

'Liberated' art for a liberated country

The politicisation of realism and abstraction in the Netherlands after the Second World War

Claartje Wesselink, University of Amsterdam

The national socialist regime in the Netherlands – but also elsewhere – spent a relatively large amount of money on art. Art was meant to convince the people of **the virtues** of the national socialist ideology. **Very strict standards** were set for art: it had to be realistic and represent **popular themes** such as landscapes of Holland, farm life, ideal cityscapes, and 'Aryan' persons.

Registration with the Dutch Chamber of Culture (*Kultuurkamer*) was mandatory for Dutch artists during the war, but **Jewish artists were not permitted** to join. The Kultuurkamer was a **national socialist artists' association** that provided subsidies and material, organised exhibitions, and took action against '*kitsch*', such as abstract art. **Entartete Kunst** is the notion you might think of right now.

Moreover, filling out an Aryan Declaration was part of the registration procedure of the Kultuurkamer. **Artists who did not register** with the Kultuurkamer were banned from pursuing their profession.

After the liberation, when Dutch artists were freed from all of these National Socialist regulations, the **memory of the war** played a significant role in the **reformulation of the canon** of Dutch art post-1945. It played a significant role in the **gradual disappearance** of realistic art from prominent museums and galleries, and the **widespread acceptance** of modern art.

Leading figures in the art world such as Willem Sandberg, Bram Hammacher, Hans Jaffé, and Edy de Wilde, who were largely determinative for the image of Dutch art after 1945, used the power of collective memories to **promote non-figurative styles**. Art they found to be stylistically 'good' – such as the work of Mondrian, Karel Appel and the Groningen-based Hendrik Werkman – they depicted as morally 'good' art. The notions **'free' and 'pure'** were frequently linked to this art, which had a **positive influence** on how it was received.

The cultural historian Aby Warburg pointed to **the ‘mnemonic’¹ potential of art** already in the early twentieth century. **Art, as a reservoir of memories**, has a wholesome and unifying effect on society, he said.

According to Warburg, it was his goal

‘(...) auf die Funktion des europäischen Kollektivgedächtnisses als stilbildende Macht hinzuweisen (...). Die Abweichungen der Wiedergabe, im Spiegel der Zeit erschaut, geben die bewusst oder unbewusst auswählende Tendenz des Zeitalters wieder und damit kommt die wunschtbildende, idealsetzende Gesamtseele an das Tageslicht, die, im Kreislauf von Konkretion und Abstraktion und zurück, Zeugnis für jene Kämpfe ablegt, die der Mensch um die Sophrosyne zu führen hat.’²

Warburg explained the **reuse of stylistic patterns** by means of the notion *Pathosformeln*: visual ‘formulas’ or motives which can recur in different iconographic contexts as mediators of meaning.³ The literary scientist Perdita Rösch describes these pathos formulas as ‘Bilder/Bildmotive als Träger bestimmter kollektiv erinnerter und transportierter Ausdruckswerte’.⁴ **In accordance with the hypothesis of Warburg**, one can say that the war, and fascism in general, reinforced the pathos formulas of the avant-garde.

In other words: modernism gained power of persuasion because the Nazis had abhorred it. It is understandable that young artists, standing at the beginning of their career in the late forties, chose for **the avant-garde rather than the realistic style** which had dominated the Dutch art world for twenty years, and which had become the only artistic means of expression approved of by the Nazis.

As the art historian Meyer Schapiro has pointed out in his much-read essay ‘Style’ (1953), it is no coincidence that art history’s stylistic breaks follow the political and economic breaks of society.

¹ The word ‘mnemonic’ – meaning ‘assisting or intended to assist memory’ – was inspired by the Greek Titaness Mnemosyne, the personification of memory.

² As cited by E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An intellectual biography* (London 1970) 270-271. The word ‘sophrosyne’ was inspired by the Greek goddess with the same name. It refers to excellence of character and soundness of mind.

³ Marlite Halbertsma, ‘De geschiedenis van de kunstgeschiedenis in de Duitssprekende landen en in Nederland van 1764 tot 1933’ in: Marlite Halbertsma and Kitty Zeilmans ed., *Gezichtsputten. Een inleiding in de methoden van de kunstgeschiedenis* (Nijmegen 1993) 89.

⁴ Perdita Rösch, *Aby Warburg* (Paderborn 2010) 52.

As Shapiro argued, '[Art history's] main divisions, accepted by all students, are also the boundaries of social units – cultures, empires, dynasties, cities, classes, churches, etc. – and periods which mark significant stages in social development. (...) Important economic and political shifts within these systems are often accompanied or followed by shifts in the centers of art and their styles.'⁵

Or to say it with Warburg: stylistic patterns of overruled and rejected regimes become bearers of negative memories. **New artistic forms are sought**, suitable for the new period. In the **reconstruction period** right after Europe's liberation of Nazism, **Entartete Kunst** provided the answer. The artistic style of the early twentieth century avant-garde was thought suitable to represent the values of the liberated society.

The Groningen-based artist Hendrik Werkman, who was against the Nazi regime, and who was one of the **very few Dutch artists who worked in an abstract manner during the war**, wrote in 1942:

'Changes can only take place slowly, but after the times we go through at present, change might go fast. Let's stick to that for the moment.'⁶

After the war, it turned out that Werkman had been right.

Twenty years later, **in 1962**, the famous Dutch museum director Willem Sandberg, who played a major role in changing Dutch art after the war, looked back and concluded:

Wars are the catalysts of history
Economic relationships change rapidly
Boundaries between social groups fade away
Prejudices grow dim
(...)
But the major changes in human relationships
Have not yet reached the Dutch social institutions.

⁵ Meyer Schapiro, 'Style' in: idem, *Theory and philosophy of art: style, artist, and society* (New York 1994) 99.

⁶ Frans R.E. Blom, Willem van Koppen and Mieke van der Wal, *Brieven rond de Blauwe Schuit I* (Nijmegen 2008) 498. Translation by the author.

**Workshop Re-Anchoring After the Crisis:
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on War, Memory, and Innovation**
University of Groningen, 4 December 2015

The younger generations, though, are living a new, and often wild life.
And also the art world is penetrated with this new life.⁷

⁷ As cited in W. Sandberg and H.L.C. Jaffé, *Kunst van heden in het Stedelijk* (Amsterdam 1961). Translation by the author.