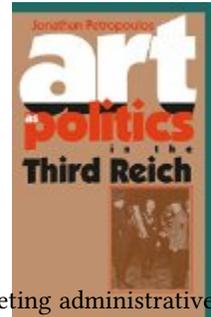


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Petropoulos. *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xviii + 439 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2240-1.

Reviewed by Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University)
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In 1954, Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, a former Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives official with the U.S. Occupation Army, published one of the first accounts describing the relationship between art and totalitarian politics in *Art under a Dictatorship*. What he wrote then remains paramount today: “Most of us who live in a democratic country have understood the art policies of Nazi Germany...mainly as a form of especially rigid censorship or of extremely thorough propaganda. That is only part of the story....What we must realize is the central role assigned to the arts by the modern dictator. He always sees it as a vital part of the very nerve center of the social organism. He has a healthy respect for it” (p. xviii).

The visual arts in the Third Reich had multiple roles. Among them were the attempts to promote national integration through the display of images that fostered the cultivation of a *Volksgemeinschaft*. Additionally, the Nazis asked and demanded that art and the vast system supporting the arts (commissions, curatorial policies, teaching, and art education) serve the state. There has been a steady flow of books and exhibition catalogues detailing art during the Nazi era, both from the point of view of art that the National Socialists viewed as “degenerate” (for example, Stephanie Barron, ed., *“Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*), to Berthold Hinz’s *Art in the Third Reich*, which focused on the realist-representational art the Nazis promoted, conveying nationalist or militarist values.

The government also utilized the visual arts to serve as a display of Germany’s power and authority. Petropoulos’s volume, a revised and enlarged version of his Harvard University dissertation, concentrates on the latter aesthetic function. He admirably discusses two features of the Nazi art world that have not been described

in such rich detail before: the competing administrative fiefdoms of Goebbels, Rosenberg, Rust, Ley, Speer, and Himmler, all of which had an interest in the arts. Second, he outlines the art-collecting activities of the leading Nazis themselves.

He divides his book into two sections. The first section minutely charts the establishment of multiple bureaucracies entrusted with promoting culture. Petropoulos presents an increasingly predatory Nazi hierarchy that began with removing discredited modern art from public collections and dismissing artists, museum, and academy personnel from official positions. By the mid-1930s, the leadership expanded their domain by confiscating not only the modernist art in German museums, but by seizing Jewish collections that included various types of art and artifacts, from Old Masters and rare books to the avant-garde painters the Nazis abhorred.

Once the Germans occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia, their avarice escalated explosively. Petropoulos describes with disheartening detail plundering efforts throughout the eastern and western territories conquered after the war began. Focusing on the activities of Kajetan Muehlmann, an Austrian SS officer selected by Goering to become “special commissar for the securing of art and cultural treasures of [Poland]” (p. 105), as well as other plunderers, he links Nazi art confiscation to the desire to create huge centers of German culture, particularly in Berlin and in Hitler’s hometown, Linz. Lynn Nicholas’s recently published account of art plundering (*The Rape of Europa, The Fate of Europe’s Treasures in the Third Reich and Second World War*), presented a finely textured narrative of Nazi cultural looting. But her descriptions, detailed as they were, lacked a larger contextual frame and analysis, both of which Petropoulos provides.

Petropoulos connects Nazi art confiscation with the leaders' personal eagerness to display their own cultural authority and to use art as a means of distributing favors and power. A European art exhibit currently on view ("Art and Power, Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1945" and being shown sequentially in London, Barcelona, and Berlin) corroborates this relationship between totalitarianism and displays of aesthetic power. A fascinating part of Petropoulos's thorough account is his analysis of the Nazi leaders' personal collecting proclivities. Their motivations varied, but they wished to appear cultivated in the traditional princely sense of amassing vast numbers of precious paintings and *objects d'art*. They also acquired art in order to be able to present Old Master and nineteenth-century German and Austrian genre art to favorites and, most important, to Hitler himself. The author quotes a 1936 Goebbels diary entry: "Fuehrer's birthday: we are all so happy! Magda, Maria and the children there. He is very touched and takes great joy in my [Franz] Lenbach" [a turn-of-the-century Munich painter] (p. 265). Through exchanging artworks as gifts, the Nazis attempted to represent themselves as standard bearers of the highest culture.

Petropoulos writes gracefully and has an extraordinary command of the sources. These include major archival holdings from the Berlin Document Center, the relevant files from the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, archival materials in Paris, Vienna, and Washington,

D.C., printed sources, memoirs, and a very complete listing of secondary literature. Perhaps because he has immersed himself so deeply in the materials, he tends to describe the various bureaucracies and their competing interests in such a way as to occasionally confuse the reader. Acronyms and letters proliferate: mastering the alphabet-soup names of organizations such as the RMBO, NS-KG, GBI, DBFU, RKS, RKK, RMWEV, RPL, etc. takes a herculean effort! Petropoulos thoughtfully provides a glossary of key names, abbreviations, and an organizational chart. Yet, as most scholars of National Socialism know only too well, trying to compartmentalize and illustrate the profusion of government agencies is a rather hopeless task.

But aside from this minor caveat, the author succeeds wonderfully in demonstrating the interconnectedness of two aesthetic enterprises: the administration of art and the collection of art. He enriches our understanding of visual arts policies, adding to recent studies on the professional status of Third Reich artists by Alan Steinweis and the works referred to earlier by Nicholas, Barron, and others. He again reminds the reader that for the Nazis, politics was not only a high art, but that art was serious politics.

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