

Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and Iain Boyd Whyte,
eds, *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators, 1930-45.*
London, Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward
Gallery, 1995, 360 pp., 200 colour and 50 black-and-white illus.,
"Foreword" by Eric Hobsbawm, "Afterword" by Neil Ascherson

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Volume 23, Number 1-2, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073303ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073303ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Ramsay, E. L. (1996). Review of [Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and Iain Boyd Whyte, eds, *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators, 1930-45*. London, Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward Gallery, 1995, 360 pp., 200 colour and 50 black-and-white illus., "Foreword" by Eric Hobsbawm, "Afterword" by Neil Ascherson]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 23(1-2), 116–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073303ar>

of Romanesque painting, by rescuing this subject from the academic doldrums in which it has languished for far too long. As the author states (p. 5), "Romanesque mural painting is a highly visible and public art, which helps shape sacred space and potentially reveals much about the history, religious practices, and politics of the community for which it was designed." Dale has more than made his point for the crypt of Aquileia, but the general approach transcends the specifics of any particular site. It is this notion of an integrated design – of a fully worked out "programme," of a decorative "package" encompassing all its constituent elements even down to the smallest details of ornament –

that should commend this study to a much wider audience, and more specifically to all those concerned with how the visual arts have been used historically to both establish a "text" and then to manipulate the viewer's response. It may well be that many of the ideas about programmatic decoration, which we now take for granted in studying more recent periods of history, originated in the intellectual milieu of twelfth-century scholasticism. If so, students of art history who continue to ignore the painted programmes of the central Middle Ages will do so at their peril!

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DAWN ADES, TIM BENTON, DAVID ELLIOTT AND IAIN BOYD WHYTE, eds, *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators, 1930-45*. London, Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward Gallery, 1995, 360 pp., 200 colour and 50 black-and-white illus., "Foreword" by Eric Hobsbawm, "Afterword" by Neil Ascherson.

... In a politics of totalitarianism (or even consensus), where democracy is elevated at the expense of freedom, it is easy to overlook its value. But, like a canary down a coalmine, its state, no longer allied to power but dependent on it, may be an indicator of potential disaster.

In a world of metaphor which art resolutely occupies, the health of the canary is of the greatest importance, the essence (and paradox) of the autonomy of modern art is that it should be valued not only for itself but also as a sign and guarantor of other freedoms – particularly when it turns to peck the hand that solicitously tries to feed it.

David Elliott, "The Battle for Art,"
Art and Power, 35.

Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of the taste for the arts ... besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to slavery, they know well that the needs that people create for themselves are like chains binding them ... The sciences, letters and arts ... wind garlands of flowers around the iron chains that bind [the people and] stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, makes them love their slavery and turn them into what are called civilized people.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau,
Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts, 1750.

As occurs with many collective endeavours, the valuable content of the volume, *Art and Power: Europe under the*

Dictators, 1930-45, lies in the sum of its parts; and to the discerning reader, this considerable tome offers valuable insights into the diverse ways in which nation-states mobilized cultural communities under the Fascist and Stalinist dictatorships of Europe. In the current context of the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the creation of a European Union and the rise of old and new nationalisms, the authors have managed to contribute to the breaking down of the simplistic rendering of the period as a polarization between totalitarian and modernist avant-garde culture. In its place, the reader may discern the importance of examining the effects of state policy on art at both the local and individual level, as well as its implication for a culture which could be free from rigid dogma and state control.

The *Art and Power* exhibition which toured London, Barcelona and Berlin between October 1995 and August 1996 is part of a series sponsored by the Council of Europe, initiated in Brussels in 1955. The intention of these exhibitions, to highlight European cultural heritage, began with *Humanist Europe* (Brussels, 1955) and is continued in the current exhibition. *Art and Power* attempts to introduce a contemporary theme, focusing on the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris where art and politics were brought together during the regimes of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. Perhaps most importantly, the selectors have included work from the popular resistance to totalitarian forces through the inclusion of art from Spain. The current exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are the product of a long series of consultations and exchanges on art in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. These were conceived by museum directors at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and included an international symposium at the Courtauld Institute which drew representatives from seventeen countries. The exhibition and catalogue incorporate paintings, sculpture, architecture, cinema, photography and literature, although the emphasis falls on the first three. Also of interest are the

four introductory essays; the four sections of the catalogue dealing with art, sculpture and architecture in Paris, Rome, Moscow and Berlin and the selection of documents, plates, chronology and biography which fill the 360-page volume. Crucially, the catalogue examines the effects of cultural policy on the lives of artists – both artists who worked for the regimes in power and those who opposed it – including the effects on their creative output and the exhibition of their works.

Simply expressed, the essays in this volume contribute to debates on totalitarianism and culture through the examination of the material effects of government policy on the lives of individual artists in the modern state. So far, within the cultural realm, debate has been circumscribed by a polarization of the period into totalitarian and modernist avant-garde art. This, however, is to simplify the more complex relations of artistic creation within a historical community. Rather than letting the aesthetic argument write the script, the authors have attempted to reinscribe human agency to the period granting the role of artists as both dissenting and participant individuals in that community. David Elliott's article, "The Battle for Art," perhaps highlights the issues of the debate most clearly by providing connections between the historical model of the 1930s and contemporary debates on art and culture in modern Europe. The debate here concerns the role of the individual and freedom within a collective state (with reference to Rousseau and Kant), especially within the context of a modern notion of nationhood.¹

By focusing on the 1937 Paris Exhibition, the authors are able to highlight the historical and aesthetic ironies of an International that was dedicated to Peace at a crucial juncture in European politics. While Albert Speer's German and Boris Iofan's Soviet pavilions were provocatively placed in confrontation with each other in the foreign section (under the arrangement of the French directors during the Popular Front), the Spanish pavilion bearing Picasso's *Guernica* poised urgently in the background, a symbol of an opportunity that was missed. Remembering that Europe was still at the crossroads between democracy, totalitarianism and war, the authors suggest there was more than aesthetic issues at hand. While Eric Hobsbawm deftly outlines the aesthetic similarities between the German and Soviet pavilions, he and the other contributors, through their collective enterprise, move beyond this simplification.

The aesthetic argument posits that power made three primary demands on art: that it be large in scale, that it be organized as part of a public drama, and that it serve an educational or propagandistic purpose. While the past was not necessarily prescribed, art would make reference to it

through revival and manipulation of classical and neo-classical architectural form and, in some instances, late-impressionist styles of painting (p. 135). Where possible, however, especially in the domain of public statuary and public decoration, the forms would be contemporary, with as little associational baggage as possible so that the art could create a new symbolic reference to the totalitarian regimes. Architecture, therefore, while echoing classical endeavours of the past, was to be modern in design and to be decorated with the swastika, hammer and sickle, etc., as well as adorned with contemporary sculptures of happy mothers, virile athletes, happy workers and other monuments to nation, work, sport and family. These matters are well elaborated by Dawn Ades, Marko Daniel, Karen Fiss and Josephina Alix Trueba and contribute well to recent discussions in the gallery community.²

To limit the argument to this analysis, however, would be to simplify the nature of art under totalitarianism and risk parallels with almost every government in Europe at the time. The argument is therefore extended from the exploration of totalitarianism on artistic creation to the role of government policy in making and shaping (as well as eliminating) the artistic production of artists, architects and sculptors. The nationalistic, *völkisch* and neo-classical forces echoing lofty ideals of nationhood were not the only faces of culture in these regimes. Several of the authors provide sharper detail of the role of specific urban planners and cultural policy makers in the shaping of the new culture. Jean-Louis Cohen, for instance, discusses the role of Vladimir Seminov as deputy head of the Directorate of Architecture and Planning in Moscow. Ester Coen examines the role of Giuseppe Bottai as Under-secretary and later Minister of Corporations under Mussolini, and Iain Boyd Whyte looks at Albert Speer's role as Hitler's Chief Architect in Germany. This section is accompanied by numerous quotations by individuals active at the time.³

One of the most forceful arguments to be made against a purely aesthetic interpretation of culture under the totalitarian regimes is made by David Elliott in the sections of the catalogue dealing with Moscow and Berlin. While the argument has traditionally focused on the very real attacks on "degenerate" art in the period, a more satisfactory and fuller explanation may be found by understanding that artists were part of the broader political culture of the time and that these regimes ultimately seemed fickle not only to their opponents but also to their supporters.

As we know, artists in Nazi Germany were labelled "cultural bolsheviks" as part of the larger anti-communist attacks of the period, and art was labelled "degenerate," for the portrayal of people as though they were disabled (a point

of ridicule at the time), and “cosmopolitan,” which was a code word for “Jewish.” For their part, politically engaged German dissident artists tried to challenge the prevailing classical norms and general banality of art advocated by Goebbels in a period where there was little subtlety in the crackdown on dissident artists. The confiscation of 17,000 modernist art works by 1,000 artists (600 by Max Beckmann) in 1937 under Adolf Ziegler’s five-man commission, coupled with Nazi counter-exhibitions including *Entarte Kunst*, *Kammern der Kunst* and *Schandausstellungen* formed only one part of the story, which almost eliminated modern art in a five-year period.

The three main methods used to block perceived political opponents in the cultural domain in Germany included the withholding of the licence to teach; the withholding of permission to exhibit; and ultimately, the withholding of the permission to paint (under Goebbels’ *Malverbot*). However, as David Elliott demonstrates, the simple division of the period into responses of physical emigration/exile and inner emigration is insufficient to account for the responses of many artists as they struggled to continue their art in a period of repression. Some artists, like Georg Schimpf, once labelled degenerate during this period, were later rehabilitated by the Nazis. A similar fate awaited the Russian artist, Vladimir Mayakovsky, although his suicide predated his official rehabilitation. Kazimir Malevich, arrested and expelled from the State Institute of the History of Art in Leningrad in 1929, was later exhibited at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in a major retrospective and awarded a public funeral by the Leningrad City Council after his death in 1935. Paul Filonov, another Russian avant-garde artist, was offered an exhibition in 1929 at the State Russian Museum in Leningrad only to have the offer retracted when the cultural climate changed. Even during the repression of Filonov’s work, Izaak Brodsky, a leading proponent of socialist realism, spoke in favour of it. Joseph Stalin, for his part, turned on old and new bolsheviks alike, in both the political and cultural arenas, eliminating all perceived opposition across any political and aesthetic lines during this fever of repression. The police (in all regimes) similarly extended their paranoia in irrational directions, seeing coded messages in the most innocuous of artworks. The result is an account of the imprisonment, exile, torture and murder of perceived dissidents with little respect for the more delicate matters of aesthetic *deference*; a sobering perspective on the realities of the period.

As a contribution to the human drama of that period, the selectors and authors have chosen to rehabilitate the work of Spanish surrealist sculptor, Alberto Sánchez Pérez.

A particularly poignant account is given of this artist, who joined the ranks of many who were isolated by the political currents of the period. In Pablo Picasso’s assessment:

Alberto’s work has considerably influenced many artists of our time, many important artists. His theories and his work stimulated a creative restlessness and provided impetus for those avant-garde art movements in Spain which broke with academicism and reactionary conformism. (p. 111)

Sánchez Pérez’s career came to a swift end in the turbulent years of the 1930s when he was attacked on all sides by critics, including those demanding a politically engaged realist art; this precipitated his departure to a protected place in Russia by arrangement of the Spanish Republicans. Once there, Sánchez Pérez joined the ranks of other artists in exile (in many countries) who entered into isolation, remaining largely within his own language and producing work for exhibitions in his new country only at request. Some of his artworks, many of which are now lost, are documented here in photographic form.

Here, it might be relevant to suggest that the political situation in Spain could have played a more pivotal role in the account. Indeed, had Madrid been warranted inclusion among the list of major urban centres in the main body of the catalogue, the aesthetic polarization of the period might have been further broken down by the upheavals of 1936-37. Given the pivotal political importance of Spain, the volume might have been better served by a study of *Madrid*, Rome, Moscow and Berlin rather than by the inclusion of several smaller essays on Spain in the section on the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris. This might have extended the authors’ analysis of resistance to totalitarianism. Indeed, the political and cultural recuperation of the Spanish resistance might provide fertile ground for a future exhibition in the Council of Europe series.

Apart from this, the only criticisms this author has of the catalogue are minor technical points. These include the unfortunate undersizing of the column headings of “Art” and “Power” in Marko Daniel’s otherwise useful chronology. A clearer and more linear arrangement of these pages might have eased the reading. The relocation of marginal notes to within visual proximity of the relevant text would have eliminated the unnecessary thumbing of pages throughout. Also, the biography should be understood to be a “select” biography rather than a complete listing of those mentioned in the text. These are, however, mild criticisms of an otherwise interesting volume.

A more significant criticism of the volume is the suggestion that the authors arguments could have been

strengthened by the inclusion of *women* and works by women in the totalitarian period. The selectors indicate their awareness of this with their brief references to women in the Introduction (p. 16) and the Afterword (p. 342). The text between includes brief references by Iain Boyd Whyte in a description of the "German mother" (p. 45) and by Berthold Hinz with reference to the female nude (p. 332). Russian artists Vera Ignatievna Mukhina and Vera Mikhailovna Yermolayeva and German artist Käthe Kollwitz also appear in the volume, for those who wish to pursue this area of study. However, we shall no doubt have to wait for another volume for the difficult project of the recuperation of women artists and their struggles in this period.

One of the notable features of this period, then, is that if the aesthetic argument is allowed to write the script, the historiography may remain in its current form of polarization between modernist avant-garde and totalitarian art. The reality was much more complex than this, as most artists tried to resist the tyranny of state intervention in their art and lives; and this resistance took many forms. As the authors of this volume suggest, aesthetic decisions alone did not determine the fate of artists in these regimes. Ultimately, there was little logic to the totalitarian governments, and artists, like other citizens, rose above the political quagmire.

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Notes

- 1 See Umberto Eco, "Ur-fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995, cited also in the Selectors Introduction on p.16.
- 2 There have been a number of recent exhibitions referring to the demands of totalitarianism on art, including the avant-garde. See *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism Under Stalin*, New York, Institute for Contemporary Art (New York, 1994), *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, Los Angeles, County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, 1991), and *Engineers of the Human Soul: Soviet Socialist Realist Painting, 1930s to 1960s*, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art (Oxford, 1992).
- 3 In addition to the primary sources, scholars may wish to refer to some of the secondary sources which deal with both the political and aesthetic arguments: Richard A. Etlin, *Modernism in Italian Architecture 1890-1940* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1991); Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the Peoples' Republic of China* (London, 1990); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalin* (Princeton, 1992); and Robert S. Wistrich, *Weekend in Munich: Art, Propaganda and Terror in the Third Reich* (London, 1995).