

# UNMASTERED PAST?

MODERNISM IN  
NAZI GERMANY  
ART, ART TRADE,  
CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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FERDINAND-MÖLLER-STIFTUNG

EDITED BY  
MEIKE HOFFMANN  
DIETER SCHOLZ

UNDER ORGANIZATIONAL  
ASSISTANCE OF  
NATASCHA HELLWAG



**DEDICATED TO  
ANGELIKA FESSLER-MÖLLER (1919–2002)**

Common traditional values, shaped by the example of her father, Ferdinand Möller, and my many years working in the art trade, led by way of happy circumstance to our establishing the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung in 1995.

Twenty-five years after the foundation was established, this collection is not only an expression of our motivation and desire to advance research on expressionism but also testimony to many years of collaboration and friendship.

Wolfgang Wittrock  
Zermützel, May 1, 2020

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MEIKE HOFFMANN  
DIETER SCHOLZ

## PREFACE

Modernism and Nazism have for a long time been perceived as opposites—and with good reason. But in reality, the two overlapped. In recent years, a great deal of research has been done, resulting in an increasingly differentiated picture, while other aspects remain unilluminated. The contributions to this volume seek to explore this historically tense relationship through the question posed by the title *Unmastered Past?*, while remaining well aware that there can never be a final “mastering” of the past in the sense of a definitive reckoning: hence the question mark.

The contributions to this volume are based on lectures that were held at a conference organized by Berlin’s Nationalgalerie (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) and the Forschungsstelle “Entartete Kunst” at the Freie Universität Berlin. The opening event took place on May 16, 2019, at the Brücke-Museum, and the conference continued on May 17–18, 2019, at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart – Berlin. Wolfgang Wittrock initiated this conference and its accompanying publication, and made both possible as chairman of the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung. The same venue, Hamburger Bahnhof, had already hosted a conference in 1997, which was also initiated and financed by the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung and which dealt with the “modernism controversy,” where the topics covered stretched from the closing of the Weimar Bauhaus in 1925, forced by reactionary German nationalists, to the “degenerate art” campaign of 1937.

Titled *Überbrückt: Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunsthistoriker und Künstler 1925–1937*, this first conference explored the motivations of artists, art historians, art dealers, and journalists who saw no contradiction between modernist art and the totalitarian regime and were thus simultaneously victims of and active participants or collaborators in the Nazi system. After the Second World War, what several key

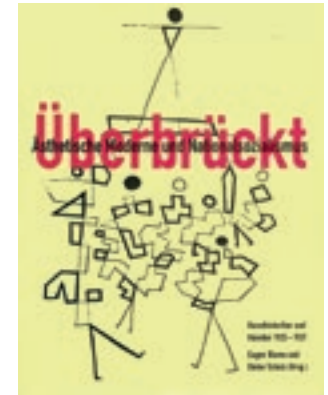
1 *Überbrückt: Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus*, edited collection of contributions to the conference, Cologne, 1999, cover (with the drawing *Überbrückt* [Bridged] by Paul Klee, 1931)

figures of the time had found to be a surmountable difference was later considered irreconcilable—but the notion of the utter incompatibility of modernism and dictatorship only became established well into the postwar period.

Twenty years after the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung addressed the wider public with the publication *Überbrückt*, this second conference sought to explore developments that were inspired at the time, answers that research had uncovered in the meantime, and to look closely at what remains unmastered, with an eye on mechanisms of canonization in art history, the return of ideologically charged concepts, and the narratives, legends, and argumentative patterns of the direct present. In addition, in the meantime the research landscape has changed significantly, new institutions have emerged, emphases have shifted. Importantly, the question of how newly generated knowledge is communicated has moved to the focus; this is true not only of new exhibition formats, but also of the possibilities, responsibilities, and perspectives of art museums in general.

In the year 1997, an ink drawing that Paul Klee entitled *Überbrückt* [Bridged] was used as the conference’s heading and selected for the cover of the publication that followed, because it was considered a “compelling visual symbol of the period’s controversies.”<sup>1</sup> Taking this as a model, another Klee work was selected for the conference *Unmastered Past?* and the cover illustration. Executed in colored paste over pencil, the work entitled *Nordischer Künstler* (Nordic Artist) depicts Klee’s colleague and friend Emil Nolde. The relationship between Klee and Nolde remained remarkably close despite their diametrically opposed personal responses to the Nazi takeover in 1933. In 1908, the two held their first joint exhibition in the framework of the Berlin Secession, they knew one another personally starting at least in 1921, and they corresponded regularly and visited each other until briefly before Paul Klee’s death in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

But at first their paths seemed to diverge in 1933. In late November, Nolde’s wife, Ada, wrote to Paul and Lily Klee: “Our faith in the Führer, in his integrity, in his mission gives us inner peace.”<sup>3</sup> And on the question of Emil Nolde’s possible emigration, since he was a Danish citizen, we read





2 Podium discussion with Bernhard Fulda, Meike Hoffmann, and Aya Soika, led by Dieter Scholz, during the conference *Unbewältigt? Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunst, Kunsthandel, Ausstellungspraxis*, May 16–18, 2019

in Ada's letter: "He feels so much part of Germany that it would mean tearing him from the roots without being able to find another soil in which to replant him."<sup>4</sup> This is quite unlike Paul Klee, who only a month later, on December 24, 1933, left Germany forever and emigrated to Switzerland, the land of his birth. Obvious political differences expressed in their correspondence notwithstanding, the friendship between the artists continued. One thing they had in common: the works of both artists were considered "degenerate" by the Nazis. In early 1939, the Noldes once again visited the Klees in Switzerland, and on this opportunity Klee rendered the "Nordic artist" Nolde in rough brush strokes with piercing blue eyes, just as Nolde had depicted himself in 1917.<sup>5</sup> With the title of his portrait, Klee was consciously or unconsciously referring to the 1934/35 debate about whether expressionism was a genuinely "Nordic" style of painting that could serve as a model for an art suited to the new state.<sup>6</sup> This controversy was long over by 1939, but Nolde represented the link between modernist aesthetic and Nazi ideology like no one else.

This example shows the full complexity and ambivalence discussed in the 2019 conference and that was also the subject of the two exhibitions that were held concurrently, *Emil Nolde: A German Legend—The Artist during the Nazi Regime* at Hamburger Bahnhof and *Escape into Art? The Brücke Painters in the Nazi Period* at the Brücke-Museum and Kunsthaus Dahlem. Even if the idea for the conference predated the organization of these two exhibitions and it was held independently of them, the framework they provided was fruitful for the conference and found its way into many of the discussions held there.

The interrelationship of the exhibitions and colloquium also complemented art historical perspectives from the angle of historical scholarship, for which we have Aya Soika and Bernhard Fulda to thank. The thematic profile of the conference was developed and further honed through intense exchange with them. We extend our heartfelt thanks to them and to all participants, including above all the contributors, but also to those not in-

cluded in the publication—the moderators Andrea Meyer (TU Berlin) and Julia Albrecht (writer and filmmaker). For the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung, Natascha Hellwag undertook the task of organizing the conference and coordinating the publication with great diligence and true commitment. Our thanks go to her for all her help in managing this task.

The Gerda Henkel Stiftung filmed all the lectures held at the conference and placed them on their online scholarship portal L.I.S.A. With the publication of this volume, the contributions are presented in a revised form and with sources for long-term and scholarly verifiable reception. This English language version has been published to ensure an international readership. Our thanks in this regard go to Jörg Sundermeier and Verbrecher Verlag, graphic designer Petra Ahke, the translators Brian Currid and Wilhelm Werthern (*Zweisprachkunst*) as well as Miranda Robbins, and the copyeditors Katrin Günther and Kristie Kachler for the German and English versions respectively. We especially owe our gratitude to Wolfgang Wittrock for his untiring commitment and to the Ferdinand-Möller-Stiftung, without whose generous thematic and financial support the conference and the publication could never have been realized.

Meike Hoffmann and Dieter Scholz  
Berlin, May 2020

#### NOTES

1 See Eugen Blume and Dieter Scholz, eds., *Überbrückt. Ästhetische Moderne und Nationalsozialismus. Kunsthistoriker und Künstler 1925–1937* (Cologne, 1999), 8–11. Klee researchers criticized the use of the drawing for the cover of the volume as "pseudo-historical design" and "ideological appropriation," explaining that the drawing only referred to Klee's dissatisfaction with the situation at the Dessau Bauhaus and his move to Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie. See Wolfgang Kersten, "Strategien künstlerischer Selbstbehauptung. Fallstudie zu Paul Klees beruflichem Wechsel vom Bauhaus Dessau an die Staatliche Kunstakademie Düsseldorf," *Paul Klee im Rheinland: Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Gouachen*, eds. Uta Gerlach-Laxner and Frank Günter Zehnder (Cologne, 2003), 239.

2 Astrid Becker, "Emil Nolde und Paul Klee: Ein Geflecht der Freundschaft," *Emil Nolde. Vetter der Tiefe. Mit der Korrespondenz Nolde – Klee*, eds. Nina Zimmer, Fabienne Eggelhöfer, and Christian Ring (Cologne, 2018), 100–109.

3 Letter from Emil and Ada Nolde to Paul and Lily Klee, November 27, 1933, *ibid.*, 149.

4 *Ibid.*

5 For illustrations of both works in direct comparison, *ibid.*, see 8–9.

6 See Uwe Fleckner and Maike Steinkamp, eds., *Gauklerfest unterm Galgen: Expressionismus zwischen "nordischer" Moderne und "entarteter" Kunst* (Berlin, 2015).