

Quantifying Hitler's Salon: A Statistical Analysis of Subjects at the Great German Art Exhibition, 1937-1944

Patrick J. Jung

Department of Humanities, Social Science, and Communication
Milwaukee School of Engineering
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202, USA
Email: jung@msoe.edu

Abstract:

In recent decades, scholars have reassessed earlier historical interpretations that argued German art produced during the Nazi era was little more than kitsch. This reassessment has occurred in part due to the increased accessibility to the various sources required to thoroughly research Nazi-era art. The availability of the artistic oeuvre of the Third Reich has been enhanced by the 2012 launch of the online database *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*. This database makes possible a quantitative analysis of the artworks exhibited at Adolf Hitler's annual art exhibition, the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition), from 1937 to 1944. Tabulating the information found in this database indicates that landscapes and related works constituted the dominant subject category. Portraits, nudes, and depictions of animals were also significant, but overtly political art was uncommon. The subjects of Nazi-era art reflected the racial ideology of the Third Reich, but several subject categories remain largely unexamined in this respect. This essay provides statistical evidence that supports many of the scholarly interpretations concerning these subject categories and suggests new directions for future research.

Keywords: Third Reich, Nazi-era art, Great German Art Exhibition, Adolf Hitler

Introduction: Reassessing Nazi-Era Art

Prior to the 1970s, art historians generally dismissed Nazi-era art as mere kitsch and the product of a dictatorship that had suppressed modernist styles. In 1957, for example, Werner Haftmann characterized the art of Nazi Germany as “the uniform stylistic phenomenon of any dictatorship: a false, prettified, photographic realism that monotonously recapitulated the same themes” (Haftmann 1957, 129). Writing the next year, Haftmann's contemporary, Franz Roh, dismissed such art as “a repetition of the attitudes from the nineteenth century, a stereotype imitation of external nature interspersed with a declamatory pathos...it would be a waste of time to illustrate it here” (Roh 1968 [1958], 151). Since the 1970s, and particularly since the 1990s, a new generation of researchers has reassessed these earlier appraisals. Contemporary scholars now conclude that no overarching “Nazi style” existed. Moreover, Nazi-era art displayed continuities with the art of the preceding eras, including the modernist art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and particularly the modernist styles developed in Weimar Germany from

1919 to 1933. For all the bluster of the Nazi state in its crusade to “purify” German art of “Jewish-Bolshevist” influences, elements of modernist styles such as Expressionism, Cubism, and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) found their way into the art of Nazi Germany (van Dyke 2011, 12-17; Potter 2016, 130-174; Maertz 2019, 44-46; Kater 2019, 41, 51).

The results of this reassessment are largely qualitative and focus on the various styles expressed in Nazi-era art. This reassessment includes the artworks of the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition, hereafter GDK), Adolf Hitler’s annual art exhibition in Munich. Art historian Ines Schlenker calls the GDKs “Hitler’s Salon,” and they were the premier art events in Nazi Germany that highlighted the subjects and styles that Hitler and the Third Reich’s cultural bureaucracy sought to encourage among German artists (Schlenker 2007b, 11, 20, 95-98). While a great deal has been written about the GDKs in recent decades, there has not been a detailed quantitative analysis of the various subjects found in GDK artworks. A total of 13,403 pieces of art were exhibited at the eight GDKs from 1937 to 1944, and a quantitative analysis of these artworks is now possible thanks to the 2012 launch of the online database *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*, a collaborative project of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (Central Institute for Art History) in Munich, the Haus der Kunst (House of Art) in Munich, and the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) in Berlin (Fuhrmeister 2013, 11-13).¹ A few scholars have used the database for limited quantitative analysis. Christian Fuhrmeister (2015, 98) presents statistics for specific subject categories, while Marlies Schmidt (2012, 71-73, 138-145) provides a breakdown of the various subjects evident at the first GDK in 1937. However, there has been no comprehensive statistical examination of the various subject categories that characterized the artworks at all eight GDKs.

This essay tabulates the works of the GDKs by subject categories. The development of the database makes this endeavor possible, as does the digitization of the GDK exhibition catalogs (Fig. 1).² A quantitative analysis of GDK artworks reveals certain trends that scholars have long suspected, particularly that landscapes and related subjects constituted the largest category of GDK pieces. Portraits and busts tended to be the second largest category, while male and female nudes (both paintings and sculptures) comprised the third largest subject category in most years. Surprisingly, artistic representations of animals often approached the previous two categories in both number and percentage, as did still-life compositions and depictions of plants. Military subjects increased after Germany went to war in 1939, but these works never exceeded nine percent of the total. Contrary to what is often believed, overtly political works were uncommon and even declined in number and percentage over the course of the GDKs.

Sources and Methodology

The requisite primary sources for this analysis are the GDK exhibition catalogs and the online database, which provides a record for each piece of fine art (i.e., paintings, sketches, sculptures, etc.) and includes photographs and sales documentation, when available. Virtually all

GDK artworks were intended for purchase, with Hitler having the right of first refusal. Beginning in 1938, the GDK organizers also accepted “exchange” works so that those pieces sold could be replaced with works of equal quality. Thus, from 1938 onward, the organizers published two catalogs: the main catalog and a supplementary catalog (*Ergänzungsteil*) for the exchange works (Schmidt 2012, 140). All fifteen exhibition catalogs are found in the reference list at the end of this essay along with the abbreviations used when citing them in the text.

Some discrepancies become evident when comparing information in the database to the entries in the catalogs. For example, the database has artworks not found in the catalogs that are confirmed through other documentation (e.g., Baum 1941; *GDK 1941*, 19; *Ergänzungsteil 1941*, 3). These pieces are counted in the tables found in the next section along with those artworks registered in the catalogs. The database also has a few spurious second entries of individual works that are only counted once (e.g., Werner 1943; *Ergänzungsteil 1943*, 26). Additionally, the catalogs often list multiple artworks under a single entry. An example is Franz Gerwin’s series of twelve watercolors, *Großbaustelle der OT (Large Construction Site of the Todt Organization)*. These are counted as individual works here, but they were listed under a single entry in the 1942 catalog (Gerwin 1942; *GDK 1942*, 34). In a similar fashion, triptychs consisting of three panels were also listed as single works in the catalogs but are counted as three separate pieces since several triptychs depicted different subjects on each panel (e.g., Schmitz-Wiedenbrück 1941; *GDK 1941*, 73). In the case of applied art such as medals and plaques, individual entries in the GDK catalogs often referenced multiple pieces (e.g., *GDK 1942*, 18, 28, 58). In one case, forty-nine pieces of applied art were placed under a single catalog entry (*GDK 1937*, 69). Researchers who provide statistics that differ from those presented here often count only the individual catalog entries to determine the number of artworks exhibited at the GDKs and thus undercount the actual number of discrete pieces (e.g., Söseman and Lange 2011, 830).

Photographs of the artworks and the galleries in which they were exhibited exist for each of the GDKs, at least from 1938 to 1943. For these years, images are available for almost every piece of fine art. Fewer images exist for the 1937 GDK, and many photographs for the 1944 GDK were lost. For those artworks where no photographs exist, the subjects can often be determined through other documentation referenced by the creators of the database or simply by the titles of the works. Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine the subject in every case. The percentage of undetermined works is as low as .22 percent for 1942 and as high as 10.35 percent for 1944 (see Table 2). Virtually no images exist for works of applied art, and few of these pieces had titles. Because it is impossible to determine what subjects, if any, characterized applied works of art, these pieces are counted separately from works of fine art (see Table 1).

The subject categories used here require explanation since their determination is, to a degree, a subjective exercise. Other scholars have developed subject categories that inform those utilized in this essay (Adam 1992, 129-173; Schmidt 2012, 73-76). Landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, and architecture are counted as a single category and consisted entirely of pictorial

art since these subjects did not lend themselves to three-dimensional media such as stone and bronze used for busts and sculptures. The same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants. Other subject categories include artworks composed from both two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, including portraits and busts; male and female nudes; animals; genre scenes; farming and agriculture; families and children; industry and technology; religious works; and mythology, history, and literature. Certain subject categories have priority over others. For example, nudes that depicted figures from Greco-Roman antiquity could also be considered mythology, history, or literature. However, most nudes in this category (e.g., Kluska 1941) could only be discerned as classical subjects by their titles and were visually indistinguishable from other nudes (e.g., Nißl 1940) that made no reference to any temporal era. Also, as several scholars note, nude depictions, both male and female, highlighted the Nazis' racial ideal of the healthy, beautiful "Aryan" body, regardless of whether the image referenced classical antiquity or not (Hinz 1995, 332-333; Spotts 2004, 110-111; Adam 1992, 144-155, 176-205). Thus, classical nudes are counted simply as nudes—and not as mythology, history, or literature—unless the artwork exhibited iconographic elements that strongly suggested references to the classical past. This same rationale is used to categorize paintings, sketches, and etchings as landscapes if they had only a few, small visual references to cultivation and herding (e.g., Halberg-Krauss 1943), while pieces categorized as farming and agriculture illustrated activities such as planting, harvesting, and animal husbandry as the principal iconographic elements (e.g., Nyssen 1941).

Nazi, fascist, and political artworks also are prioritized over other subject categories and are considered in the broadest possible manner. Pieces that exhibited recognizable Nazi symbols such as swastikas are included in this category, but so are portraits and busts of Nazi leaders, even if the pieces did not display fascist iconography (e.g., Hahn 1937). This category also includes all depictions of Nazi Party formations such as the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), the *Sturmabteilung* (SA or Storm Troopers), and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS or Protective Squadron). It is important to distinguish party formations from the German armed forces, which constituted an arm of the state that predated the Nazi Party (Burleigh 2000, 89, 104-105, 235-237).³ Therefore, depictions of the German armed forces and their activities are considered as military subjects. Depictions of Nazi Party formations, even those that engaged in frontline combat during World War II such as the SS, are categorized as Nazi, fascist, or political rather than as military subjects.

Tables and Graph

The 13,403 artworks that appeared at the eight GDKs from 1937 to 1944 are tabulated and quantified by subject categories in Table 1. As noted, some works of fine art cannot be categorized due to a lack of photographic documentation, ambiguous titles, or both. These are listed as undetermined in Table 1. Table 2 shows the percentages of each subject category by year with undetermined works of fine art included. Table 3 shows the percentages with the undetermined pieces of fine art excluded. Neither Table 2 nor Table 3 consider applied art since, in virtually

every case, the subjects depicted on these pieces cannot be determined. The data in Table 3 is used to construct Graph 1, which illustrates only select subject categories of fine art for the sake of visual clarity.

Table 1. GDK Subject Categories by Number

Subjects	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	Totals
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	273	430	495	499	538	629	614	506	3,984
Portraits, Busts	140	191	184	196	210	209	230	201	1,561
Nudes	72	138	191	184	196	176	165	84	1,206
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	54	91	132	198	206	175	139	149	1,144
Animals	85	182	165	168	156	119	128	112	1,115
Military	27	35	40	100	160	143	135	77	717
Genre	34	64	60	89	93	84	92	48	564
Mythology, History, Literature	37	38	41	59	52	71	47	56	401
Families, Children	20	52	34	27	59	43	44	41	320
Industry, Technology	15	48	57	65	71	58	45	34	393
Farming, Agriculture	25	55	51	34	41	44	37	18	305
Nazi, Fascist, Political	43	33	31	38	35	25	19	20	244
Religious	10	1	4	2	3	0	0	0	20
Miscellaneous	6	11	18	17	2	12	11	14	91
Undetermined	43	16	8	46	34	4	7	157	315
Totals, Fine Art (Paintings, Sculptures, etc.)	884	1,385	1,511	1,722	1,856	1,792	1,713	1,517	12,380
Totals, Applied Art (Plaques, Medals, etc.)	287	79	170	84	172	91	62	78	1,023
Grand Totals	1,171	1,464	1,681	1,806	2,028	1,883	1,775	1,595	13,403

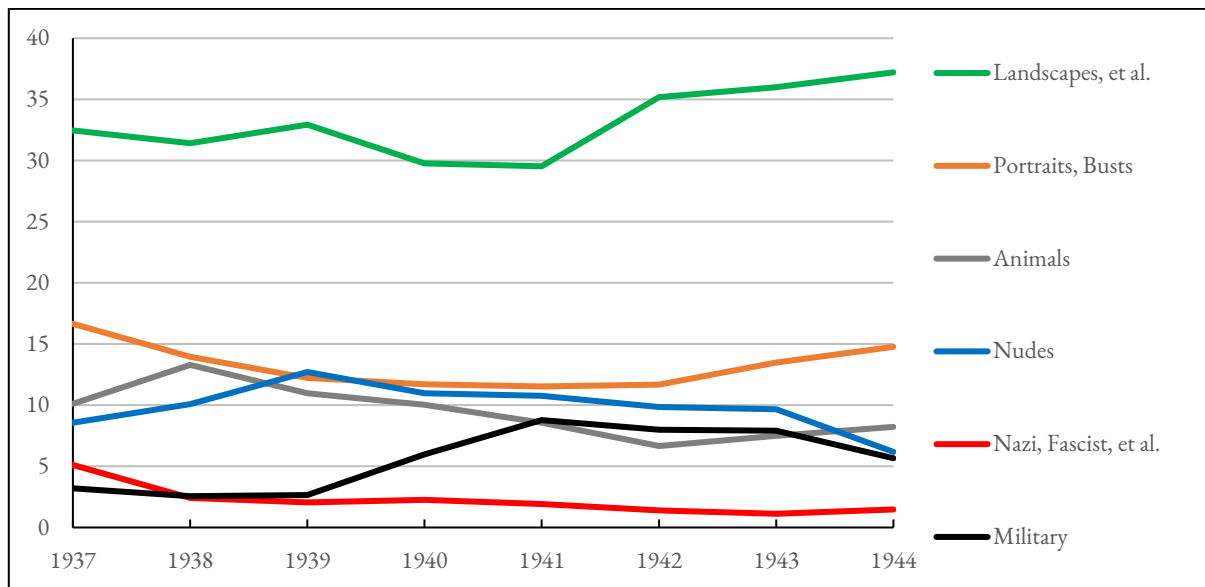
Table 2. GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Including Undetermined)

Subjects	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	30.88	31.05	32.76	28.98	28.99	35.10	35.84	33.36
Portraits, Busts	15.84	13.79	12.18	11.38	11.31	11.66	13.43	13.25
Nudes	8.15	9.96	12.64	10.68	10.56	9.82	9.63	5.54
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	6.11	6.57	8.74	11.50	11.10	9.77	8.12	9.82
Animals	9.62	13.14	10.92	9.75	8.40	6.64	7.47	7.38
Military	3.05	2.53	2.65	5.81	8.62	7.98	7.88	5.08
Genre	3.85	4.62	3.97	5.17	5.01	4.69	5.37	3.16
Mythology, History, Literature	4.19	2.74	2.71	3.43	2.80	3.96	2.74	3.69
Families, Children	2.26	3.75	2.25	1.57	3.18	2.40	2.57	2.70
Industry, Technology	1.70	3.47	3.77	3.77	3.83	3.23	2.63	2.24
Farming, Agriculture	2.82	3.97	3.38	1.97	2.21	2.46	2.16	1.19
Nazi, Fascist, Political	4.86	2.38	2.05	2.21	1.89	1.40	1.11	1.32
Religious	1.13	0.08	0.26	0.12	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
Miscellaneous	0.68	0.79	1.19	0.99	0.11	0.67	0.64	0.92
Undetermined	4.86	1.16	0.53	2.67	1.83	0.22	0.41	10.35
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3. GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Excluding Undetermined)

Subjects	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	32.46	31.41	32.94	29.77	29.53	35.18	35.99	37.21
Portraits, Busts	16.65	13.95	12.24	11.70	11.53	11.69	13.48	14.78
Nudes	8.56	10.08	12.71	10.98	10.76	9.84	9.67	6.18
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	6.42	6.65	8.78	11.81	11.31	9.79	8.15	10.96
Animals	10.11	13.29	10.98	10.02	8.56	6.66	7.50	8.23
Military	3.21	2.56	2.66	5.97	8.78	8.00	7.92	5.66
Genre	4.04	4.67	3.99	5.31	5.10	4.70	5.39	3.53
Mythology, History, Literature	4.40	2.78	2.73	3.52	2.85	3.97	2.75	4.12
Families, Children	2.38	3.80	2.26	1.61	3.24	2.40	2.58	3.01
Industry, Technology	1.79	3.51	3.79	3.88	3.90	3.24	2.64	2.50
Farming, Agriculture	2.97	4.02	3.39	2.03	2.25	2.46	2.17	1.32
Nazi, Fascist, Political	5.11	2.41	2.06	2.27	1.92	1.40	1.12	1.47
Religious	1.19	0.07	0.27	0.12	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
Miscellaneous	0.71	0.80	1.20	1.01	0.11	0.67	0.64	1.03
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Graph 1. Select GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Excluding Undetermined)



Analysis of the Data

The data confirms several trends for which scholars have lacked firm statistics in the past. Landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes, and depictions of architecture constituted the largest subject category for all eight GDKs. Such works reflected the Nazi ideology of “*Blut und Boden*” (blood and soil): the notion that German racial identity, strength, and purity were rooted in the German soil. These works also reflected Hitler’s preference for the Austro-Bavarian landscape painting common to southern Germany and Austria that he had come to appreciate in his youth (Petropoulos 1996, 11, 246-247; Schmidt 2012, 73, 82; Adam 1992, 129-132) (Fig. 2). Works depicting other

regions of Germany were also abundant. Most years, portraits and busts constituted the second largest category, and the individual artworks reveal a conspicuous pattern. Many portraits and busts depicted specific persons familiar to the artists or well-known persons whom the viewers would have recognized. However, many others illustrated unnamed persons who represented racial and cultural archetypes that reflected Nazi ideology. These pieces often illustrated occupational categories; farmers and other persons engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry were particularly popular subjects (e.g., Baumgartner 1944; Hedloff 1939) (Fig. 3). Other artworks presented images of persons wearing traditional clothing and costumes from various regions of Germany and Austria such as the Black Forest or the mountain districts of Tyrol (e.g., Blos 1940; Gdaniec 1943) (Fig. 4).

Nudes, as mentioned, reflected Nazi racial ideas concerning “Aryan” beauty, and most years the number of nudes, both in pictorial form and sculpture, was only marginally lower than the number of portraits and busts. Surprisingly, depictions of animals were only slightly lower than these two subject categories. While scholars have thoroughly investigated landscapes, nudes, and portraits produced during the Third Reich, little has been written about the prevalence of animals in Nazi-era art. Marlies Schmidt (2012, 78), in her examination of the 1937 GDK, suggests that artists considered animals to be extensions of the German landscape, regardless of whether they were feral animals such as deer, rabbits, and wolves or domesticates such as horses, sheep, and cattle. However, this does not account for those works that depicted species whose habitats laid far from Germany’s borders such as elephants, giraffes, and penguins (e.g., Christlieb 1938; Greiner 1941; Thiele 1942). More research is required to determine what ideological purpose, if any, artistic representations of such animals played in Nazi-era art. The same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants, both of which arguably represented products of the landscape in the same manner as animals (e.g., Müller-Wischin 1943; Pfeiffer 1942) (Fig. 5). As the tables illustrate, artworks that depicted still-life compositions and plants sometimes equaled or exceeded, both in number and percentage, pieces in other subject categories such as nudes and portraits and busts. Yet, like animals, no extant scholarship explains the prevalence of these works in the corpus of Nazi-era art.

Indeed, more has been written about GDK artworks that constituted several of the lesser subject categories such as farming and agriculture, families and children, and genre pieces. In every case, the percentages of works in these subject categories were significantly lower than either representations of animals or still-life compositions and depictions of plants for every GDK. This phenomenon constitutes something of a sampling error as researchers have assumed these lesser subject categories to have been of greater significance within the artistic production of the Third Reich than the statistical data indicates. Scholars have noted that artworks depicting farming and agriculture, for example, painted an idyllic portrayal of the bucolic life in the countryside that also illustrated the Nazi ideology of racial purity rooted in the German soil. However, these pieces were wildly anachronistic as they reflected the bygone age of the nineteenth

century and completely excluded any modern machinery or elements of twentieth-century mechanization (Adam 1992, 132-134). Artworks that depicted farming and agriculture were also closely linked to Nazi beliefs about family life. Artistic representations of families and children emphasized traditional gender roles, particularly women as the bearers of racially pure children who symbolized Germany's future (Adam 1992, 134-140). Likewise, genre scenes, a particular staple of Austro-Bavarian artists since the Biedermeier period of the early nineteenth century, portrayed scenes of everyday life that also harkened back to Germany's pre-industrial past: lumbermen cutting trees in the forest, blacksmiths shoeing plow horses, and old women quietly spinning thread (Petropoulos 1996, 246-247; Böttger 1940; Stahl 1940; Wölflle 1942).

Also related to these motifs were artworks that referenced mythology, history, and literature. Many of these pieces illustrated great events and persons in German history such as Frederick the Great and his miraculous victory at Leuthen during the Seven Years' War (Schnürpel 1939). Others highlighted Germany's towering figures in literature and the arts such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Richard Wagner (e.g., Müller 1940; Breker 1944). However, a significant number also depicted the Greco-Roman past (e.g., Cauer 1942; Kampf 1943). Hitler sought to link the German nation to the earlier classical tradition, both genetically and artistically, for the Greeks in particular had established the mathematical laws of beauty that governed both art and architecture. They were also thoroughly "Aryan" in Hitler's mind and thus were the racial and cultural predecessors of the Germans (Adam 1992, 27-32; Spotts 2004, 20-24). Hitler went so far as to link the art of Germany to that of classical antiquity with his description of the aesthetic principles he labeled "Greco-Nordic art" (Peters 2014a, 27). So important was the Greco-Roman tradition to the genealogy of German art in the Nazi mind that the symbol of Pallas Athena graced the covers of the GDK exhibition catalogs (Schlenker 2007b, 102) (Fig. 1).

In contrast to these subject categories, industrial landscapes and related pieces highlighted the technological might and savvy of contemporary Germany. Artworks that depicted industry and technology had their genesis with the German Realist painter Adolph Menzel and his influential painting *Eisenwalzwerk (Iron-Rolling Mill)* produced between 1872 and 1875 at the Königshütte iron and steel works in Silesia (Schlecking 2016, 130-143, 215-217; Türk 2010, 472-475). During the Weimar period, German industrial artists increasingly celebrated their nation's technological advances through what Jeffery Herf labels "reactionary modernism," an idea that embraced technological progress while simultaneously rejecting Enlightenment values such as political equality, liberal democracy, and religious toleration (Herf 1984, 1-48). The Nazi regime later appropriated this notion, and industrial artists during the era of the Third Reich continued to produce heroic depictions of German industry and technology. They not only painted the steel mills of the Ruhr Valley but also the great bridges of Germany's Autobahn, a symbol of the country's technological prowess (Engelskirchen 2002, 108-111; Jung and Stahnke 2014, 19-32, 47-48, 86; Zeller 2007, 62-71). The workers who labored in these great industrial enterprises were celebrated as men who were as tough and strong as the steel they

produced and the bridges they built. Like other racial and cultural archetypes, artists transformed industrial workers into heroic, muscular “Aryan” figures who epitomized the Nazi pathos (Michaud 2004, 198-204). Like artworks in all the lesser subject categories, those that depicted industry and technology were never a significant portion of the totals, but they consistently appeared in all eight GDKs.

The only works that dramatically increased in number and percentage over the course of the GDKs were those that depicted military and war-related subjects. The advent of World War II in 1939 resulted in a significant number of such works, from fewer than five percent in 1937 to almost nine percent in 1941. In fact, the modest declines in other subject categories after 1939 were largely due to the limited exhibition space that had to be dedicated to works that illustrated Germany’s ongoing military campaigns. Of course, this increase in war-related art after 1939 has been noted by art historians (Schlenker 2007b, 146-148; Schmidt 2012, 141-143). The Nazi cultural bureaucracy believed such works were important for maintaining civilian morale and convincing the German people that victory would be the ultimate reward for their country’s sacrifices on the battlefield. The German soldier was configured as a new “heroic Aryan,” defending his country from its enemies (Adam 1992, 156-160). War paintings and other military art also had a visceral quality that brought the grittiness of the war to the viewer. Artworks in this subject category were very popular with the nation’s citizenry. Indeed, recent studies conclude that during the war years, the German public desired even more art with military and war-related themes than the Nazi state provided (Werckmeister 2015, 107-125; Schmidt 2007, 293).

Two other trends are also evident in the data. First, religious art was virtually non-existent at the GDKs. Religious themes, even when broadly considered, never constituted even two percent of the exhibited artworks, and in the three GDKs between 1942 and 1944, the number of religious-themed artworks was zero. However, while the leadership of the Third Reich eschewed Christian beliefs and practices, Christian ritual and iconography were preserved in Nazi ceremonies and Nazi-era art (Schmidt 2012, 17, 75; Maertz 2019, 77-110; Ruppert 2015, 44-45). For example, thirty-five GDK works had the title *Mutter und Kind* (*Mother and Child*), at least two works and as many as seven at each of the eight GDKs. Many of these pieces bore an uncanny resemblance to religious icons of the Madonna and Child (e.g., Eichhorst 1938; Heinsdorff 1938; Weissmüller 1944) (Fig. 6). Particularly striking was Josef Thorak’s sculpture *Pietà*, which portrayed a mother holding the body of her son, a fallen German soldier, in the same manner as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* of the Virgin Mary cradling the crucified Christ (Thorak 1942).

Like religious art, overtly political subjects were also uncommon. Only about five percent of the pieces at the 1937 GDK exhibited political content, and thereafter the numbers and percentages steadily declined. This is astounding when one considers that the general public today tends to believe that such art was the mainstay of the Third Reich. Instead, several of the lesser subject categories—genre scenes; mythological, historical and literary subjects; families and children; industry and technology; and agricultural motifs—consistently had greater representation than

political themes in most GDKs. Hitler disliked political art, and even when the broadest definition of “political art” is employed, relatively few GDK works displayed overtly Nazi, fascist, or political themes (Spotts 2004, 176). As James van Dyke notes, “Although Germany was littered with images that were clearly propaganda, they were generally not found in the halls of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* [House of German Art, the museum that hosted the GDKs]. The vast majority of the paintings exhibited there served a conventional taste in art” (van Dyke 2007, 255).⁴

The process of choosing artworks explains why this “conventional taste” characterized GDK art. The selection of works for the first GDK in 1937 was initially in the hands of a jury composed principally of artists. The jury also included interior designer Gerdy Troost, the widow of architect Paul Troost who had designed the House of German Art. When Hitler inspected the jury’s choices, he became enraged at the number of modernist works, particularly impressionistic paintings that he declared to be “unfinished.” He dismissed the jury and entrusted his personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann—a man of limited artistic experience—with selecting artworks for the 1937 GDK and every other GDK thereafter. Troost was later invited back to assist but had diminished influence (Schlenker 2007a, 260; Stratigakos 2015, 132-134). Hoffmann later wrote, “I knew Hitler’s views, and I had a fairly good idea of what would find favour in his eyes” (Hoffmann 1955, 173). Even after Hoffmann made his selections, Hitler still passed final judgment on all artworks. Thus, GDK pieces were characterized by a strong tendency toward nineteenth-century academic art as well as the Austro-Bavarian traditions of landscapes and portraits that Hitler preferred (Petropoulos 1996, 11, 246-247; Peters 2014b, 108).

Nevertheless, his seemingly discerning eyes often failed him, and pieces that bore unmistakable characteristics of Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and New Objectivity found their way into the exhibitions (Peters 2014b, 108-109). Thus, the art of the eight GDKs varied widely in quality. Virtually all pieces demonstrated a high degree of technical skill, and some were clearly superior artworks that displayed modernist elements and originality that contemporary art scholars now appreciate. However, as researchers have long argued, many other GDK artworks were unimaginative, imitative of traditional subjects and styles, and uninspiring (Schlenker 2007a, 259-260; Adam 1992, 119; Petropoulos 2000, 255). It is also crucial to remember that all works of art at the eight GDKs, regardless of their quality or modernist influences, reflected the ideology of the Third Reich, a fact that contemporary scholars stress (Steinweis 1993, 20-31; Petropoulos 2000, 61, 243-244, 253-269; Jung and Stahnke 2014, 103-105; Ruppert 2015, 38-46). If the road to Auschwitz was “twisted” as Karl Schleunes (1970, viii) has argued, then each piece of artwork at the GDKs was a paving stone along that murderous route.

Conclusion

The analysis presented here does not distinguish between superior or inferior pieces of art; nor does it provide any commentary on those GDK artworks that exhibited undeniable aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernism. Instead, its purpose is to provide quantitative

data for the burgeoning body of scholarship on the art of the Third Reich and especially the premier art exhibitions of the Nazi state, the GDKs. As the first such comprehensive statistical analysis of GDK art, it furnishes substance to the scholarly conclusions that have been proffered over the last three decades. Certainly, it lays to rest the popular belief that GDK art was principally characterized by political content. While art scholars have long known that landscapes, portraits, and nudes predominated at the GDKs, less has been written about other subject categories. In the case of artworks that depicted animals, almost nothing has been written, and the same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants. These subject categories constituted a significant proportion of the artworks at the eight GDKs, but virtually nothing has been written by art scholars about what ideological purpose, if any, they served. Hopefully, this analysis will open future avenues for research into the art of the Third Reich.

Endnotes:

1. For the database, see *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*, available at: www.gdk-research.de [accessed 9 Apr 2021]. Individual works of art discussed in this essay are found in the reference list along with the GDKs at which they were exhibited and the specific URLs from the database.
2. Digital copies of the catalogs can be downloaded from *Arthistoricum.net*, available at: <https://www.arthistoricum.net/themen/textquellen/kataloge-der-grossen-deutschen-kunstaustellung> [accessed 9 Apr 2021].
3. In contrast, Marlies Schmidt (2012, 76, 143) places political and military subjects into a single subject category.
4. Translation by the author.

References

GDK Catalogs Listed Chronologically with Abbreviations Referenced in the Text:

- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, 18. Juli bis 31. Oktober 1937*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1937. (*GDK 1937*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1938 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, 10. Juli – 16. Oktober 1938*. Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1938. (*GDK 1938*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1938 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1938. (*Ergänzungsteil 1938*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, 16. Juli bis 15. Oktober 1939*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1939. (*GDK 1939*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1939 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1939. (*Ergänzungsteil 1939*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1940 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, Juli bis Oktober 1940*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1940. (*GDK 1940*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1940 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1940. (*Ergänzungsteil 1940*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1941 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, Juli bis auf weiteres*. Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1941. (*GDK 1941*)

- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1941 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1941. (*Ergänzungsteil 1941*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1942 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, Juli bis auf weiteres.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1942. (*GDK 1942*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1942 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1942. (*Ergänzungsteil 1942*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1943 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, Juni bis auf weiteres.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1943. (*GDK 1943*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1943 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1943. (*Ergänzungsteil 1943*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1944 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, Juli bis auf weiteres.* Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1944. (*GDK 1944*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grosse Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1944 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München.* München: F. Bruckmann, 1944. (*Ergänzungsteil 1944*)

GDK Artworks Referenced in the Text:

- Baum, Carl. *Tannheimer Alpen (Tannheim Alps)*. GDK 1941. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19363604.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Baumgartner, Thomas. *Kreuther Bauernbursche (Farm Lad from Kreuth, Germany)*. GDK 1944. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19440036.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Blos, Carl. *Schwarzwälderin (Black Forest Woman)*. GDK 1940. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19403947.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Böttger, Rudolf. *Holzschlag (Cutting Timber)*. GDK 1940. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19403957.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Breker, Arno. *Büste Richard Wagner (Bust of Richard Wagner)*. GDK 1944. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19440105.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Cauer, Hanna. *Speersenkende Pallas (Pallas Lowering the Spear)*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19361913.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Christlieb, Harry. *Giraffe*. GDK 1938. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19401027.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Eichhorst, Franz. *Mutter und Kind (Mother and Child)*. GDK 1938. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19401077.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Gdanietz, Wilhelm. *Tiroler Bauer (Tyrolean Farmer)*. GDK 1943. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19361280.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Gerwin, Franz. *Großbaustelle der OT (Large Construction Site of the Todt Organization)*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19362087.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Greiner, Eugen. *Pinguine (Penguins)*. GDK 1941. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19363923.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Günther, Georg. *Deutsches Mittelgebirge (German Foothills)*. GDK 1939. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19403697.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Hahn, Hermann. *Büste Ministerpräsident Siebert (Bust of Minister President Siebert)*. GDK 1937. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19400252.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].

- Halberg-Krauss, Fritz. *Heuernte mit aufziehendem Gewitter (Hay Harvest with an Approaching Storm)*. GDK 1943. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19360312.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Hedloff, Kurt. *Junger Schäfer (Young Shepherd)*. GDK 1939. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19403709.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Heinsdorff, Emil. *Mutter und Kind (Mother and Child)*. GDK 1938. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19401230.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Kampf, Herbert. *Ikarus (Icarus)*. GDK 1943. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19360420.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Kluska, Johann. *Venus*. GDK 1941. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19365142.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Müller, Georg. *Goethebüste (Bust of Goethe)*. GDK 1940. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19404662.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Müller-Wischin, Anton. *Rote Rosen (Red Roses)*. GDK 1943. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19360593.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Nißl, Rudolf. *Ruhe (Rest)*. GDK 1940. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19404697.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Nyssen, Leo. *Kartoffelernte (Potato Harvest)*. GDK 1941. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19364359.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Pfeiffer, Ruth. *Mehlbeere (Mountain Ash Tree)*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19363352.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Schmitz-Wiedenbrück, Hans. *Arbeiter, Bauern, Soldaten (Workers, Farmers, Soldiers)*. GDK 1941. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19364576.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Schnürpel, Herbert. *Ansprache Friedrichs des Großen an seine Generäle vor der Schlacht bei Leuthen (Address by Frederick the Great to His Generals Before the Battle of Leuthen)*. GDK 1939. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19403332.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Stahl, Franz Xaver. *Schmiede (Blacksmith Shop)*. GDK 1940. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19405013.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Thiele, Alfred. *Elefant (Elephant)*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19362826.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Thorak, Josef. *Pietà*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19362834.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Weissmüller, Otto. *Mutter und Kind (Mother and Child)*. GDK 1944. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19441027.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Werner, Rudolph. *Der Panzergrenadier (Armored Infantryman)*. GDK 1943. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19990021.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021]. Also available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19361675.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].
- Wölfle, Franz Xaver. *Alte Spinnerin (Old Spinner Woman)*. GDK 1942. Available at: <http://www.gdk-research.de/de/obj19362948.html> [Accessed 9 Apr 2021].

Textual Sources:

Adam, Peter. *Art of the Third Reich*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

Burleigh, Michael. *The Third Reich: A New History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000.

- Engelskirchen, Lutz. "Eisen und Stahl—Ausstellungen zum Industriebild in Deutschland." *Die Zweite Schöpfung: Bilder der industriellen Welt vom 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart*. (Eds.) Sabine Beneke and Hans Ottomeyer. Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2002. 108-113.
- Fuhrmeister, Christian. "Die Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937-1944." *Künstler in Nationalsozialismus: Die 'Deutsche Kunst', die Kunstpolitik und die Berliner Kunsthochschule*. (Ed.) Wolfgang Ruppert. Cologne: Böhlau, 2015. 97-106.
- Fuhrmeister, Christian. "Kunst im Nationalsozialismus: Rezeptionsgeschichte, Forschungsstand und Perspektiven." *Künstler und Kunst im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Diskussion um die Gelsenkirchener Künstlersiedlung Halfmannshof*. (Eds.) Holger Germann and Stefan Goch. Essen: Klartext, 2013. 11-20.
- Haftmann, Werner. "Painting." *German Art of the Twentieth Century*. (Ed.) Andrew Ritchie. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1957. 13-140.
- Herf, Jeffrey. *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Hinz, Berthold. "'Degenerate' and 'Authentic': Aspects of Art and Power in the Third Reich." *Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930-45*. (Eds.) Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott, and Iain Boyd Whyte. Stuttgart: Oktagon, 1995. 330-333.
- Hoffmann, Heinrich. *Hitler Was My Friend*. (Trans.) R. H. Stevens. London: Burke, 1955.
- Jung, Patrick, and Carma Stahnke. *Erich Mercker and Technical Subjects: A Landscape and Industrial Artist in Twentieth-Century Germany*. Milwaukee: MSOE Press, 2014.
- Kater, Michael. *Culture in Nazi Germany*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Maertz, Gregory. *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany*. Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2019.
- Michaud, Eric. *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Peters, Olaf. "From Nordau to Hitler: 'Degeneration' and Anti-Modernism between the Fin-de-Siècle and the National Socialist Takeover of Power." *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*. (Ed.) Olaf Peters. Munich: Prestel, 2014a. 16-35.
- Peters, Olaf. "Genesis, Conception, and Consequences: The 'Entartete Kunst' Exhibition in Munich in 1937." *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*. (Ed.) Olaf Peters. Munich: Prestel, 2014b. 106-125.
- Petropoulos, Jonathan. *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Petropoulos, Jonathan. *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Potter, Pamela. *Art of Suppression: Confronting the Nazi Past in Histories of the Visual and Performing Arts*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.
- Roh, Franz. *German Art in the 20th Century*. (Trans.) Catherine Hutter. (Trans. ed.) Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968 [1958].
- Ruppert, Wolfgang. "Bildende Kunst im NS-Staat." *Kunst im NS-Staat: Ideologie, Ästhetik, Protagonisten*. (Eds.) Wolfgang Benz, Peter Eckel, and Andreas Nachama. Berlin: Metropol, 2015. 29-47.
- Schlecking, Jennifer. *Reflexion und Verklärung—Industrieller Fortschritt und gesellschaftliche Realität in der offiziellen Malerei des deutschen Kaiserreichs der 1870er bis 1890er Jahre*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2016.

- Schlenker, Ines. "Die 'Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellungen' und ihre Auswirkungen auf den nationalsozialistischen Kunstbetrieb." *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen 1930-1945*. (Eds.) Hans-Jörg Czech and Nikola Doll. Dresden: Sandstein, 2007a. 258-266.
- Schlenker, Ines. *Hitler's Salon: The Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich 1937-1944*. German Linguistic and Cultural Studies. Vol. 20. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007b.
- Schleunes, Karl. *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz: Nazi Policy toward German Jews, 1933-1939*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970.
- Schmidt, Marlies. "Die 'Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München': Rekonstruktion und Analyse." Ph.D. diss., Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, 2012.
- Schmidt, Wolfgang. "Die Mobilisierung der Künste für den Krieg: Maler in Uniform." *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen 1930-1945*. (Eds.) Hans-Jörg Czech and Nikola Doll. Dresden: Sandstein, 2007. 284-297.
- Sösemann, Bernd and Marius Lange. (Eds.) *Propaganda: Medien und Öffentlichkeit in der NS-Diktatur*. Vol. 2. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2011.
- Spotts, Frederic. *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*. New York: Overlook Press, 2004.
- Steinweis, Alan. *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: The Reich Chambers of Music, Theater, and the Visual Arts*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
- Stratigakos, Despina. *Hitler at Home*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Türk, Klaus. "Menzels 'Eisenwalzwerk': Realismus zwischen alter und neuer Mythologie." *Feuerländer—Regions of Vulcan: Malerei um Koble und Stabl*. (Ed.) LVR-Industriemuseum. Münster: Aschendorf, 2010. 471-482.
- van Dyke, James. *Franz Radziwill and the Contradictions of German Art History, 1919-45*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- van Dyke, James. "Über die Beziehungen zwischen Kunst, Propaganda und Kitsch in Deutschland 1933 bis 1945." *Kunst und Propaganda im Streit der Nationen 1930-1945*. (Eds.) Hans-Jörg Czech and Nikola Doll. Dresden: Sandstein, 2007. 250-257.
- Werckmeister, Karl. "Politische Führung und politische Überwachung der deutschen Kunst im Zweiten Weltkrieg." *Künstler im Nationalsozialismus: Die 'Deutsche Kunst', die Kunstpolitik und die Berliner Kunsthochschule*. (Ed.) Wolfgang Ruppert. Cologne: Böhlau, 2015. 107-125.
- Zeller, Thomas. *Driving Germany: The Landscape of the German Autobahn, 1930-1970*. New York: Berghahn, 2007.

List of figures:

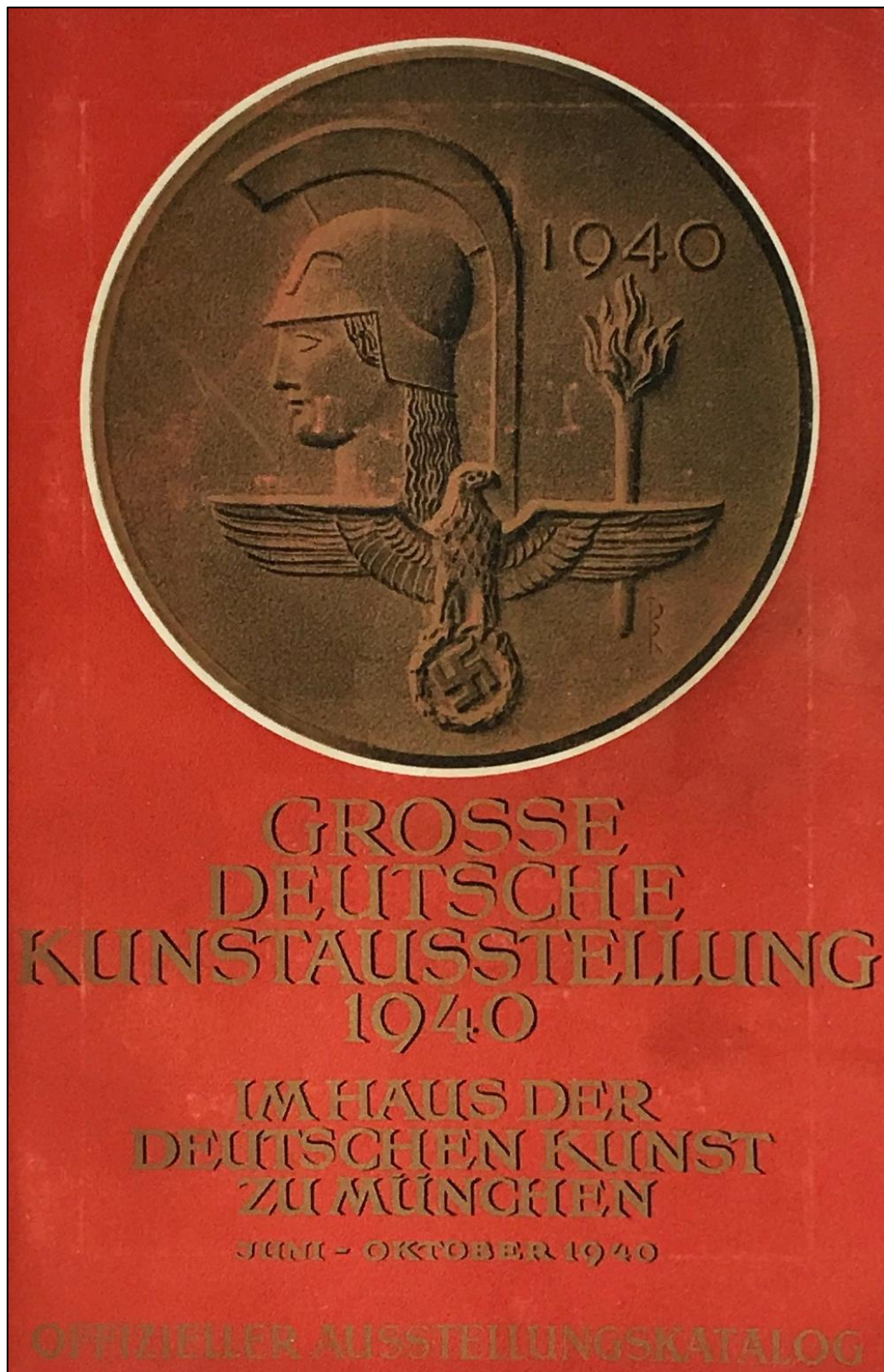


Fig. 1, Catalog cover, *Die Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, 1940. Courtesy of the German Art Gallery (<https://germanartgallery.eu>).



Fig. 2, Georg Günther, *Deutsches Mittelgebirge (German Foothills)*, GDK 1939. Courtesy of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 3, Thomas Baumgartner, *Kreuther Bauernbursche (Farm Lad from Kreuth, Germany)*, GDK 1944. Courtesy of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich.

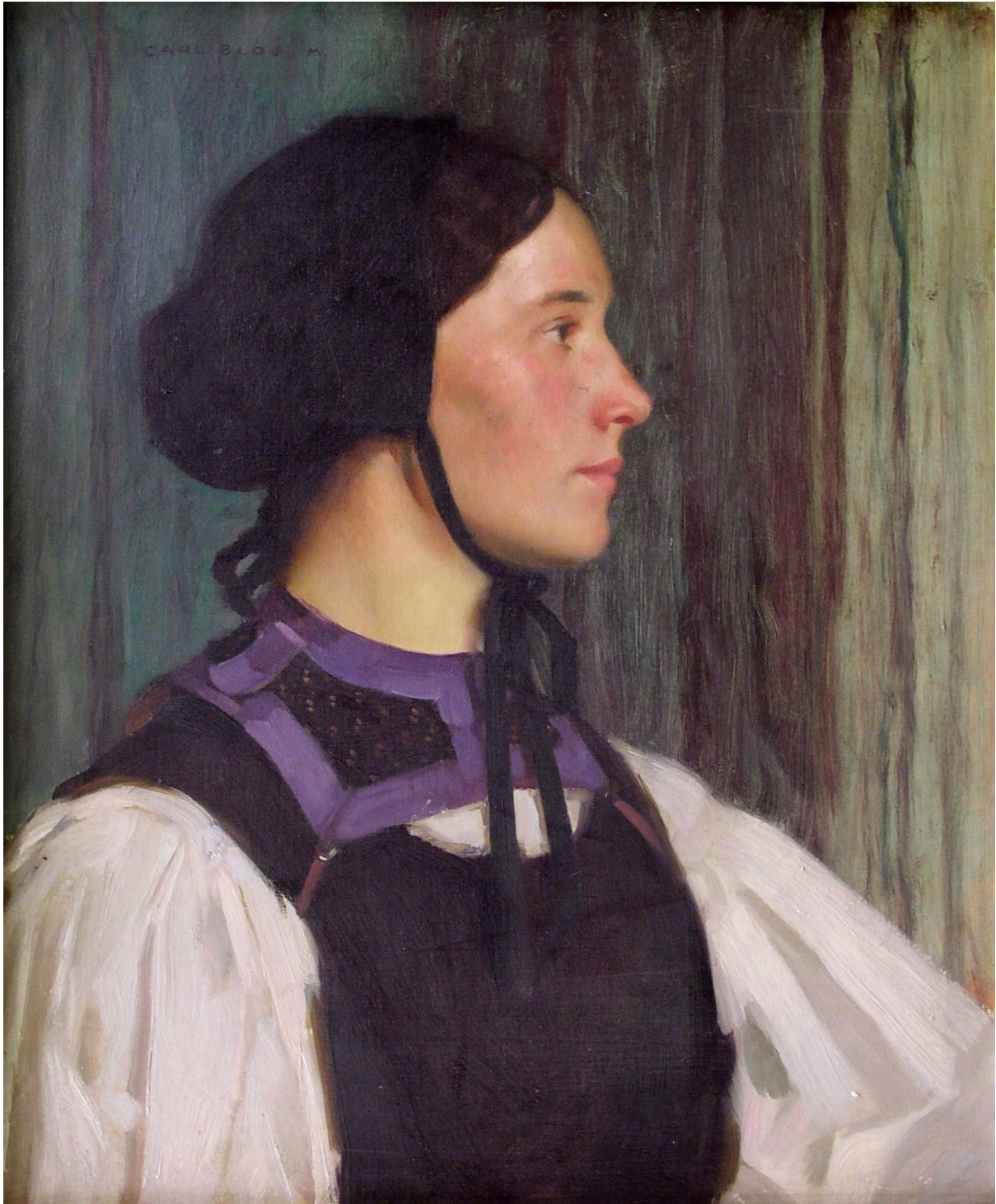


Fig. 4, Carl Blossfeldt, *Schwarzwälderin* (*Black Forest Woman*), GDK 1940. Courtesy of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 5, Anton Müller-Wischin, *Rote Rosen (Red Roses)*, GDK 1943. Courtesy of the German Art Gallery (<https://germanartgallery.eu>).



Fig. 6, Otto Weissmüller, *Mutter und Kind* (*Mother and Child*), GDK 1944. Courtesy of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich.