

Preface

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”

Walter Benjamin, *“Theses on the Philosophy of History,”*
7th thesis, 1940¹

In his ambiguity during the National Socialist regime and the historicization that followed his death in 1947, Georg Kolbe emerges more and more clearly as a key figure in a newly developing art historiography of modernism. This is increasingly working from the previous margins of a male-centered Eurocentric narrative, emphasizing research on the social conditions for artistic creation as well as the relationships to overarching social and political forces that need to be reappraised, described, and contextualized.

This publication, edited by my predecessor Julia Wallner and the researcher Elisa Tamaschke, is thus a central contribution to a new integrative understanding of—and critical demand for—art historiography in relation to ideologies and power relations, and it assigns Georg Kolbe an important position in this context. The work of artists, the context of creation, and their own attitudes and responsibilities are increasingly at the center of innovative museum work and exhibition practice. Many of the studies carried out here in the methodological tradition of the social history of art thus reposition Kolbe within the construct of art histories, which has become mutable. They place the plural and often non-linear narratives of the everyday on an equal footing with familiar art-historical narratives in order to broaden our access to art historiographies. This publication positions Kolbe as a critical example to trace and understand how artists have navigated, appropriated, and come to terms with various institutionalized systems and forms of power. Transcending national boundaries, this volume invites further research and reflection on the relationship between difficult pasts and their influence today, as an often self-centered and overly consolidated German memory landscape needs to be updated and reactivated anew for the increasingly challenging present.

In this way, not only are new insights developed and classified, but far-reaching questions can be developed that offer many possibilities for research. As a contemporary research and learning institution, the Georg Kolbe Museum will use this space opened up by the past to ask which forms of contemporary confrontation are important and central. What kind of society do we live in today, what stories and truths need to be told in order to grasp and assess its complexity, and how do we do this? Making and exhibiting art means understanding the world as changeable. Museums need to find a form of active memory that is able to take into account both the light and the dark sides in equal measure, and to connect the time and the circumstances of the works to be preserved,

researched, and presented with the urgent questions of our present, in order to be effective as a place of knowledge formation and enchantment at the same time.

For a museum must situate and communicate the artists not only in the contexts of their lives, but also in our own time. This publication is therefore also a basis and a starting point for asking more broadly how we can go beyond the boundaries of the archive and move towards other models of knowledge. What role do we assign to the archive and its reprocessing as a tool for imagining new futures, for building multi-layered collective knowledge through and with artists and thinkers, new art histories, curatorial practices, and documentation and display strategies? How can an awareness of the past, updated through an engagement with art and its contexts, which does not excuse but also does not absolutely demonize lead to a new sense of responsibility in our present?

This publication is also to be understood as a handing over, as it were, in which a chorus of outstanding scholarly voices opens a new chapter for the institution with their work. As the Georg Kolbe Foundation and Museum, it is now necessary to make productive use of this often distressing basis, not only to research what was and to show what is, but also to imagine and shape what can be. The publication is therefore intended to serve as a compass, not only for the still incomplete indexing, classification, and visualization of new sources, or the deconstruction of the mechanisms of the process of coming to terms with the past in Germany that have been in effect for decades, but above all in the search for an institutional approach that is capable of critically grasping this process in all its complexity, which ranges from the artistic and cultural claim of universality to the abysses of colonialism. It also feeds on what the publicist Max Czollek recently called “inconsolability” in the face of what has happened and how it could have happened at all. With its emphasis on feeling, it forms an antipole to the sovereign claim of a self-centered German understanding of history. In its deliberately chosen sentimentality, the term also reaches deeply into the reappraisal of Georg Kolbe’s life and work that this publication brings about.

I conclude with great thanks to the former director of the Georg Kolbe Museum, Julia Wallner, and the art historian Elisa Tamaschke, who supervised this publication with outstanding commitment. I would also like to thank all those involved for their exceptional work and the impulses they have given. This publication would not have been possible without the support of the Hermann Reemtsma Foundation, the Ferdinand Möller Foundation, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, and the Friends of the Museum.

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