

Background: On 26 June 1943, Goebbels gave a speech to open the 7th German Art Exhibition. This was an annual event, continued even during the war. Goebbels uses the occasion to accuse his enemies of being barbarians, and to claim that National Socialism is doing all it can to advance art even in the midst of war.

The source: “Unsterbliche deutsche Kultur. Rede zur Eröffnung der 7. Großen Deutschen Kunstausstellung,” *Der steile Aufstieg* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., 1944), pp. 339-346.

Immortal German Culture

by Joseph Goebbels

Were one to imagine Western culture without its contributions from Germany and Italy, much would be missing. As obvious as this may be, one has to repeat it now and again to give a short but persuasive reply to the enemy’s arrogant talk. They love to pretend to be the protectors and defenders of an art and culture that they themselves have not created, or to which they made at best a modest contribution that could vanish without much harm to the cultural edifice. The art treasures they possess were mostly stolen by their armies in Europe or the rest of the world. They have hardly any cultural achievements of their own, and those that they do have stem from the spiritual consciousness of that part of the world that they today are trying to destroy. Cities such as Nuremberg and Munich or Florence and Venice contain more eternal manifestations of Western culture than the entire North American continent. What musicians do the English have to compare with Beethoven or Richard Wagner, and what artists can the Americans present to match Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci? They talk of human culture. We have it, and remain today its guardians, wardens, and protectors.

We have to remember that to properly understand and appreciate the gigantic struggle the Axis powers are engaged in. We are fighting for the basic values that Europe has created in its thousands of years of history. Even more, we are fighting for the very source of these values, both in the past and for the future. The very roots of Europe are threatened. The nations that made the greatest contribution to the West are fighting for their material and spiritual existence. Were they to surrender, our continent would lose everything. The very roots of its growth, that have borne so much fruit over two millennia, would be cut off.

It is stupid, and easy to refute, when our enemies maintain that they are fighting only the present leadership of the Axis powers, not their peoples. That is what they have always said, but forgotten when the time came to act, as for example in 1918 and 1919. Second, these regimes are the natural expression of their peoples’ modern political thinking. They have no other reasonable form of government. The claim that their autocratic structure takes the life from art, even makes its further progress impossible, is easily refuted both theoretically and practically. These regimes are not nearly as autocratic as they are accused of being. They actually have stronger democratic traits than the traditional democracies, and besides the history of culture shows that everywhere and at every time art does not ask under which political system it lives. Churches and secular buildings were built over the centuries by tyrannical popes and kings. The best of Europe’s paintings come from ages filled with the noise of the battlefield. Demonic noble families promoted the highest flowering of the visual arts, while their citizens lived in fear.

Even ignoring the past, the present refutes the stupid and base claims our enemies use to conceal their actions, which oppose or destroy culture. It is a rape of sound understanding to justify the crazed

attacks of English or American terror planes on German or Italian cities on cultural grounds. German or Italian cultural centers that were built over centuries are reduced to soot and ashes in a brief hour. This is far more than an attempt to terrorize our population, much less to attack our armaments production. This is evidence of an historical inferiority complex that wants to destroy what the enemy is incapable of producing himself, and has never created in the past. European humanity must blush in shame that a 20-year-old American, Canadian, or Australian terror flyer can destroy a painting by Albrecht Dürer or Titian, that he can destroy the work of the most honored names in history, though he and millions of his countrymen have not even heard of them. There can be no apology for such behavior. It is a cold, cynical, calculating attack by the spoiled child of Europe. These upstarts from the New World turn against the Old World because it is richer in soul and spirit. Its eternal artistic accomplishments stand against skyscrapers, cars, and refrigerators.

Is it not interesting that the English leadership has destroyed dozens of German theaters, while England itself does not have even a single serious theater? And the Americans are not even worth mentioning. They lay waste to Europe's cities and its cultural landmarks, since there is nothing to compare them to in Chicago or San Francisco. Their bombing terror will destroy that part of European art and culture that they cannot buy.

We know what they are up to. This war is about more than our daily bread, our living space, and our peace. More than ever before we have to defend our most valuable possessions, the things that make life worth living, without which human life is meaningless, like the lives of our enemies from the steppes of the east.

War is indeed a great destroyer, but it also contains constructive elements that suddenly appear in the midst of its destructive work. It robs us of our senses, yet also gives them back. Never before have our continent's people been able to see so clearly where Europe stands and what we must do. Times of comfortable peace may make the lure of material comfort seem all too satisfying. War wipes it all away. It drives away dullness and indifference, and returns us to the roots and sources of our strength, teaching that man does not live by bread alone. Never have the German people had such a drive toward intellectual and spiritual things as they do today. I am not speaking of the less pleasant manifestations of war, which are always there. But one should look to our theaters, concert halls, museums, and art exhibitions. Day and night, summer and winter, tens and hundreds of thousands of Germans sit or stand there astonished at so much beauty. We have become richer, more fulfilled, and better as a result of the war.

It would be a mistake to explain this development exclusively on material grounds. The German people are not spending their money on art because there is no other way to spend it, as is sometimes said. The path to art is the path to their hearts. The present with its pain and misery drive us to the consoling certainties of our people, and where are they more visible than in art? We see in it the answer to the destructive fury of our enemies. We learn today to appreciate what they cannot understand, since it is threatened. It is of no importance if this occasionally occurs in primitive ways, or as some know-it-alls call it, *Kitsch*. Over time things will work themselves out. We were all beginners once, and what pleased us as children often does not please us once we are mature. A large part of our people still is in its childhood years in this regard, which leaves room for systematic education and development. Despite all our rich and glorious past, we are a people at its beginning. Everything is open before us. We need only to reach out.

It would be more than serious if today's artists did not want to understand that. Never have they had a more eager public than they have today. One must recall the past to know what that means. New pictures, sculptures, plays, novels, symphonies, and operas are no longer of interest only to intellectual critics in the newspapers, as was once often the case. Today they must withstand the eye and ear of the people. Even more, they have to endure comparison with the great works of the past, which the popular

consciousness today has begun to understand, and which provide the standards for the new fans of art. Goethe's maxim is truer today than it ever was: artists must create, not talk. The age offers each the opportunity to test his talents. In contrast to the past, each has an equal chance. No one can complain that he had no chance to speak, as long as he has something to say. Let him reach for the pen, the brush, the chisel, and the compass and speak with the instruments of his art and his calling to an age that is waiting for enlightenment.

It is almost a miracle that in the midst of this gigantic battle, art is able to exist, almost untouched by the storms of our people's gigantic and fateful struggle. Were any proof needed of National Socialism's support for the arts, this is that proof. That does not mean that artists can ignore what is going on around them. There may be an artist here or there who believes that since his art does not concern the war, the elementary laws of war have no application to him. He must be reminded of his duty, perhaps rather firmly. His work, even if not related to the war, is not an end in itself. He is still working for his people, which is enduring the heaviest burdens and deepest sorrows. It has a right to expect the artist to recognize that, particularly since he enjoys creative freedom in the mist of war that he never had in times of normal and unmolested peace.

In this fourth year of the war, I have the honor to open in the Führer's name the 7th Great German Art Exhibition in the House of German Art in Munich.

The beautiful and impressive exhibition is not independent of its age. Its form is influenced by it. It contributes to the war at the front. Our artists here give the best evidence of their energy and their creative fanaticism.

As in the past war years, the Führer cannot be with us. But his spirit is even more with us. This cultural monument, the building, and the exhibition, are his work. It was built in peace, maintained and expanded in war, and points to a happy and blessed peace. Its splendor today gives us a sign of what will be when the victory comes, in which we believe more today than ever before.

I greet the Führer in this great age, of which he is the creator. The scaffolding is still there and only the expert can see what its creator has in mind. But we can all believe in it.

We do that with all the strength of our hearts.