

Art and Politics

Arab art was always about human relationships: love, distress, joy and hope. But young artists are leaving that behind. They're interested in social, political and cultural issues. There's no precedent for that in our art world, so they have to find their own ways to deal with these issues, and develop an appropriate artistic language.

Interview with Ayman Yossri Daydban, 2011

Seminar 2: Structure

1. Art & power: basic considerations
2. The rise of the artist as a free thinker and creator
3. The role of the artist in the modern period (20th century +)
 - a. Futurism
 - b. Constructivism
 - c. Socialist realism
 - d. Nazi art
4. Guest presentation by Vincent van Gerven Oei: *Politics and Modern Art Living Happily Ever After...*
 - a. Preliminary positions
 - b. The case of abstract expressionism
 - c. Institutional critique
 - d. Post-propaganda
5. Concluding remarks about the position of the contemporary artist within Western structures of power
6. Debate with the class
7. Visit of the exhibition 'Enacting Populism'

Art is dependent on power...

The artist glorifies power



From the façade of the throne room of the Palace of Babylon, 6th Century BC (glazed brick tiles)

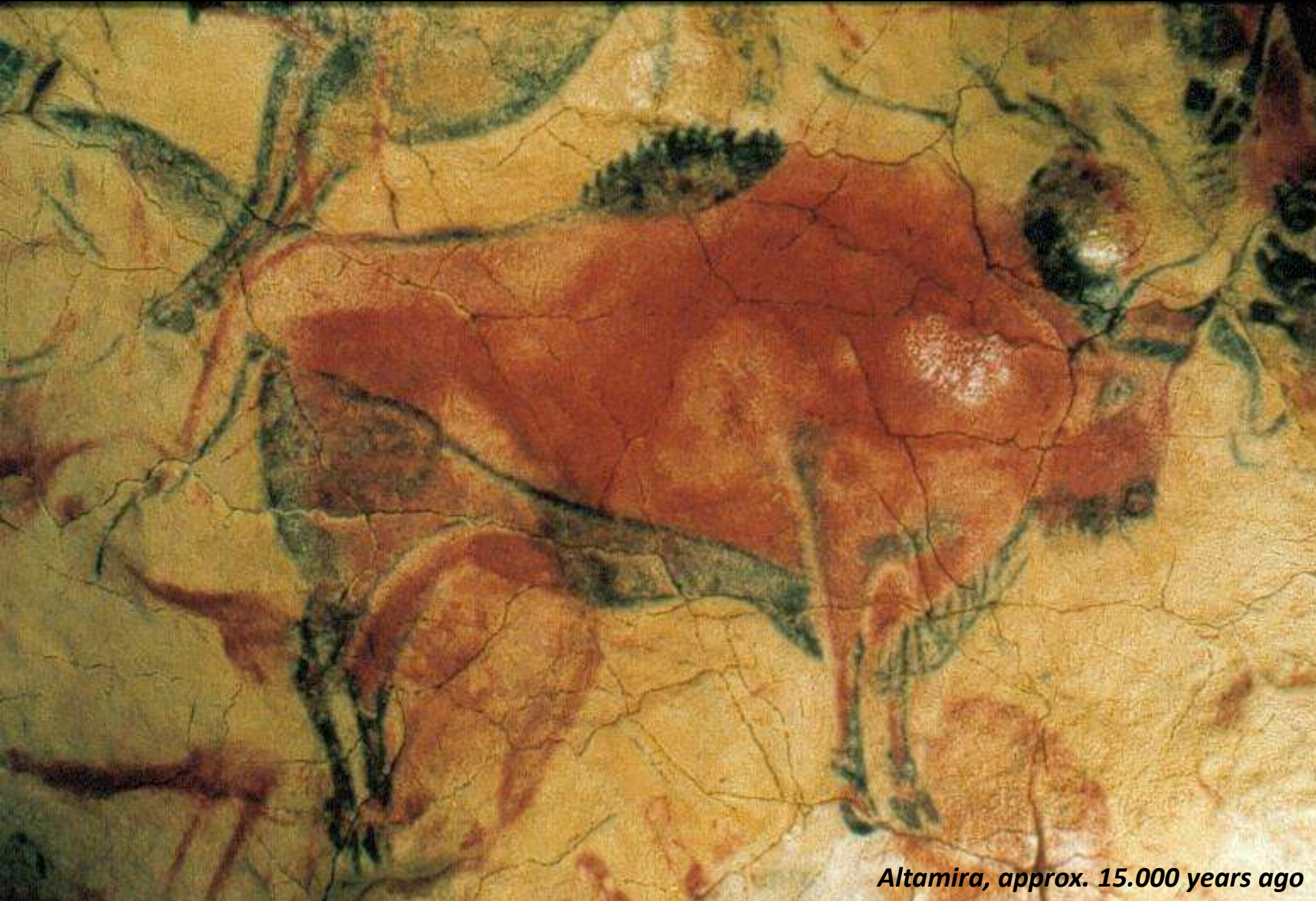


Lorenzo de' Medici by Girolamo Macchietti, 16th C

The artist makes propaganda for his patrons

The art world is still dependent on patronage today

...but the human creative impulse is free



Altamira, approx. 15.000 years ago

The Rise of the Artist: 1/Art and Craftsmanship

The professional artist has developed out of the professional craftsman

Craftsmanship: skill in evolving or reproducing a specific form or pattern

Artistry: individual creative expression

The skill of the craftsman has been imbued, in many different cultures, with a mystical, demiurgic quality – but usually not the craftsman himself, who remained anonymous

The object made by the craftsman could remain imbued with this spiritual power (the **idol**) or refer to it (the **symbol**) depending on the beliefs of the community he worked in.

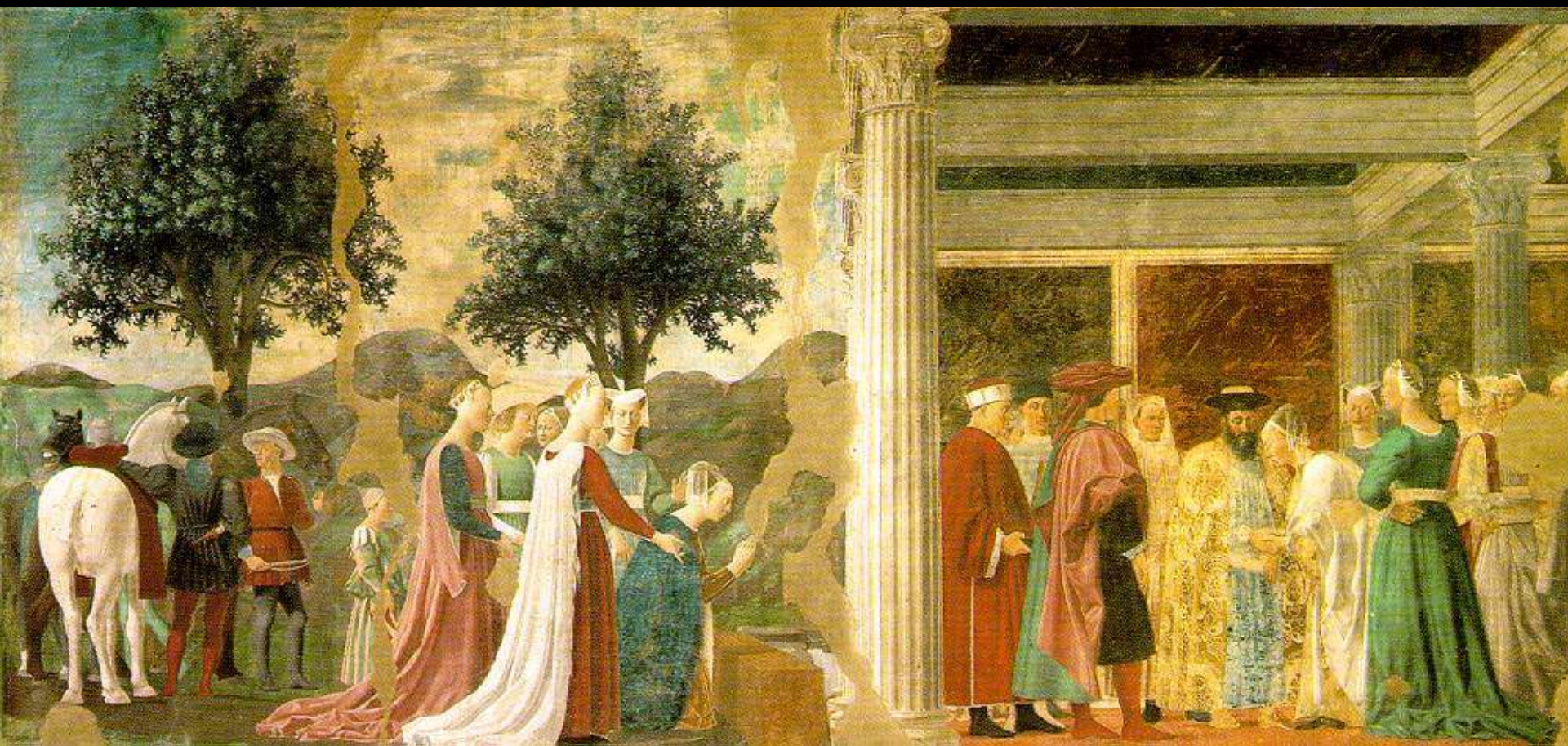
The transfer of the supra-human qualities from the object to its maker could only occur in a non-religious society (such as ancient China); thus the craftsman became an artist.

The patron attempted to make the power of the art work for him, and thus be seen as a demiurge himself: the birth of civilizations which, in our current views at least, are based on art.





Wang Xizhi depicted by Qian Xuan (13th C)



Piero della Francesca: the Visit of the Queen of Sheba, 1466



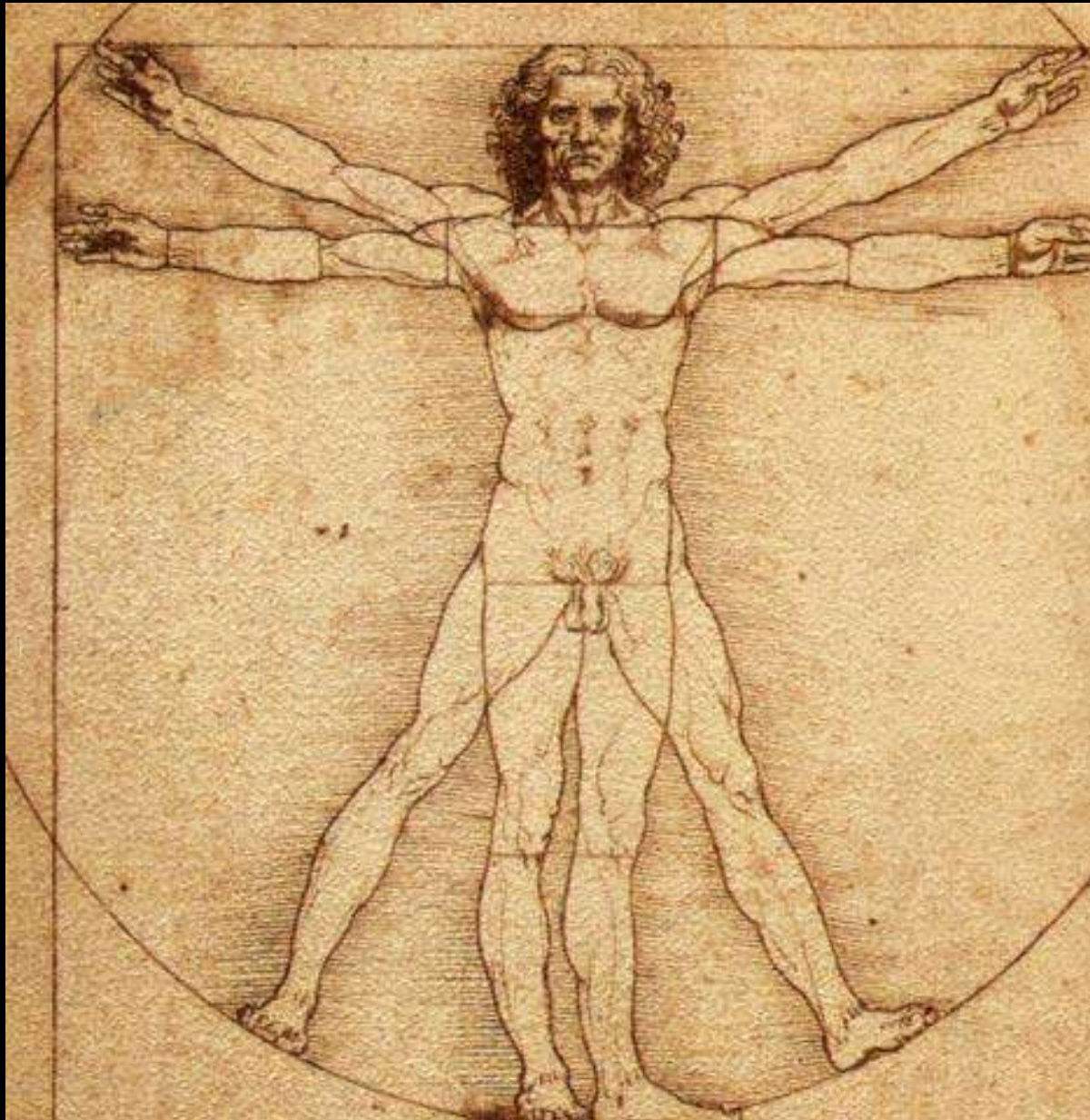
The Rise of the Artist: 2/The Chronicler of Power

Throughout the ages the power that art (or the artist) imbued on its patron was a-temporal. This changed with the Renaissance, when historical progress became an element of the mastery of power. (The rediscovery of ancient knowledge also instilled the notion of **natural science and progress** in the general awareness of Europe's ruling classes). The artist was henceforth required to depict progress and understanding of the natural world. Thus his own knowledge and evolving skills became important. Gradually the artist became more important than his art, but this only really became common during the Romantic period.

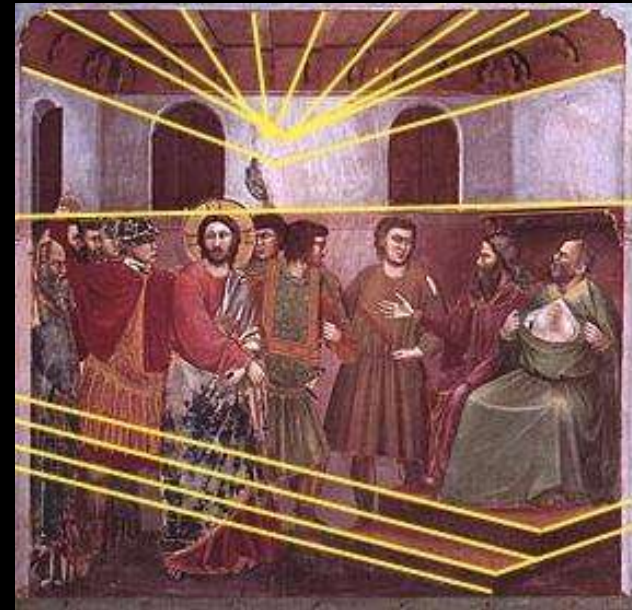
The 'discovery of perspective' by Giotto is in itself fallacious. Perspective may have disappeared from European art in the Middle Ages but it existed in the Arab world and other visual traditions. However the importance given to this discovery is in itself significant: it heralded the return of natural science in European painting.

The art that our Western museums are full of documents the shifts in power and the general progress of intellectual development in European history. Gradually the artist becomes not only the chronicler of cultural progress but also its torch-bearer; he gains ascendancy over the subject he paints (including his patron).

There is however no designated space yet for the artist's individual creative expression, which he either carefully incorporates into his work (trying to maintain a balance with his patron's expectations) or develops as a private side-activity.



Leonardo da Vinci: Vitruvian Man, 1490



Giotto: Jesus before the Caif, 1302



Rembrandt: the Anatomy Lesson, 1632



*Hieronymus Bosch:
Christ Carrying the
Cross (ca 1490)*



Goya: the Family of Carlos IV, 1800-01



Francisco Goya: Colossus, 1810

The Rise of the Artist: 3/The Modern Age

The eternal problem of the artist is his patron: the patron generally has no benefit in letting the artist develop his individual creative expression as it might turn against the interests of the patron or the status quo he represents. At the same time the patron wants to let the artist develop his creative skills insofar this symbolic power transfers to and benefits the patron. It's a question of balance, and the relationship is human so very variable – but inherently limited.

The artistic and intellectual current of romanticism provided some legitimacy to the individual creative expression of the artist, elevating as it did the personal genius of the artist or thinker against a gradually dehumanizing social backdrop. Patrons could privately resonate with this and started collecting and displaying the works of romantic artists in salons, thus encouraging artists to continue developing their personal artistic expression.

Romanticism even went further and made artistic originality and the development of a personal voice and style the basic criterion to judge art. This is still a pervasive concept in the art world.

The dilemma of the artist (*l'artiste maudit*) was whether to continue making socially acceptable art (for the patrons) or to rush along in a romantic self-discovery and be a misunderstood genius: Delacroix or Van Gogh. Experiments continued through impressionism to cubism.

The rise of a wealthy European middle class, interested in artistic experimentation and with less vested interests than the old ruling classes, finally propitiated the rise of modern art.



Thomas Cole: The Voyage of Life, Childhood; 1842




Gustave Moreau: Oedipus and the Sphinx (1864) and The Apparition (1876)



Breaking with the Past: Modern Art

Futurism

Umberto Boccioni: Charge of the Lancers, 1915



We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.

Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.

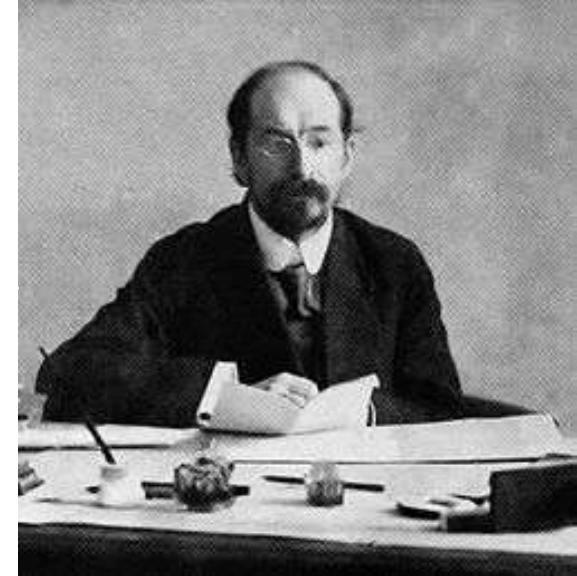
We want to glorify war — the only cure for the world — militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman.



Genesis of Socialist Realism

In 1907 they split from the Bolshevik faction led by Lenin to form the 'Left Bolsheviks' inspired by the philosophy of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius

Empirio-criticism: science is based not on reality but on the sensations it produces within human observers, who will never be able to comprehend the full complexity of reality
→ inspired not only Einstein but also artists



Anatoly Lunacharsky: first Soviet People's Commissar for enlightenment 1918+

Alexander Bogdanov
leading theoretician of
Proletkult 1917-1920

During the years of European exile Bogdanov, Lunacharsky and Maxim Gorky initiated several cultural and educational resources for Russian workers and published extensively about them

In 1917 Proletkult was formed, independent of the new Soviet state. It advocated a radical break with the artistic past, championed futurism and constructivism as the new proletarian culture and extended the domain of 'art and culture' to hygiene, education and eating habits.

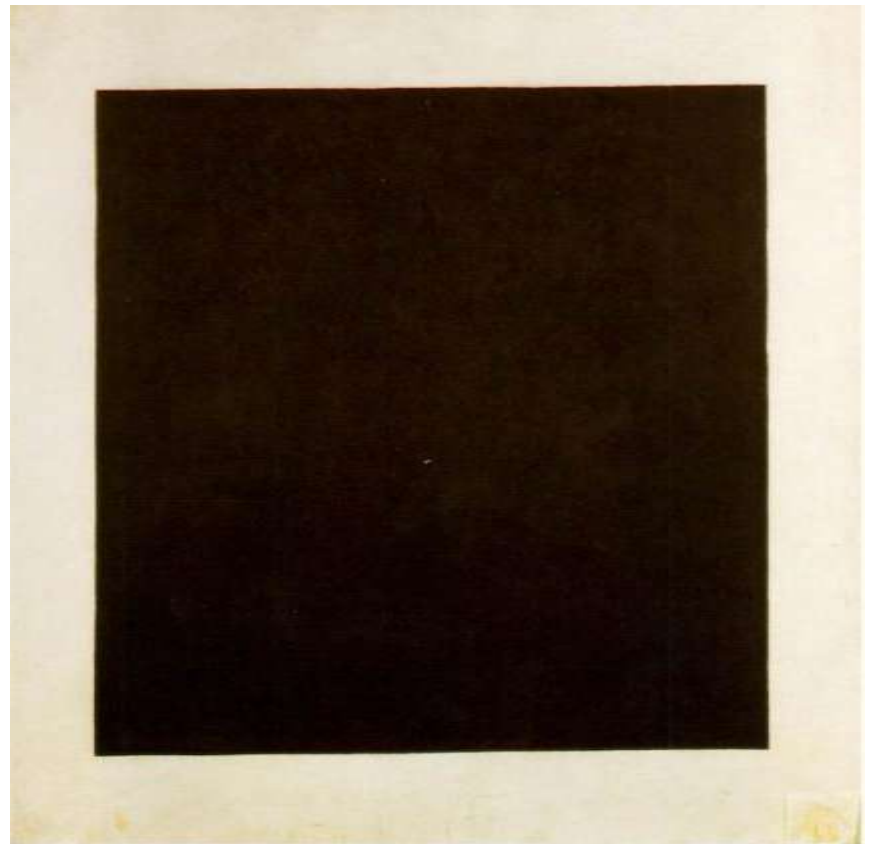
In 1920 Lenin (himself a cultural conservative, who accused Bogdanov c.s. of bourgeois idealism) incorporated Proletkult into the gvt structures. Henceforth figurative art, easy to understand for the masses, would become the Soviet norm

Expanding the Scope of Art

Marcel Duchamp: Fountain, 1917



Kazimir Malevich: Black Square, 1915



Constructivism

Rejection of the idea of autonomous art; art must help transform society

The Realistic Manifesto Naum Gabo, Moscow, 1920

In spite of the demand of the nascent spirit of our time, Art is still nourished by impression, external appearance, and wanders helplessly back and forth from Naturalism to Symbolism, from Romanticism to Mysticism.

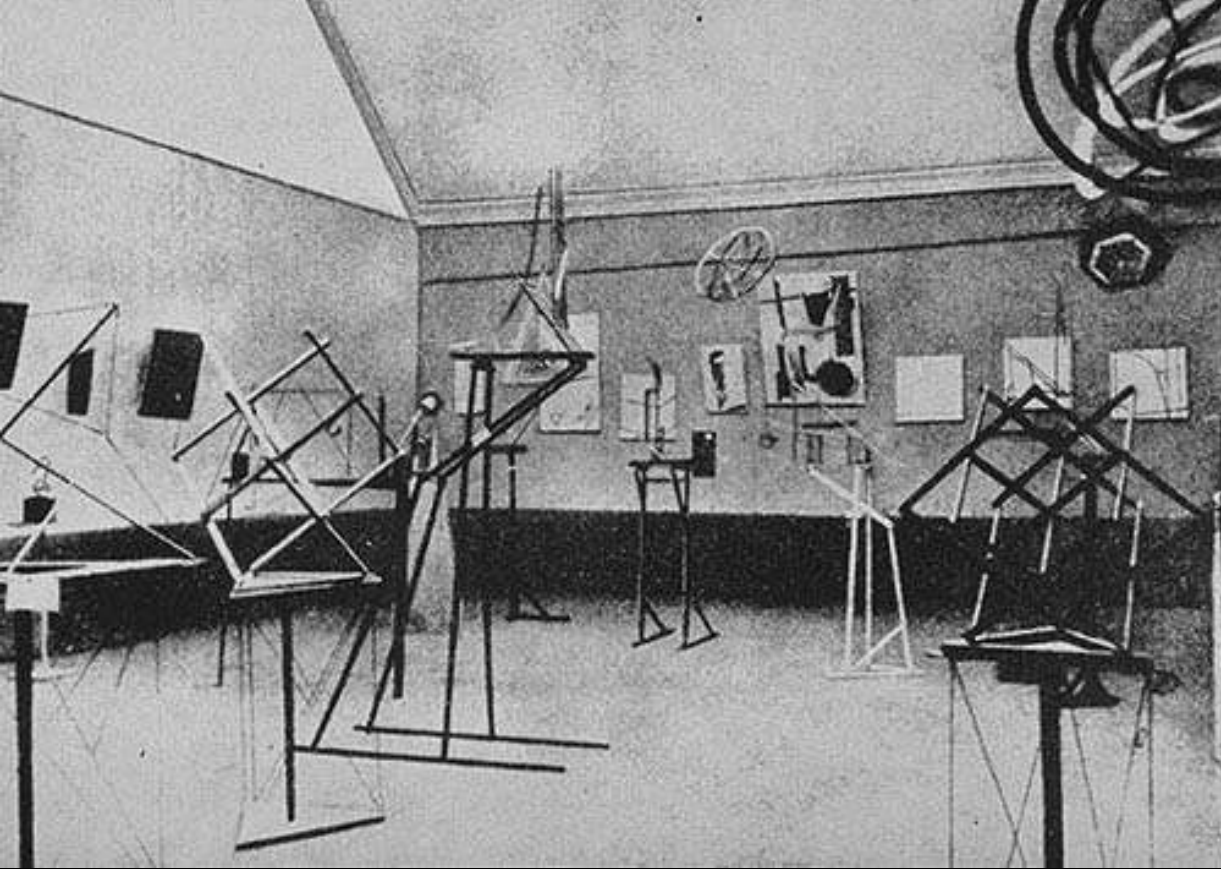
The attempts of the Cubists and the Futurists to lift the visual arts from the bogs of the past have led only to new delusions.

One had to examine Futurism beneath its appearance to realize that one faced a very ordinary chatterer, a very agile and prevaricating guy, clad in the tatters of worn-out words like “patriotism,” “militarism,” “contempt for the female,” and all the rest of such provincial tags.

One could heed with interest the experiments of the Cubists, but one cannot follow them, being convinced that their experiments are being made on the surface of Art and do not touch on the bases of it, seeing plainly that the end result amounts to the same old graphic, to the same old volume, and to the same decorative surface as of old.



Tatlin's design for a monument for the 3rd Internationale, 1919



Constructivism inspired other art forms:

- Literature
- Cinema (e.g. [Aelita](#))
- Theatre
- Industrial Design
- Typography
- Architecture

-**Legacy:** Bauhaus, Modernist architecture and generally a lot of Western culture

Constructivist Exhibition, OBMOKhU, 1921

The realization of our perceptions of the world in the forms of space and time is the only aim of our pictorial and plastic art.

In them we do not measure our works with the yardstick of beauty, we do not weigh them with pounds of tenderness and sentiments.

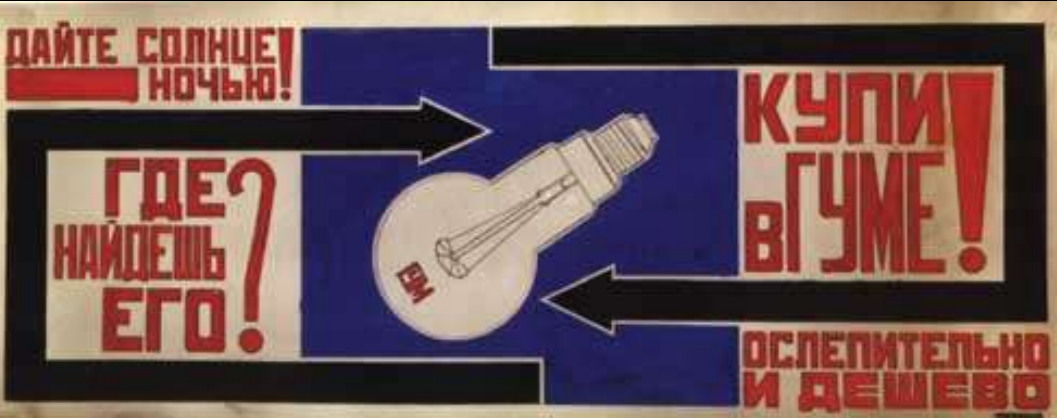
The plumb-line in our hand, eyes as precise as a ruler, in a spirit as taut as a compass . . . we construct our work as the universe constructs its own, as the engineer constructs his bridges, as the mathematician his formula of the orbits.

**Constructivist
Poster Art**



*Mayakovsky: Plakat
1918*

*Alexander Rodchenko:
advertisement for
light bulbs, 1924*



*The best rubber nipples are from
Rezinotrest; example of constructivist
advertisement (anonymous)*

- Lenin rejected constructivism and related modern art forms and deplored its rejection of beauty for being old. He explicitly described art as needing to call on its heritage: "Proletarian culture must be the logical development of the store of knowledge mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist, landowner, and bureaucratic society." However, during his lifetime he did not take a strong stance against modern art (people surrounding him including his wife Nadejda Krupskaya valued contemporary art) although he limited its spread in the educational realm.
 - Socialist realism became state policy in 1932 when Stalin promulgated the decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations".
- ⇒ Socialist realism was a call for state-sponsored romantic art, which reflected the ideal rather than the realistic. The work of art should show **one clear and unambiguous meaning**.
- The constructivist heritage was not thrown away, but made subordinate to state art policy; it especially found its place in applied arts (cinema to industrial design). For example propaganda poster art of the 1960s and 70s clearly references the constructivist posters of the 1920s.

Socialist Realism

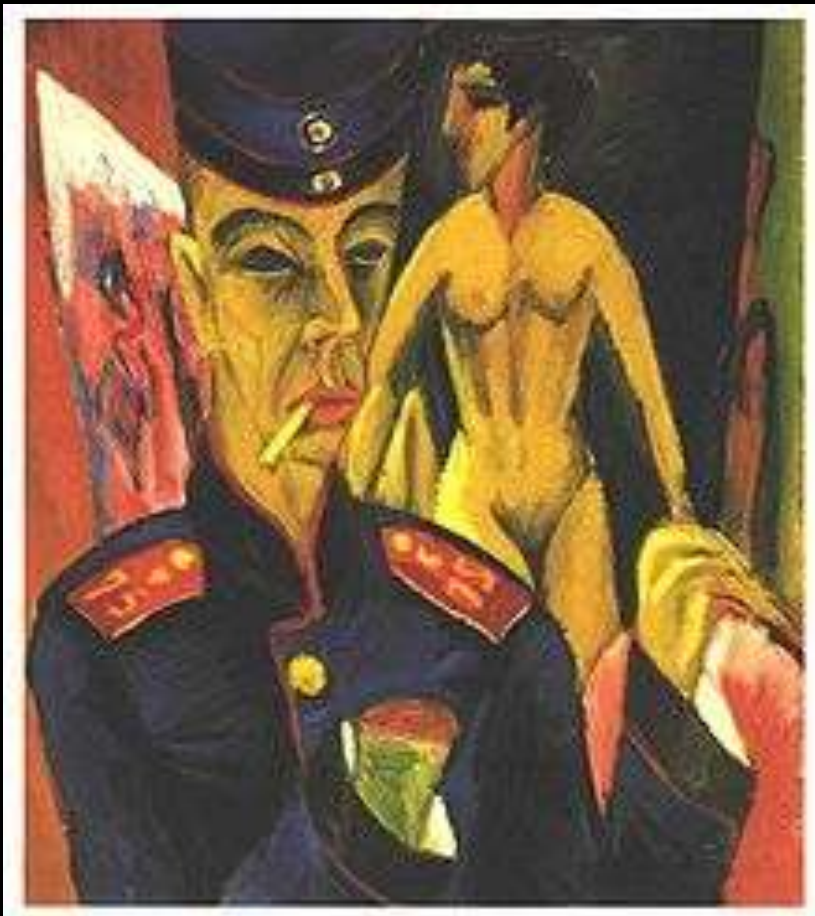




Nazi Cultural Modernism

Munich, 1937: The first annual 'Great German Art Exhibition' is held with mostly recently made and commissioned work. In terms of audience it is a flop.

A few days later the 'Degenerate Art' exhibition opens its doors opposite, with works mostly decommissioned from public institutions. It attracts many more visitors



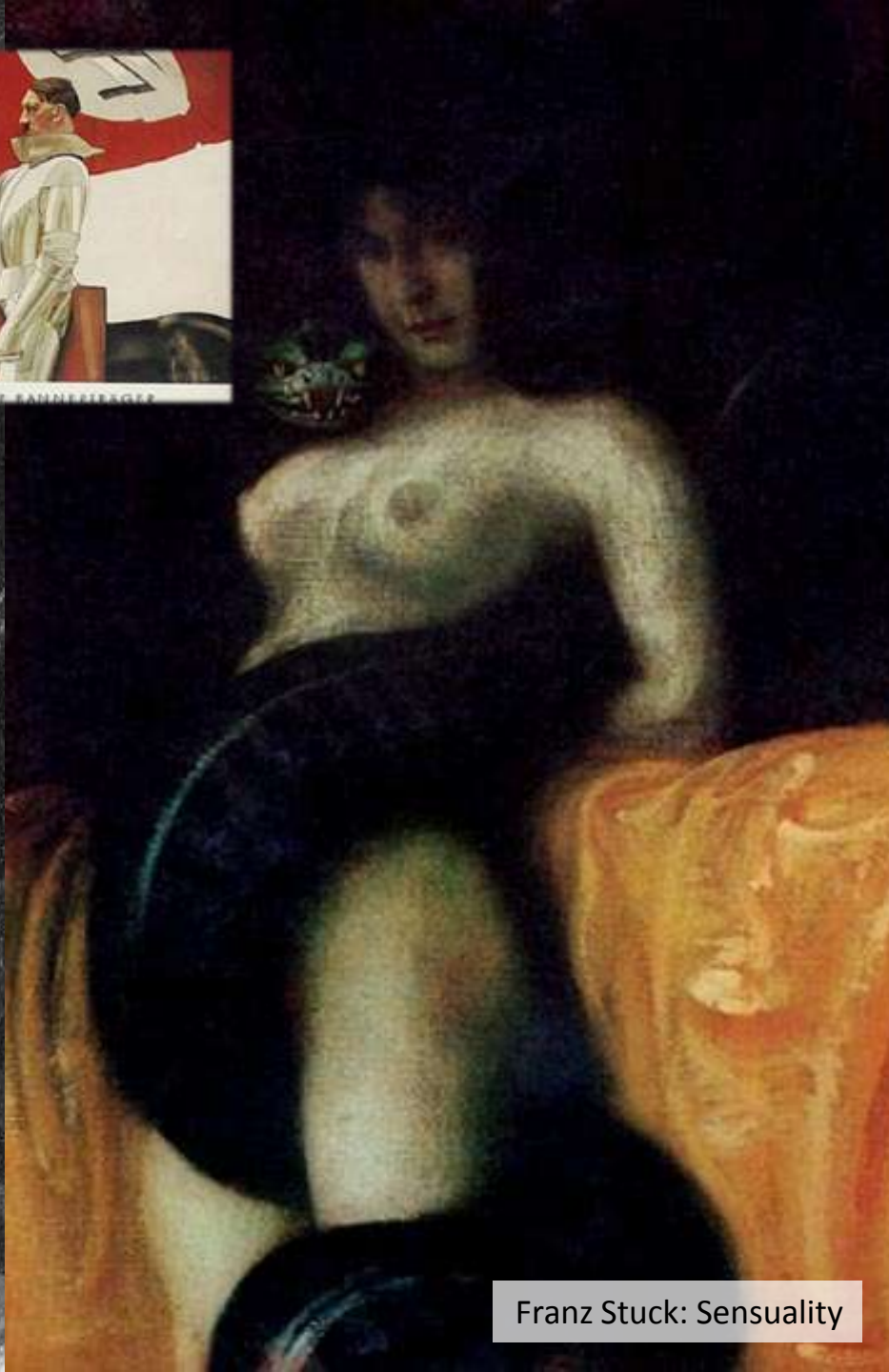
Ernst Kirchner: Selbstbildnis als Soldat (1915)



Fritz Klimt :Der Kämpfer in Wind und Sonne (1936)



Paul Matthias Padua: Leda and the Swan

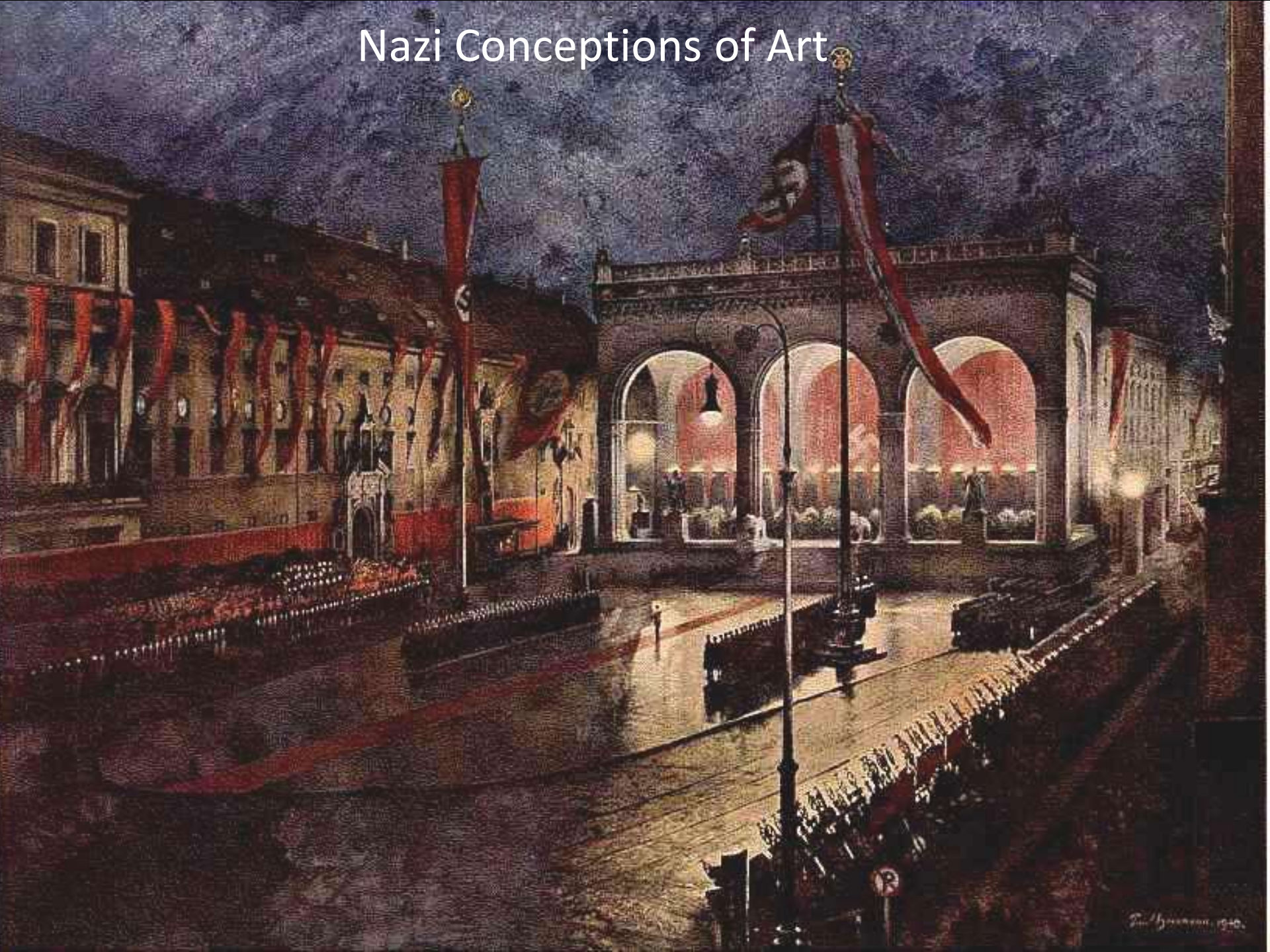


Franz Stuck: Sensuality

What the Nazis thought of contemporary modern art

- Importance of Hitler's personal experiences in fin-de-siècle Vienna pre WW1
- Roger Griffin (p307): *To Nazi cultural theorists the proliferation of different movements, aesthetics, and 'isms' in early twentieth-century Europe was a sign not of vitality and progress, but of the morbidity and decay that resulted from modernity's destructive power to sever the living roots and tendrils connecting artists to their people and 'life'.*
- Professor Hans Adolph Buhler felt that in modern Germany, the role of art had shifted from a nurturing role as a healing goddess into a whore who served the art market as well as the art intellectual.
- Kurt Karl Eberlein (1933): art silences the voice of everyman
- *"How deeply the perverse Jewish spirit has penetrated German cultural life is shown in the frightening and horrifying forms of the Exhibition Of Degenerate Art in Munich . This has nothing at all to do with the suppression of artistic freedom and modern progress. On the contrary, the botched art works which were exhibited there and their creators are of yesterday and before yesterday. They are the senile representatives, no longer to be taken seriously, of a period that we have intellectually and politically overcome and whose monstrous, degenerate creations still haunt the field of the plastic arts in our time."*
Goebbels, November 26th, 1937
- According to the official Nazi position, the artist and his creation were synonymous. An artist from a degenerate 'race' could not make good art, while an artist who made 'degenerate' art must be a degenerate himself

Nazi Conceptions of Art







Nazi Conceptions of Art

- Art must serve the ideal of collective social progress in several ways:
 - by reminding the German people of its ‘eternal values’ (bucolic, romantic scenes)
 - by expressing the most perfect characteristics of the Aryan race (emulation)
 - by contributing to (or reflecting) technological innovation (the applied arts)
- Reflections about Nazi modernism in art (Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 2007)
 - Artistic production under Nazis was impressive in terms of volume; many artists worked ‘in the spirit of the Fuhrer’; not motivated by fear but genuinely enthusiastic
 - Not monolithic: diversity from below, gradually constrained by policies but still diverse at the end of the 30s
 - paradigm shift away from romantic notions of individual artistic genius towards the incorporation of the arts in general social progress [artist as craftsman working on the body collective]
 - the aesthetic ideals of classical antiquity or German romanticism were not evidence of anti-modernism per se, but of the manner in which the utopian ideal was to be realized.
- Nazis closed Bauhaus as soon as they came to power as ‘a nest of cultural bolshevism’ but offered Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe architectural assignments.
- The destruction of ‘degenerate culture’ (i.e. European modernist art) was pursued with the same ruthless energy as the destruction of the ‘Jewish enemy’.
- With the end of WW II nothing remained of Nazi conceptions of art.

Concept of Modernism in Art

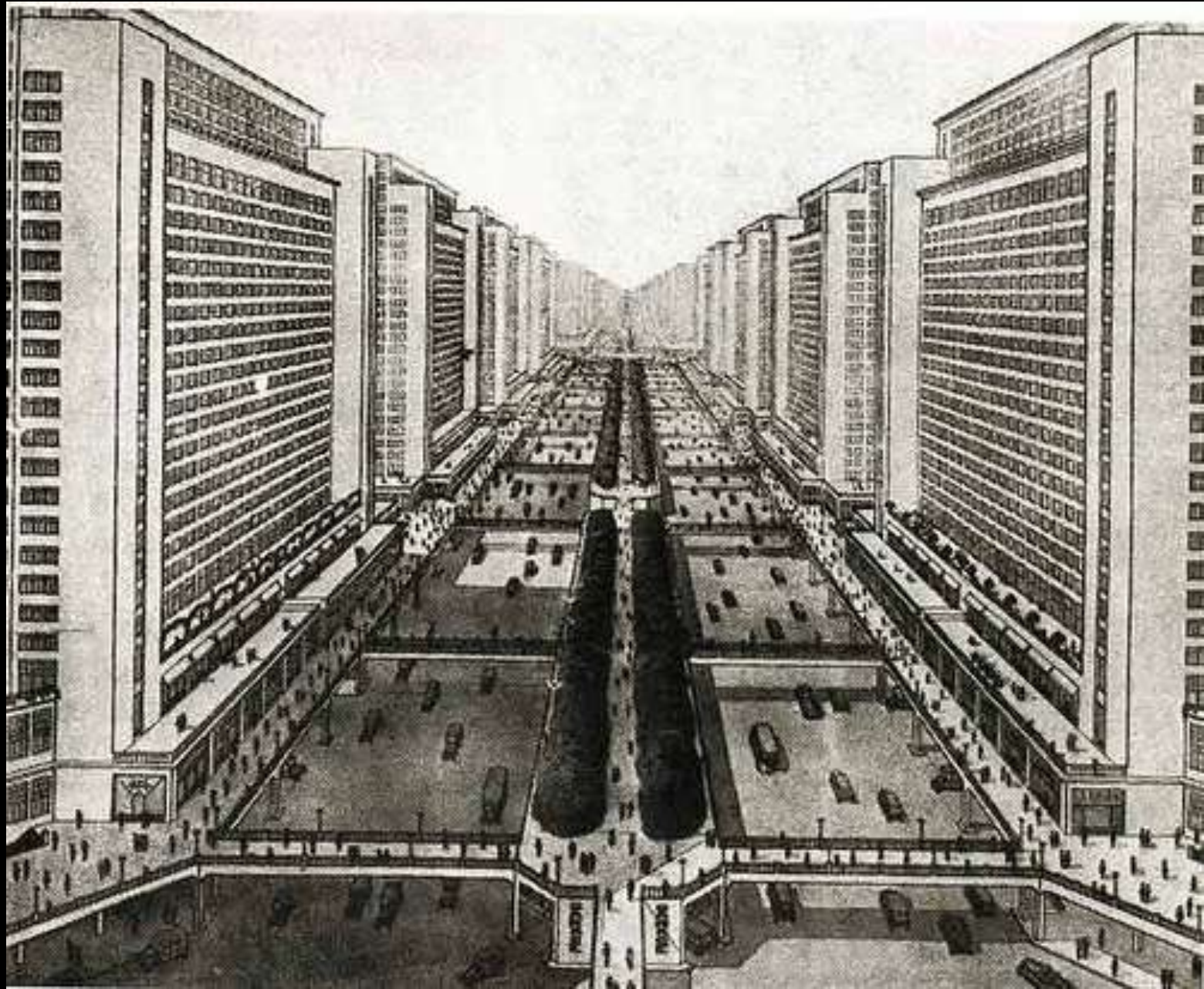
- Similarities between Soviet and Nazi concepts of art have led Western art theorists to surmise that both developments were 'anti-modernist', an aberration in Europe's cultural history; whereas there would be a straight line leading from impressionism to contemporary art.
- In the view of the totalitarian regimes in Europe (and the rest of the world) that were trying to create an alternate modernity/a new society: European modernism (in art) is nothing more than proof of 'The Decline of the West', forecast by Oswald Spengler in 1918.
- Despite wholesale rejection in the West of fascist modernism and nearly complete rejection of 'Soviet modernism', Western architecture implemented many of the positivist tenets of 'totalitarian' modernism, namely in the fields of architecture and other applied arts (industrial design etc.)
- In the Arab world many of the modernist ideals of communism, fascism and the liberal West played an essential role in the formation of regional art scenes. The debate among Arab intellectuals, artists and politicians echoed the developments of modernism in Europe.

Architectural Modernism in the West: Le Corbusier

La Ville Radieuse, 1935.

Le Corbusier advocated using modern industrial techniques and strategies to devise a more efficient environment that would allow the transformation of society, the erasing of class differences and an increase in the standard of living.

He argued that this transformation was necessary to avoid the spectre of revolution that would otherwise shake society.



Le Corbusier: Unite d'Habitation a Marseille, 1947-52





Proletarian vacation housing at Prora, Rugen Island, Germany



Microrayon near Moscow, 1970s



Microrayon in Kabul, 1970s