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Fake Hitlers and a Real Art Problem for Merkel

Paintings signed “A. Hitler” attract wealthy buyers – but at the same time, Merkel removes paintings by a true master from her office wall because he was a Nazi.

By

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Nolde's sunflowers; Merkel's problem.

Photographer: Sean Gallup/Getty Images

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Adolf Hitler, the failed artist, appears to be taking his revenge on Emil Nolde, the successful artist he envied and hated. Just as Hitler watercolors, even those demonstrated to be fake, fetch high prices at auctions, there's a political backlash in Germany against Nolde. Chancellor Angela Merkel even took his works off her office walls this year.

The contrasting and intertwined stories of Hitler and Nolde — the latter as ardent a Nazi as the former — are among the best illustrations of the complicated relationship between art and evil that permeates the last century of German history. Both men's artistic careers started with a rejection by a major art academy (Hitler in Vienna, Nolde in Munich), but that led them in startlingly different directions — and to an eventual clash.

Two Artists

Hitler the artist is still something of a mystery, though biographers have thoroughly documented the Nazi dictator's life. It's known that he came to

Vienna in the fall of 1907, at age 18, to take an entrance exam at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, that the rejection devastated him and that, after his money ran out in 1909, he started eking out a living as a painter in Vienna and then Munich, until going off to fight in World War I.

That leaves many questions open. How many works did Hitler actually produce? What kind were they? Where did they end up? In a 1997 [article](#), the German art historian Otto Karl Werckmeister wrote of “between two and three thousand drawings, sketches, watercolors and oil paintings extant from the years before the war.” But his source is a self-published [book](#) by Billy F. Price, a Texas collector of all things Hitler, that purports to be a catalog of all his known paintings. Price, in turn, was relying on the consultations of August Priesack, who worked on finding and buying up the Fuhrer’s artwork as an employee of the Nazi Party’s main archive in the 1930s — and again for private collectors after World War II. Priesack was an interested party, since he helped Price build his collection, and in any case, his reputation was shredded when he authenticated the “[Hitler’s Diaries](#),” a notorious fake created by the arch-forgery Konrad [Kujau](#).

What we do know is that a petty criminal and self-taught draftsman, Reinhold Hanisch, put up a then-homeless Hitler to producing art for sale in 1909. Hanisch sold Hitler’s works to random people in beer halls and to frame-shop owners. The partners eventually had a falling-out after Hitler accused Hanisch of pocketing his share of the proceeds. Later, when Hitler was German chancellor, Hanisch started faking Hitler watercolors and selling them to the Fuhrer’s many fans in Vienna; in 1937, he was imprisoned for it and soon died in his cell.

According to British historian Ian Kershaw’s two-volume biography of Hitler, the future dictator was a lazy drifter who would work only when he needed cash; a watercolor every two or three days was his normal production rate. That would imply that no more than 800 small paintings could have been produced in the short time Hitler worked as an artist — and many buyers probably wouldn’t attach much value to art they bought for the price of a couple of meals, so the works were unlikely to be treasured and preserved.

Bart F.M. Droog, a Dutch investigative journalist who, along with his colleague Jaap van den Born, has been [studying](#) the market for Hitler art and objects, estimates the number of extant Hitler paintings at between 75 and 125. Droog told me that the Nazi archive where Priesack worked (known as the NSDAP) managed to locate only about 50 in the 1930s — despite a

willingness to buy them for about the equivalent of the average German annual income — and not even all of those had been genuine.

According to Droog, Hitler produced drawings and watercolors, never any oil paintings. They were all cityscapes, mostly copies of postcards of Vienna and Munich landmarks, enlarged with the help of a grid. Even Hitler himself probably couldn't have told a forgery from the real thing.

Droog, admittedly, is not a proper art historian. But the problem with Hitler's art is that it's so mundane there's not much for an art expert to go on when identifying his hand. I asked the distinguished British historian Sir Robert Evans, who wrote a three-volume history of the Third Reich and this year published an [article](#) about Hitler's artistic output, whether he agreed with Droog's assertions about Hitler's works. "I'd go with his views," Evans wrote back. "I guess if you wanted to authenticate one you'd now go to Mr. Droog! The catalogs are all unreliable."

Hitler himself knew what his paintings were worth. Kershaw cites the transcript of a 1944 conversation in which Hitler calls them "modest." In the late 1930s, the Fuhrer even banned their publication, ending his party's attempts to promote them as paragons of pure Aryan art. There's evidence that he was intensely jealous of more successful artists, in particular of Nolde — who, despite his rejection by the Munich Academy, had become a famous painter by the time Hitler came to power in Germany.

"Nolde, that swine!" Hitler raged during a 1933 visit to the studio of one of his favorite architects, Paul Ludwig Troost. [□](#) "We have the power and the money today, but they will not get one commission from me. We will see who will hold out longer. And every one of the gallery directors will be instructed not to purchase one piece more. They will be liable to me with their personal fortunes for this, or I will have them imprisoned."

In his memoir, "Inside the Third Reich," Hitler's minister of armaments, Albert Speer, recalled how he'd decorated the house of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels with Nolde watercolors, and the propaganda minister was "delighted with the paintings" — until Hitler came to visit and "expressed his severe disapproval." Goebbels immediately had the paintings taken down.

Oskar Kokoschka, the Austrian expressionist who did get into the Vienna Academy in 1907, blamed frustrated artistic ambition for much of what Hitler did after World War I. The British writer Elias Canetti [recalled](#) a conversation

with Kokoschka in which the painter blamed himself for World War II: Had the academy accepted Hitler in his place, he said, Hitler never would have ended up in politics. It may sound like an exaggeration, but the Fuhrer's virulent jealousy of the obviously more talented Nolde makes me think Kokoschka was probably onto something.

The works of Nolde, a bold experimenter with colors and shapes, were included in the Nazis' 1937 exhibition of "degenerate art," and more than 1,000 of them, more than any other artist's, were removed from museums. But he remained one of Germany's most sought-after and best-paid artists — making 80,000 reichsmarks (almost \$400,000 2015 U.S. dollars) a year — until the Nazis banned him from painting in 1941. Hitler couldn't have dreamed of such an income from his art.

Nothing but intense jealousy can explain Hitler's open hatred of Nolde. The painter was an avid Nazi and a rabid anti-Semite; he praised Hitler as a "brilliant man of action." The Nazis could have embraced him as a co-creator of the Aryan myth, but Hitler would have none of it.

The Nazi-imposed ban on painting kept Nolde from being denounced as a Nazi after World War II; he died a venerated master in 1956. The heroic depiction of Nolde in the 1968 novel "The German Lesson" by Siegfried Lenz contributed to the widespread view of him as a victim of the Hitler regime. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a Nolde collector, chose the artist's paintings for the walls of his office in the 1970s.

Hitler's Revenge

Merkel took them down this year, days before a Berlin exhibition highlighted Nolde's anti-Semitism and his connection to the Nazi Party. Though Merkel's office tried to present the removal as a mere return of valuable artworks to the foundation that had loaned them — one of the paintings was to go to the revealing exhibition — German media immediately caught on to Merkel's more likely motives for not wanting her Noldes back.

After the Berlin exhibition, any public figure displaying Nolde's art on office walls would face tough questions. There would be no point in arguing that Nolde could make a storm look real with a dozen brushstrokes and that his sunflowers were arguably more luminous than van Gogh's. A Nazi is a Nazi.

It's hard to say whether Nolde's views in the 1930s and 1940s, now at the forefront of any and all discussion of his work, have affected the market value of his oeuvre. But the prices his watercolors have commanded at auctions are similar to those fetched by paintings signed with Hitler's name. Indeed, Hitler

art can be more expensive; in 2014, the Weidler auction house sold a cityscape bearing the dictator's signature for 130,000 euros (\$143,600).



Hitler's signature on the back of a picture at the Weidler auction house in 2015.
Photographer: Christof Stache/AFP/Getty Images

Auction houses offer a broad variety of “Hitler” works — still lifes, portraits, landscapes, some of them done in oil on canvas. Droog considers most of them forgeries; they're often “authenticated” by the likes of Priesack or a U.S.-based handwriting expert named Frank Garo, who charges a small fee for his services. In 2017, van den Born himself clumsily forged a Hitler watercolor and sent a photo to Garo, who authenticated it.

Many of the “Hitler” works, genuine or fake, go to China these days. “People in China and other Asian countries don't take it as personally as we do,” Droog said. “For them, a Hitler painting on the wall is something like a Mao poster in the Netherlands.”

Those paintings and various objects that purportedly belonged to Hitler — furniture, spoons, vases — account, according to Droog, for 5% to 10% of the much bigger Nazi militaria market, which he estimates at \$40 million to \$50 million a year. Much of that money is paid for fakes, sometimes quite blatant ones. “There are factories in Poland, China, Pakistan that make this stuff,” Droog told me. “The more swastikas there are on it, the higher the price.”

Some of the buyers are, of course, neo-Nazis. But as long as trade in these objects is legal (and it is, with various restrictions, in most big markets — even in Germany, Hitler’s art and objects can be sold if there are no Nazi symbols on them), no one has any right to suspect them of being loyal Hitlerites. And besides, Droog and Evans both told me they believe many “Hitler” buyers — apart from some dedicated collectors — have a purely financial interest in the Fuhrer’s work. “Even the fakes sell and so could be a useful investment,” Evans emailed me.

Truth on the Wall

German authorities are as embarrassed by the auctions as Merkel was by the Noldes on her wall. Input from Droog and van der Born comes in handy when police and prosecutors want to disrupt a sale, such as a big auction Weidler had planned for this February. Prosecutors in Nuremberg temporarily confiscated 63 works just before the sale for authentication purposes. Seven months later, the city prosecutor’s office told me the investigation wasn’t over, and I’m pretty sure it’ll go on at a snail’s pace. Nuremberg’s mayor condemned the disrupted auction as being “in bad taste,” and the city where the Nazis used to hold their grandiose gatherings doesn’t need this kind of publicity. Nevertheless, the Weidler website contains a special page on “Watercolors signed A. Hitler”; it’s protected by a password.



Hitlers (?) from the canceled sale at the Weidler auction house in Nuremberg, February 2019.
Photographer: Daniel Karman/AFP/Getty Images

Police interventions notwithstanding, there are still plenty of buyers for likely fake Hitler paintings at the same price as authentic Noldes. It seems they are, deep down, fine with the forgeries; they're really buying a story, a narrative of Hitler the poor, rejected young artist turned evil genius. They're essentially investing in the lie of his humanity, the lie that his watercolors are, indeed, art, no matter how "modest."

Nolde's story, that of a Nazi scorned by his own people, doesn't work as well for marketing purposes. Berliners flocked to this year's exhibition to learn an inconvenient truth, but Merkel is hardly alone in not wanting that kind of truth on her wall.

Something I've grown to understand in the five years I've lived in Germany, though, is that the truth doesn't tarnish what it touches, nor can lies be in any way redemptive. That's why Nolde's work shines so, and Hitler's — real or fake — is so pitiful.

1. The Hitler quote was displayed at the Nolde exhibition in Berlin in 2019, curated by Bernhard Fulda, Christian Ring and Aya Soika.

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