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Review of Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina U.P., 1996)

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Jonathan Petropoulos. *Art as Politics in the Third Reich*. Chapel Hill & London, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Pp. xviii + 439. Cloth \$45.00. ISBN 0-8078-2240-x.

Judging from the title of this book, one might assume that it was written for an audience curious about the way arts - specifically painting and sculpture - were incorporated into Nazi propaganda. This is not the case. Petropoulos does not study connections between aesthetics and ideology according to the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. Unlike the best-known monographs and exhibition catalogues to have documented this topic - for instance, Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (1979) and Stephanie Barron, ed., *"Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant Garde in Nazi Germany* (1991) - Petropoulos' book does not focus on how Hitler and his cronies perceived paintings and sculptures, nor does it explore their exploitation of art to heighten the popularity of the N.S.D.A.P. Instead, Petropoulos' primary subject is the effort of the Nazi leadership to obtain European art treasures by some legal but usually underhanded methods in order to "further their own careers and as a means of self-definition." (7)

Petropoulos treats the history of Nazi art plundering in two stages. In his first part, he details how each of the Nazi principals, including Goebbels, Rosenberg, Göring, Himmler, Ley, Rust, Schirach, Speer, and Hitler competed to control party and state policies toward the arts. Like Petropoulos, one is struck by the "inordinate amount of time and energy" (5) they devoted to administering museums, academies, art journals, exhibitions, and cultural exchanges at the same time as managing the rest of the "Nazi revolution" and pushing their nation into war. In his

close reading of many new-found sources, Petropoulos reveals much that justifies Martin Broszat's theses about the competitive environment within the top Nazi clique. No area of cultural authority remained uncontested as the subleaders struggled to earn their Führer's favor. In most cases the intention was not to realize a vision of German or National Socialist beauty, though all of these parvenus pretended cultural expertise. Many of the works they deemed unacceptable were destroyed, but their main aim was to position themselves to be best able to steal from the victims of Nazi race and foreign policies. In perhaps the most extreme and heinous case of conspicuous consumption on record, these men (especially Hitler) undertook a ferocious campaign of pillaging on a scale surely greater than any in European history.

In the second part of his book, Petropoulos aligns chapters on the "collecting" habits of each of the major plunderers, particularly in the occupied territories. Supposedly devoted to establishing a new German community based on subsuming individual under state identity, we learn here that the thieves were motivated less by aesthetic, national, or even racist ideals than by desire for personal gain. Behind facades of ascetic commitment, greed, corruption, and a taste for luxury were common to all the leaders of the "new order," even the supposedly respectable "artist," Albert Speer. Petropoulos is right when he describes this as a revival of "gift and pillage" traditions: in the case of Himmler this was a way to live out feudal fantasies. More broadly, Petropoulos holds, the amassing and exchanging of stolen treasure was a process "laden with symbolic meaning" (15) by which the perpetrators demonstrated personal authority (vis à vis victims *and* other perpetrators), marked power alliances (by giving gifts to friends and enemies), and competed for the affection of the Führer (by providing him signs of fealty). Petropoulos closes by suggesting that the

hoarding was also meant to signify that these men constituted a new elite destined to replace the old German aristocracy, and thus foreshadowed the class war launched after 20 July 1944.

One should be familiar with the literature on National Socialist culture before reading this book, since Petropoulos offers very little about the theories behind the policies: he often attempts to explain concepts such as “völkisch aesthetics,” “Nazi art,” and “degenerate art” *in parenthesis*. Moreover, he doesn’t discuss earlier phases of the Nazi movement as regards art. Though *his* story begins in the thirties, it is wrong to state that attacks on modern art were not common in the main party newspaper until that time. A tradition of anti-modernism among people of all political persuasions led up to the Nazi imposition of conservative aesthetic principles, and this partly explains the enthusiasm, or at best indifference, with which these measures were received by the public at large. Besides leaving the artworks out of sight, Petropoulos also omits stories about the persons victimized by these “policies.” While compassionate about the suffering they caused, he does not communicate how art seizures added to the pain of people who lost everything. This said, Petropoulos has developed important insights into the motives of the perpetrators, and thereby clarified the context that surrounded specific actions described in Lynn Nicholas’ *The Rape of Europa* (1994).

By mentioning these omissions, I do not mean to criticize Petropoulos’ work, but to specify its content. Not about art as expression, but art as commodity, this book might have carried a different title: perhaps “Artworks as Booty Inside and Outside the Third Reich”? If not a compelling read for someone interested in aesthetics and ideology, it is an excellent source of information about art theft and destruction by the self-styled

cultural elite of the Third Reich: men who obviously weren’t talented enough to create anything on their own.

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