

**“An extraordinary
case of ambivalence”—
The American Reception
of Georg Kolbe during
and after the
National Socialist
Dictatorship**

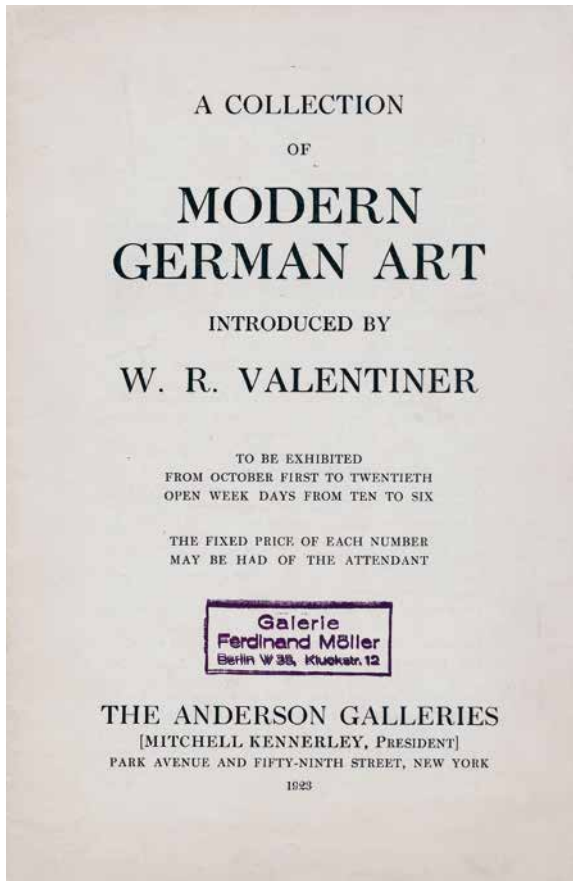
In his 1957 essay in the catalog for the landmark exhibition *German Art of the Twentieth Century* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the art historian Alfred Hentzen wrote of German sculpture of the twentieth century: "The most important representatives of German sculpture have been known in the United States for a long time, better known than in any other country outside of Germany. Even before the First World War, the first works of Georg Kolbe had reached America, and after the war many others followed."¹ With this short summary, the art historian had established that Georg Kolbe was to be considered in the United States as one of the most important representatives of German sculpture of the twentieth century. This recognition, however, was not uncontroversial, nor had it experienced a continuous rise in the preceding decades. Rather, it must be noted that Kolbe's reception in North America required important advocates and, far more importantly in this context, underwent a transformation during the National Socialist dictatorship, from an esteemed and recognized artist to a hostile representative of the NS regime to a sculptor who, after the end of the Second World War and his death in 1947, once again became esteemed and appreciated.

The reception of the German sculptor in the United States began in the early 1920s. Although Kolbe had already made a marble bust for the German Pavilion in Saint Louis in 1904, his first significant exhibition participation did not occur until 1923 at The Anderson Galleries in New York, when *A Collection of Modern German Art* presented three bronzes and five drawings by the artist (fig. 1).²

Already three years earlier, in 1920, the magazine *American Art News* had reported on the exhibition participation at the Free Secession in Berlin: "Georg Kolbe, who has become quite famous, sent three bronze figures, the 'Dancer' being exquisite in every detail."³

On the occasion of an exhibition of the work of the Berlin-based sculptor at the Neumann Gallery in New York in 1927, the German curator Carl Georg Heise comprehensively explained the artist's significance to American readers for the first time. In the magazine *Art in America*, he introduced his monographic treatise with laudatory words: "Who is the greatest German painter? One might give a hundred different answers. Who is the greatest German sculptor? This question can be answered in one way only. Georg Kolbe."⁴ Heise considered especially those sculptures by Kolbe that captured moments of movement to be masterpieces: *Tänzerin* (Dancer, 1911/12) from the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, as well as later works such as *Assunta* and *Lucino* (both 1921). The fact that Heise's appreciation did not reflect a singular recognition in the North American context is also evidenced by the numerous acquisitions made and collections received during this period. Of particular importance was the Detroit Institute of Arts, which purchased the work *Auferstehung* (Resurrection, 1919/20) in 1927 and *Assunta* in 1929. The director of the institution at the time was the German-born art historian Wilhelm Valentiner, who had already published an extensive monograph on Kolbe in 1922.⁵

Probably the most important public recognition during this period in the context of a museum exhibition came in 1931, when the artist was represented with eight works in the exhibition *German Painting and Sculpture* at The Museum of Modern Art in New



1 Exhibition catalog *A Collection of Modern German Art*, The Anderson Galleries, New York, 1923

York (fig. 2).⁶ The museum's press release reiterated Heise's assessment from a few years earlier: "In addition to Belling and de Fiori the exhibition includes eight works by Kolbe, the most famous of living German sculptors."⁷

By the time the National Socialists came to power, Georg Kolbe had thus gained considerable recognition among the American public. A few years later, however, this positive reception would change fundamentally. As the National Socialist regime's hostility toward modern and contemporary art in Germany became more widely known, culminating in the 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) and the extensive confiscations of works from various museums and public collections, the efforts of American curators to provide a forum for defamed art increased.

At first, Kolbe was excluded from the critical to openly horrified attitude of the American art world toward the atrocities of the National Socialist regime. However, the presentation of his work in the exhibition *Twentieth Century German Art* at the New Burlington Galleries in London in the summer of 1938 at the latest fundamentally changed the view of Georg Kolbe in the United States as well. With 269 works by sixty-five artists, the London exhibition was the most comprehensive presentation of German art in England



2 Exhibition view of *German Painting and Sculpture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1931, historical photograph

before the Second World War.⁸ The organizers, led by the British curator and art critic Herbert Read, focused on German modernism, especially Expressionism, thus sending a clear signal against the anti-modernist fervor in Germany. Efforts were obviously made to make the presentation appear apolitical; in the accompanying exhibition catalog, the organizers went so far as to state: “The organisers of the present exhibition are not concerned with the political aspect of this situation; they merely affirm one principle: that art, as an expression of the human spirit in all its mutations, is only great in so far as it is free.”⁹ Given the choice of works and the timing of the exhibition, however, it could no longer be apolitical. Not surprisingly, the leftist-leaning Artists’ International Association demanded in a leaflet: “go and see expelled and banned art.” For the Association, a visit to an exhibition was at the same time a commitment to a democratically constituted, liberal political order: “Why does Hitler expel artists? Because fascism is afraid of those who think, of those who seek truth, of those who speak the truth.”¹⁰

However, the organizers’ interest in maintaining the exhibition’s apolitical appearance ultimately led to a scandal in which Georg Kolbe was to play a central role—and which had a decisive impact on the artist’s reception in the United States. As a concession to the British policy of appeasement, the critical author Thomas Mann was removed from the list of patrons in London, and at the same time Georg Kolbe, an artist already officially recognized by the National Socialists in Germany, was added to the exhibition list. Despite the



3 Georg Kolbe, *Paul Cassirer*, 1925, bronze, h. 32 cm, Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin

fact that the selected work—the portrait of the Jewish art dealer Paul Cassirer (fig. 3)—was not an expression of NS propaganda, his participation in the 1937 Exposition Internationale in Paris and his acceptance of public commissions were seen as ingratiating with the regime in Berlin and had made him *persona non grata* in exile circles. The controversy eventually went so far that the Freier Deutscher Künstlerbund (Free German Artists' Association) in Paris, represented by the exiled artists Eugen Spiro and Gert Wollheim, sent a letter of protest to the curator in charge, Herbert Read, stating: "Mister Bear has explained that the London committee decided to exhibit the sculptor Kolbe as well: 'for historical reasons.' [...] With this, the exhibition management has gone so far as to want to exhibit Nazi artists as well, which must be taken as a surprising concession to the spirit that committed that 'injustice' [sic!] against the German artistic community."¹¹ Herbert Read responded diplomatically to the harsh accusations: "The decision [...] followed logically from the decision to present the exhibition on a non-political basis. We made that decision in the interests of those artists who are still living in Germany [...] Kolbe's name was merely mentioned as an example of the kind of artist who might have to be included to justify our non-political attitude."¹² Read's conciliatory words, however, did little to

defuse the conflict. For many critics and artists, the London exhibition project remained an expression of political pandering to National Socialist art and cultural propaganda. The art critic William Hickey even went so far as to claim: "They are even including work by at least one artist who is still OK in Germany. It might have been better to go the whole hog & include, without comment, paintings by HITLER himself & his special protégés, leaving it to critics & connoisseurs here to draw their own moral."¹³ Obviously, for the London organizers, Kolbe represented a still viable middle course of an artist who had received recognition in the NS regime, who had remained in the country, and yet was not to be understood as a political artist. It was precisely this depoliticization, however, that was met with vehement protest and fostered the negative judgment of Kolbe as a follower or regime artist that would cling to him until his death in 1947 and beyond.

This description of Kolbe as a lackey and beneficiary of the NS regime was then also reflected in the reception of the artist in the United States. Numerous correspondents had reported extensively on the London exhibition in American magazines and newspapers, and the art public had also been able to form their own impressions on site.

The American efforts to promote the ostracized German modernism were then obviously clearly influenced by the negative press from London. As in London, attempts were made from the late 1930s onward, especially on the East Coast, to organize exhibitions that would be perceived as a determined statement against the art and cultural policies in the German Reich. Following on the heels of the exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, an exhibition of German art opened at the Milwaukee Art Institute on June 1, 1939, which was subsequently shown at the City Art Museum in Saint Louis, the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, and the San Francisco Museum of Art. Of the seventy-six works, however, not one was by Kolbe.

However, Georg Kolbe's work did not disappear completely from the exhibition scene in the United States. Galleries in particular continued to make an effort to represent the sculptor and exhibit his work. In the spring of 1937, for example, the gallerist Curt Valentin opened the New York branch of the Berlin-based Buchholz Gallery with a group exhibition under the rather neutral title *Opening Exhibition: Sculpture and Drawings*, which included works by Ernst Barlach, Georg Kolbe, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, Gerhard Marcks, Richard Scheibe, and Renée Sintenis, thus following the list of artists at Galerie Flechthelm. With Barlach, Lehmbruck, and Marcks, three of the six artists presented were featured in the same year in the defamatory exhibition *Entartete Kunst* in Munich. The central importance of the gallerist Curt Valentin for Kolbe's "survival" in the American discourse is evidenced by the fact that he not only presented the now much-criticized sculptor in his own gallery spaces but was also a generous lender for museum presentations.

In January 1939, the Springfield Museum presented ninety-four works by German artists in the exhibition *Modern German Art*, with Curt Valentin as the principal lender. Five of these works were by Georg Kolbe—on loan from the Buchholz Gallery: the bronzes *Tänzerin* (Dancer), *Selbstporträt* (Self-Portrait, 1925), and *Badende* (Bathers, 1926), as well as two nude drawings.

In November of that year, only two months after the German Reich's invasion of Poland, the exhibition *Contemporary German Art* opened at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston. Here as well, Kolbe was prominently represented with five works, namely the terracotta sculpture *Stehendes Mädchen* (Standing Girl, 1906)¹⁴ from the private collection of Curt Valentin, as well as four bronzes: *Mädchenkopf* (Head of a Girl), also from Valentin's collection, *Tänzer* (Dancer, 1913) from the Germanic Museum at Harvard University, *Herabsteigende* (Descending Woman, 1926) from the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, and a self-portrait from the Buchholz Gallery.

The two exhibitions in Massachusetts were finally followed in 1940 by *Landmarks in Modern German Art* at Curt Valentin's Buchholz Gallery in New York. Here, Valentin presented Expressionist painting—primarily by representatives of the Brücke and the Blauer Reiter—as well as four sculptural positions: Ernst Barlach, Georg Kolbe, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, and Gerhard Marcks. Included in an exhibition entitled *Landmarks*, and presented in the context of modernism, which had been ostracized by the National Socialists, Kolbe's oeuvre, albeit represented by only one work (*Standing Girl Looking Up*, 1920), was here freed from any possible hostility as an aesthetic conforming to the regime.

With the entry of the United States of America into the Second World War in December 1941, the number of exhibitions of German art was drastically reduced. The only other counter-model to the defamatory exhibition of 1937 was the 1942 exhibition *New Acquisitions: Free German Art*, featuring works by Ernst Barlach, Max Beckmann, Käthe Kollwitz, and Emil Nolde at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. This exhibition, however, was not meant to be just another event in the series of presentations of German art. Alfred H. Barr Jr., the museum's founding director and curator of the exhibition, saw it more as an attempt to present the “actual” artistic achievements of German modernism, since previous exhibitions in America had, in his opinion, shown rather unrepresentative examples of artistic creation. Regarding an exhibition planned for 1940 at The Museum of Modern Art, he had written to a collector: “the reason we are doing this is what I have heard—this is confidential—that there is a large exhibition of German art, rather badly chosen, touring museums. It seems to be doing a lot of harm so far as the reputation of German painting is concerned and is even causing people who are not in sympathy with modern art to say, with a certain relief, that Hitler is right.”¹⁵ His scathing judgment referred to the aforementioned exhibition in Milwaukee.

Barr's presentation was intended not only to showcase the latest additions to the collection, but also to make a political and art-historical statement. This politicized reading of the most recent acquisitions is especially significant when compared to the eponymous presentation of recent acquisitions and gifts two years earlier, in 1940. Here, several works by Kolbe from the prominent collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, wife of the influential industrialist and patron John D. Rockefeller II, were almost tacitly added to the collection. While other artists were introduced in the press release for the 1940 exhibition with words such as “striking,” “masterpiece,” “sensitive,” etc., Georg Kolbe—for the sake of the completeness of all gifts—was listed with only a half-sentence.¹⁶ And in 1942, his work was not among the acquisitions. Instead, according to the museum's press release, the

intention was to support those artists who had been persecuted or marginalized by the National Socialists:

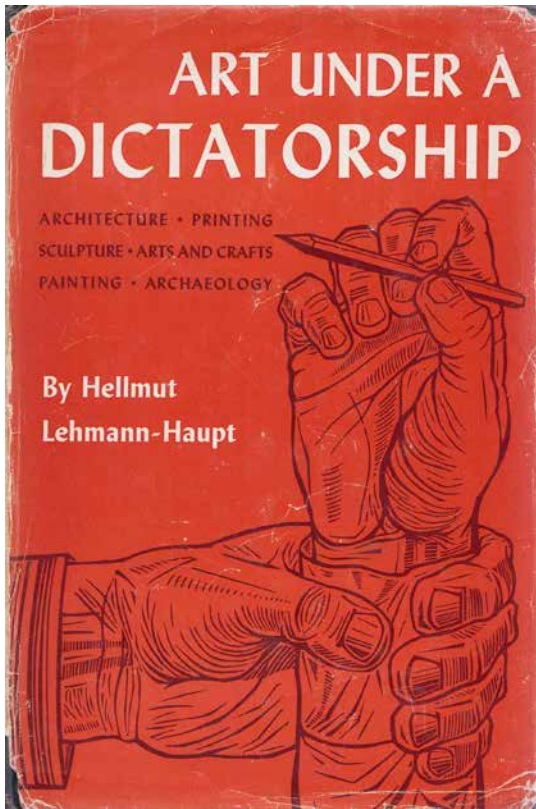
“The Museum of Modern Art announces the acquisition of several works by German artists not approved by the Nazi government. [...] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of the Museum, makes the following statement regarding the acquisitions of Free German Art: ‘Among the Freedoms which the Nazis have destroyed, none has been more cynically perverted, more brutally stamped upon than the Freedom of Art.’ [...] But German artists of spirit and integrity have refused to conform.”¹⁷

The curator did not count the sculptor among these artists of integrity and nonconformity. This is evidenced by private correspondence between members of the occupying forces in the spring of 1947, which made Alfred Barr’s opinion of Kolbe abundantly clear:

“From the Wiesbaden director I learned that Military Govt. had found enough metal to have Kolbe’s head of Beethoven cast for posterity. No one at the ETO seemed to be aware of Kolbe’s Nazi record. [...] By chance I happened to list the whereabouts and activities of some of Germany’s modern artists (including Kolbe) in a letter to Alfred Barr when I wrote him asking for his new Picasso book. Since his museum has some Kolbe sculpture, I even thought that the Museum had possibly instigated the Beethoven head casting. Imagine my surprise when he answered that Kolbe had not done any important work for the past 20 years, had accepted too many Nazi sculpture orders to be thought of as anything other than pro-Nazi, and had even gone so to Spain to make a head of Franco. I also gathered that Barr hardly shared our concern for the aging old man.”¹⁸

Thus, at the end of the war, Georg Kolbe appeared in the United States as an artistic personality with two opposing readings. On the one hand, as the most important representative of German sculpture without any political association; on the other, as a follower, if not an accomplice, of the National Socialist regime, whose neoclassical style was a compliant expression of propaganda and ideology. To resolve this contradiction and reinterpret it in favor of the artist required eloquent advocates after the end of the war. In addition to numerous German museum directors, art critics, and art historians, American connoisseurs of German modernism also spoke out on Kolbe’s behalf. Among them was Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, a German-born member of the American occupation forces, who argued in his book *Art Under a Dictatorship*, published in 1954 with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation (figs. 4 and 5):

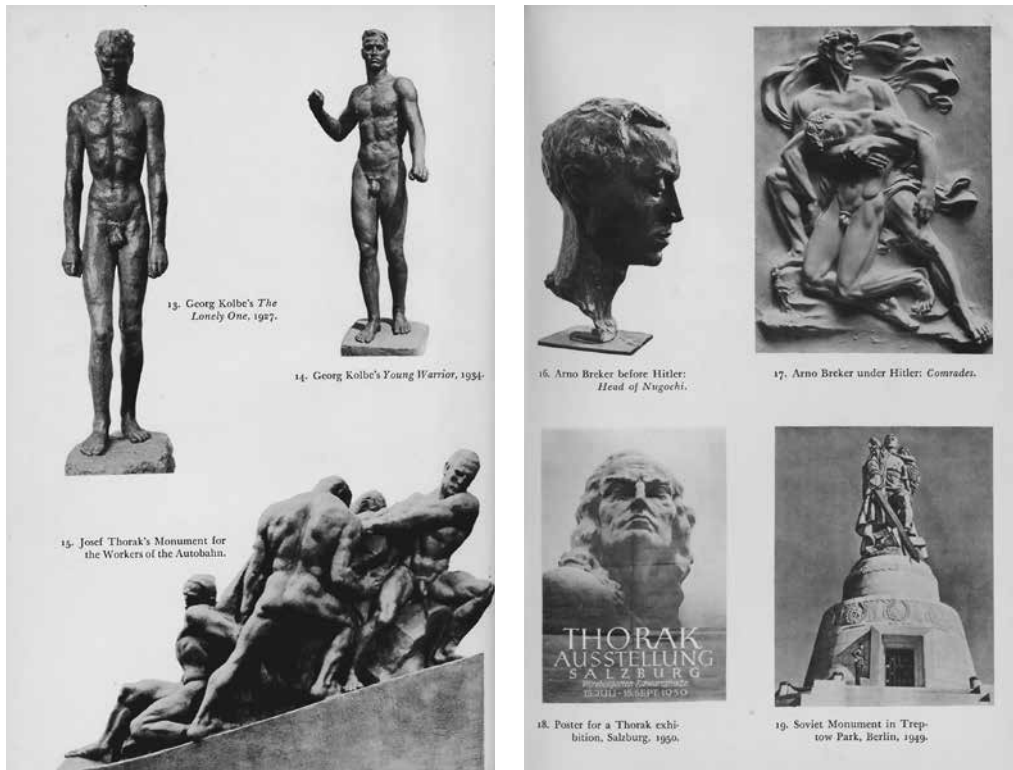
“Georg Kolbe, the great German sculptor, defended modern architecture. He pointed out that Mies van der Rohe had repeatedly used his own figures in



4 *Art Under a Dictatorship* by the German American art historian Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, published in New York in 1954

happy combination with modern buildings. If the new architect used unadorned, flat wall spaces, he did so intentionally and for good aesthetic reasons. Merely decorative additions, he wrote indignantly, were not the real task of the sculptor. Taken by itself, this stand would seem to place Kolbe in opposition to the official Nazi doctrines. Actually, he was not in opposition, was not a member of a small but valiant group of culturally resisting elements. Nor was he, on the other hand, an outright Nazi-sculptor as were Breker and Thorak. The position of this undoubtedly great sculptor was an in-between one, neither quite 'white' not yet really 'black,' an extraordinary case of ambivalence."¹⁹

According to Lehmann-Haupt, it was primarily titles and patrons that made Kolbe a follower, i.e., more indicative of a "mild sort of co-operation."²⁰ Titles such as *Youthful Warrior* and *Athlete in Repose*, as well as his soldiers' memorial in Stralsund, were seen as expressions of this closeness to the regime. To put Kolbe's attitude toward the NS regime into perspective, the author concludes with a quote from the artist about his own work *Zarathustra* (1943):



5 Double page from Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt's *Art Under a Dictatorship* from 1954, with images of several works by the artists Georg Kolbe, Arno Breker, and Josef Thorak

"It is a relief that this figure finally found its form. To be sure, perhaps I had to climb yet beyond this. This is as far as my strength has carried me, and this fulfilment is up to now my freest position in the realm of the male body. A high plane has therewith been entered. The name, the title is absolutely necessary for the public – little as I need it myself. The great powerful man who liberates himself, that was the task, that also was the way to my own freedom. Zarathustra is the commonly understood symbol."²¹

Accordingly, Kolbe's works of the early 1940s were for the artist less a stylistic adaptation to the National Socialist regime than the starting point of a formal or stylistic development that Kolbe perceived as an act of liberation.

While for Lehmann-Haupt it was the titles and the patrons that had brought the artist close to the regime—and by no means an adaptation of his style—in the eyes of the art critic Alfred Werner, it was precisely this stylistic adaptation that had pleased the National Socialists only a few years later. In 1957, the author judged: "Except for the sculptor Georg Kolbe (whose work had become sufficiently academic to please the Nazis), not a single important artist chose to collaborate with the Hitler regime"²²—a notoriously inaccurate assessment of the political stance of not a few artists.

Lehmann-Haupt's "mild sort of co-operation" and Werner's comments that Kolbe's style was "sufficiently academic" to please the Nazis without any intervention on his part then allowed members of the American military administration after 1945 not only to visit the aging sculptor in his studio, but also to issue commissions and rare casting permits. In addition to Lehmann-Haupt, guests in the studio included Richard F. Howard, head of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives program, and even the military governor of the American occupation zone, General Lucius D. Clay.²³

Soon after the end of the war, Georg Kolbe was thus able to rely on a high-ranking network of new supporters within the occupying power. Their positive assessment of Kolbe's political stance and the interpretation of his work during the National Socialist dictatorship contributed significantly to the artist's rehabilitation in the United States, where he was at best regarded as an insignificant follower, but above all as one of Germany's most important sculptors. Thus, in 1957, Georg Kolbe was able to regain undisputed recognition at The Museum of Modern Art and, as mentioned at the outset, was described by Alfred Hentzen as being firmly anchored in the North American discourse.

Notes

- 1 Alfred Hentzen, "Sculpture," in: *German Art of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, exh. cat. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1957, pp. 141–183, here p. 141.
- 2 The author would like to thank Thomas Pavel, Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin, for important information on early exhibitions of Georg Kolbe in the United States.
- 3 [A. L. W.], "Berlin," in: *American Art News* 18, no. 38, 1920, p. 2.
- 4 Carl Georg Heise, "Georg Kolbe," in: *Art in America*, April 1927, pp. 136–138, here p. 136.
- 5 Another example of an early museum acquisition is the gift of *Ascending Woman* (1926) to the Albright Knox Art Gallery (now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum) in Buffalo, New York in 1927.
- 6 See also: Jan Giebel, "'Und jetzt hat ihn Flechtheim.' Georg Kolbe in der Galerie Alfred Flechtheim," in: *Sprung in den Raum. Skulpturen bei Alfred Flechtheim* (Wädenswil 2017), pp. 389–437.
- 7 MoMA press release date March 13 [1931], available online at: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/54/releases/MOMA_1929-31_0054_1931-03-13.pdf [last accessed February 25, 2023].
- 8 For more on the controversy surrounding the exhibition in London, see: Jennifer McComas, *The Politics of Display: Exhibiting Modern German Art in America, 1937–1957*, PhD diss., Indiana University, 2014.
- 9 "Introduction," in: *Exhibition of Twentieth Century German Art*, exh. cat. New Burlington Galleries, London, 1938, pp. 6–7.
- 10 "Hitler Attacks London Art Exhibition," Records of the Artists International Association, TGA 7043.17.2, Tate Gallery Archives, London (TGA).
- 11 Letter from the Freier Deutscher Künstlerbund to Herbert Read, May 11, 1938; Archive of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Eugen Spiro Archive, 3/39 [translated].
- 12 Letter from Herbert Read to Gert Wollheim, May 17, 1938, Archive of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Eugen Spiro Archive, 3/60.
- 13 William Hickey, "Banned but Cautious," in: *Daily Express*, July 6, 1938.
- 14 In the catalog for the exhibition, it was presumably wrongly dated 1916. It is probably a *Stehendes Mädchen* from 1906 in the respective dimensions, which, although made of stucco, was considered terracotta and was also called so by Georg Kolbe, which in turn could have been adopted by Valentiner. Thomas Pavel is to be thanked for this reference to the dating.
- 15 This exhibition in The Museum of Modern Art did not come to fruition; see: letter from Alfred Barr to Paul E. Geier, October 5, 1939; quoted in: Vivian Endecott Barnett, "Reception and Institutional Support of Modern German Art in the United States, 1933–45," in: *Exiles + Emigrés. The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, and Nationalgalerie, Berlin (Los Angeles 1997), pp. 273–284, here p. 279. Barr took up the idea of "free art" once again in the fall of 1942; see: "The Museum Collection," in: *The Bulletin of The Museum of Modern Art*, no. 1, 1942 (*The Museum and The War*), pp. 3–19, here p. 19: "THE MUSEUM COLLECTION / is a symbol of one of the four freedoms for which we are fighting — the freedom of expression. / Composed of / painting / sculpture / architecture / photography / films / industrial design / from 25 countries it is / art that Hitler hates / because it is modern, progressive, challenging (Hitler insists upon magazine cover realism or prettiness) / because it is international, leading to understanding and tolerance among nations (Hitler despises the culture of all countries but his own) / because it is free, the free expression of free men (Hitler insists upon the subjugation of art)" [emphasis in the original].
- 16 MoMA press release dated March 6, 1940, available online at: https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325165.pdf?_ga=2.247782087.1972304125.1670428747-416995297.1669896063 [last accessed February 23, 2023].
- 17 MoMA press release, undated, available online at: https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_master-checklist_325320.pdf [last accessed February 23, 2023].
- 18 Letter from Virginia Fontaine to Carter and Kitsy Higgins, April 1, 1947, Paul and Virginia Fontaine Archive, Austin, Texas.
- 19 Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York 1954), p. 101.
- 20 Ibid., p. 102.
- 21 Georg Kolbe, quoted in: Lehmann-Haupt 1954 (see note 19), pp. 102f.
- 22 Alfred Werner, "The Miracle of Postwar German Art," in: *The Antioch Review* 17, no. 3, Fall 1957, pp. 366–373, here p. 368.
- 23 See also the address book and calendar of the artist, MvT Estate, GKM Archive, Berlin.

