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DIE VIER ELEMENTE (THE FOUR ELEMENTS) BY ADOLF ZIEGLER

RESEARCH PROJECT ON “TRANSFERS FROM STATE PROPERTY”

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Adolf Ziegler (1892–1959), *The Four Elements*, before 1937, oil on canvas, central panel 171,3 x 110,5 cm, right panel 172,3 x 86 cm, left panel 171,5 x 86 cm, Modern Art Collection in the Pinakothek der Moderne (© Sibylle Forster, Bavarian State Painting Collections)

In the 1950s and 1960s especially, the Bavarian State Painting Collections acquired around 900 art objects which until 1945 had belonged to high-ranking organisations and functionaries and functionaries of the Nazi Party—including works from the personal collections of Adolph Hitler, Hermann Göring, Heinrich Hoffmann and the Party Chancellery. Since 2013 the Bavarian State Painting Collections have been researching the provenance of these objects in the research project “[Transfers from State Property](#)” (Überweisungen aus Staatsbesitz), currently handled by Johannes Gramlich and Sophie Kriegenhofer.

There is good reason to suspect that many of these works were looted from their previous owners by the Nazis. However, this is not the case for all of the art objects in these holdings. More than 200 of the works were created by contemporary artists under National Socialism. They conformed to National Socialist taste and the reigning views of art, and were mainly acquired by Nazi functionaries at commercial exhibitions. Adolf Ziegler’s triptych *The Four Elements* belongs to this group; it was reproduced millions of times during the Nazi regime, and is one of the best-known works of National Socialist artistic production. The problem in this case is thus not the provenance of the work, but the work itself, and its creator.



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8 April 2020 will be the second International Day of Provenance Research, on which more than 100 cultural institutions in Germany and elsewhere were to have presented their work in the field. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, all public events have to be cancelled. To replace the discussion in the Pinakothek der Moderne, this blog post will provide information about the artist Adolf Ziegler, his triptych *The Four Elements*, and its post-war reception. In the end, the question remains: how ought we to deal with a work of this kind today?

ADOLF ZIEGLER AND NATIONALIST SOCIALISTS ARTS POLICY



Adolf Hitler visits the Haus der Deutschen Kunst with Gerdy Troost, Adolf Ziegler and Joseph Goebbels on 5 May 1937 (© Bundesarchiv)

The fine arts were enormously significant under National Socialism: the geopolitical supremacy of the “German People” was to be demonstrated in comprehensive, valuable and impressive art collections. Contemporary artworks were tasked in addition to this with conveying the Nazis’ racist ideology. A work such as Ziegler’s *Four Elements* was supposed to contribute to the constitution of a German “*Volksgemeinschaft*” (national community) by propagating perceptions of the “racial ideal”. The Nazis accordingly attached great importance to artistic and cultural policy, over which Ziegler was able to exercise considerable influence.

Ziegler had studied art in Weimar and Munich until 1924. He had already come into contact with Hitler during the Weimar Republic period, through a patron. He joined the Nazi Party on 16 February 1929. Although he had had limited success as an artist and was still largely unknown, from 1933 onwards he experienced a swift rise within the cultural-political hierarchy of the Nazi regime and came to hold a range of official posts, including his appointment as professor of drawing and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in 1934. From 1 December 1936, Ziegler was president of the *Reichskammer der*



bildenden Künste (Reich Chamber of Fine Arts), where he had been previously held the position of vice president.

The *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste* (Imperial Chamber of Fine Arts) was established as early as November 1933. It developed into a central institution of the Nazi state, with the purpose of controlling the art business throughout the Third Reich and orienting it according to ideological criteria. As a wing of the *Reichskulturkammer*, it was directly under the control of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

From its foundation, the *Kunstkammer* pursued the goal of excluding from the art scene all “non-Aryan” artists and art dealers, as well as those who were critical of the system. *From 1935, all exhibitions and art fairs had to have Kunstkammer authorisation.* In 1937–38, the Nazi regime confiscated more than 21,000 works of Modernist art that they labelled “decadent art”, “culturally Bolshevik”, and “degenerate”, from over 100 museums. Commissioned by Joseph Goebbels and authorized by Adolf Hitler, Ziegler was responsible for organizing the confiscation campaign throughout the Reich. These artworks were then displayed in the defamatory exhibition *Degenerate Art*, or else were sold or destroyed.

Juxtaposed with this, from 1937 onwards the Nazis presented contemporary artworks that were in accordance with their tastes and views on art, in the Great German Art Exhibitions at the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst* (now *Haus der Kunst*) in Munich. Ziegler was involved, selecting the exhibits. Over the years, eleven of his own works were displayed there, including *The Four Elements*. Adolf Hitler and other high-ranking NS functionaries supported the artists by purchasing large numbers of the exhibited works. By 1944, these exhibitions had attracted a total of over 2,800 different private buyers, who accordingly disseminated the Nazi-compliant art.

LINK: [ZIEGLER'S FOUR ELEMENTS IN THE CATALOGUE OF THE 1937 GREAT GERMAN ART EXHIBITION](#)



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THE FOUR ELEMENTS



Adolf Ziegler (1892–1959), *The Four Elements*, before 1937, oil on canvas, central panel 171,3 x 110,5 cm, right panel 172,3 x 86 cm, left panel 171,5 x 86 cm, Modern Art Collection in the Pinakothek der Moderne [© Sibylle Forster, Bavarian State Painting Collections]

In *The Four Elements*, painted in the triptych format traditionally applied to sacred themes—with a wide central canvas and two narrower flanking canvases—Adolf Ziegler pulled out all the stops in order to create an exemplary “*völkisch*” artwork. This entailed a style that punctiliously depicts its subject with photographic precision—“clearly”, in the jargon of the time. The brush strokes depicting the four naked female bodies are not individualistic or even particularly expressive, but seem rather to attempt to echo the style of the old masters. Two of the seated women appear in the central panel, and one on each of the side panels. The setting seems timeless, the floor is tiled. Where are we here? If we look more closely we notice an important detail: the disrobed figures are sitting on what seems to be a single stone pedestal, which carries four rectangular slabs reminiscent of plinths at the base of a statue. This allows us to view the four figures as sculptures that have come to life. For the “educated classes”, the vivification of sculpture immediately connects with a whole range of classical materials. And this is no accident. It matches the concept of a new Classicism, an “eternal” art, likewise embodied in Paul Ludwig Troost’s Schinkel-inspired design for the *Haus der Deutschen Kunst*, where the painting must have caught the attention of considerable numbers of people in 1937. Adolf Hitler repeatedly laid claim to the “classical” in his “cultural speeches”, for example those given at the Nuremberg Rallies. For the opening of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst*, for example, he spoke of “degenerate” modernism as a transitory and passing fad, in contrast with true art, which was unceasingly and unerringly connected with a (“racially” defined) *Volk*. Above one of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst*’s side portals was a quotation from Hitler, cast in bronze: “No *Volk* (people) lives longer than the records of its culture”.

LINK: [THE HAUS DER DEUTSCHEN KUNST IN THE CATALOGUE OF THE FIRST GREAT GERMAN ART EXHIBITION IN 1937](#)



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THE “WOMAN” AS “PROTECTOR OF THE RACE”

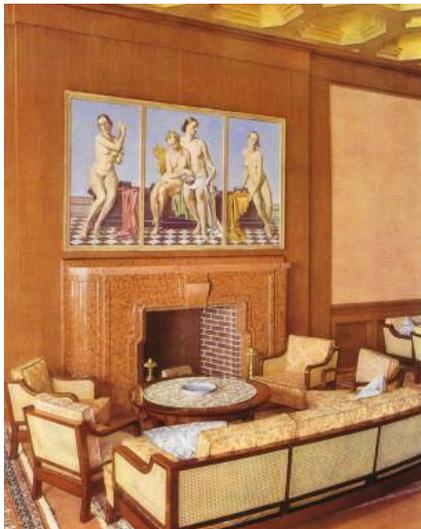


This reclining female nude by Adolf Ziegler also belongs to the holdings of the Bavarian State Painting Collections. Ziegler’s meticulous nudes brought him the derisive nickname “the Reich Pubic Hair Painter”. (© Bavarian State Painting Collections)

The subject of *The Four Elements* likewise makes reference to something that is not subservient to (historical) time. Fire (represented by a torch), water, earth (represented by a sheaf of grain), and air together form the basis for life. “No *Volk* lives longer than the records of its culture”—so it is “*das Volk*” that connects these elements together. In the Nazi world-view, “*Volksgesundheit*” (the “health of the people”) is connected with the destiny of the “*Weib*” (woman) as “protector of the race”. The depicted women, with their varying shades of blonde hair and their supposedly “elongated” skulls (a feature of Nazi racial theory), could easily have stepped out of publications on the “German race”, even if Ziegler worked with real models. However, what was particularly insidious was the embedding of such a “positive” image in contrast to the antisemitic (and also anti-modern) pictorial language that had been disseminated so intensively in the preceding years, even before 1933: the “hook-nosed” stereotyping of Jewish masculinity. The not-so-hidden message, which impinged on daily life so brutally with the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, could be understood as an appeal to keeping the “race” pure. This was the task proposed to “the German woman” who stood looking at the painting. On a side note: when the work was displayed in the Pinakothek der Moderne for the first time (in the context of the exhibition *GegenKunst!*), we regularly held discussions with the public. During one of these, there was actually a woman present who had seen the picture during a school excursion in the 1930s, and who told of how she and her classmates had been disappointed by it. The reason for this was that in her village near Rosenheim in the south of Germany, everyone had dark hair and round faces.



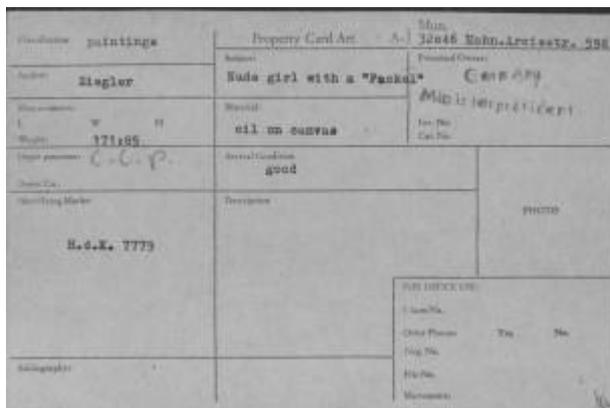
ON THE PROVENANCE OF ZIEGLER'S *THE FOUR ELEMENTS*



Ziegler's *Four Elements* in the winter sitting room of the Führerbau in Munich

Adolf Ziegler's triptych *The Four Elements* was exhibited in the *Great German Art Exhibition* in 1937. The exhibition catalogue listed it as not available for purchase, as it was already earmarked to adorn Party buildings. On 8 April 1938, the work was bought for 30,000 Reichsmark using funds from the coffers of Martin Bormann, head of the Nazi Party Chancellery. From then on it adorned the winter sitting room of the *Führerbau* on München's Königsplatz, where it could not be viewed by the public.

THE CENTRAL COLLECTING POINT IN MUNICH



The "monuments men" cataloguing the left panel of Ziegler's *Four Elements* at the Central Collecting Point in Munich (© National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.)

After the war, the artwork was secured by the American military government, who inventoried it at their Central Collecting Point in Munich in June of 1946. The Americans brought thousands of artworks to the Collecting Point in order to investigate whether they were to be classified as Nazi-looted art, and to organise their restitution where appropriate. Since Ziegler's triptych had been



a legal purchase, the Free State of Bavaria was able to claim ownership of the work in May 1953. This was possible because the Allies had determined in 1947 that Nazi assets would in general be transferred to the state in which they were located. The Bavarian State Painting Collections subsequently selected the work for their holdings.

However, at the time of the artwork's transfer, the triptych's right panel was missing, apparently stolen by an American soldier in the chaos of the war and then given as a gift of gratitude to a woman working for the American Red Cross. The panel did not return to Munich from the USA until July 1993.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS AFTER THE WAR



The special exhibition GegenKunst at the Pinakothek der Moderne in 2015 (© Bavarian State Painting Collections)

After the Second World War, German art history endeavoured to re-establish connections with the pre-1933 artistic avant garde. The First General German Art Exhibition (*Erste allgemeine deutsche Kunstausstellung*) in 1946 in Dresden rehabilitated artists and works that had been defamed as “degenerate” under National Socialism. On an international level, the first *documenta* in Kassel in 1955 also had this focus. Many museum directors were now swiftly trying to remedy the modern art lacunae in their collections, or indeed to pay attention to these artists for the first time.

In this context Nazi art was increasingly tabooed. It ceased to play a role in art theory and history. When, on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in 1987, the collector Peter Ludwig suggested that Nazi-compliant art objects be shown in museums again, this was able to generate a scandal. In the ensuing debate, one side warned against the manipulation of the masses and the consecration of Nazi artists by the museums. The other side feared a mystification of Nazi art, and considered the censorship of these works to be an unacceptable form of paternalism.



As one of the most well-known works of Nazi art production, since the 1970s Ziegler's *The Four Elements* has been shown in various special exhibitions dealing critically with Nazi cultural policy. Since 2011, the artworks shown in the Great German Art Exhibitions between 1937 and 1944 have been available online in the GDK Research database.

LINK: [GDK RESEARCH](#)

THE FOUR ELEMENTS IN THE PINAKOTHEK DER MODERNE

In 2015, *The Four Elements* was exhibited again for the first time, in the Pinakothek der Moderne, which is thus one of the first museums to present Nazi art in a modern art context. In the special exhibition *GegenKunst*, curated by Oliver Kase, the Bavarian State Painting Collections juxtaposed Ziegler's triptych with other triptychs and monumental sculptures of the modern period. Since 2016, *The Four Elements* has continuously been on display in the Pinakothek's permanent collection. Changing presentations of the collection place *The Four Elements* in varying contexts with other sculptures and paintings created between 1933 and 1945. Further information in German language can be found at www.pinakothek.de/gegenkunst. We also invite you to discuss the topic of "artists under National Socialism" using the hashtag #GegenKunst on Twitter.

FURTHER RESSOURCES: [ARTISTS UNDER THE NATIONAL SOCIALISTS](#).
https://pinakothek.de/sites/default/files/downloadable/2020-01/Broschure-seit%2006_2016.pdf

https://pinakothek.de/sites/default/files/downloadable/2020-01/GegenKunst_Flyer_2015.pdf