When I received this book for review I assumed, from the title, that I would be reading a book about artists under Hitler, as well as one about the influence of concepts of race on culture from 1918 to 1945. However, as I read the introduction, it became clear to me that the scope of the book would not be anything as comprehensive as I had envisaged. Joan L. Clinefelter’s study focuses on the German Art Society from its founding in 1920 through to its collapse in 1944 and, more specifically, on the driving force behind this society, Bettina Feistel-Rohmeder. I admit I felt misled by the title and I was not a little irritated. But by the time I had reached the first chapter, Clinefelter’s book had gripped me and it continued to grip me to the very end. The lesson I learned is that I should not be put off by misleading titles. Indeed, by the time I had reached the final pages of the book, I was wishing the book as many readers as it could get and was quite grateful for having been misled. To my shame, I must admit that I am not sure I would have agreed to review the book had I known at the outset that it was about the German Art Society, of which I had heard, but assumed to be a rather insignificant body.

In fact, on reflection, perhaps Clinefelter’s book is more wide-ranging than I am giving it credit for being. While the author focuses in detail on the feisty and ideologically pugnacious attempts by Feistel-Rohmeder to promote the cause of völkisch art, attempts undertaken through the German Art Society, she also examines the place of this group in the conservative landscape of völkisch organizations that sprang up before 1914 and particularly after the end of the First World War. In the chapters on the Third Reich, she explores the surprisingly uneasy relationship between the German Art Society and Nazi organizations such as the National Socialist Culture Community and Josef Goebbels’s Propaganda Ministry. The role of the German Art Society in organizing Degenerate Art exhibitions—it helped to organize some thirteen of these between 1933 and 1937—is closely examined by Clinefelter and here again the part played by the Society within the wider context of Third Reich cultural policy is discussed at length.

What, then, is Clinefelter’s story? It is a fascinating one. Feistel-Rohmeder was a champion of racially based German art. She believed that German artworks could only be created by those of the right racial pedigree and that the German Volk would be able to recognize itself in such artworks. She also believed that Germany’s art world, before 1914 and even more so after 1918, was dominated by the alien products of degenerate modernism, products that, to Feistel-Rohmeder’s evident horror, were on display throughout Germany’s art galleries during the Weimar Republic. Resentful of what she perceived to be the success both in terms of cultural and material recognition of the modernists, such as Max Liebermann, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and bitter about the ostensible lack of recognition of more traditionalist German painters, she launched, as of 1920, a relentless campaign against modernism, bolstered by a regular publication called “German Art Correspondence.” A journal set up by Feistel-Rohmeder’s German Art Society in 1927, “German Pictorial Art,” became a vehicle for the promotion of the art Feistel-Rohmeder preferred: conventional figurative art in the nineteenth-century style, showing landscapes, bucolic idylls, natural life and strongly delineated rustic characters. In short: “Germanic” art in the supposed tra-
dition of Hans Thoma.

Feistel-Rohmeder was nothing if not a great organizer and mobilizer and in 1929 the German Art Society formalized its links to other völkisch cultural groups through the formation of the Executive Council of United German Art and Culture Associations, a council in which the German Art Society figured prominently. Feistel-Rohmeder wanted to forge links not just with industrialist backers such as Emil Kirdorf, but also sought contact to the Nazi movement. She joined the Party in 1929. Clinefelter portrays Feistel-Rohmeder as an astute opportunist. While she clearly felt drawn to Nazism, she also hoped to exploit Nazism’s success to promote her own völkisch vision of a Germany whose galleries would be free of modernism and hung instead with Germanic landscape paintings and conventional portraits. That she miscalculated became clear after 1933, however, as she found to her surprise that National Socialism did not instantly set about expurgating all traces of modernism. On the contrary, the Nazi German Student League declared its support for the “Nordic Expressionists” (p. 70), while Goebbels also flirted with modernism. Moreover, Feistel-Rohmeder’s attempts to curry favor with Alfred Rosenberg of the Combat League for German Culture, who also detested modernism, met with little success.

Between 1933 and 1937, conservative artists, art historians and art functionaries did gradually come to replace the more modernist-minded, and when modernism finally fell completely out of favor in the Third Reich in 1936 and 1937, the German Art Society and Feistel-Rohmeder soon found they had little to do. Their goals seemed to have been achieved. The National Socialists orchestrated a massive Degenerate Art exhibition in July 1937 and between 1937 and 1944 the Great German Art Exhibition brought to the public eye those works considered truly German, if not specifically National Socialist. Feistel-Rohmeder and her society gradually receded into a background from which they had never really emerged. During the war, the society did experience some success in promoting Germanic art at the front and its cultural support of the war effort would seem to have been duly noted by the upper echelons of the Nazi Party. Thanks to the intervention of Paul Schultzze-Naumburg, an early member of the German Art Society, the National Socialist Visual Arts Chamber awarded Feistel-Rohmeder an honorary stipend of 1,000 RM on the occasion of her seventieth birthday in 1943 and Hitler approved a monthly stipend in “recognition of service to the German art movement” (p. 116). It was a belated recognition. Feistel-Rohmeder had long felt that it was she who had first fought for the ideals later espoused and realized by Nazism and that this achievement should have entitled her to more attention from the Nazi leadership than she ever enjoyed.

Clinefelter demonstrates that elements of Nazi artistic ideology were quite common to other völkisch organizations before 1933, not in itself a new discovery. Much more interestingly, however, she also shows that one of these organizations accompanied parallel Nazi organizations into the Third Reich, retaining its original character and aims, for which it campaigned until these same aims became a consistent element of Nazi policy as of 1937. From that point on, it became largely superfluous. In 1933, the German Art Society knew what it wanted, while the Nazis were still split on the issue of modernism. Not that they took much notice of the German Art Society. But the fact that a semi-private organization maintained a consistent position of anti-modernism while Nazi organizations and cultural functionaries were still debating the issue amongst themselves shows that the cultural world of the Third Reich is even more complex than one might imagine. Not only did individual Nazis such as Goebbels, Hermann Göring and Rosenberg battle for supremacy. Not only was the Propaganda Ministry at loggerheads with the National Socialist Cultural Community. At the same time, vocally if somewhat marginally, an organization that was not part of the Nazi cultural establishment was promoting its agenda, one which, in 1933, was more radical than some Nazis at the time were prepared to contemplate.

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