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## **Adolf Wissel: Compliant Dissidence, a Nonbinary Reading of Work Executed from 1933 – 1941**

Jeremy Lyn Schrupp  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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ADOLF WISSEL: COMPLIANT DISSIDENCE,  
A NONBINARY READING OF WORK EXECUTED FROM 1933 – 1941

by

Jeremy Lyn Schrupp

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### ADOLF WISSEL: COMPLIANT DISSIDENCE, A NONBINARY READING OF WORK EXECUTED FROM 1933 – 1941

by

Jeremy Lyn Schrupp

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019  
Under the Supervision of Dr. Sarah C. Schaefer

Despite the vast amount of scholarship devoted to the Nazi era, there is very little dedicated to the analysis of its works of art. This paper aims to rectify that, by analyzing the work of Adolf Wissel. Aside from its didactic use amongst academia, there is only one academic analysis of his work. The intent of the present analysis is to build from that foundation and provide an additional layer of contextualization to an era that is relatively unexplored within our field. This analysis will establish that Adolf Wissel maintained specific subject, compositional, and stylistic choices that subtly opposed NSDAP directives. Because of the heavy mobilization of his works by the National Socialists, the art of Adolf Wissel has become synonymous with it. Yet, there is strong visual evidence to support the notion that Wissel's works both adhered to the dominant social structure while they simultaneously critique and reject it.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|       |                                                                                                     |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| GDK   | Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition)                                      |
| NAZI  | Colloquial form: a member of the NSDAP and of or concerning the NSDAP                               |
| NS    | <i>Nationalsozialisten</i> (National Socialists)                                                    |
| NSDAP | <i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i><br>(National Socialist German Workers' Party) |
| SA    | <i>Sturmabteilung</i> (The NSDAP's Paramilitary Combat Organization)                                |
| SDAP  | <i>Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei</i> (Social Democratic Labor Party)                           |
| SS    | <i>Schutzstaffel</i> (The NSDAP's Protection Squads)                                                |



## I. INTRODUCTION

Adolf Wissel (1894-1973) was a German painter, born and raised on a farm in the county of Hannover in the state of Niedersachsen. Wissel was primarily known as both a painter of portraits and of rural genre scenes. Wissel attended the *Kunstgewerbeschule* (School of arts and Crafts) in Hannover from 1911 to 1914, and again after the Great War in 1919. He studied under Fritz Burger-Mühlfeld, a progenitor of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (“New Objectivity”). Additionally, at this time, he may have met several of the members of the Hannoverian *Neue Sachlichkeit*, as he attended a summer session at the *Kunstgewerbeschule* with them. From 1922 to 1924 Wissel studied at the *Kunstakademie* in Kassel, after which he returned home to Velber, a small farming village outside of Hannover. He began working in the style of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in the mid 1920s and continued more or less in this fashion until his death in 1973. Wissel produced only a few works between 1924 and 1933; of those, his portraiture gained some local recognition.<sup>1</sup>

Adolf Wissel “re-emerged” following this period and came to fame as a “compliant artist” under Germany’s National Socialist regime. Wissel was introduced to the party in 1926 by his former professor from the *Kunstgewerbeschule*, Richard Schlösser. At the time, Schlösser was serving as a reviewing official of a regional exhibition in which Wissel’s work was shown. After the Nazis’ rise to power in 1933, Wissel gained notoriety as his subject matter was congruent with party ideology and more specifically the *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) campaign.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The primary biographical source for Wissel’s career has been compiled by Ingeborg Bloth; Ingeborg Bloth: *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*. (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1994), 17-30; 31-36; 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel, Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 52.

*Blut und Boden* was central to National Socialist ideology. It was first developed by nineteenth-century agrarian romanticists, and after the First World War the idea was socially mobilized by the architect Shultz-Naumburg and the ideologist and Reich Minister Richard Walther Darré.<sup>3</sup> This agrarian political ideology proposed that there was a unity between the racially defined people's body and its settlement area and was mobilized as a counterbalance to "urbanity" (cosmopolitanism) and supposed "Jewish nomadism."<sup>4</sup> It, additionally, had the effect of nationalizing rural values and created a mystical link between the German people and their physical homeland.<sup>5</sup> The land, by way of ideological interpretation, becomes inseparable from the people. In this line of thinking, works of art depicting the idyllic life of country folk working in a perfect landscape become signifiers for Nazi ideology and provide a reference for individual and social identity construction. These works, in many cases, could be read in relation to the allegorical arcadia presented in nineteenth century German landscapes from a century earlier, because they 'romantically' highlight the German countryside and its people.

Most scholarship concludes that since the *Neue Sachlichkeit* was predominately associated with the Weimar era (1918-33), the decline of this style coincided with the rise of National Socialism in 1933.<sup>6</sup> Yet scholars also note that the *Neue Sachlichkeit* influenced art well beyond this date.<sup>7</sup> Its influences can be found in the works of Balthus and Dalí and finds parallel within the art of the American Regionalists, chiefly in that of Grant Wood.<sup>8</sup> In the

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's Green Party* (Somerset: The Kensal Press, 1985), 49-54.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Walther Darré, *Neuadel Aus Blut Und Boden* (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's Green Party*, 54-63.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Plumb: *Neue Sachlichkeit: 1918-33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit: 1918-33, Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement*, 140 – 150.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Haskell: *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018.); Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds. *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), 34. Olaf Peters makes a direct comparison between the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and American regionalism. Specifically targeting the art of Grant Wood.

immediate postwar period, it was noted that the National Socialist Party too adopted the stylistic tendencies of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. The National Socialists were said to twist the genre to suit their own ideological requirements. These scholars pointed to the work of Adolph Wissel as their primary referent.<sup>9</sup>

Many of Adolf Wissel's works from this period were, indeed, purchased by the State and by its top officials. His agrarian genre scenes were mobilized by the party as its ideological paragon.<sup>10</sup> They were among the most reproduced paintings in the Nazi state, and the works garnered mass recognition within Germany from 1937 till the end of World War Two.<sup>11</sup> For the Nazis, Wissel's genre scenes at once depicted the racial prototype and the subjects' connectedness to the landscape. Wissel's peasant figures are healthy and bountiful, and so too is the land. For the Nazis, these pastoral depictions stood in sharp contrast to the supposed unhealthy small family units found in industrialized areas and served as a visual guide for emulation. It is for these reasons that his work has come to be considered a perversion of modern art, of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and written off as pure National Socialist propaganda.<sup>12</sup>

As noted by Ingeborg Bloth, the only art historian who has significantly analyzed the work of Adolf Wissel,<sup>13</sup> following World War Two scholarship adopted a "blanket negation" policy when it came to works of art produced in Germany during the National Socialist era.<sup>14</sup> In

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He noted that Wood, during the 1920s, traveled to Germany no less than four times. The most important lessons he brought back were from München and he was impressed by the contemporary art movement known as the New Objectivity. The author also notes that Wood remained committed to depicting regional life in America, throughout his career and that he hoped to aid in the creation of a national style.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Plumb: *Neue Sachlichkeit: 1918-33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 140 – 150.

<sup>10</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel, Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Burgdorfer, *Das Haus Der Deutschen Kunst 1937-1944*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. (Kiel: Arndt-Verlag, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Steve Plumb: *Neue Sachlichkeit: 1918-33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 140 – 150.

<sup>13</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9-14.

the rare instance that an academic wished to utilize these artworks, the accepted reading is one that responds to and reflects the policies and ideologies of the National Socialist party.<sup>15</sup> Nazi art, according to Klaus Fisher, “was colossal, impersonal, and stereotypical. People were shorn of all individuality and became mere emblems expressive of assumed eternal truths. In looking at Nazi architecture, art, or painting one quickly gains the feeling that the faces, shapes, and colors all serve a propagandistic purpose; they are all the same stylized statements of Nazi virtues—power, strength, solidity, and Nordic beauty.”<sup>16</sup> To maintain or explore any other approach was, and is still, to some extent, considered highly taboo.<sup>17</sup>

Bloth argues that scholarship forgo analyses based upon “blanket negation” and begin looking at these works with the same scrutiny that we would any other era.<sup>18</sup> The first step in this process, I believe, is to acknowledge that there is a difference between art produced in Germany during the National Socialist era and National Socialist Art. In part, that is what the present analysis intends to proffer. This notion is slowly gaining prominence among academics and Bloth’s argument finds its foothold within this narrative.

Centering on the oeuvre of Adolf Wissel, Bloth argues that it is highly problematic to consider his art as purely propagandistic. Her analysis provides evidence that implies a certain amount of naïveté in his art production and that he was, in essence, an artist whose person and subject matter just happened to appeal to National socialist sensibilities. Her argument therefore bolsters the notion of individual artistic agency over blanket compliance and suggests that the era is owed further academic analysis.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9-14.

<sup>16</sup> Klaus P. Fischer: *Nazi Germany: A New History* (London: Constable, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9-14.

<sup>18</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9-14.

<sup>19</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 42.

I agree that there seems to be some sort of negotiation between Adolf Wissel's subject matter and the ideals of the National Socialist party, and, further, that the work of Adolf Wissel can be read in a way that, indeed, promotes propagandistic ideals. Although there is value in Bloth's problematization of the "blanket negation" narrative, I disagree with her suggestion that Wissel was in any way naïve in his negotiation with Reichskulturkammer policy. The present essay will analyze these arguments and provide evidence for an additional reading. I propose that there is strong visual evidence to support the notion that Wissel's works both adhered to the dominant social structure while they simultaneously critique and reject it. Additionally, this analysis will establish that Adolf Wissel maintained specific subject, compositional, and stylistic choices that subtly opposed NSDAP directives. Although Wissel stated that he was always a non-political painter and strived only to improve his own technique, his art, I believe, says otherwise.<sup>20</sup> The evidence is most readily available in non-commissioned works produced between 1933 and 1941, including *Kind mit Narzissen* (1934), *Bauerngruppe* (1935), and *Bäuerin* (1938).

In 1933, there seems to be a subtle shift in Adolf Wissel's approach (figures 1 and 2 were created prior to this moment). The subjects within his work take on a more solemn tone. His line work becomes more defined. His color becomes flatter. Overall, his work seems to become more invested in the modernist attributes of the Neue Sachlichkeit. The "members" of the Neue Sachlichkeit are usually placed into two to three separate groups: those that practice a more veristic approach, those that are more classicist, and those who fall into a category referred to as

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<sup>20</sup> Helmut Plath and Ernst Lüddeckens: *Der Maler Adolf Wissel: (1894-1973): Gedächtnisausstellung: Ausstellungsführer Des Historischen Museums Am Hohen Ufer*. (Hannover: Historisches Museum am Hohen Ufer, 1974).

“magic realism” though this last label can and has been employed as an umbrella term, encompassing both groups).<sup>21</sup>

In his 1925 book *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*, Roh coined the term “Magic Realism” (*see note*) to analyze a quality unique to this movement (that rejected expressionism) and as a way to separate it from realism, naturalism, and Post-impressionism. Simultaneously, the term *Neue Sachlichkeit* was coined by Hartlaub as the title of an exhibition and with the same intent. Both men sought to analyze and describe the same artistic shift that they observed following the end of World War One. It was not until the conclusion of World War Two that these terms came to define separate movements. At this point both terms were mobilized to define subtle variations within the movement. Though Roh set this further delineation upon its eventual course (the magic in magic realism: the appearance of the strange, fantastic, or eerie), it was Hartlaub who offhandedly separated the verists from the classicists. The verists draw largely upon contemporary experience and visual media and project it in all its “tempo and fevered temperature.” The classicists drew largely from nineteenth-century romantic models and their works are more academic in both composition and application. Additionally, the subject matter depicted within these works become acutely regionalist.<sup>22</sup>

Wissel’s non-commissioned work from 1933 to 1941 displays an amalgam of influences. The framing, minimalist composition, and color derives from a classicist approach inspired by

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<sup>21</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 18; 41-47. As defined by Franz Roh and Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub.

<sup>22</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 41-47. The use of Roh’s term “magic realism” in Germany, though influential within the Latin American literary circles (specifically in the mid-twentieth century when the term “magical realism” was developed (*see Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." Hispania. 38 no. 2 (May 1955): 187.*)), should be considered in separate terms.

the Biedermeier. The engagement in social critique and commentary via Hannoverian regionalities, naïve objectivity, and figuration demonstrates the influence of the veristic approach. The line, spatial arrangement, perspective, and color intensity are informed by “magic realism.”

Despite the vast amount of scholarship devoted to the Nazi era, generally speaking there is very little specifically dedicated to the analysis of its works of art.<sup>23</sup> This is partly due to several conferences that took place in the United States and Europe, such as “Europe’s First Millennium” held in Austria in 1949, in which delegates discussed how academia would approach the art of the Nazi era.<sup>24</sup> At their conclusion two stances were taken; one in which a ‘New Internationalism’ was adopted and the other was the application of an ‘Occidental Cultural Model’.<sup>25</sup> In general, both methods allowed for the understandable discrediting of Nazi era art and the tabooing of attention to it.<sup>26</sup> Because of the heavy mobilization of his works by the National Socialists, the art of Adolf Wissel has become synonymous with party propaganda and ideology. Yet aside from its use in academic works to illustrate an ideological connection between National Socialism and art, there has been only one academic analysis conducted of his work in the post war era. The intent of the present analysis is to build from that foundation by

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<sup>23</sup> Notable exceptions include Bertold Hinz’s “Art in The Third Reich” (1974), one of the first academic attempts to fill the gap between 1933 and 1945 in German art history; Klaus Staack’s “Nazi-Kunst ins Museum?” (1988), the first major work to encourage conversation and analysis of Nazi era art work; Johnathan Petropoulos’s “Art as Politics in The Third Reich” (1996) and others, provide a layer of contextualization that is foundational to any scholar wishing to study the art of Nazi Germany.

<sup>24</sup> See Hans Belting: *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Doss, *Benton Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*.

<sup>25</sup> New Internationalism or the interruption model, claims that modernism was interrupted by the Nazis and resurrected via the United States in the form of abstraction. The Occidental Cultural Model, in broad terms, proposes that the history of art is not tied to a political border but has a shared history. See Belting. *The Germans and Their Art*, 80-9.

<sup>26</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art*.

providing an additional epistemic layer of contextualization to an era that is relatively unexplored within our field.

I will begin by defining the primary artistic movements that influenced or effected the work of Adolf Wissel. Therein, I will also provide a brief description of the eras in which these movements resided and in many cases are responding to. Next, I will analyze the complicated history of studying German art history, examples of the post-modern “blanket negation” model, and the argument proposed by Ingeborg Bloth (the present work’s primary biographical source). Finally, having laid the contextual groundwork, I will analyze several of Adolf Wissel’s works as a means of providing evidence for a nonbinary reading.

## **II. MOVEMENTS/ERAS**

### **Biedermeier**

The movement that is a crucial starting point for understanding Adolf Wissel’s style, is the Biedermeier, which flourished in German speaking nations in the first half of the nineteenth century. Stylistically the Biedermeier, like any other era, is hard to pin down. Unlike the Neoclassical period that preceded it and the Romantic period that, to some extent, overlapped it, the Biedermeier, as a recent exhibition catalogue states, “evolved free of strict logic.” The style flirted with Romanticism yet eluded categorization. The artistic movement was most prolific between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the Revolutions of 1848, yet characteristics appeared well before 1815 and as late as the 1860s. Most importantly the Biedermeier is



associated with the political landscape of the restoration following the Napoleonic wars and coincided with the newly created German Confederation.<sup>27</sup>

The centers for artistic production were in Berlin and Vienna. In 1909 Richard Muther identified the Biedermeier as “*treu deutsch*” (“faithfully German”) and “a style that genuinely and sincerely expressed the signature of an age.” The Biedermeier, especially in Germany and Austria, was considered nationalist in its approach. Its hallmarks include some if not all of the following: purity and abstraction of form, brilliant color, lack of superficial ornamentation, and a sensitive appreciation of nature.<sup>28</sup>

The Biedermeier developed out of the need for the Germanic states to create a style all their own. It was responding to the prevailing English, French, and Italian styles and in many ways rejecting them. To see the Biedermeier is to see an intense struggle for a socio-political artistic model. As Hans Ottomeyer argues, it is “a style grounded in reason or rationally determined conventions amidst a tense field of oppositional styles and relationships.” He further notes that “it gained definition within the pluralistic stylistic environment of the evolving nineteenth century German and Austrian culture.” Additionally, there was a need amongst artists, at this time, to emphasize the fundamental characteristic of their subject matter, not unlike scientific observation, for the purpose of classification and understanding (*see note*).<sup>29</sup>

Biedermeier design relied on the reduction of surface to clear contours. Though, this was really the chief driver of the style, furniture, and interior design. Biedermeier painting was sort of

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<sup>27</sup> Klaus Albrecht Schröder, Laurie Winters, Albrecht Pyritz, and Hans Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2006), 32-33; see *Adolf Wissel*, 52. As he was known to emulate it, furthermore critics too noted the association.

<sup>28</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 33-35; 39.

<sup>29</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 45-46; 51-52. Ottomeyer notes that the shift to taxonomical inspection was inspired by literary prints found in works such as Swedish botanist, physician, zoologist Carl Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* (1758) (the most important addition). Examples can be readily seen in paintings such as Moritz Michael Daffinger’s *Paris quadrifolia L, Herb Paris* (1830s/40s) (see *Biedermeier*, 378) and Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller’s *Fruit Still Life with Parrot* (1831) (see *Biedermeier*, 388).

an adjunct to a new conception of bourgeois interiors. In an entry from the 1844 Brockhaus Encyclopedia, the author explores the meaning of simplicity in art and observes that “it can be both positive and pejorative.” The author additionally notes that the art of simplicity rejects the need to appeal to traditional form and composition, yet, “as if governed by alien laws,” is still of the moment, and at the same time exposes its innermost truth without being demanding.<sup>30</sup>

The artists and designers of the Biedermeier era, to avoid over simplicity and monotony, favored geometric forms and pure elementary colors. Though objective simplicity was the aesthetic goal, there was an emphasis on bringing out the beauty of the material and the clarity of all the elements, specifically with geometric lines and volume. The Biedermeier emphasized reality, what was “empirically graspable, without romantic, symbolic, or ennobling overstatement” and, at that time, it was considered revolutionary. Biedermeier portraits and genre scenes were devoid of idealization and considered “an autonomous pictorial subject” in their own right. Artists at this time, in portraiture, “used bright color schemes, precision of detail, neutral backgrounds, and near frontal poses that conveyed a sense of comfortable self-assurance and integrity.” Additionally, Biedermeier portraits seemed to blur the lines between portraiture and genre painting. The work of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, one of the era’s most prolific painters, embodied all the aforementioned tenets (*see* figure 8) and in the early twentieth century was stylistically linked to a movement developed in the Weimar Republic, the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 53-54; 284; 35.

## Neue Sachlichkeit

The Weimar Republic is a term used to refer to the German Republic from 1918 to 1933.<sup>32</sup> It replaced the constitutional monarchy of Germany's Imperial era and emerged during the November Revolution.<sup>33</sup> The first constitutional assembly was held in the city of Weimar, which is where the name is derived.<sup>34</sup> It ended with the NSDAP's seizure of power and the appointment of Adolf Hitler to the position of chancellor in 1933.<sup>35</sup>

In retrospect, the art and culture of the Weimar Republic was temporally and spatially created outside of itself. It was part of the greater concept of modernism, that rose in Western society in the late nineteenth century and, according to some scholars, ended with the emergence of fascism and the start of World War Two.<sup>36</sup> During the Weimar era Germany was both a testing ground for the latest avant-garde trends and the site of the most violent reactions to it.<sup>37</sup> According to Walter Laqueur (an American historian of Jewish-German origin), it became "naturally the most interesting country in Europe."<sup>38</sup> The 1920s, according to Hagen Schulze, were "of an unprecedented intellectual fruitfulness. They were nourished by the nervous neurotic feeling of insecurity and homelessness that permeated intellectual and political life after the war and made people search restlessly for Archimedean points from which the whole present could be lifted off its hinges."<sup>39</sup>

Historians, in the attempt to understand the complexities of the Weimar era, have divided it, culturally, into three phases. The first, from 1918 to 1924 developed in response to the first

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Gay: *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, 9-10.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>36</sup> Detlev Peukert: *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre Der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), 166.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Laqueur: *Weimar: Die Kultur Der Republik* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1976), 44.

<sup>38</sup> Laqueur, *Weimar: Die Kultur Der Republik*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Hagen Schulze: *Weimar: Deutschland 1917-1933* (Berlin: Severin & Siedler, 1993), 128.

world war and the political turmoil following the 1918 revolutions. During the war avant-garde artists in Germany began to create highly subjective reactionary works of art. Two movements dominate this time frame. One, known as Dada, was founded in Zurich in 1918 and can be readily identified by its innate irrationality (*see note*).<sup>40</sup> The other, Expressionism, developed just before the war and did not linguistically coalesce under a single umbrella term until after the war.<sup>41</sup> These experiences, according to Detlev Peukert, ‘allowed the Expressionists to [appeal to the] general public [by promoting] utopian human pathos.’ Their “revolutionary gestures and even revolutionary engagement [was] a liberating [force that easily] connected with the masses.”<sup>42</sup> On the one hand a proletarian message was prevalent in Otto Dix’s portrayals of workers, as well as in his portraits of pimps and prostitutes.<sup>43</sup> The message could also be seen in Käthe Kollwitz’s graphic depictions of mourning mothers, hungry children, victims of war, and capitalist exploitation.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, following World War One, Germany experienced a mass social upheaval. This in turn brought about general psychological insecurity in Germany itself, leading to a national identity crisis.<sup>45</sup> Out of this crisis the Neue Sachlichkeit developed as the era’s predominant movement.<sup>46</sup> The Neue Sachlichkeit became prevalent during the second

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<sup>40</sup> Shearer West: *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair / Shearer West*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 159-160. This is contested by more recent scholarship, *see Leah Dickerman’s Dada* catalogue from the 2005 National Gallery of Art exhibition.

<sup>41</sup> West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair / Shearer West*, 83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Peukert, Detlev. *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre Der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987), 167.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Gay and Helmut Lindemann: *Die Republik Der Außenseiter: Geist Und Kultur in Der Weimarer Zeit: 1918-1933* (Frankfurt Am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 144.

<sup>44</sup> Gay and Lindemann, *Die Republik Der Außenseiter: Geist Und Kultur in Der Weimarer Zeit: 1918-1933*, 144.

<sup>45</sup> Gunther Sander: *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Gay and Lindemann, *Die Republik Der Außenseiter: Geist Und Kultur in Der Weimarer Zeit: 1918-1933*, 162.

phase (1924-1929), with the intent of providing a veristic and objective view of reality during a brief moment of relative socio-political stability.<sup>47</sup>

The Neue Sachlichkeit was in large part born as a rejection of the Expressionist movements that had dominated German artistic circles since the beginning of the century. Artists such as Christian Shad, George Grosz, August Sander, and Otto Dix turned toward realism to project a grounded and sober view of everyday life as a rejection of the often abstract allusion to polemic human emotion preferred by the Expressionists. The individuality of style amongst various artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit made it difficult to categorize as a movement. Contemporary critics noted that their type of realism often avoided individuality and resembled something closer to a type of verism. They stated that the hallmark of the Neue Sachlichkeit technique was to move away from the brushwork of the Expressionists and towards the exploration of methods used by the old masters, such as those from the Late Gothic and Early Modern periods. Additionally, critics described this style as an “observation of the modern environment that was sober, unsentimental, and significantly divorced from the pallet, painterliness, and tendency toward exoticism and impassioned subjectivity popular in the previous decade.”<sup>48</sup>

Contemporary critics focused on the tactility of the genre. In that it denied tactility through “minute attention to surface,” which in a sense seemed to “convey a longing for ethical norms and social stability yet is also shown to expose thingness as it embodies the uncanny.” Sabine Eckmann notes that “the ways in which some of these artists suggest and deny tactility

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<sup>47</sup> Gay, Peter, and Helmut Lindemann. *Die Republik Der Außenseiter: Geist Und Kultur in Der Weimarer Zeit: 1918-1933*. (Frankfurt Am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 162; Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair / Shearer West*, 159-60.

<sup>48</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 15, 16, 18, 20.

and embodiment was through surface imitation, uncanny shadows, or tectonic simplification.” She observes that the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit developed a realism that was a form of social critique and a way of “immersing themselves in a disenchanted, often soulless contemporaneity.”<sup>49</sup>

This reality would soon end abruptly. The National Socialists had a different view of German art and culture and they violently enforced it. They rejected the Neue Sachlichkeit style in two ways: First, they rejected it as an unrelatable emotionless style which labored to construct a narrow view of reality. Second, they opposed the rationality of the artist’s supposed “objectivity” because it highlighted the irrationality of the Party’s racist ideological agenda.<sup>50</sup>

### **Compliant and Degenerate Art**

Compliant art or *artige Kunst* is a term coined by Silke Von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Jörg-Uwe Neumann, and Agnes Tieze in 2016 for an exhibition titled *Artige Kunst, Kunst und Politik im Nationalsozialismus (Compliant Art, Art and politics in the National Socialist era)* and is defined as “art produced in accordance with the preferences of the Nazi elite.”<sup>51</sup> The National Socialist government chose to define their own artistic expectations in simpler terms. In the summer of 1937, two major art exhibitions were held in München: the *Entarte Kunst Ausstellungs (Degenerate Art Exhibition)*<sup>52</sup> and the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (Great German Art Exhibition)*, which publicly defined exactly what they believed to be artistically “good” and “bad” for the nation and its global image. According to Adolf Hitler “good” art, in

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<sup>49</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Silke Von Berswordt-Wallrabe and Jörg-Uwe Neumann and Agnes Tieze: *Artige Kunst, Kunst und Politik im Nationalsozialismus*. Bielefeld: Kerber, Christof, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Fritz Kaiser: *Degenerate art: the exhibition catalogue guide in german and english*. Burlington, IA: Ostara Publications, 2012; *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. (München: Bruckmann, 1937).

basic terms, was “realistically” or “naturally” rendered and easily read and understood by the masses. “Bad” art was, again in basic terms, everything else. The respective catalogs made for these shows further defined and bolstered the propagation of Nazi ideology.

The use of the term “degenerate,” as in the *Degenerate Art Exhibition*, at the time was a highly radicalized term and had specific racial and social connotations. These specific associations stemmed, in part, from late nineteenth century philosophical rhetoric. In 1880, Eugen Dühring, a well-known German philosopher and economist, coined the term “degeneration” in reference to the purity of the German race. To Dühring, this was a degeneration of the blood caused by an infection known as the Jew. Dühring wasn’t the only one to use this term. In the 1890s, Jewish-German author and social critic, Max Nordau, applied the term “degeneration” to modernist art. Nordau noted that society was in the process of degeneration and that the modernist movements within the art world directly influenced this degeneration.<sup>53</sup>

Thirty years later, in the 1920s, the NSDAP would return to this theme. Ignoring his Jewish lineage, the National Socialists grabbed hold of Nordau’s ideas and spliced them together with Dühring’s beliefs. They were able to gain power and influence throughout Germany by promoting the idea that the degeneration of German culture had been allowed to happen under the government of the Weimar Republic and claiming that they would be able to put a stop to it. The platform of the NSDAP was an amalgamation of philosophical and racial propaganda, which prominently included art. They believed that all art was national art, i.e. a cultural representation of the German people, and that race and nationhood and culture were inseparably linked.<sup>54</sup> They

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<sup>53</sup> Stephanie Barron and Peter W. Guenther: *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1991),16-17.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos: *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 175.

also believed that degeneration could be seen most clearly in Germany's modernist works of art. The political leaders of the NSDAP believed that modernist art was, in fact, a visual form of Bolshevism.<sup>55</sup> They felt that this art had developed in response to the loss of World War One. They also considered it to be a spiritual degeneration instigated by foreign elements and emblematic of both Jewish and Bolshevik ideologies, that deliberately deformed German character and traditions.<sup>56</sup> The NSDAP propagandist rhetoric promoted modernist art as elitist, unintelligible, and internationalist, factors that threatened the Party's ideological Germanocentrism.<sup>57</sup>

In 1928, the NSDAP created the National Socialist Society for German Culture with the goal of enlightening the German people about the connections they imagined between race, art, science, and moral and military values.<sup>58</sup> Members of the organization began to infiltrate schools, universities, and museums as well as radio, film, theater, and literature with hopes of securing a monopoly on cultural ideology centered on the ideas of the Party leader, Adolf Hitler.<sup>59</sup> Political pressure was applied to these institutions in order to influence the German people's cultural preferences so that they would become congruent with Party ideology and the "German norm."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Barron and Guenther, *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, 16-17. Dühring was also strongly opposed to the growing influence of Marxism on the German people. In the very early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism had proven extremely popular in Russia, becoming intertwined with the Bolshevik revolution that later led to the Communist takeover of Russia. The NSDAP believed that Jewish people were at the center of this revolution and later coined the term "Jewish Bolshevism" in order to link Jews with Communists.

<sup>56</sup> Glenn R. Cuomo: *National Socialist Cultural Policy*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 129.

<sup>58</sup> Barron and Guenther: *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, 22-3.

<sup>59</sup> Barron and Guenther: *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, 22-3.

<sup>60</sup> Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 5. The NSDAP's definition of what was "German" was based on a biomedical worldview based on a fictitious norm (The Master Race, a concept in National Socialist ideology in which the Nordic or Aryan races were considered the ideal; defining characteristics included blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin). They claimed that anything or anyone deviating from this norm was like a cancer that needed to be removed from the body of the German people, and that body had to be protected from or immunized against the influence of degeneration.



The NSDAP purposefully and publicly condemned much of the modernist art produced in Germany during the Second Reich and the Weimar Republic. They specifically targeted Expressionism, Cubism, and Dadaism, and eventually the Neue Sachlichkeit, denouncing the movements as historical aberrations and degenerate.<sup>61</sup> Adolf Hitler believed in many things, but three stand out: self-promotion (through the realization of projects of unprecedented scale which were conceived to elicit pride and awe in his people), his superintendency (i.e. his leadership ability and his ability to make such dreams a reality), and the triumph of the German-Aryan culture.<sup>62</sup> He believed that Aryan Germans were the originators of culture and, in turn, it was their rightful responsibility to guide it, nurture it and control it.<sup>63</sup> The intent was to reshape the German art world in its own image, and in doing so motivate the German people to adopt a Germanophile view on cultural nationalism.<sup>64</sup>

In a speech given early in 1933, Hitler condemned modernist art, and asserted that “today’s tasks require new methods.” In September 1934, he defined and set the course of the cultural policies for the years to come. He also identified two cultural dangers threatening National Socialism. First, he targeted modernists as the corrupters of art. He proclaimed that there was no place in Germany for modernist art and that such charlatans were mistaken if they thought that the creators of the Third Reich were foolish or cowardly enough to let themselves be

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<sup>61</sup> Adolf Hitler: *Mein Kampf, Complete and Unabridged, Fully Annotated*. (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 353. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler claimed that artistic expression was an affair of the state. He believed that it was the most effective medium through which to communicate and propagate national and cultural identity. Simultaneously, he claimed that the Jewish artists and Russian artists were also expressing the same message in works of modernist art. He wrote: “For if the time of Pericles appears incorporated in the Parthenon, so does the Bolshevistic present in a cubistic grimace...” He believed that Jewish and Bolshevist ideology were as innate to modernist art as the ideals of Pericles were to the art of Classical Greece. He also believed that the removal of modernist art from the public sphere should be based on its “factual” evidence that the artwork was an expression of a person who was subnormal, from a racial point of view. He suspected that the day modernist art became the cultural norm or the standard by which society viewed the world, that the human brain at that point would have begun a backward slide or degeneration.

<sup>62</sup> Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*, 241-3.

<sup>63</sup> Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*, 241-3.

<sup>64</sup> Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*, 175.

intimidated by their protests. He would not tolerate any works of art that were incongruent with Party ideology, and he demanded that art be integrated into the Nazi political program. Secondly, he condemned the traditionalists (*see note*) for attempting to revive “their own version” of the history of the Germanic people. Instead, he insisted that the cultural history of Germany be dictated by and align with National Socialist ideology. This became the official program of Nazi cultural politics, and there was to be no significant deviation from it.<sup>65</sup>

### III. HISTORIOGRAPHY

#### Hans Belting

In his 1998 work *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, Hans Belting states that “for many readers outside Germany, this book will reveal how much art was, and still is, a matter of national concern in Germany, and to what degree it is mediated by contemporary interest and myth.”<sup>66</sup> Additionally he expresses that this work “might also reveal how art historiography is itself a subject of history, which it usually pretends to write from a neutral position.”<sup>67</sup> Both of these statements are undeniably foundational considering the present analysis. Belting unpacks, among other things, the uncomfortable relationship that both scholars and society have when dealing specifically with the art of Germany’s National Socialist era.

Belting makes clear that his intent was to both explore the problematic relationship Germans have maintained with their own visual arts and to analyze the often subjective nature of global art historical scholarship, with the effect of eliciting discussion amongst contemporary

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<sup>65</sup> Cuomo, *National Socialist Cultural Policy*, 15. Followers of Rosenberg’s Combat League for German Culture.

<sup>66</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, vi.

<sup>67</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, vi.

scholars. His work was inspired both by the German unification and the emerging of the then controversial idea of *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst* (two kinds of German art). Though he is specifically referring to the art created during the Cold War period, the term is nonetheless applicable to the present argument. Therein, he states that the basic definition concerns art that was created by those that were “free” and those who were not “free.” There is a similar dichotomy which divides the art produced prior to and outside of the National Socialist state from that which was created from within it. It is through this lens of *Zweierlei deutsche Kunst* that he analyzes the history of German art and its “decidedly divisive” historical interpretation.<sup>68</sup> As it is profoundly important to the nature of the present argument, I will relay his approach here:

“For years, the shadow of Auschwitz so darkened our history that at times it seemed everything else of historical importance threatened to be engulfed by its huge shadow and forgotten altogether, but unification has meant a change in this as well. German history whether we like it or not, has now returned with a vengeance – a vengeance made stronger by being suppressed all these years. In an effort to understand ourselves better, we have once again begun to ask what Germany and the Germans have been in the past. My analysis will not focus on the question of how German art has been, but rather what we as a people have seen reflected in the mirror of our own arts, and how this reflection represents how we have developed a sense of our own history, a history with a long tradition of controversy about the arts.”<sup>69</sup>

In a sense, a thorough and objective art historical analysis of the history of German art has been impossible since the conclusion of World War Two. This is due to the proximity of the

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<sup>68</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 4-5.

<sup>69</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 5.

atrocities that occurred under the National Socialists. But, with German unification a renewed interest in German art history has inspired a new generation of scholars eager to take on the Highly debated subject.

In the immediate aftermath of World War Two, West Germany adopted the precepts of the modern art tradition, with the United States as its centre. Yet, Belting makes it clear that the controversy and heated debate amongst historians began long before the Nazis' rise to power, but the war and the decisions concerning art made by the Nazis added fire to that debate. Belting highlights that the great German art debate began in 1911 in response to the state's purchase of foreign art over domestic, polemicizing scholarship and dividing society in ideological terms.

Belting highlights the motivation behind much of the postwar debate as being influenced by several speeches given by Thomas Mann. A month after the conclusion of the war Mann spoke in Washington DC, calling for the need to develop an aversion to the commonly held German belief that art created in a specific region is unique to that region, just as art created in another region is indicative of that region. Mann was in a sense highlighting the idea of Germany's historical identity of alienation and isolationism vis-à-vis the manifestation of German nationalism. In an earlier speech given in 1933 in München, Mann, in relation to Richard Wagner, but nonetheless speaking about art in general, introduces the idea that in art "metaphysical impulse' is presented as a German trait."<sup>70</sup> Yet, in order to negate the nationalistic tendency in art, Mann introduces the occidental ideal: that the Germans themselves transcend national identity by their collective willingness to enjoy and appreciate the global art tradition, but also that the nationalism contained within German art is completely "saturated with European art' and that it should not be reduced to the simple concept of 'German'."<sup>71</sup> But,

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<sup>70</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 8-9.

<sup>71</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 8-9.

as Belting shows, the history of German art history is precisely about national identity and self-definition. In the recent past he notes that there has been a universal concept that implies that any scholar that identifies art in relation to the nation and mobilizes the term German art is in a sense bolstering bad scholarship. In this Belting implies scholarly insecurity and a hesitation to identify with the past, and a redefinition of a past shaped by the influence of the United States and the idea of a Pan-European artistic tradition.

Belting notes that the early nineteenth century saw a similar fracture in German art, one occurring between the neo-Greeks, fostered a generation before by Winckelmann, and the patriotic neo-Germans who employed themes which mixed national pride and religion. Both groups worked in a more or less Romantic style and both believed in a cultural rebirth. Additionally, both rejected the modern art scene as dictated by Paris. While the neo-Greeks looked south for inspiration, the Neo-Germans looked within and found inspiration in *das Volk* (synonymous with regional ethnic identity). German Romanticism transitioned to Realism fostered by the Second Reich's aristocracy and its popularity amongst the proletariat. Yet, as Belting notes, another heated debate erupted concerning the relevance of German art in light of the French Avant-Garde and namely the Impressionist painters. The consensus was that no longer could Germany employ an isolationist attitude in the arts, it would have to "transcend national parameters to become modern."<sup>72</sup> Yet, in spite of this, Belting states, that a truly German art form did appear and that scholars were taken by surprise at the sudden arrival of Expressionism. Though, before it could be accepted as mainstream, the movement would have to come to terms that it was in opposition with the "national German art tradition;" a notion that did not go unnoticed by the National Socialists.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Belting, *The Germans and Their Art: A Troublesome Relationship*, 31.

Belting states that in the postwar era the notion of “National Art” has lost its saliency and even the idea of “European art” has been called into question. He states that National Art in Germany is still a source of national shame. Therein, he asks the international scholarly community for their assistance. He implores them both to engage with and to help in the appropriate display of Germany’s cultural heritage, which would ultimately include controversial subject matter. Belting’s work is in direct dialogue with the “blanket negation narrative” model that was, in part, developed in response to Thomas Mann’s speech in Washington DC and that continues to be the foundational narrative of almost all post-war scholarship.

### **Blanket Negation Narrative**

The notion of a “blanket negation” proposes that there is a specific narrative used when discussing German art from the National Socialist era. This narrative, constructed over the course of the post-war period, suggests that all art created in and publicly viewed in Germany during the National Socialist era is and should be discussed in terms of NSDAP ideology and propaganda. This section is intended to highlight the prevalence of an international “blanket negation” policy.

Werner Hofmann, in his 1983 article “Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ in its Historical Context,” attempts to prove that non-compliant artists are more ideologically authentic and that “compliant art” is of a subpar level and is a failed attempt at great public art.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, he refers to another issue that marked scholarship from the 1980s onward; he states: “We get more insight into the Nazi approach to ‘Arts and Propaganda’ when we look at some of the didactic exhibitions conceived to sell Hitler’s prophecies to the masses.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Werner Hofmann, "Picasso's" Guernica" in its historical context." *Artibus et Historiae* (1983): 141-169.

<sup>75</sup> Hofmann, "Picasso's" Guernica" in its historical context," 141-169.

Klaus Staeck, in his 1988 anthology *Nazi-Kunst ins Museum? (Nazi-Art in the Museum?)*, vehemently opposed the public display of Compliant Art. However, he nonetheless maintained a median stance. He explains that the work was a compilation of scholarly essays that he hoped would illuminate positions on both sides of the debate. The purpose he said was not to provide a definitive answer but rather a means to further discussion. He concludes with a quote from Auschwitz: “*Ein Volk kann seine Vergangenheit nicht durch Totschweigen bewältigen*” (Referring to the public, silence is not a way to grapple with the past). This quote negates his very public personal stance, but he later defines the duality in his essay “Einspruch!” (“Objection!”). Staeck makes it clear that his objection lies not in the display of Compliant Art but rather of its display within a museum setting. He feels that the art of Nazi Germany should be displayed, but within a setting more appropriate to its meaning. He states that Compliant Art should have a home of its own or be placed in settings such as Auschwitz.<sup>76</sup>

It is also in this anthology that Max Imdahl’s now famous essay “Prose und Indoktrination: - zu Werken der Plastik und Malerei im Dritten Reich” (“Prose and Indoctrination: On Works of Sculpture and Painting in The Third Reich”), on this very subject, first appears. In his article Imdahl utilizes Wissel’s artwork as a catalyst in bolstering his argument. He states that in works such as Adolf Wissel’s, the ideology of the Nazi party is plainly evident. He maintains that compliant artists employed the techniques of “real” artists with the intent to mislead the public at large into believing that “compliant art” was indeed great art. Additionally, he proposes that these methods were employed specifically to prevent the public from reading into the artworks’ proposed propagandistic agenda. Furthermore, Imdahl states that the Nazi party essentially stripped artists of their individuality as a process of indoctrination, therefore rendering their art in

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<sup>76</sup> Klaus Staeck and Hans Mommsen: *Nazi-Kunst ins Museum?* (Göttingen: Steidl, 1988), 7-8.

what he terms “anti-art.” He states, “that the reflections promoted by a work and the exhibition of a work in a museum are not one in the same. The question of a permanent exhibition of works of art of the third Reich can readily be negated by citing its character as anti-art.” In this passage he says that it is unnecessary for “compliant art” to be placed in a museum setting. He later says that as “anti-art” it garners no further analytical engagement, as the answer will always be the same. Imdahl ends with an appeal to other art historians: “It repudiates the possibility of reflective perception and thus of any perceptible that would extend individual consciousness. In its exclusively ideological function, the message is necessarily restrictive.”<sup>77</sup>

Until the 1990s a vast majority of the scholarship relating to Adolf Wissel and more generally to “compliant art” was almost exclusively conducted by Germans. Outside Germany the reunification brought to the fore an understandable and heightened concern about Nazi era art. Over the course of the last two decades the academic approach of English-language art historical scholarship has shifted. Generally accepted schools of thought and their methods have been called into question. Modes of investigation based solely upon observational critique, artistic merit, and comparative analysis were swiftly becoming passé. Instead, many scholars in the 1990s began to critically analyze “Compliant Art” through a broader social lens.

*The Nazification of Art*, an anthology published in 1990, includes Susan Sontag’s 1974 essay “Fascinating Fascism,” which illustrates a common response prevalent in 1970s and early 1980s literature, one that highlights ideological innateness and general artistic banality. Sontag proclaimed that “fascist style at its best is Art Deco” and that “Nazi art was simple, figurative, emotional, not intellectual” and that it was “not just sententious” but rather “astonishingly

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<sup>77</sup> Staeck and Mommsen, *Nazi-Kunst ins Museum?*, 87-99. “Sie veröglichkeit zu reflektieren der Anschauung und damit jede das individuelle Bewußtein erweiternde Perspektive. In ausschließlich ideologischer Funktion ist die Botschaft notwendig restriktiv.”



meager as Art.” In the same volume, Walter Grasskamp states that “modern aesthetics in its entirety would have to be invalidated before one could open the art museum to [Compliant Art].” The interdisciplinary amalgamation of analysis in this anthology was unprecedented and an early catalyst in furthering our understanding of the social complexities that shaped the art of the National Socialist era. Intriguingly, in the preface, editors Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will note that there is a literary consensus that “National Socialist culture represented a combination of immense mass appeal and highly simplified, even banal aesthetic programming.”<sup>78</sup>

In *Art of the Third Reich* Peter Adams states that “not much is known about the art of the Third Reich... a number of books have been written about its political history but very few about the art it produced.”<sup>79</sup> He goes on to say that “passionate discussion follows any attempt to display works from this period” and that it “demonstrates that politicians, wide sections of the population, and even art historians are still ignorant about the nature and substance of the art produced in Germany under the National Socialists.”<sup>80</sup> He states that, “oversimplification about the art of this period has led to clichés”<sup>81</sup> and further implies that the public’s general lack of knowledge has led to misinterpretation, suspicion, and fear that has in turn prompted countless heated debates.<sup>82</sup>

In *The Faustian Bargain, The Art World in Nazi Germany*, Jonathan Petropoulos immediately identifies Adolf Wissel as “one of the most representative artists of the Third

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<sup>78</sup> Brandon Taylor and Wilfried Van Der Will: *The Nazification of Art: Art, Design, Music, Architecture, and Film in the Third Reich*. (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1990), 204-218; 213; 239; vi.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Adam: *Art of the Third Reich*. (New York: H.N Abrams, 1992), 7.

<sup>80</sup> Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, 7-21.

Reich.”<sup>83</sup> Therein, he confronts the single most important question that scholars have been trying to answer since the end of the regime. Why would artists and scholars, who are “erudite and polished professionals, members of a glamorous international elite who have mastered vast stores of arcane knowledge, who are cognizant of contemporary political and cultural trends, who were skilled and successful individuals” collaborate with Nazi leaders and help “implement a nefarious cultural program?”<sup>84</sup> He then explains that there is no answer and points out that “it is naïve and without historical foundation to expect members of the intelligentsia to behave in a more scrupulous and humane fashion.”<sup>85</sup> Petropoulos sets the tone for future analysis by compelling scholars such as Ingeborg Bloth to find a unique approach that would reframe how the arts and culture of Germany’s National Socialist era are perceived.

### **Ingeborg Bloth**

In her work *Adolf Wissel Malerei und Kunstpolitik im Nationalsozialismus*, Ingeborg Bloth opens with a quote from an article in the German arts journal *Kritische Berichte*: “The controversiality contained within the analysis and arguments of contemporary historians doesn’t exist in or has no counterpart in the work of art historians.”<sup>86</sup> This statement, she says, is further evidenced, comparatively, by the lack of public exposure, through mass media, of art historical issues. She goes on to say that the journal suggests that art historians avoid this material; that because of this circumvention, art historians cannot contribute to contemporary debates, and as such the discipline suffers from a lack of reality. Therefore she proposes that the present work is

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<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos: *The Faustian bargain the art world in Nazi Germany*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

<sup>84</sup> Petropoulos, *The Faustian bargain the art world in Nazi Germany*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Petropoulos, *The Faustian bargain the art world in Nazi Germany*, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Bloth: *Adolf Wissel, Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9. “Faschismusrezeption in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte nach 1945”, 1990.

her attempt to contribute to the historicization of National Socialist art by way of a methodology that is identifiably delineated from the prior methodology of circumvention employed in our field. She proposes that this delineation makes evident the bias in previous phases of scholarly attention to the subject, by highlighting their circumvention of both the subject and the object. In this case study she hopes to illustrate the historicization of the complex relationship between painting and the policies of the regime.<sup>87</sup> This case study is the cornerstone of the present analysis and as such Bloth's argument is in its entirety foundational.

Bloth explains that the circumvention or avoidance of Nazi art has been naturalized in the field and states that both historical and art historical consciousness is formed by the questions it asks itself. That the degree of narrowness or expanse, of abstraction or concentration, of differentiation or generalization, of limitation or openness of the questioning, constitutes the quality of the answers to the relative appropriation of the past reality still present in their works of art. Although, she recognizes that the 1970s and 1980s were the beginning, in a broader sense, of research relating to the art of the Nazi era, she states that this research was primarily centered around questions concerning its 'politically stabilizing' visual narrative, in relation to politico-fascist-theory and the concurrent power structure.

It is here that Bloth indicates that earlier research models established an "almost dogmatic" precedent of the total tabooing of the art of the Nazi era in the guise of "blanket-quality-negation." She relays that in 1986 Berthold Hinz emphasized its scientifically counterproductive affect. She further indicates that publications since then continue to show a

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<sup>87</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 9. Historicization was a term coined by Martin Broszat in 1983 where he proposed a "*Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus*" (Historization of National Socialism). Historians then adopted this term. Nevertheless, Broszat and those that mobilized this term needed to guard against the oversimplification of its meaning regarding concurrent arguments (of which Broszat was a part) pertaining to the patriotization of Nazi history.

“flat-rate rejection of artistic quality,” in that researchers are not willing to analyze and make clear distinctions. The common narrative, she says, is one that assumes total ideological homogeneity, which in turn implies that the indoctrinating effect produced by the art has been unquestionably taken for historical reality. Though Bloth acknowledges that the “blanket-quality-negation” decision was based on the need to differentiate the art condemned by the NSDAP from the art created under it, and that the legitimization of this decision was done as a moral response to the situational aftermath of 1945, she then mobilizes contemporary research that points to innate flaws in this type of analysis. Bloth uses an argument proposed by Klaus Herding as justification. Herding points out the problematic effect of replacing an analytical assessment with a moralizing one. He states that “the more one rejects something, the more it will be further necessary to withdraw to the utmost of analytical objectivity.” He further contextualizes that the point is to provide a precise reason for why something has occurred and that it is “from this basis that the entire system can be determined;” but, he continues, “such precise justifications would require “initially accurate sources.”<sup>88</sup> Those sources, she states, are found within an inextricable web of primary materials and research, and in a lack of contemporary voices to convey initial reception. Therein, Bloth implies that there is a lack of new or original research and that most scholarship relies heavily upon past scholarship and models.

Bloth also points out that, since 1974, there have been several attempts to display the art of the National Socialist era. In her analysis of the curation, reception, and discourse of these exhibitions a pattern emerges. The pattern parallels that of the “blanket negation” model. In an exhibition from 1991 the art of Adolf Wissel was prominently featured. Bloth notes that the

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<sup>88</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 10-11.

curatorial premise emphasized the cultural-historical relevance of the images instead of their nonexistent artistic quality. The notion put forth, she states, was one that required the viewer to grapple with the functionality of the individual within the National Socialist state and asked the viewer how this understanding is then reflected in, and associated with, art production. Bloth elaborates that the public's understanding of these roles was this exhibition's theme and that this theme corresponds to and is an interpretation of a common socio-historical model. The model, she says, was based on reception theory. She states that this approach is an appropriate model for the presentation of not only National Socialist art but the arts and cultural products of any period. Unfortunately, she notes, the catalogue, which provided visual and thinking aids, provided a narrative that incorporated standardize formulas in which to "see" the painting (*see note*) and provided for the viewer a caveat as to the delicate and controversial nature of displaying this type of artwork.<sup>89</sup> When she inquired into the historical evidence for the curatorial supposition, she found that they used conjecture and inconclusive evidence. The fact, she states, was that Wissel's artwork scored poorly amongst Nazi jurists, as its propagandist purpose probability was low. Additionally, his work was among hundreds purchased by the state in 1937 and after its exhibition in the great German art exhibition of 1939 the Nazi state considered them not worthy of any other exhibition.

Bloth makes evident that the art of Adolf Wissel is linguistically capable of speaking for today's observer. She cites a 1974 review of his work by Umberto Eco in which he states that the paintings "belong to a small group of pictures that stood out for their excellent style... [then speaking of the figures] it hard to say if they are Nazis and they are certainly not heroic, but they are not aware of their fossilization either. They wait and although they know that they are not

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<sup>89</sup> To see the painting as a complex array of formal attributes that prove to cleverly convey Nazi ideological propaganda.

real, they would like to appear genuine; in order not to take any risks, they do not make any great efforts. A wonderful parable for the false consciousness of an artist who could undoubtedly paint and would not renounce his style, but [nonetheless] sought to please the regime.”<sup>90</sup> It is within Eco’s nonbinary observation of Adolf Wissel’s paintings that the present analysis finds its foothold.

#### IV. VISUAL ANALYSIS

##### *SA-Mann*

In what seems like a counterintuitive approach in bolstering my own argument, the first image I would like to discuss depicts a member of the National Socialist Party. In 1933 Adolf Wissel painted *SA-Mann* (figure 3). Early on in the Party’s rise to power within Germany, members of the SA or *Sturmabteilung* (Storm Detachment) were a common sight in many larger towns. The SA’s function was to “navigate” or “propel” citizens to vote for or join the NSDAP.<sup>91</sup> They functioned as an extension of the police force providing crowd control and protection at Nazi rallies and assemblies. Additionally, they were tasked with disrupting the meetings of opposing parties, specifically the Communist party.

Although the work has been missing since the 1940s<sup>92</sup>, we are still able to glean a modicum of the artist’s treatment of this particular subject through a black and white

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<sup>90</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 13.

<sup>91</sup> John Toland: *Adolf Hitler*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 112.

<sup>92</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 52; Helmut Plath and Ernst Lüddeckens: *Der Maler Adolf Wissel: (1894-1973): Gedächtnisausstellung: Ausstellungsführer Des Historischen Museums Am Hohen Ufer*. (Hannover: Historisches Museum am Hohen Ufer, 1974), 14. According to the sources we have, which include 1 catalogue entry and several critic reviews, *SA-Mann* was last seen in München. “It was later heroized by party liberals and presented in an exhibition in München.” We can surmise that it went missing at this time, as it is not mentioned again.

reproduction. The painting depicts a three-quarter angle portrait bust of a young man donning the SA uniform and set against an indistinct solid background. His shank cap seems to be of the old style (figure 4), which was produced in a solid color tone with a leather bill—the new style after 1933 was constructed in solid canvas with the top rendered in a different color denoting a specific region or unit (figure 5).<sup>93</sup> Additionally, the newer uniform shirts would have been constructed with the same material and in the same color as the cap, and in this image they are distinctly different.<sup>94</sup> His cap has a leather chin strap, decorative silver button, and the *Parteiadler* (Stylized German Eagle, facing left, gripping an oak wreath containing a swastika). A dark tie, a leather shoulder strap, and a piped shoulder epaulette are just visible. His rank of *Sharführer* (Noncommissioned Officer) and unit or detachment are readable, respectively, on the left and right piped collar of his shirt.

Singularly, this depiction would seem to verify the artist's support for the party. Yet when taking into consideration his depiction of other portraits painted within the same relative time frame, this work seems severe in its treatment. The coloring in the face seems intentionally dirty. His brushwork throughout is particularly and atypically rough. His facial expression is both intent and threatening. He has been given gaunt features, which have been further exaggerated by his slumping shoulders, ill-fitting garments, large glaring eyes, thin lips, and large ears. This is the only image created by Wissel I am aware of that was accomplished in this caricatured style,<sup>95</sup> and his only image of a militarized party member from the period.

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<sup>93</sup> Andrew Mollo: *Uniforms of the SS*. London: Windrow & Greene, 1991.

<sup>94</sup> Mollo, *Uniforms of the SS*.

<sup>95</sup> Helmut Plath and Ernst Lüddeckens. *Der Maler Adolf Wissel: (1894-1973): Gedächtnisausstellung: Ausstellungsführer Des Historischen Museums Am Hohen Ufer*. (Hannover: Historisches Museum am Hohen Ufer, 1974) 14. The author notes the uncharacteristically rough and unheroic style applied to this work.

The National Socialist's official imagery of itself was highly vetted and regulated (*see* figures 6 and 7). Members of the SA were to be depicted as both physically and visually "ideal," robust, and authoritative. The man in figure 6 embodies those ideals: the SA member is young, blond, proud, and confident. The man depicted in figure 7 is the actor Heinz Klingenberg, who starred in the highly propagandistic film *SA-Mann Brand* in the summer of 1933. The overarching message conveyed by the film promotes the effectiveness of the NSDAP in defending the nation against the imminent and violent threat of Communist-Bolshevism, the need to support Adolf Hitler in the federal election, and the SA as heroic figures that facilitate the nation's "awakening."

It was also in the spring of 1933 that the SA publicly executed two top officials of the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or Social Democratic Party) in Hannover.<sup>96</sup> Niedersachsen and specifically Hannover and its surrounding villages were (and still are) predominantly supporters of the SPD. Additionally, most Germans both then and today maintain regional and civic pride over that of national pride as a matter of principal.<sup>97</sup> The region surrounding Hannover is nationally known to exhibit an extreme sense of pride in their regional variations and hold community in high regard.<sup>98</sup> Fascist propaganda asserted that the SA were there to protect the citizens of Hannover and their freedoms against the threat of Communism, not to murder their own.

This is the same year Adolf Wissel produced *SA-Mann*, which is a far cry from the National Socialist ideal. Wissel has been known to base his type figures on real people—could

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<sup>96</sup> "Ortsverein Hannover-Mitte Und Calenberger Neustadt Im Herzen Hannovers - Kranzniederlegung Für Das." SPD. February 22, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Glenn Penny: "Fashioning Local Identities in an Age of Nation-Building: Museums, Cosmopolitan Visions, and Intra-German Competition." *German History* 17, no. 4 (1999): 489-502.

<sup>98</sup> Penny, "Fashioning Local Identities in an Age of Nation-Building: Museums, Cosmopolitan Visions, and Intra-German Competition," 489-502.



this be a depiction related to the propaganda imagery in which Klingenberg operated? If so, it represents a type of tactile reality based upon a representation of a representation of a constructed nonreality. Wissel employs, through style and technique, the ideals of the Neue Sachlichkeit, and his naïve approach provides his viewers with an “objective” view of the reality of the SA as opposed to the fictive representation. His depiction of a Sturmabteilung, therefore, could be read as political critique and considered counterintuitive to party directive.

### ***Bäuerin***

For the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit the intent was to render an “objective” and sober view of their subject matter unadulterated by personal and societal “subjectivity” and uninfluenced by emotion or supposition. These artists sought to convey a universal truth stripped of sentimentality and anecdote. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the diversity of styles associated with the movement has made it difficult for scholars to definitively categorize any official tenets. However, as Sabine Eckmann notes, the “artists of the genre share a singular commitment to visibility,” which, “complicates their perception and their meaning, specifically because they are caught within a culture of visual display.”<sup>99</sup> In a sense their continued production was dictated by an awareness of the susceptibility of their art to perform well within the process of commodification.

During the National Socialist era Adolf Wissel maintained a singular commitment to the stylistic tendencies of the Neue Sachlichkeit, though he was primarily informed by the classicist approach. For many German artists who operated within a classicist model, a return to realism meant a return to a specifically German realist archetype. For Adolf Wissel, I would argue that

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<sup>99</sup>Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 27.

the Biedermeier style was the most significant point of influence. The most important attribute of the Biedermeier is that it was developed, in part, as a response to the social upheaval incited by the Napoleonic wars, just as the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in some capacity, was responding to the social disorder following World War One.

The art of the Biedermeier emphasized reality through precision of detail informed by firsthand observation. In addition, there was an emphasis on simplicity of line and composition and an increased effort toward portraying regional specificities. The work of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, such as his *Self-Portrait* from 1828 (figure 8), is often seen as an exemplar of this style and approach to subject matter. The work of artists like Waldmüller have been stylistically linked to the art of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and carries through to the work of Adolf Wissel.<sup>100</sup>

Like Waldmüller's *Self-Portrait*, Wissel's *Bäuerin* (1938) (figure 9) contains a singular forward-facing monumental figure set against a neutral background, both of which prompt the viewer to question whether the content that they are viewing is a portrait or a genre scene.<sup>101</sup> The artists both seem to capture a fragment of everyday life, yet, simultaneously, their subjects appear overtly posed. Wissel emulates Waldmüller's perspectival scheme, as evident in his use of deep background recession and placement of the horizon line at the center of the composition. In this instance, Wissel also emulates the way in which Waldmüller frames his composition by pressing his subject into the picture plane, filling the work with the subject, and effectively divorcing it from the swiftly receding background. These seemingly shared visual characteristics create a greater sense of frankness, solemnity, and realism that we see, more generally, within *Neue Sachlichkeit* art and in Adolf Wissel's work. It is Wissel's flatness of form and unsettling

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<sup>100</sup> Schröder and Winters and Pyritz and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 35.

<sup>101</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 162-164. This work has been missing since 1945. This is his wife's mother, it was in the GDK in 1938, he didn't want to sell this particular picture. It was sold without his knowledge.

rigid frontal positioning of this figure that separates his modernist approach from Waldmüller's more Romantic portraiture style.

Wissel's *Bäuerin* is a three-quarter length forward facing figure of a farmer's wife in the latter half of her life. Her head and shoulders are framed by a brilliant blue sky that recedes into a lightly clouded distance. The lower half of her body is framed on each side by a dark green grassy field hemmed off by two rustic wooden fence lines before receding into a wooded horizon. On the left in the far distance are two figures that seem to be at work. The woman herself is clad in a dark blue button-down vest, matching pleated skirt, and white linen short sleeved undergarments indicative of the era. An evenly positioned white scarf covers her head and is fastened tightly in a simple symmetrical knot under her chin. Her eyes, which reflect the deep blue of her gown, are lined with age. Her lips are thin but not pressed. Her countenance is calm. Her hands, similarly worn with time, are simply crossed with her left arm resting upon her abdomen and her right settled gently upon the wrist of her left. Her tan lines are visible just below her sleeves and expose the soft creamy flesh beneath. The color then transitions down her arms becoming a golden hue that, but for its glint, renders her wedding ring almost invisible.

Wissel's depiction of the rural peasantry, as noted by Ingeborg Bloth, was extremely popular during the National Socialist era. Many of his works, this one included, were used by the National Socialists for promotional and propagandistic purposes (figure 10). The subject matter was promoted by the government and was taken up by many of the most prominent artists of the era. The National Socialists made clear their opposition to modernist artistic movements and styles, specifically those from the twentieth century. They required artists to work in what they called the clearer and more "naturalistic" styles of the previous centuries. Realism, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism were all considered acceptable stylistic formats. In this light, it

is probable that the work of Wissel was deemed acceptable because of his subject matter and because his classicist approach was inspired by a realist movement in the form of the Biedermeier.

Although Wissel's *Bäuerin* maintains ideological and compositional similarities to Waldmüller's *Self-Portrait*, and the Biedermeier style more generally, it is decidedly modern in its execution. Though subtle, attributes such as the geometrical precision, the hard contours of the figure, the spatial arrangement, the striking juxtaposition of colors, and the figure's monumentality are all prominent features of the Neue Sachlichkeit. In 1934 the National Socialists officially condemned the Neue Sachlichkeit as an inappropriate style and many of its artists and their works were labeled "degenerate." Wissel could have adopted a more "appropriate" style in the creation of his work; he had ample opportunity to do so and a plethora of examples were available for him to emulate, both contemporaneous and historical. Wissel may very well have been influenced by paintings like Michael Nader's *Alte Frau mit weißer Bluse* (1829) (figure 12), which maintains almost identical framing and subject matter as *Bäuerin*. Yet he, unlike his contemporaries, who were composing similar subject matter (figure 11), intentionally executed his work in a style that was, at the time and for all intent and purposes, declared degenerate. Laurie Winters notes that, in the case of the Biedermeier, "there was a need amongst artists to emphasize the fundamental characteristics of their subject matter, not unlike scientific observation for the purpose of classification and understanding."<sup>102</sup> She states further that "this explains the strange state of suspension between surrealistic precision and idealized typology".<sup>103</sup> For the purposes of the present analysis this suspension is what fundamentally ties the Biedermeier to the Neue Sachlichkeit. In an entry from F.A. Brockhaus's

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<sup>102</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 260.

<sup>103</sup> Schröder, Winters, Pyritz, and Ottomeyer, *Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity*, 260.

widely circulated *Conversations-Lexicon* (1844), the critic explores the meaning of simplicity in art. Brockhaus relays that “the art of simplicity rejects the need to appeal through traditional form and composition and as if governed by ‘alien laws’, is still of the moment and at the same time exposes its innermost truth without being demanding.”<sup>104</sup> Continuing in this line of thinking, it is plausible that Wissel, in his pursuit of “objectivity” and “truth,” was able to sideline government policy and continue to paint in a prohibited style because he appeared to conform to approved ideological conventions. Yet, those conventions, which revolve around identity politics and typological homogeneity become pregnant with meanings that sharply contrast with party policy.

### ***Kind mit Narzissen and Bauernmädchen (Niedersächsisches Bauernkind)***

Though varied in their approach the artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit explored the human subject in terms of identity and social status. For some artists, specifically those who operated in the photographic medium, an interest in human typological representation arose out of the desire to encapsulate and preserve society on the one hand, and the need to analyze and classify the nation’s physiognomic variation on the other. Although these projects were ostensibly motivated by an archival impulse, they were nonetheless intended as a means “to give the public a comforting impression that the German spirit [and culture] had survived the war uninjured.”<sup>105</sup>

As Matthew Biro has persuasively argued, the 1920s saw the elevation of photography to the status of “high art,” in large part due to avant-garde disruptions to established artistic norms

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<sup>104</sup> F.A. Brockhaus: *Brockhaus Conversations-Lexicon: Vollständig in 15 Bänden*. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1844), 609.

<sup>105</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 9. Quote by Ulrich Keller.

and hierarchies.<sup>106</sup> In the Weimar era, photography was often manipulated, reincorporated, and bestowed alternative meanings and functions. George Baker has noted that the photograph was once thought of as an objective autonomous object, specifically in the modern era where there was a general belief that the link between the subjectivity of the author and the photographic product could be severed.<sup>107</sup> This general belief was bolstered by societal claims of photography's innate objectivity. Yet, even in the pursuit of "objectivity" to portray or depict "truth," there must be some process of meaning-making. Photographer and critic Allan Sekula asserts that to provide any sort of photographic meaning the artist must reincorporate a certain subjective dimension.<sup>108</sup> For a photo to be analyzed or read, an individual must be provided with some semblance of both textual and contextual factors related to the production of the work.<sup>109</sup>

For August Sander (1876 - 1964), who has often been linked with the emergence of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the creation of a truly "objective" work meant the incorporation of scientific analysis and observation within his process. Sander composed his figures, with their cooperation, in a "paradigmatic demonstration" that exposed all the characteristics of the individual and the setting.<sup>110</sup> By using the camera as a type of scientific tool used for the process of objective observation and archiving, Sander was able to strip away anecdote and sentimentality and further

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<sup>106</sup> Matthew Biro: "How Can I Be Sure?: The Dialogue Between Painting and Photography in Modern and Contemporary Art." *Hallmark Art Collection*. (2015). Accessed February 14, (2019), 3. "As a mode of advanced art, modernist painting was first successfully challenged by photography in the 1920s, when abstraction began to be criticized for its disconnection from everyday life. The academic hierarchy of the fine arts, which placed painting and sculpture at the pinnacle, was disrupted, as avant-garde artists like the Dadaists, Constructivists, and Surrealists sought to make contact not just with elite beholders but also with a modern mass audience. Now all media were equal in the service of radical art; the truth of the work was a result of its criticism of the world; and the concept behind the work's production grew in importance."

<sup>107</sup> George Baker: "Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait." *October* 76 (1996): 72-113. (Accessed January 10, 2019), 75.

<sup>108</sup> Baker, "Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait", 75.

<sup>109</sup> Baker, "Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait", 75.

<sup>110</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 30.

bridge the gap between portrait and genre scene, in the interest of expressing the presentation of factual information.<sup>111</sup> To create meaning, he used an encyclopedic format in the naming of his works. Instead of providing the viewer with the name of the sitter he often provided his viewers with a typological classification, i.e. their occupation and or social station (figures 15, and 16). This at once provided a method of creating distance between the subject and the work of art, dialogue between the work and viewer, and meaning by way of individual psycho-social objectification.

Adolf Wissel, in a similar vein, in his pursuit of “objectivity,” used photography as part of his process. Figures 17 and 18, taken by the artist in his studio, illustrate this. Wissel may have used photography not simply as a tool for realistic rendering, but rather, like Sander, as a method of separation in the pursuit of “truth.” For Sander’s work, as argued by Baker, this was achieved by applying the Freudian theory of “the uncanny”, specifically the “double”, to our understanding of his work.<sup>112</sup> In basic terms, “doubling” implies a negotiation between the familiar and the unfamiliar.<sup>113</sup> The space between, also known as the liminal, is precisely the point where our mind perceives the uncanny. In a sense, photographic imagery resides within that space, the effect being a “doubling” of our sense of self: the familiar refers to the continuum, the unfamiliar refers to a specific moment, and the uncanny refers to a captured moment (like in a photograph) residing within the continuum. In a sense all photographs could be seen to fit within this paradigm. Yet Sander seems to take it a step further. Ulrich Keller notes incongruities that seem to seep into the surface of Sander’s imagery, propelling us to ask: what lies beneath the

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<sup>111</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 30.

<sup>112</sup> Baker, "Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait", 98-101.

<sup>113</sup> David Bate: *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*. (London: Tauris, 2011), 39-40.

surface, what is both seen and unseen?<sup>114</sup> For example: In his work *Konfirmand* (figure 13), Sander refers to a specific time or moment in this person's life (their confirmation); he then effectively doubles its significance again, through the inclusion of the clock in the background and by "confirming" an actual time. Additionally, it is not insignificant that this image features a child. In Freudian theory this moment of "the uncanny" and the discovery of the "double" is often associated with a degree of human development, a liminal stage in childhood referred to as the "narcissism of the child."<sup>115</sup> This last point is of note. Since it is known that Wissel is utilizing photography as means of exploring "truth," is it possible that he, like Sander, may have occasionally referenced these themes within his art?

In 1934 Adolf Wissel was commissioned by a local manager to paint his daughter.<sup>116</sup> *Kind mit Narzissen (Child with Narcissuses)* (figure 19), depicts a forward-facing young child holding a small bouquet of daffodils. The scene incorporates an undulating and playful bucolic landscape. Additionally, as with many of his other works, Wissel has thrust his subject into the immediate foreground, effectively divorcing it from the background. The title, the framing, the subject matter, and the composition, suggest a flirtation with psychological theory. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidential material to support this claim. However, it should be mentioned that the active engagement with contemporary theoretical concepts was prevalent amongst members of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

In 1935 this work was paired with a similarly constructed non-commissioned work titled *Bauernmädchen (Niedersächsisches Bauernkind)* (1935) (figure 20), during the 1935 Reichsertedankfest at *Deutsche Kunst Goslar* (discussed below); what results is a kind of

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<sup>114</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Bate, *Photography and Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*, 39-40.

<sup>116</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 82.



Freudian “doubling”.<sup>117</sup> In this work, Wissel depicts a three-quarter angled portrait bust of a young girl. As the extended title suggests, she is a rural child from Niedersachsen. This image is similarly framed as the former painting, yet, it is lacking the former’s playful background and perspective. Ingeborg Bloth notes the visual similarities between the two works, as well as the fact that they both represent young, blond, blue-eyed Hannoverian girls.<sup>118</sup> She does so to highlight a possible ideological preference for *Kind mit Narzissen*, citing that Wissel showed a total of six works at this show (one of which will be discussed momentarily), yet only *Kind mit Narzissen* appeared in the official catalog.<sup>119</sup> Bloth argues that this was due to the former’s prominently featured Nordic aspects (stark blond hair and pronounced cheekbone structure).<sup>120</sup> This helps to bolster her argument that Wissel was not always ideologically complacent in his depiction of Germany’s peasantry. What is most interesting for my analysis is the paring itself. The very act of showing these works together (as pendant portraits) suggests a form of “doubling,” not unlike Sander’s *Bauernkinder* (1927) (figure 14). In Keller’s description of Sander’s *Bauernkinder* there is a noted similarity between this particular paring and Wissel’s. Therein, he states that, the details could promote a narrative of a happy childhood ideal, “but the total effect tells another story.”<sup>121</sup> Although, the girl on the left seemingly does what the portrait situation requires the girl on the right does not seem to want to conform. Additionally, in their placement in a bleak field far out in the country, we encounter “a disparity between social aspiration and reality that seems to possess surreal overtones.”<sup>122</sup> Sander’s farm children no more conform to a social ideal than they affirm it. Their appearance, he states, could be

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<sup>117</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 72.

<sup>118</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 72-73.

<sup>119</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 72.

<sup>120</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 72.

<sup>121</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 2.

multivalently read. Yet the fictive narrative Sander presents becomes all the more complex, as his final product was only partly successful. Keller further notes that Sanders contemporaries would have taken it at face value, but today's viewers would note its incongruities. Additionally, works like August Sander's and Adolf Wissel's do not simply present a fictive reality but rather draw attention to the construction of that reality. By presenting these works together, Wissel creates a dialogue that seems to point out innate differences in the creation of these works.

Taking for granted that Wissel has indeed photographed his subjects, we are provided, on the one hand, with an approach which depicts a reality rendered "objectively" by way of an object that has been impregnated with a fictive ideologically driven narrative; while on the other, a more academic approach where we are provided with an "objective" representation of an "objective" representation (which contains no ideological function). Contemplated together, it is as if Wissel were asking his viewers to question their own idea of reality. Similarly, according to Keller, Sander's technique also exposed a few tellingly unusual features, ensuring that we neither thoughtlessly accept the appearance of the sitter nor relish it; rather, we are led to examine it as a social fiction and projection.<sup>123</sup> It would seem that Adolf Wissel intended, like August Sander, to present his audience with visual evidence in the attempt to stimulate discussion and reflection.<sup>124</sup> As mentioned previously, *Kind mit Narzissen* was the officially preferred work. This both bolsters the idea that the Party preferred imagery that reflected its own fictive reality over a more "naturalistic" representation and one which reflects Keller's suggestion of face value acceptance. That aside, together these works present a narrative that directly confronted the fictive reality that the National Socialists were immediately presenting at Goslar.

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<sup>123</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 2.

<sup>124</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 2.

## *Bauerngruppe*

From 1933 to 1937 the National Socialists staged an annual rally on the Bückeberg (a hill near the city of Hameln 25 miles south of Hannover). Referred to as Bückebergfest and considered an integral part of the larger Reichsertedankfest (Reich Thanksgiving), the purpose of this rally was to promote “German culture” by enveloping and promoting the rural communities (specifically in Niedersachsen, as they believed it to be the ideological heart of the Nation) as the source-blood of the “German people.” The rally began with a motorcade from Hannover to the Bückeberg and concluded in Goslar. The purposes of the Nazi rallies varied; where the Nürnberg rally was to promote NSDAP leadership and the one in Berlin celebrated the NSDAP’s commitment to the working class, the rally at Bückeberg was a propagandistic device developed to appeal specifically to the nation’s peasantry.<sup>125</sup> The Party actively promoted the idea that the peasantry, whom they also marketed as descendants of a racially defined homogeneous group of farmer-warriors, were the originators of German culture. The NSDAP believed that this type of activation of propagandist discourse would effectively “bind the rural population idealistically and emotionally to the regime.”<sup>126</sup>

The concept was developed by the *Reichspropagandaministeriums* (Reich Propaganda Ministry) as a way to mobilize Germany’s rural population to unite with the leaders of the NSDAP in a visual act of solidarity. Visuals of Bückebergfest could in turn be utilized by the Party’s propaganda machine to promote its nationalist rhetoric of a culturally diverse, racially homogeneous, robust nation. To obtain the sheer number of guests that were needed to propagate a successful event, the National Socialists released three successive waves of propaganda. The

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<sup>125</sup> Frederic Spotts: *Hitler and The Power of Aesthetics*. (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2009), 19; 101; Peter Fritzsche: *Germans into Nazis*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 17-19.

<sup>126</sup> Zeitgeschichte Hameln. “Der Bückeberg – Ein Unbequemes Denkmal.” Dokumentation Bückeberg.

first phase began in June of 1933 under the motto “Stadt und Land – Hand in Hand” (“City and Country - Hand in Hand”), proclaiming a unified nation under National Socialism. Then in August they used the slogan “Unser Brot aus eigener Scholle” (“Our Bread from our own Region”), an illusion to self-sufficiency and an abundant national reserve. Finally, in September, they appropriated the motto “Unterm Erntekranz” (“Under the Harvest Wreath”) from the church to integrate and legitimize NSDAP propaganda within a longer narrative of rural religious tradition.<sup>127</sup>

The first wave of propaganda references the *Volksgemeinschaft* and is arguably the most central concept of National Socialist thought.<sup>128</sup> The *Volksgemeinschaft* is described as a *völkish* (of the people) ideal that pertains to a predominantly conflict-free, harmonious society that is free of class barriers and struggle.<sup>129</sup> In this vein, the *völker* (the people) is a racially and ethnically defined term mobilized in a nationalist sense. It is strongly related to the term “state” as in a nation comprised of a diverse set of nation states with individual regional variation (not unlike the United States, France, and the United Kingdom). When utilized in the context of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German social and political rhetoric, the term “volk” implies a culturally diverse, ethnically homogeneous society unified through a common language and organized as a national community. According to the Association for Regional Cultural and Contemporary History Hameln eV, “the National Socialists propagated the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a solution to all political and social antagonisms of the Weimar Republic and related slogans

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<sup>127</sup> Zeitgeschichte Hameln. “Der Bückeberg – Ein Unbequemes Denkmal.” Dokumentation Bückeberg.

<sup>128</sup> Hilde Kammer and Elisabeth Bartsch: *Jugendlexikon Nationalsozialismus: Begriffe Aus Der Zeit Der Gewaltherrschaft 1933-1945*. (Reinbek Bei Hamburg: Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verl., 2007), 222.

<sup>129</sup> Kammer and Bartsch, *Jugendlexikon Nationalsozialismus: Begriffe Aus Der Zeit Der Gewaltherrschaft 1933-1945*, 222.

such as ‘community action goes before self-interest’ were met with broad approval.”<sup>130</sup> This last point is understandable as it nationalized the average Germans sense of civic pride.

In 1933 Goslar was chosen as the headquarters for the *Reichsnährstand* (Reich Department of Agriculture) and later distinguished as the *Reichsbauernstadt* (Reich Farmers City or Seat of Farming). The city was given an idealizing, “Germanic” agrarian, facelift and during the Reichsertedankfest the “idyllic” atmosphere was further heightened by the imposition of state sanctioned décor. If your home or business was a part of or could be seen from the festival grounds or parade route, strictly defined decoration was violently enforced. These decorations included garlands, party symbols, and propaganda that include posters and banners with slogans and messages similar to those mentioned earlier. The façade created during the Reichsertedankfest also prominently included the people. *Volk* who met the Party’s idealized physiognomic requirements were recruited to dress in traditional costume for propaganda purposes. This was to give the “impression of a farmer's party and to highlight the peasantry” and the Volksgemeinschaft. Yet the propaganda and pageantry were a far cry from reality. The peasantry only accounted for one sixth of those participating in the events, “*Artfremde*” (strangers) like the Jews and other “Non-Germans” were excluded, and Party officials acting in self-interest profited while those they actively promoted (the peasantry) were stifled.<sup>131</sup>

The National Socialists were masters of mass indoctrination through visual spectacles that were simultaneously performances and performative.<sup>132</sup> Events such as Reichsertedankfest were meant to both inform and guide the general *Weltanschauung* (world view and a key

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<sup>130</sup> Zeitgeschichte Hameln. “Der Bückeberg – Ein Unbequemes Denkmal.” Dokumentation Bückeberg.

<sup>131</sup> Zeitgeschichte Hameln. “Der Bückeberg – Ein Unbequemes Denkmal.” Dokumentation Bückeberg.

<sup>132</sup> Jeremy L Schrupp: “Albert Speer's Cathedral of Light: The Politico-Religious Experience of National Socialist Performance Art.” In *Education and Human Rights*, edited by Witold Stankowski and Nevide Akpinar Dellal, 76-89. (Beau Bassin, Mauritius: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2018), 2.

signifier in the construction of identity) of the völker.<sup>133</sup> This event provided a link between the general population and their “cultural roots”. For the National Socialists, this connection was both biological and physiognomic and emphasized the idea of the “*Stamme*” or “*Ur-type*” (an ordinary archetype).<sup>134</sup> As noted by George Baker, typological analysis was both a prevalent and highly caviled analytical concept, one that was applied across the breadth of academia.<sup>135</sup>

Much of Sander’s and Wissel’s typologically titled depictions of rural peasantry easily fed into NSDAP propaganda and narrative. Photographs by Sander such as *Jungbauern* (1914) and *Jungbauern* (1920) (figures 15 and 16) promote an idea of mirroring or familiarity. Both images contain a grouping of men, smartly dressed in what appear to be contemporary fashions, and depicted en route to some sort of social affair. These are, as the titles suggest, depictions of farmers, yet they dress and look as we do. Additionally, the artist has visually tied them to the land. These images exude a sense of comfort and ease which can only be explained in terms of “*Heimat*” (the psycho-social German linguistic concept of “home”). Therefore, the viewer is led to believe that they must share some sort of cultural and biological connection.

Wissel’s work served a similar function when mobilized by the NSDAP. Among the work presented at the Goslar show was *Bauerngruppe* (1935) (figure 21). This work was Wissel’s first monumental typologically titled grouping and his first public showing of the piece. As the title would suggest it depicts a grouping of farmers. Typologically, the figures represent a typical example of peasantry one could find anywhere in Germany in the 1930s. This particular group would have been easily recognized as Hanoverian, due to the regionally specific hooded

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<sup>133</sup> Schrupp, “Albert Speer’s Cathedral of Light: The Politico-Religious Experience of National Socialist Performance Art,” 2.

<sup>134</sup> George Baker: “Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait.” *October*76 (1996): 72-113. (Accessed January 10, 2019), 84.

<sup>135</sup> Baker, “Photography between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait,” 84.

bonnet worn by the female figure.<sup>136</sup> As with most of his imagery from this time, Wissel has thrust his figures into the liminal space. Because of both the work's monumental proportions (scaled to life) and because of the figure's position on the edge, a direct dialogue is created between viewer and object. The narrative implied is one of unity: the viewer is confronted with a depiction of the "indigenous" people or "Stamme" from the ideological heart of the nation. Placed within a rolling bucolic Hanoverian landscape, the figures are depicted as both healthy and hard-working. The land bears the fruit of their labors, inextricably binding them to it. The figures are placed in front of a short-cut grassy knoll which visually divides the work in half. On the top of the knoll a rustic wooden fence runs parallel to the viewing plane, visually separating the middle ground from the swiftly receding background. Just beyond this fence lies a bountiful field of grain that extends from the left side out of the visual plane and swiftly recedes towards the vanishing point at center. To the right of the vanishing point, a distant hill is just visible.

Like his other works, Wissel emulates the portrait format by having his subjects dominate the work. The work contains four figures, divided visually into pairs. Centered on the left, is a three-quarter length middle aged male dressed in typical clothes of the era: brown pants and vest, white collarless blouse, and a brown newsboy cap. In front of him stands a young boy, cut off by the frame and visible as a quarter length angled bust. He wears a white collared button-down blouse and a brown ascot cap. His head has been rendered in strict profile. To the right is a grown man and woman, both are approximately three-quarter length. The man stands in profile to the far right, hands crossed leaning on a walking stick, and dressed in contemporary work attire: tan collarless over coat, dark brown collarless blouse, and brown straw fedora. The woman stands at his side, slightly to the rear-left, and is angled toward the viewer. She dons a white

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<sup>136</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 69.

bonnet, a gray pleated skirt, and a dark brown button-down vest over a white linen short sleeved shirt. Her bare arms are folded at the waist. A light green fabric, presumably a shawl, is folded casually over her right arm. She is the only figure whose gaze connects with the viewer; her countenance seems to convey a silent knowing.

Wissel constructed this work using a classical rule of composition, the golden triangle (figure 22, A). The bisecting line runs from the lower left to the upper right corner. This triangulation would have had the effect of unifying the entire group while also uniting the couple with the child, who faces them. This harmonious model would not have been lost on the National Socialists and could have aided them in constructing both a hierarchy and a generational familial narrative. One such interpretation is as follows: the patriarch, to the left of the work, is an embodiment of pride and prominently placed in the top-most position. His thumbs are tucked in his vest while his head, framed by the sky, is held high. His son at the far right is visually depicted just below his father, his wife below him. Their son, the progeny of the family line, is placed at the bottom. He is physical proof of the grouping's familial bounty. His existence echoes the abundance of their land.

Additionally, the National Socialist's racially charged propaganda encouraged a high birthrate by actively promoting that German women become mothers and housewives, while simultaneously fostering the patriarchal line to "sow" and "cultivate" the German family, insuring the future strength of the German race. A propaganda poster from the era (figure 23), propagates this very idea. It depicts a racially ideal, happy, healthy, strong, and bountiful family unit in the foreground, dominated and embraced by the *Parteiadler* (Party Eagle) directly behind them. Therein, it suggests that families look to the Party (both ideologically and physically) to encourage their neighbors to follow suit.



Interestingly, the prevailing criticism of Wissel's *Bauerngruppe* at the Goslar show was that the female figure had a less than ideal physiognomy. In that, she was depicted with brown hair, brown eyes, and broader facial features. Bloth notes that this initial criticism was rationalized as an artistic oversight due to the artist's positioning of the child's head. This strict profile view was accepted as an attempt by Wissel to prominently feature the Nordic physiognomy of the ideal German rural family. The purchase of this work during the Goslar show by Richard Walther Darré, the *Reichsbauernführer* (Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture), validated its ideological suitability.<sup>137</sup> Although we cannot be certain that this was the meaning that Wissel intended to convey, it is nonetheless a viable one.

Bloth argues that *Bauerngruppe* was grossly misrepresented at Goslar. As proof she points again to Wissel's continuity of subject, style, and his apolitical stance.<sup>138</sup> In essence, she argues that Wissel's work can indeed be read as propaganda, but that it was likely not his intention. I would argue, in contrast, that Wissel may have intended this work to be read thusly, but that there is evidence to suggest that *Bauerngruppe* may harbor an intentional double meaning.

In her analysis of this image, Bloth inadvertently discovers keys to unlocking the double reading that I believe this work conveys. To aide in her investigation, Bloth uses both her knowledge of the subjects depicted and an oil cartoon (figure 24) created by the artist within the same year. First, she notes that the models for this grouping were his wife, her father, a neighbor, and his little son.<sup>139</sup> She then states that, apart from being neighbors, these models were not really farmers. She then goes on to say that although the figures are endowed with individuality

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<sup>137</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 71-75.

<sup>138</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 71-75.

<sup>139</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 69.

and distinct physiognomy, that any stance in favor of individualism is negated by the typological title. She then bolsters this train of thought by indicating that Wissel began to be concerned with the depiction of peasant types at this moment and continued in this format until the end of the 1940s. Lynette Roth, in her exploration of the typological tendency of portraiture within the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, notes that artists, rather than emphasizing a unique individual or personality, subverted the conventions of the genre to represent social types.<sup>140</sup> She states that the “tendency to think of their subject matter as a type prompted them to seek out their sitters accordingly”.<sup>141</sup> This statement is of note, specifically in the case of Adolf Wissel. It would suggest that Wissel’s highly composed scenes, populated by non-farming friends and family, contradicted their archival typological titling. Additionally, Wissel had begun using typological titles in the 1920s and continued using them until the end of his career.<sup>142</sup> The difference between those and the artwork analyzed here is that the subjects in his former work, like August Sander, were in reality the social types inscribed by the title. This shift, I believe, was a conscious choice. Wissel had ample opportunity to select actual farmers as his subjects but chose not to. Also, like Sander, the idea of creating an archive was bound up with the logic of loss and control, that what is being documented was the narrative.<sup>143</sup> However, the observer, in Wissel’s case, should question what is actually being documented. Are the ideas of loss and control, in this case, bound up with the concurrent political landscape? If these are not actually farmers, as the title suggests, what narrative is the artist proposing and how should these works be read? For Bloth, the title acts as a foil in reading the models as individuals. However, in relation to the tenets of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the typological narrative points to the constructed nature of the grouping and

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<sup>140</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 260.

<sup>141</sup> Barron and Eckmann, eds., *New Objectivity: Modern German Art in the Weimar Republic, 1919-1933*, 260.

<sup>142</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*.

<sup>143</sup> Sander, *August Sander: Citizens of The Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs, 1892-1952*, 2.

vicariously their individuality, causing us to question the proposed narrative and, again, the present construction at Goslar.

Secondly, Bloth states that the figural framing highlights the relative distance from the picture plane to the horizon line helping to define and solidify the space.<sup>144</sup> Additionally, she notes that the broken shape of the rustic wooden fence has the effect of connecting both the figures and the observer with the space. I would argue, in contrast, that the positioning and framing of the subjects have the effect of opening the center space, providing the viewer with a clear view of the vanishing point, but in doing so an additional compositional model is created (figure 22, B). When positioned upright the triangle composition traditionally provides a sense of hierarchical structure and stability. When inverted, as in this case, it destabilizes the composition and contradicts the harmonious lines created by the golden triangle. Wissel then doubles this aura of instability by composing his background in yet another destabilizing compositional model (figure 22, C). This work has been bisected both vertically, through the separation of the figures on either side of the work creating the feeling of double or pendent portraits, and horizontally, by positioning the horizon in the absolute center. The combined use of three separate compositional models stacked on top of each other contribute to an atmosphere that can be explained in terms of its irrationality. Additionally, as with many of his works, Wissel's framing presses his subjects to the very edge of the picture plane, filling the space, effectively divorcing them from the background. The effect resembles that of a photographic portrait studio. Therein, the subjects are positioned in front of a fictional backdrop and framed accordingly to give the impression of a type of narrated reality.

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<sup>144</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 70.

Thirdly, as can be seen in the initial cartoon, Wissel made several compositional adjustments in the creation of the final work. Among these was the addition of the central bisection. Bloth notes moreover that the artist has made an adjustment to the horizon, which she explains was a scenery modification and that the relative flatness of the original horizon resembled the Wendland, the setting in which the work was painted.<sup>145</sup> This seemingly unimportant remark, for the purposes of the present argument, is monumental. In 1934, Wissel married and relocated his studio from his brother's farm in Velber to his wife's home in Cussebode, part of the Wendland in the far northeast corner of Niedersachsen.<sup>146</sup> Now known as Kussebode, the name derives from the Slavic *kosa* (scythe) and *bodút'* (stab or sting).<sup>147</sup> Historically Wendland, which linguistically derived from *Wenden*, an old German term meaning Slavs who reside in German-speaking lands, was inhabited by a western Slavic tribe.<sup>148</sup> Bloth noted earlier in her analysis that the only major criticism of *Bauerngruppe* related to the unideal features of the female figure. In this light, Frau Wissel's physiognomy could be considered less than "Nordic." The National Socialists actively promoted *Antislawismus* (anti-Slavic sentiment), considering the Slavs as a lesser race. Adolf Wissel, in his depiction of a racially defined "German" type, chose to highlight the more accurate heterogeneous reality of the German population. Additionally, the background adjustment from the flat Wendland to the rolling hills of Hannover, though undetectable by the viewer, further emphasizes the fictive nature of Wissel's proposed typological narrative.

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<sup>145</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*. 71-72.

<sup>146</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 25.

<sup>147</sup> *Historisches Gemeindeverzeichnis Für Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Namens-, Grenz- Und Schlüsselnummernänderungen Bei Gemeinden, Kreisen Und Regierungsbezirken Vom 27.5.1970 Bis 31.12.1982*. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1983), 230.

<sup>148</sup> *Historisches Gemeindeverzeichnis Für Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Namens-, Grenz- Und Schlüsselnummernänderungen Bei Gemeinden, Kreisen Und Regierungsbezirken Vom 27.5.1970 Bis 31.12.1982*, 230.

Finally, Bloth notes that the young boy has been repositioned. She states that the composition juxtaposes the figures with the viewer without bringing them together and that the change in the position of the boy (at the very edge of the picture plane and at the eye-level of the viewer) helped monumentalize the other figures. She further states that in 1935 this composition was likely what led people to believe that the picture reinforced a basic Volkisch and National Socialist ideology: “the valorization of the peasants.” Though I agree that the work hinders the subjective discourse on the part of the viewer, the obstruction does not lie in the figure’s monumentalization. The barrier is the flattened, unsettling, and inflexible profile view of the child. The profile view acts as a foil, making a subjective “gaze” or dialogical connection difficult. Additionally, Wissel provides the viewer with another double image. The boy both inhabits the liminal space of the canvas and as a young adolescent inhabits a liminal stage in life.<sup>149</sup>

Interestingly, *Bauerngruppe* was made specifically for the show at Goslar. This work, like the aforementioned pairing *Kind mit Narzissen* and *Bauernmädchen*, serves dual functions. It at once evokes the problematic ideologies and propaganda enforced by the concurrent political regime and, at the same time, denies their efficacy. Adolf Wissel created works that were imbued with meaning by way of their typological titling. In doing so, their works capture moments of social reality—realities which, I believe, were often blocked by ideological filters and blinders.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 71-72.

<sup>150</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 71-72.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the postwar era, Adolf Wissel's art has been considered exclusively in terms of its relative association with National Socialism and its propaganda. That premise is not unfounded. Beginning in 1933, the regime established clear guide lines (*see* introductory chapter) concerning artistic production. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that there was and still is a high level of social relationality created between German art of the National Socialist era and the ideologies of the NSDAP. According to Joan L. Clinefelter the visual arts were forcibly transformed into expressions of National Socialist ideology.<sup>151</sup> And, as noted by Shearer West, the National Socialists promoted 'Realism' as a way in which propagandist or ideological meaning could be cloaked behind the work's 'universal legibility'.<sup>152</sup> Additionally, and importantly, Clinefelter adds that the social interpretation of the works in question was further augmented by an amalgam of psycho-social referents, such as the "interpretation of the works in the media and of the exhibits, and by the artist's participation in the regime."<sup>153</sup> She also asserts that the Party-controlled artistic institutions and would often "cast thematically 'non-Nazi' art into a suitably 'Nazi' mode" through the application of a "supplemental layer of varnish" or a kind of "Nazi gloss."<sup>154</sup>

As noted, in 1933 the National Socialists actively pursued political and ideological control over all areas of artistic production.<sup>155</sup> German artistic institutions were forcibly

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<sup>151</sup> Joan L. Clinefelter: *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany*. (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 100.

<sup>152</sup> West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair / Shearer West*, 202.

<sup>153</sup> Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany*, 100.

<sup>154</sup> Clinefelter, *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany*, 100.

<sup>155</sup> Hermann Glaser *Wie Hitler Den Deutschen Geist Zerstörte: Kulturpolitik Im Dritten Reich*. (Hamburg: Ellert & Richter, 2005), 106.

compartmentalized within the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Chamber of Culture) as part of the states *Gleichschaltung* agenda. Gleichschaltung is a German fascist term that, from the 1930s onward, was defined as the standardization and unification of all political, economic, and social institutions. Membership within a state sponsored organization was required. Anyone who was not admitted into one of these organizations for political, racial, and art-political reasons, received a ban on designing, producing, exhibiting, and publicizing any work of art. Additionally, they would incur the loss of any professional position that they held.<sup>156</sup>

Prior to the take-over of the NSDAP, Adolf Wissel was a member of several Hannoverian Artistic Associations. In 1933, these would coalesce with other nation-wide organizations to form The Association of German Painters and Graphic Artists. On April 1 of the same year Wissel applied to join the NSDAP. That fall, he won both the Tramm Prize and the Provincial Administration Prize for Hannover. The NSDAP sponsored both events. In spring of 1934 he was admitted to the *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste* (the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts).<sup>157</sup>

In exhibitions, Wissel was formally represented as a painter among peasants and a peasant among painters.<sup>158</sup> In any other circumstance, outside of National Socialist ideology, the latter would have been considered an insult. For Richard Walther Darré, the head of the *Reichsministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft* (Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture) and the sponsor of the Goslar exhibition, the idea that a formally trained artist came from and identified with the peasant community fed into the parties racially charged propaganda. Darré

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<sup>156</sup> Glaser, *Wie Hitler Den Deutschen Geist Zerstörte: Kulturpolitik Im Dritten Reich*, 106; 134.

<sup>157</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 25.

<sup>158</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 49-50.

stated that “German painters were obligated to ‘passionately’ portray the peasant world, specifically those in whom the peasant blood of their ancestors was still alive and circulating.”<sup>159</sup>

In a contemporaneous newspaper interview, cited by Ingeborg Bloth, Wissel describes his artistic aim: “Yes, I see my greatest task in presenting the farmers, the peasants as they really are, in particular the farmers and the landscape surrounding Kalenberg. ...Not embellished nor idealized: the farmer must be [depicted] as he is, but it is not something that you can describe, it is something that you must feel: when you are born a farmer, you know who they are, what they imagine, and what they hope for. That is what I want to portray...”<sup>160</sup> Bloth then states that the reporter added a subjective description of Wissel’s farmer-figures: “These farmers stand firmly on the ground and listen to the call of the earth.”<sup>161</sup> Bloth notes the similarity between the way in which the National Socialists linguistically archaized works such as Carl Bantzer’s *Hessischer Erntearbeiter* (1907) and the “realistic” and mythologically propagandist way in which they interpret and rebrand the work of Adolf Wissel. Most importantly, for the present analysis, she relays that, at the time, neither Bantzer nor Wissel opposed such revaluation. What was revealing were the differences in the general public’s reaction to their works: the work of 80-year-old Carl Bantzer largely eludes art-political association, while the work of 40-year-old Adolf Wissel was reduced to it, by way of his personal intentions.

It should be noted, however, that Wissel’s interest in depicting rural subjects predated both the rise of National Socialism and his party membership. His version of “Realism” was, as mentioned earlier, indebted to the tenets of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*. However, Bloth mentions Wissel’s works’ innate inability to conform to the inquiry proposed by the artists of the

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<sup>159</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 42.

<sup>160</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 42-43.

<sup>161</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 43.



Hannoverian Neue Sachlichkeit. She states that the goal of these artists was to “objectively” portray the urbanity of Hannover, its life, its culture, its problems and hold them up to a mirror as a form of social critique.<sup>162</sup> Yet, as I have already highlighted, it is possible that he was doing precisely that, albeit from the rural perspective. From the National Socialist perspective, Wissel’s depictions of agrarian “reality” reinforce their own ideologies by critiquing cosmopolitanism and urbanity through the glorification of the mythological German peasant. His lack of rebuttal, regarding the media associating his works with the ideological aspects of the NSDAP, seems to confirm this stance. Yet, as previously proposed, Wissel’s carefully constructed paintings can also be read as a subtle critique of Germany’s present National Socialist version of reality. His lack of rebuttal likely had more to do with the way in which the turn of phrase could be construed and his continued ability to maintain employment.<sup>163</sup>

Yet, both general society and academia, contemporaneously and contemporarily, have predominantly read Wissel’s work as dialogically part and parcel of National Socialist rhetoric. So how do we account for the oppositional readings described within the present analysis? If we prescribe to Umberto Eco’s semiotic model of ‘aberrant decoding’ (1965) and its relationship to ‘reception theory’, then it must be assumed that since a majority of the population read his works as such, this must have been his intention and the present proposition is likely incorrect due to my relative distance from the subject matter. According to this model, Wissel communicates by way of code (such as style, composition, and subject matter) and these codes are then decoded by the viewer in the process of creating meaning. This model posits that a work’s meaning is

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<sup>162</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 49-50.

<sup>163</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 26; Christopher Hutton: *Linguistics and the Third Reich: Mother-Tongue Fascism, Race and The Science of Language*. (London: Routledge, 2014), 211. This, I believe, is bolstered by Wissel’s refusal to vow allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Bloth notes that both in 1937 and in 1938 Wissel was offered professorships by Adolf Hitler, both of which he turned down. (*see* also Bloth page 26.) According to Christopher M. Hutton, all professors were to sign a vow of Allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

predicated singularly by the artist agent and any other reading is aberrant. In a recent study John Heartly used “the term ‘meaning’ both when defining the concept of ‘aberrant decoding’ and in the typology of the respective reality.” It states that “any message must be sent by means of a certain code, but what is most important is the transmission of meaning.”<sup>164</sup> This last point is of note. In art, the transmission of meaning is arguably generated through context as much as through content. Thus, “a sign can be misinterpreted not only when the interpreter does not know the context of the message (including the language it belongs to [or in our case, the genre specific ideologies it represents]), but also when the respective sign is placed in a wrong context (namely when it is taken from the original context and ‘lost’ in another context)”.<sup>165</sup>

Again, this last point is of note. The National Socialist would often contextualize works of art to serve their own propagandistic purposes. In this light, it could be said that the standard reading of Wissel’s artwork could also be an aberrant decoding. Therefore, the problem lies not in the various interpretations of his works, but rather in the investigative model itself. To place meaning in a single binary or another is, in fact, an aberrant decoding of the work. I believe that it is possible, as previously stated, that Wissel intended for his work to have double meanings. This is fundamentally the difference between an objective model and an understanding of subjective construal.<sup>166</sup> The first, as just described, ascribes singular efficacy to the artist and also allows for the juxtaposition of multiple interpretations, wherein those interpretations are either an aberrant or a preferred decoding of the artist’s intent, and as such, are open to subjective evaluation; the other is an intention by the artist to acknowledge pluralism and allow for a more

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<sup>164</sup> Cristinel Munteanu: "Aberrant Decoding and Its Linguistic Expression (An Attempt to Restore the Original Concept)." (*Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*63 (2012): 229-41), 233.

<sup>165</sup> Munteanu, "Aberrant Decoding and Its Linguistic Expression (An Attempt to Restore the Original Concept)," 233.

<sup>166</sup> Lee Ross and Andrew Ward: "Naive Realism in Everyday Life: Implications for Social Conflict and Misunderstanding." In *Values and Knowledge*, 103-35. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass., 1996), 103.

nuanced analysis. This, in turn, supports the idea that, in the process of meaning making, Adolf Wissel incorporated a certain level of subjectivity within his “objective” depictions of reality. Bloth notes that Wissel’s peasant figures were inspired by his own corporeal and ontological experiences, as a Niedersachsener farmer, and that his artistic depictions of those experiences had become highly politicized. She asserts that he allowed for this type of concession due to the blindness of his own emotional conviction and “a naive understanding of realism.”<sup>167</sup>

As I hope to have demonstrated, Wissel was undoubtedly aware of how his works would be interpreted and of the legacy and meaning behind the artistic movements, genres, and ideologies he chose to incorporate within his works of art. By understanding ways in which people interpret his work, Adolf Wissel is afforded an advantage. Ross and Ward suggest “that the fate of attempts to understand, predict, or control behavior in the political arena often hinges not on success in recognizing or invoking differences in ethical values, but rather on success in understanding, predicting, or controlling the way in which the relevant issues are construed.”<sup>168</sup>

When applied to Wissel’s art work, the notion is profound. It allows for an innate duality within the construction of his pictorial narrative. Within a single image he has the ability to adhere to the dominant social structure (by providing visual cues, such as subject matter and stylistic attributes, that allude to National Socialist ideology), while simultaneously critiquing and rejecting that same structure (by making use and applying his knowledge of a variety of artistic attributes, specifically those that had been developed and maintained by members of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*).

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<sup>167</sup> Bloth, *Adolf Wissel: Malerei Und Kunstpolitik Im Nationalsozialismus*, 42-43.

<sup>168</sup> Ross and Andrew Ward: “Naive Realism in Everyday Life: Implications for Social Conflict and Misunderstanding,” 104.

Since 1945, only a handful of his works have been exhibited. In 2012 the most extensive postwar exhibition of Adolf Wissel's interwar work was held in the Heimatmuseum in Seelse. Understandably, Wissel's genre scenes have not been exhibited beyond the confines of this "hometown" retrospective, as they were used as a means of propagating the racist ideology of the Nazi regime. Although the relationship between these works and Nazi propaganda cannot be sidelined, these paintings are worth reconsidering, particularly in light of contemporary public discourse on racism and propaganda. Though this thesis investigates but a fraction of Wissel's oeuvre, it highlights several important points. First, although the Nazis did not commission these works, they were and still are used and understood as examples of Nazi ideology and aesthetics. Additionally, these works merged a Romantic, agrarian ideal in subject matter with the contemporary stylistic trend of *Neue Sachlichkeit* that appealed to Nazi ideology. Lastly, and most notably, within these works Wissel seems to create visual foils and compositional and stylistic choices that dispute any straightforward binary reading, drawing attention to the constructedness of Nazi ideology with respect to German identity.

## VI. EPILOGUE

Thirty years ago, Peter Adam noted that "few people have actually seen the works, as they are hidden away in storage. Only a few art historians and people with a 'genuine professional interest' are allowed to see them and few have made use of this opportunity."<sup>169</sup> What was true then still holds truth today. Only a small fraction of Nazi era art is shown publicly. This makes it relatively impossible to conduct a thorough and accurate analysis of

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<sup>169</sup> Adam, 8.

National Socialist art. In the preceding 28 years since German reunification, Germany has come to grips with its cultural and sociopolitical past. The debates that were once so fervent have calmed. Therefore, it is time that we begin to take another look at this art. It is an era that is almost completely unexamined by members of our field. There are endless avenues to follow on a quantitative level that has no contemporary precedence. Though the present analysis is a portion of a much larger project, one that I will continue to pursue over the course of the next few years, it nonetheless contributes to our overall understanding of this era. The subject of Nazi art is and will always be a challenging one; and to that end, this work is but a small part of a larger conversation, one which promotes further dialog between the past, present, and future narratives.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Adolf Wissel: *Jung Mädchen beim Gebet*, 1930, Oil on Canvas, 35.5 x 30.5 cm.



Figure 2. Adolf Wissel: *Portrait der jungen Frau*, 1928, Oil on Canvas, 55.88 x 48.26 cm.



Figure 3. Adolf Wissel: *SA-Mann*, 1933, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 30 cm.



Figure 4. Sturmabteilung Shank Cap, 1920s-1933.



Figure 5. Sturmabteilung Shank Cap, 1933.



Figure 6. SA-Mann, Nachrichtensturm, 1930s, German Tobacco Collecting Card, 4 x 6 cm.





Figure 7. Actor Card: *Heinz Klingenberg*, Film: *SA Mann Brand*, 1933.



Figure 8. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller: *Self-Portrait*, 1828.



Figure 9. Adolf Wissel: *Bäuerin*, 1938, Oil on Canvas.



Figure 10. "NS Frauen Warte," Issue 3, 1 August, 1938.

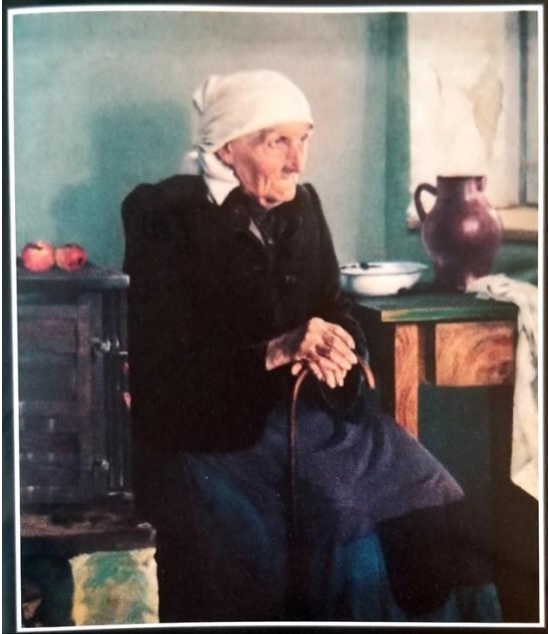


Figure 11. Franz Xaver Wölfe: *Im Austrag*, 1940, Oil on Canvas.



Figure 12. Michael Neder: *Alte Frau mit weißer Bluse*, 1829, Oil on Canvas.



Figure 13. August Sander: *Konfirmand*, Photograph, 1921/22.



Figure 14. August Sander: *Bauernkinder*, Photograph, 1927.



Figure 15. August Sander: *Jungbauern*, Photograph, 1914.



Figure 16. August Sander: *Jungbauern*, Photograph, 1920.

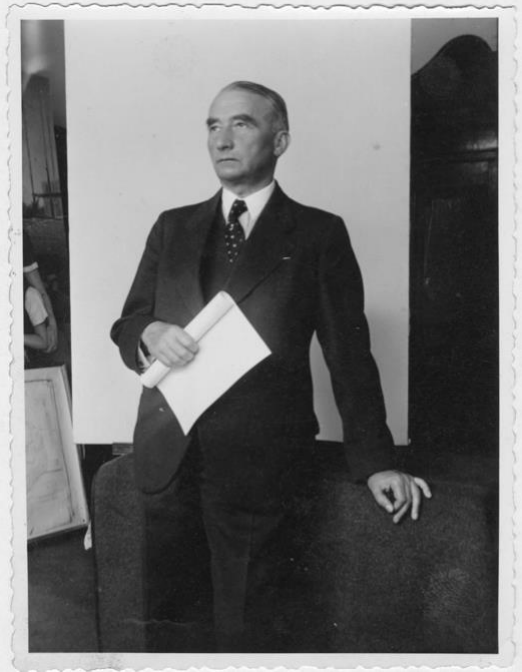


Figure 17. Adolf Wissel: Original photo for the painting of Lord Mayor Arthur Menge in the New Town Hall of Hannover, Photograph, 1941.

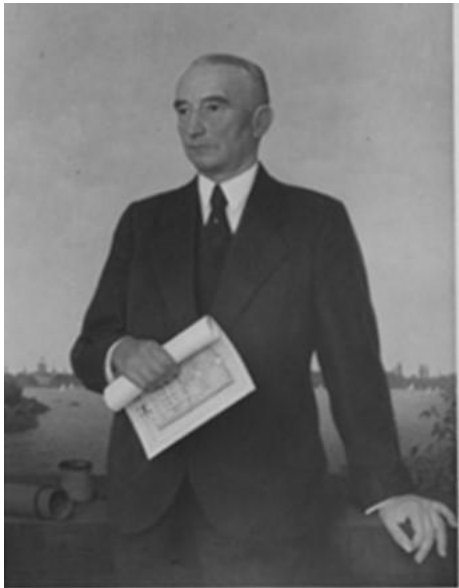


Figure 18. Adolf Wissel: *Dr. Menge (Oberbürgermeister von Hannover)*, 1941, Oil on Canvas, 131 x 101cm.



Figure 19. Adolf Wissel: *Kind mit Narzissen*, 1934, Oil on Canvas, 56 x 44.5 cm.



Figure 20. Adolf Wissel: *Bauernmädchen (Niedersächsisches Bauernkind)*, 1935, Oil on Canvas, 35 x 30 cm.



Figure 21. Adolf Wissel: *Bauerngruppe*, 1935, Oil on Canvas, 180 x 240 cm.

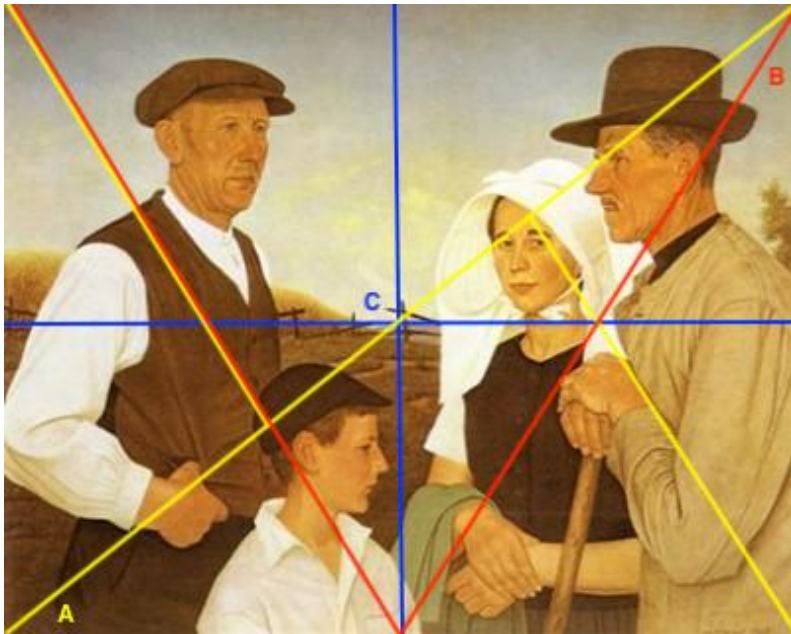


Figure 22. [Diagram] Adolf Wissel: *Bauerngruppe*, 1935, Oil on Canvas, 180 x 240 cm.





Figure 23. NSDAP: *Propaganda Poster*, 1930's.



Figure 24. Adolf Wissel: *Farbskizze zu Bauerngruppe*, 1935, Oil on Canvas, 19.5 x 27.5 cm.

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