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Topic Area: Art: Sculpture by Ernst Barlach – der Schwebende

Ernst Barlach (1870- 1936) Der Schwebende



Image taken by Stefan Ostler <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sostler/>

Ernst Barlach was born in Wedel (near Hamburg), grew up in Mecklenburg and Ratzeburg and went on to study in Hamburg and Dresden. He later lived in Paris, then worked in the Westerwald, visited Russia and gained a scholarship to Florence and ultimately settled in Güstrow, in Mecklenburg.

Part of a cosmopolitan group of artists, Barlach took part in exhibitions supporting the modernist movement in the arts: a group called 'Sonderbund' (1909-1916) and exhibitions organised by Paul Cassirer in Berlin. These exhibitions introduced the new French Art Movements (Impressionism and Fauvism) to Germany and aimed to combine art from artists of different nationalities: German, Belgium, French, Russian, Dutch and others. A new idea at the time!

Ernst Barlach's sculpture *Der Schwebende* was originally created in 1927. However, today three examples exist: one in Cologne, one in Güstrow and one in Schleswig. The original was made for the cathedral in Güstrow to commemorate the loss of life in the First World War. This original bronze sculpture was declared 'degenerate' and confiscated by the Nazis in 1937. War memorials of the time typically had the dual function of both remembrance and a certain amount of hero worship. The figures depicted were often bold and brave soldiers, seemingly ready to fight again. Barlach's angel-like figure is introverted, passive, meditative even— and so was controversial from the first day of its installation in Güstrow Cathedral. Germany's burgeoning nationalism saw Barlach's memorials vilified as anti-German and unpatriotic. One

might even assume that the confiscated sculpture was smelted to produce ammunition after having been removed by the Nazis.

However, it wasn't completely lost. Friends of the artist had rescued the original mould, produced a second casting and had hidden it away. Unbelievably, this 'second original' survived the war and was bought by a museum in Cologne in 1952. Thus, the new *Schwebende* was installed in the Antoniterkirche in Cologne, serving now to commemorate both the victims of the First and Second World Wars. Later, a second and then a third 'new' casting were also made. One was destined for the original location of the *Schwebende* in Güstrow (produced in 1953) and, in the 1980's one was made for a museum in Schleswig.

The 'biography' of the object itself speaks of both the tyranny of the Nazi Regime and the bravery of Barlach's friends. The fact that the sculpture survived at all can be seen as a symbol of hope.

After the end of the Second World War, Güstrow (not far from Barlach's home town of Wedel near Hamburg) was part of the GDR. When the second new casting of the *Schwebende* was presented by the then Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to the community in Güstrow in 1981, Schmidt said that the Barlach sculpture not only served to memorialise Germany's united past but could also symbolise Germany's united ("gemeinsame") future. Prophetic words!

And yet, in 1934, Barlach had signed a statement (together with many other artists) pledging his allegiance to Adolf Hitler as the Führer. This may come as somewhat of a shock but might perhaps only be fully understood in the fuller (and possibly unavailable) context of Barlach's situation at the time. However, this pledge could not protect his art from censure by the Nazi Regime. In 1937, his sculptures were exhibited in the infamous exhibition of so-called 'degenerate art' staged by the Nazis in Munich. Barlach then was utterly out of favour with the Nazi Regime and yet his later rehabilitation by the west still saw his work dismissed in his original locale as decadent and vacant by the, by then, GDR.

Thus, arising from an intellectual movement whose objective was to unite art across Europe and strongly influenced by his own experience of the First World War, the contradictions and vicissitudes of Barlach's work must surely be seen as uniquely German in its inspiration and yet typically European in its scope.

There is a short, informative video in German available on youtube

- [Ernst Barlachs „Der Schwebende“ in der Antoniterkirche Köln](#) – youtube-Video

and a more comprehensive article in German on the Deutsche Welle website, also in German:

http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/der-schwebende.1124.de.html?dram:article_id=176934

It might also be of interest to note that a sculpture by Barlach, called *der Lesende Klosterschüler*, features in Alfred Andersch's post war novel *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund*.