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Stripping Away Lies to Expose a Painter's  
Nazi Past



“Sunflowers in Bloom” by Emil Nolde. A new exhibition in Berlin aims to dispel myths surrounding Nolde’s relationship to the Third Reich. Credit Credit Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie/Jörg P. Anders

By Catherine Hickley

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BERLIN — Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany said last week that she would be taking down two oil paintings by Emil Nolde, an Expressionist whose work she greatly admires, from the walls of her office. Her decision, widely discussed in German media, was interpreted as a symbolic gesture: a belated official rejection of an artist who yearned for Adolf Hitler’s approval and thought that banishing Jews from the country was a good idea.

One of the works, “Breakers,” from 1936, shows crashing dark green waves against a fiery evening sky; the other, from 1915, depicts a flower garden. The decision to remove them came just a week after Felix Krämer, an art historian and Nolde expert, questioned in a newspaper article whether “the works of a committed Nazi are appropriate” in the chancellery.



Angela Merkel, left, and Barack Obama in Ms. Merkel’s office in 2016. Above Mr. Obama hangs Nolde’s 1936 oil painting “Breakers.” Credit White House Photo, via Alamy

Ms. Merkel said at a news conference last Thursday that she was returning the paintings to their owner, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, because they were needed for an exhibition in Berlin. The show, [“Emil Nolde. A](#)

[German Legend: The Artist During National Socialism,](#)” opens at the Hamburger Bahnhof museum on Friday and runs through Sept. 15. It aims to dispel myths surrounding Nolde’s career and art in the Third Reich.

Since the end of World War II, Nolde has been cherished by a broad public for his radiant landscapes and vibrantly colored flowers. But Nolde’s checkered biography has been whitewashed over the decades. Many Germans got to know Nolde as a victim of the Nazis; the exhibition will show that while his art was persecuted, the artist himself was not.

The Berlin show is based on new research that only became possible after a change of leadership at the Ada and Emil Nolde Foundation, which the painter created to manage his archive and to run a museum of his work. Christian Ring, who took over in 2013 and is one of the curators of the Berlin exhibition, started to become aware that it had been involved in reputation-laundering during preparations for a 2014 retrospective in Frankfurt.



“Battleship and Burning Steamer,” a 1943 watercolor. Nolde said he had been banned from painting during the war, and claimed that he secretly produced watercolors as studies for oil paintings. Credit Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

He decided to open the archives, containing some 25,000 documents, to independent experts to conduct an examination of Nolde's life and work under the Nazis. "It was time to put all our cards on the table," Mr. Ring said in an interview.

Nolde was an ardent anti-Semite and a fanatical Nazi. Yet he was also condemned by the regime as a "degenerate" artist. After World War II, he embellished and dramatized his victimhood, and played down his complicity in his letters and interviews with journalists, and this was the story that caught on. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Nolde was 65 and established as one of the most successful artists of the Weimar Republic, celebrated as a pioneer of "new German art." A swastika banner hung over his home near the Danish border in 1933, and Nolde joined the Nazi party in 1934. He hoped to be appointed an official state artist and had many fans in the upper ranks of the National Socialists. Yet he also faced accusations that his work was "alien to the people," and Hitler hated it, describing him in 1933 as "that pig Nolde."



Nolde's "The Life of Christ," center, at the 1937 "Degenerate Art" exhibition in Munich. Hitler detested Nolde's work. Credit Zentralarchiv - Staatliche Museums in Berlin/Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

Nolde's work "The Life of Christ" was the centerpiece of the infamous 1937

“Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich, mounted by the Nazis to defame and ridicule art considered “un-German.” In 1941, the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts imposed a requirement that Nolde had to have any sales or exhibitions authorized.

In his memoirs, Nolde exaggerated and misrepresented the ban, saying he had been forbidden to paint at all, and that it was enforced by visits from the Gestapo. He called a series of small-format watercolors he produced toward the end of the war his “Unpainted Pictures,” and said they were studies for oil paintings that he had been prohibited from making.

These myths took root and grew. After his death in 1956, the Nolde Foundation exhibited the “Unpainted Pictures” in a special room at the museum and excised anti-Semitic passages from new editions of his memoirs. In 1963, a book on the “Unpainted Pictures” by the eminent German art historian Werner Haftmann falsely claimed that Nolde turned away from Nazism in 1943.

But the biggest boost to Nolde’s image came with the 1968 publication of Siegfried

Lenz’s best-selling novel, “The German Lesson,” which is still required reading in German schools today. It centers on an artist called Max Ludwig Nansen, widely understood to be based on Nolde, who produces a series he calls “invisible pictures” when he is banned from painting by the Nazis.



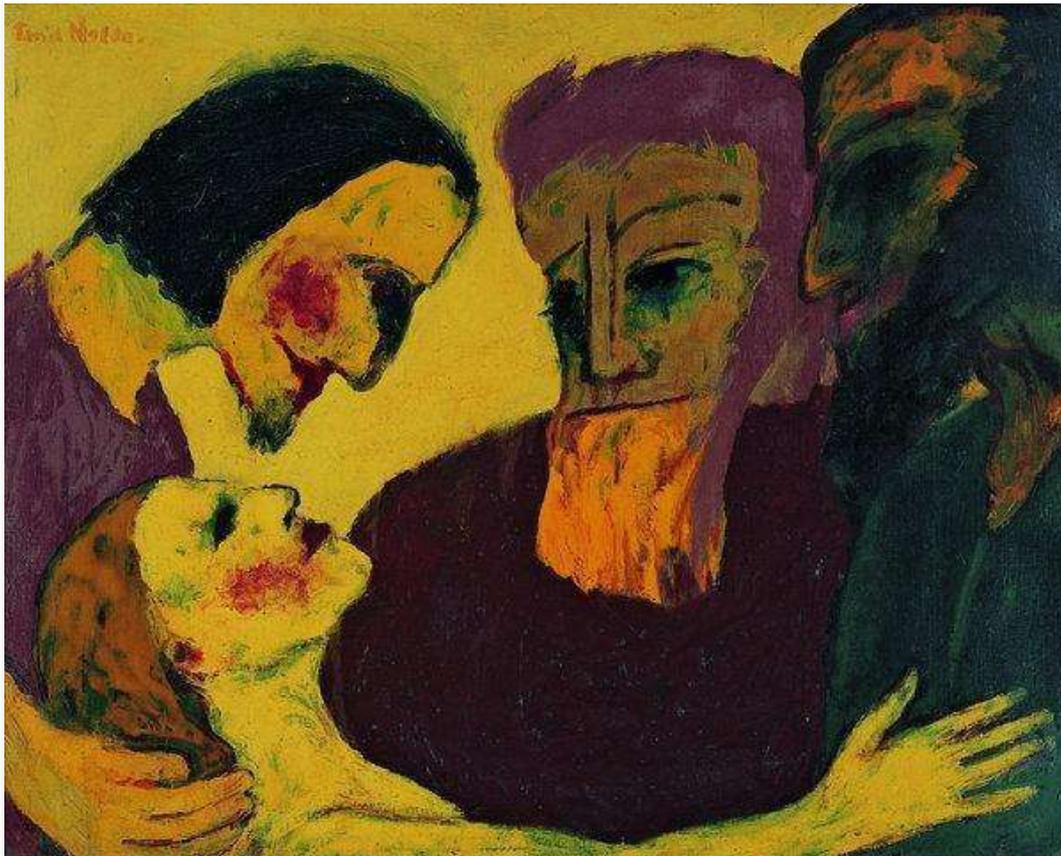
Nolde in Munich in 1937. Credit Helga Fietz, via Nolde Stiftung Seebüll

Particularly among the generation that grew up in the 1960s, embittered with their parents for enabling dictatorship and war, Lenz's novel elevated Nolde's "Unpainted Pictures" to symbols of heroic artistic resistance against a tyrannical regime. The foundation's museum was flooded with visitors.

Until 2013, the Nolde Foundation “remained wedded to the Nolde legend, the story that had been selling so well,” said Bernhard Fulda, a Cambridge historian and one of the independent experts who examined the archive. “In a way, the foundation had started to believe its own propaganda.”

The other expert, Aya Soika, a professor of art history at Bard College Berlin, recalled writing an email to the foundation in 2003, asking whether there were letters in the archive referring to an ugly incident in 1933, when Nolde incorrectly reported the artist Max Pechstein as a Jew to the Propaganda Ministry.

The foundation never responded to Ms. Soika’s request. But when she finally gained access to the archive in 2013, she discovered a file labeled “E.N. and Jews.” The document at the top was her unanswered email.



“The Sinner,” a 1926 oil painting. Credit Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie/Jörg P. Anders

The research by Mr. Fulda and Ms. Soika compelled the foundation to admit, in 2016, to “errors of judgment in the past.” Mr. Ring said he intended to digitize

the entire archive and make it available online. He has also updated texts in the permanent exhibition at the museum to reflect the new research.

Whether Ms. Merkel's decision to hand back her two paintings was motivated by the artist's unsavory past is unclear. Only one was required for the exhibition, but a spokesman told reporters that the chancellor would not take either one back after the show ends. Other paintings will be displayed instead.

Mr. Krämer, the art historian who first questioned whether it was appropriate to hang Nolde works in the chancellery, said he thought it was the right decision. "The chancellor's fast reaction speaks in her favor," he said in an interview.

But Mr. Fulda wasn't so sure. "If Angela Merkel had a picture of an eagle sitting on a swastika, we would say 'Whoa, what is going on?'" he said. "But with Nolde, it's very much a case of what you do with it. She could say to visitors, 'The German past is a complex one. There is guilt, there is complicity, there is looking away, there is beauty.'"

So perhaps Nolde succeeded in being a quintessentially German artist — just not in the way he envisaged.

