

Gregory Maertz Breaks the Ultimate Taboo

Introduction and interview by Michael Pozo

Gregory Maertz is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University. His teaching and research in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, art, and culture could best be grouped under the heading, "The Legacy of Romanticism." He is currently finishing one book, The Invisible Museum: The Secret Postwar History of Nazi Art (forthcoming from Yale University Press), and starting research on a new book, an offshoot of The Invisible Museum, which is called The Last Taboo: Rehabilitating Nazi Artists in Postwar Germany. In the 2001 Spring semester Dr. Maertz was a fellow-in-residence at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and, in the recent 2002 Fall semester, he was a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., a Wolfsonian Fellow at the Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami Beach, and a German Academic Exchange Service Fellow at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, where he is co-curating an exhibition, "Art and Propaganda," scheduled to open in March 2005. In the current Spring semester he is dividing his time between teaching in the English Department and serving as a Gilder Lehrman Fellow at the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History in New York City.

Q & A with Dr. Maertz

MP: Can you elaborate on the research on Nazi art that you conducted at the Institute for Advanced Study and in the four different places you've been working in the current academic year?

GM: In the first place, I'm trying to create a new discipline in art and cultural history by restoring to the historical record what I have dubbed the "anti-canon" of Nazi art. The main vehicle for this effort was my discovery a few years ago of the largest extant collection (nearly 10,000 pieces) of art produced during the Third Reich. Created by the United States Army in 1946-47, the collection was held in protective custody in the U.S. from 1947 to 1986. The fun part of working on this project has been the research travel and interviewing people who were involved with the creation of the collection and its subsequent controversial history. In addition to museums and archives scattered across the United States, my research has taken me to Italy, Austria, and all over Germany: to secret depots in Munich and Berlin, former hiding places for Nazi art in the Bavarian Forest near the Czech border, and obscure museum storerooms in the German provinces. I had a particularly thrilling experience in February 2002, when I was the first scholar in 50 years to see a large part of the U.S. Army's Nazi art collection. Returned to Germany by American authorities in 1951, the 1600 works of art had been considered lost until I entered a heavily guarded facility in eastern Berlin, noted its jaw-dropping contents, and realized that I had struck gold.

MP: Can you give us a brief insight into the two books you have been working on?

GM: My forthcoming book, *The Invisible Museum*, will offer the first authoritative and complete account of the formation of the U.S. Army's collection of Nazi art and its disposition in the postwar period. Combining elements of detective fiction, investigative journalism, and cultural history, my book will solve some of the most perplexing mysteries of the postwar era: what happened to the cultural patrimony of Hitler's Germany? Where has it been? Where is it now? What do these paintings, sculptures, and graphic works look like? Why, nearly sixty years after the allied victory, do these works continue to be kept hidden from view? After so many others had failed, why was I granted access to these artifacts? What does the survival of such a broadly as well as deeply representative corpus of art associated with the Third Reich mean for the history of twentieth-century art? Once its existence is made public in my book, what influence will this collection have in revising the standard interpretation of Modernism?

My new book, *The Last Taboo*, which I began to research during my recent stint at the National Gallery and am continuing to work on this semester as a Gilder Lehrman Fellow at the New York Public Library, is intended to fill another crucial gap in the historical record. Related to our understanding of how former Nazis were widely reintegrated into newly democratized German institutions after 1949, I will attempt to

clarify the process by which Adolf Hitler's favorite artists came to dominate the art world in West Germany following the restoration of sovereignty and subsequent accession to NATO. Like its predecessor *The Invisible Museum*, this book will also be the first to tackle its incendiary topic. My admittedly immodest ambitions are to instigate a radical overhaul of twentieth-century art history and to puncture the smugly self-righteous myths that have dominated our narratives about the relationship between mainstream Modernism and fascist art.

MP: How did you become interested in the art created during the Third Reich?

GM: My original field is Comparative Romanticism with emphasis on German, British, and Russian literature and art. Given that Hitler was a self-described Romantic in his taste and cultural investments, which were later embodied in National Socialist aesthetic ideology, my work on Nazi art grew organically from my interest in Romanticism. But the original idea for *The Invisible Museum* presented itself when I first learned about the collecting activities of Mitchell Wolfson Jr., founder of the Wolfsonian-FIU in Miami Beach. His collection of over 100,000 artifacts produced between 1885-1945 includes a large number of extremely rare Nazi and fascist works of art and propaganda materials. Where, I wondered, was the rest of the vast artistic legacy of the Nazi regime?

MP: Can you describe how you began the whole process of discovering these paintings?

GM: My attempt to solve the mystery of the absence of Nazi art from our cultural gaze started with a memorable visit to Wolfson's villa outside of Genoa, Italy. From there I traveled to Munich, Ingolstadt, and Berlin to call on the officials responsible for the repatriated portion of the U.S. Army's collection of Nazi art. To my amazement, all of my requests were, in due course, granted. My students and colleagues might be surprised to hear this, but I can be very persuasive when speaking German! And so began an extraordinary four-year odyssey on which I have been privileged to see things, meet people, and enjoy honors that have exceeded my wildest dreams.

MP: What are the aims of your research? How are you dealing with the controversy surrounding your work?

GM: While to some the very suggestion of writing the postwar history of Nazi art is offensive, I consider it a necessary first step in provoking a reconsideration of prevailing views on twentieth-century art. According to the standard but, as I argue, incomplete historical narrative, mainstream Modernism is sealed off from ideological and aesthetic contamination from the art of the Third Reich, which is treated as, at most, a marginal phenomenon. My work may be controversial, but the legitimacy conferred on it by the Institute for Advanced Study and CASVA has only made me feel bolder and more justified in my pursuit to restore the "anti-canon" of Nazi art, not less.

MP: Since your book, *The Invisible Museum*, will be the first treatment of what you've termed the "afterlife" of Nazi art, what kind of impact do you think it will have?

GM: I hope that its impact in North America, the UK, and Germany will be as controversial as possible.

MP: Have you run up against any resistance or backlash with regards to, say, trying to mount an exhibition of these works? What about the likely negative reaction to the thought of a lasting Nazi influence in Germany and Europe generally, such as your new project seeks to trace?

GM: As one might expect, there is tremendous resistance against the display of Nazi art in Germany. Hans-Jörg Czech, assistant director of the German Historical Museum and my co-curator for "Art and Propaganda," shares my belief in the importance of challenging conventional wisdom as well as the visitors to our exhibition. Our intention is to demonstrate surprising parallels and similarities in the propaganda

strategies and imagery employed by Nazi Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the Second World War. This will be highly controversial.

MP: Lastly, can you tell us about the painting we see here?



[Figure 1, Fritz Junghans, "Sundown on the Duhna River (Russia)," 1942.

GM: This painting by Fritz Junghans has never been published before. It is printed from a photograph that I shot in February 2002 inside the repository in Berlin housing the works of Nazi art repatriated in 1951. Junghans spent the war years as a combat artist assigned to the German army's Staff of Visual Artists and was stationed in France, Greece, and Russia. Stylistically, this painting (in mixed media) was a huge surprise to me because it quite clearly displays the artist's fluency in the Modernist vernacular. But, as I quickly realized, it is only one of thousands of images in the collection created by the U.S. Army that challenges orthodox notions of the history of twentieth-century art.