

Degenerate

Otto Freundlich's large plaster sculpture *Large Head (The New Man)* 1912 became emblematic of German avant-garde art – and of the Nazis' determination to eradicate it – when illustrated on the cover of the catalogue of the infamous *Degenerate Art* exhibition in 1937. The plaster had been acquired in 1930 by a museum with one of Germany's most extensive collections of twentieth-century art, but was withdrawn from public display three years later when the Nazis came to power. The Nazis condemned modernist styles of art as depraved symptoms of a sick society; and they particularly targeted Jewish artists such as Freundlich. To make their case they brought together over six hundred modernist works, largely confiscated from German museums, in the notorious *Degenerate Art* exhibition that opened in Munich in 1937 and toured a number of cities in Germany and Austria until 1941, attracting a huge audience of over two million (one million in the first six weeks). What happened to the sculpture at the end of the exhibition is unknown, but government officials are assumed to have been destroyed it along with many other works included in the exhibition.

Born to a Jewish family in Prussia, Freundlich had tried various careers before starting his training as an artist in 1907 aged twenty-nine. He moved to Paris the following year and rented a studio in the ramshackle building known as the Bateau Lavoir, where his neighbours included Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. In his 1931 memoir he fondly recalled the artists and writers he met in these years: 'Every Sunday we found ourselves with ... Picasso, Max Jacob, Apollinaire, Marie Laurencin, Maurice Raynal, André Salmon ... we shared our struggles and our hopes.' While living in Paris Freundlich returned regularly to Germany, where he was in touch with leading avant-garde artists (he made *Large Head* on one such visit back to Germany). However, Picasso remained his main inspiration. 'Picasso had thrown down his challenge to all traditions of art ... Braque, Herbin, Juan Gris and I were called upon to play a pioneering role ... we were witnessing a true dawn of modern painting'.

Picasso was among the first to incorporate aspects of tribal carvings in his paintings: in his famous canvas *Les Femmes d'Alger* 1907, for example, the women are represented in angular forms and two appear to be wearing African masks. Freundlich can be presumed to have seen this and similar paintings in Picasso's studio. In Germany artists such as the *Die Brücke* group also looked to so-called 'primitive' art, seeking to shake off the burdens of western culture to create a new – and to their minds ultimately truer – vision of man in their expressionist works. Freundlich's response to both cubist and expressionist movements can be seen in *Large Head* 1912, its subtitle *The New Man* referencing – supportively or ironically – the expressionists' desire for a new understanding of men in the modern age. Suggestively, the figure's expression was one of sadness and, above all, anxiety.

Freundlich completed *Large Head (The New Man)* during a stay in Hamburg in the winter of 1912. Standing at nearly one and a half metres tall, it was an imposing work, one of the largest he produced: it suggests comparison with Easter Island carved stone heads. A private collector in Hamburg quickly purchased it but no photograph of it in these years exists (we know the sculpture now only from photographs taken to represent the work – unsympathetically – in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition catalogue).

At the outbreak of the First World War Freundlich returned to Germany where he was assigned to work in the health services. After the war he joined the Berlin and Cologne dada movements and became a member of the November Group, a radical collective of artists that supported the short-lived socialist revolution in Germany and called for the integration of art and society. He cemented his credentials as a leading left-wing artist when he participated in the International Congress of Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf in 1922. Three years later Freundlich returned to Paris.

In 1930 a local collector offered *Large Head* to the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts. The museum's director, Max Sauerlandt (1880–1934), was building up an exceptionally strong collection of expressionist art, despite controversy in the press regarding the use of public funds to acquire such works, and accepted the gift. However, when Hitler's Nazi party came to power in January 1933, public and governmental discomfort regarding modernist art was transformed into a programme of vilification and censorship. Those deemed to oppose the new regime were removed from public posts. In order to practise artists had to join the state-run Artists Society, membership of which was routinely refused to modernist or Jewish artists. In April 1933 Sauerlandt was dismissed and banned from entering his museum, which ceased to show modernist works. Eventually, the regime confiscated 270 works of modern art, including Freundlich's *Large Head (The New Man)*, from the museum's collection.

In the summer of 1937 Hitler formalised his plan for the eradication of 'degenerate art' in Germany. Over a period of just three weeks, director of the Reich Chamber of Culture Adolf Ziegler began a programme of confiscation of over 16,000 objects from public museums and collections across Germany. Early confiscations were taken to Munich to form half of a great double exhibition in the city. The newly built House of German Art displayed works approved of by the regime in a grand style, while the former archaeological institute hosted the exhibition *Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art)*. Here the works were hung in chaotic and jarring groupings, with the (inflation-era) prices paid for these artworks from the public purse and sarcastic comments painted on the gallery walls. It proved a tremendously popular exhibition, attracting over two million visitors, and toured to eleven cities in Germany and Austria over the next four years. Reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue, Freundlich's sculpture became the very public image of all that Nazism sought to obliterate from German culture.

What happened to *Large Head (The New Man)* after the exhibition is unknown but it is assumed that the plaster sculpture, one of the most important modernist sculptures

produced in Germany before the First World War, was destroyed by the authorities along with many hundreds of works included in the exhibition. Despite great efforts in recent years to establish what happened to the numerous works confiscated from German public collections, the fate of many of them remains unknown.

When war broke out in 1939, Freundlich was living in Paris where he had founded his own art academy. He was arrested by the French authorities as an enemy alien and sent to a series of internment camps, though Picasso managed to secure his release in early 1940. When the German army occupied France, Freundlich was forced into hiding. On 23 February 1943 he was arrested and sent to the Majdanek Concentration Camp in Poland, arriving there on 9 March. Aged sixty-four, he was murdered the day he arrived.

Given its fragility and notoriety, it seems unlikely that *Large Head (The New Man)* will ever be found. However, another of Freundlich's works confiscated from Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts and exhibited as 'degenerate' was recently discovered. In January 2010 the 1925 terracotta *Head* turned up among a cache of eleven sculptures found by workers building an underground station in front of Berlin's town hall. Investigations suggest that in 1945 the sculptures were in a building destroyed by Allied bombing. Why they were there remains a mystery but one theory is that lawyer Erhard Owerdieck, who was known for his work assisting Jewish friends and colleagues, might have smuggled the works from government hands and kept them in his apartment there. Broken and incomplete, the sculpture is a poignant reminder of Freundlich's decimated artistic legacy and of Germany's modernist history, so nearly obliterated by government-led iconoclasm.

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