were brought to a depot owned by the Ministry of Propaganda and stored, destroyed or sold.

Occasionally they were used for other purposes. Moll's *Female Dancer* and Otto Freundlich's *Head* can be seen as props in a pro-Nazi film made in 1941.

Venus on Trial, a comedy directed by Hans Zerlett, tells the story of the young Nazi-loving sculptor Peter, who finds that he can make no headway in the art world because it is dominated by "degenerate" Modernists. He plans to expose this evil network of experts and creates a figure of Venus in a Classical style, which he buries in order for it to be found and "authenticated" as ancient by his enemies so he can reveal the scandalous misattribution. However, it is he who ends up in court and must prove that the Venus is his own work.

A scene intended to characterise the hostile art world is set in a Jewish art dealer's shop, where the walls are lined with real paintings by artists including Wassily Kandinsky, and

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sculptures such as Moll's and Freundlich's are dotted around the room to show the dealer's Modernist, "degenerate" affiliation.

What happened to the artworks used as props in the film is unknown. It had always been assumed that they were brought back to the depot of "degenerate art", but it now appears that they could have taken a different route.

There had been no reason to expect such a find in Königstrasse 60 years after the war. The building, like many of those around it, was used for both business and residential purposes. Its Jewish owner rented out apartments to, among others, a number of Jewish lawyers. In 1942, the house became the property of the state, probably because the owner was forced to sell up, and all tenants listed in a 1939 address book had left by that time.

Why the group of defamed artworks should be found there is a mystery. The only clue is a safe found together with the sculptures. It belonged to one Erhard Oewerdieck, an escrow agent who in 1941 rented several offices on the fourth floor of 50 Königstrasse. He seems to be the most promising lead, even if his safe did not contain any hints. After all, Oewerdieck and his wife Charlotte are honoured at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, for saving several Jewish citizens by hiding them or financing their departure to safer shores.

Yet, the connection to the sculptures is

still unclear – how did he come by this group of artworks? Why were they not at the Ministry of Propaganda depot with the rest of the exhibits? Did Oewerdieck store them in order to sell them, or had they been bought by one of his clients? Or were they kept by someone else altogether?

The significance of the rediscovered artworks is arguably more historical than artistic. Yet the exhibition in the Greek Courtyard of the New Museum allows an overview of the works of the ostracised – and, according to some, not yet fully rehabilitated – Modernists in a strikingly apt context.

Scharff's bronze portrait of Anni Mewes shows a surprising similarity to the ancient bust of Nefertiti exhibited two floors above it (and also, incidentally, to the female customer at the Jewish art dealer's shop in the Nazi film). Opposite Roeder's *Pregnant Woman* and Freundlich's *Head* are equally stern, squat and abstract stone figures from the Cuman period in ancient Ukraine. While the 20th-century sculptors did not necessarily take those ancient works as their inspiration or reference points – Modernists generally preferred Cycladic statues and non-European sculpture – the parallel in reduction of form and expressivity is no coincidence.

Yet Modernism and archaeology meet in more than stylistic terms. Owing to the destruction and fires following the Allied bombing raids in 1944, these 20th-century bronze, terracotta and stone sculptures have the appearance of ancient artefacts retrieved from the bottom of the ocean or buried in the ground for millennia. The patina, the flaking layers and crumbly deposits on the surfaces look exactly like what you would expect to find on works of art that have, against all odds, passed the test of time.

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