

As the 1920s recede further into history, the glamour and misery of the Weimar Republic increasingly are being linked in the popular imagination to the saga of Germany's capital, Berlin. So dramatic are the scenes of revolution and civil war, the hectic flowering of culture and entertainment, the economic crisis and Nazi takeover, that the "Babylon" of Berlin, as which the city recently has been dramatized in a popular historical TV series, tends to overshadow other locales that were of no less import to the fate of Modernism in Germany. One of these is Cologne: With over 700,000 inhabitants, it was the third-largest city in the German Empire. During World War I, it played a key military role as a heavily fortified bridgehead on the River Rhine and as a logistical hub for troops and war materiel headed for the Western Front. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers passed through the city during the war years, while 100,000 workers, men and women, toiled away in some 700 armaments factories. As a result, the left-leaning Social Democratic Party (SPD) grew into a force to be reckoned with alongside the Catholic Center Party traditionally entrenched in the Rhineland. For four years, the people of Cologne had been confronted up close with the brutal realities of war that the government's propaganda played down because a large military hospital serving the Western front operated in the city as well. The true extent of the catastrophe became even more evident in the wake of Germany's defeat in the autumn of 1918, as almost a million vanquished soldiers flooded the city on their way back into the Reich, to be followed by occupying British troops in early December 1918. Fifteen thousand citizens of Cologne had died during the war and countless others had been injured – thus taking their place on the total German casualty rolls of 2.4 million dead, 4.8 million wounded, and 2.7 million permanently disabled.

The catastrophic legacy that the German Empire had left behind was felt in Cologne just as harshly as it was everywhere else. Nonetheless, the revolution that toppled the Kaiser unfolded relatively peacefully here. This was due to the great skill of a Cologne politician of the Catholic Center Party, who began to make his mark during this time as an exceptional and forward-looking political talent: Lord Mayor Konrad Adenauer. He was able to coordinate constructively with the revolutionary councils of workers and rebellious soldiers as well as with the SPD. This compromise arrangement in Cologne between the conservative Catholic middle class and the labor movement lasted during the entire Weimar Republic. The main recurring challenges faced by policymakers during the 1920s were constantly recurring mass unemployment and social deprivation. Adenauer, who was influenced by Catholic teachings on social equity, initially tackled the issue by rapidly expanding the city's social services. He then followed up by hiring the unemployed for public works projects such as developing the green belt circling the city. All of which was financed by reckless borrowing. Given the few really "sunny years" that the Republic enjoyed, the progressive policies of the municipal government ultimately were unable to make a lasting improvement in the fundamentally precarious situation of hundreds of thousands of people.

Adenauer's modernization strategy also included re-founding the city's university, constructing trade fair centres – which hosted seminal fairs like the 1928 *Pressa* international press exhibition – and attracting enterprises to the city, e.g. a Ford auto plant and the newly established broadcaster *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*. Ambitious architectural projects, such as the first German skyscraper

and the first Autobahn, put Cologne on the map after only a few years as a key hub in Germany's modern and reform-minded industrial society. Artists and scientists were attracted by this spirit of innovation, and just as many of them gravitated to the Rhine metropolis as to Berlin. The city's musical and theatrical scene was famous; its players were determined to compete on equal terms with the capital itself. A telling detail in this context: After the Bauhaus School had been pressured to leave Weimar in 1924, Adenauer invited Walter Gropius to move to Cologne. Although the Lord Mayor's plan came to naught, he did succeed in ushering in a generous expansion of the *Kölner Werkschulen* academy of fine and applied arts, which was placed under the direction of Richard Riemerschmid, a titan of the German association of craftsmen known as the *Deutscher Werkbund*.

When the Great Depression hit Germany in 1929, however, it quickly revealed the limits of Cologne's modernization miracle. By 1931, the city had gone bankrupt. By 1932, 40 percent of the population was living on public benefits. Small wonder, then, that political radicalism began to spread dramatically. Communists and National Socialists, previously peripheral actors in the political life of Cologne, clashed violently on the streets. Nineteen people were killed between 1930 and 1933.

Cologne's *Zeitgeist* and contemporary art scene from 1918 to 1933

How best to describe the *genius loci* of the city during this era? Its guiding themes were Republicanism and social responsibility – whether driven by religious motives (on the part of the Catholic Center Party) or by a yearning for social reform (on the part of the Social Democrats). Add to this a determination to achieve modernity through social and cultural reform which seemed to be shared by all sectors of society. This openness to tackling social issues created a climate in which Cologne's bourgeoisie was still able to parley with the hard-core Left. It stands to reason that this basically tolerant environment would not be fertile soil for the provocative rejectionism of the Dada Movement to take root once the turbulent revolutionary period was over. The same applied to Dada's sense of uncompromising aesthetic revolution. Dadaists like Hans Arp and Max Ernst and their friend Otto Freundlich soon sought out greener pastures in Paris.

The Cologne Progressives

A representative figure of Cologne's culture of building bridges between people with widely divergent ideologies was the photographer August Sander and his friendship with the "Group of Progressive Artists."

This was a rather loosely organized artistic circle. Neither had it issued a manifesto, nor had it been formally established by a constituent assembly. It did present its programmatic ideas in two magazines, however, which were published at the beginning and end of the 1920s, respectively: *stupid* (1920) and *a bis z* (1929–33). The artists who would later become the Progressives first met in 1919, in the Cologne Dada circle centered around Max Ernst. But they soon went their own way, believing that the Dadaists were too "bourgeois" in aiming at a revolution confined to aesthetics, rather than a political one.

The epicentre of the Progressives was the intellectually gifted, missionary person of Franz Wilhelm Seiwert. He was joined during the 1920s by Heinrich Hoerle and Gerd Arntz, who formed the inner circle. In a broader sense, Gott-

fried Brockmann and the sculptor Hans Schmitz also formed part of the Group.

Incurably ill from childhood, Seiwert had become a radical pacifist during World War I. He had made a thorough study of Marxism, but without joining the German Communist Party (KPD). Seeing all human values exposed as bankrupt during the war was an experience that turned Seiwert into a fierce critic of the old class system. A highly sensitive moralist, Seiwert believed in a utopian form of socialism as the basis for a more humane system. Seiwert's pacifism and dedication to social revolution were shared by Heinrich Hoerle. The latter's "*Krüppel-mappe*" portfolio of images honouring the blind, armless, and legless veterans on Cologne's streets was intended to give a face to those Seiwert called "the true monuments of the world war." Hoerle later found his album overly sentimental and went on to develop extremely minimal, strictly composed "*Prothesenbilder*" of prosthetic limbs, which could serve as "symbols," "icons," and "warning signs." But the gist of his accusatory message remained unchanged: That the individual human being was being degraded through mechanized production and mechanized warfare. Hoerle's "*Maschinenmenschen*" – machine people reduced to torsos with faceless robot heads, with hooks in place of hands – embodied his social criticism as austere and timeless painted images.

However, unlike the politically uncompromising Seiwert, Hoerle also painted still lifes, nudes, portraits, and even carnival motifs. He was the first of the Progressives to attain a positive reception in German museums. By 1926, Hoerle's works were held by the *Kunstmuseum* in Düsseldorf, the art museums of Elberfeld and Hagen, the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld, and the *Kunsthalle* in Mannheim, not to mention other museums in the United States and the Soviet Union.

The third member of the Progressives' inner circle was the intensely political Gerd Arntz, the scion of a family of industrialists; he had taken up arms to defend the Republic during the right-wing Kapp Putsch of 1920.

From 1923 onwards, the sculptor Hans Schmitz also became associated with the Progressives. Born in 1896 in Cologne, he was serving in an artillery unit when the war ended. He sat on the unit's Revolutionary Soldiers' Council, sympathizing with the Spartacists and other groupings on the extreme Left of the political spectrum. His oeuvre includes figurative as well as highly abstract sculptures and graphics, all devoted to the central theme of workers and their world.

A more peripheral figure among the Progressives was Peter Paffenholz. Born in 1900, he worked mainly as an illustrator of publications issued by the broadcaster *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* (WDR), but also produced graphic art for the German Communist Party, of which he was an active member.

The youngest member of the circle was Gottfried Brockmann. The son of a successful decorative painter, he was still a fifteen-year-old grammar school student at war's end, but by that time already had become a convinced pacifist. He learned the trade of house painting and decorating and became active in the "*Freie Arbeiterjugend*" youth organization associated with the Social Democrats. He demonstrated against the Kapp Putsch in 1920, read Anarchist theoretical writings, and dreamed of "socialism from the grass roots up." His early work was heavily influenced by the signature styles of Seiwert and Hoerle and held up a mirror to the horrors and sufferings inflicted by the war. Having enrolled as an art student in Düsseldorf in the mid-1920s, Brockmann later expanded his imagery beyond the highly political themes

while adopting elements of Surrealism and New Objectivity.

What the Progressives had in common

The goal of the *gruppe progressiver künstler* – they wrote their name in lower-case in the Bauhaus fashion – was to create art of uncompromising modernity that would nonetheless be "readable," i.e. intelligible even to members of the proletariat with no prior exposure to the avant-garde. The universally understandable art they created furthermore was intended to convey the political and social realities of the time "as un sentimentally as possible." Art had to be specific and absolutely truthful, they believed. Their immediate environment was to be their arena and would serve as the touchstone for the validity of their artistic statements. Drawing mutual inspiration from one another, the Cologne Progressives created a variant of Realism that was radically reduced to the geometric and linear, whereby Seiwert and Hoerle concentrated mainly on painting, Arntz on black and white graphics.

The Cologne Progressives also wanted their art to serve as a useful tool in the daily political struggle waged by the Left. Their pictures appeared as illustrations in many Leftist regional publications of the Rhineland and in Communist dailies, as well as in British and American written materials targeting the working class. The Progressives also published postcards, pamphlets, and flyers, e.g. for the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*, a global workers' relief organization linked to the German Communist Party.

Aside from turning out visual propaganda intended for a specific time and place, Arntz also used his skills as a woodcut artist to produce a veritable encyclopedia of visual formulas with which he could analyze the social reality of modern industrial society and its power structures. Arntz' figures play out their roles on geometrically structured stages, as actors lacking their own individuality.

So it was only logical that Arntz arrived at the concept of the pictogram. In 1929, he took his idea to the Marxist-oriented *Gesellschafts- und Wirtschaftsmuseum* (museum for social and economic affairs) in Vienna, Austria. This had been founded by Otto Neurath, the "Economics Minister" of the short-lived Munich Soviet Republic, as a vehicle of social and political enlightenment.

Arntz was accompanied to Vienna by the Prague native Augustin Tschinkel, who had come to Cologne in 1928 to work at the Czechoslovak pavilion at the *Pressa* international press exhibition. Since long deeply influenced by the Progressives' ideal of typization, he had eventually joined their group.

Sander and the Progressives

August Sander created a moving portrait of the young Brockmann that cogently conveys the latter's empathetic idealism. The photo also testifies to the sympathy which the stolidly bourgeois Social Democrat Sander had for the younger man's socialist radicalism. It was the deep moral earnestness shared by both artists that bridged the gap between them. This political open-mindedness on the part of Sander resulted in epochal masterworks of 1920s art. Belonging to an older generation of artists that had been shaped by the still-intact bourgeois values of the world as it was before World War I, it took Sander many years to transition from portrait

photographer working on commission to independent artist. And it was largely due to his encounters with the Progressive artists from the younger generation, from 1920 onwards, that gave him the impetus for the monumental, long-term project that would come to define an era: his portrait series "People of the 20th Century". It was the intensely fruitful exchange of views and experiences that changed both Sander's photography as well as the painting of the Progressive circle.

Sander became the Progressives' collector and patron, as well as their sounding board. Their ideal of preparing a systematic analysis of contemporary social conditions inspired Sander to conceive his greatest project, a compendium called "*Antlitz der Zeit*" (Face of Our Time) that transcended individuality. The stylized depiction of professions and social roles by Arntz is extremely closely related to Sander's search for anonymous yet representative portraits of social types. Inasmuch, Seiwert's statement from 1926 – "With my pictorial form, I am striving to represent a reality divested of all that is sentimental and all that is accidental" – just as well could have been made by Sander.

The most significant testimony to the symbiosis between Sander and the Progressives would turn out to be the mural "wandbild für einen fotografen", which Seiwert painted especially for Sander and which hung as an eye-catcher above the staircase of the photographer's home. Sander, for his part, photographed the Progressives in portraits that conveyed an impressive sense of monumentality. He displayed two such photos of Franz Wilhelm Seiwert and Heinrich Hoerle prominently in his workroom. But Sander also made painstaking photographic records of the images created by the Progressive artists, taking the utmost care in reproducing their surface structures. The Progressives, thrilled by Sander's perfect translation of the haptic elements of their paintings into black and white photos, exploited these for political effect by disseminating them in magazines and as reproductions in exhibitions. The Sander reproductions of the Progressives' works were even shown in Moscow at the "Revolutionary Art of the West" exhibition, thereby garnering international attention. Sander-photographs were also shown at the exhibition.

Conversely, the Progressives repeatedly referenced Sander's photos in "*a bis z*," the periodical they established in the late 1920s. Seiwert commented on the photos as follows: "The task which Sander has set here both for himself and for photography gives photography a purpose which has been lying on the street, so to speak, and which therefore has not been picked up until now. Photography relieves painting of the work of creating images of the essence of the times (...); it thereby assigns painting that other task incumbent upon the visual arts: to take a utopian view of the world within the context of the times."

This said, the task at hand for the Progressives in 1920s Cologne was not just to create utopian visions of the world, but also to reconcile "art with living," given that their material circumstances were almost always precarious. In the memoirs left behind by contemporary eyewitnesses, daily life in the artists' circle is described as "modest," "frugal," and "humane."

If only for the sake of making a living, Seiwert and Hoerle participated in several public art projects in the context of the *Kunst am Bau* and *Kunst im Raum* programs targeted at the inclusion of artworks in public building projects and

public spaces, both of which had been realized as part of Cologne's architectural ambitions. The interior art created by the Progressives also included ephemeral mural decorations for Cologne's famous carnival events. But the Progressives also organized their own festivities, which were specifically geared towards artists. One example was the "*Lumpenball*" of ragamuffins, gala events at which Cologne's well-heeled art aficionados mingled with the avant-garde; first held in 1926, these balls would later become legendary. Any profits earned were used to support fellow artists in need. August Sander made photos of these artists' balls and disseminated them as postcards. A number of the portraits taken at the balls were also incorporated into his great compendium "People of the 20th Century."

Epilogue

While the last *Lumpenball* was still ongoing in 1933, news came that the Reichstag was on fire. An apocalyptic mood began to spread. Gottfried Brockmann, who was teaching at the *Kunstakademie* in Düsseldorf at the time and had joined the German Communist Party, received brutal threats from the Nazi Stormtroopers (SA). He fled overnight to Berlin, where he went underground as a non-political applied artist until 1945. Paffenholz, also a member of the Communist Party, was incarcerated for several weeks in 1933. He would later be harassed with recurring home searches and was again taken into detention for several weeks by the Gestapo following the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20th, 1944.

Seiwert, who since childhood had suffered from incurable cancer induced by x-rays administered as part of a failed medical experiment, died young in the summer of 1933. His personal tragedy spared him certain martyrdom as an enemy of the Nazi state. Hoerle, too, died before his time in 1936. He did not live to see 21 of his works confiscated from German museums and destroyed. during the *Entartete Kunst* campaign targeting so-called "degenerate art." August Sander, the avowed Social Democrat, was monitored by the suspicious regime from 1933 onwards. In 1934, the Nazis destroyed the printing plates for Sander's book "*Antlitz der Zeit*." His son Erich, a friend of Brockmann and active in the socialist resistance movement, received a long prison sentence in 1935 and died in jail in 1944, a victim of the dictatorship. Arntz emigrated to the Netherlands in 1934, after the Vienna museum had been destroyed by Austria's authoritarian Dollfuss regime. He survived the war after many adventures and later worked as a graphic statistician for UNESCO.

Taking stock

So what is the rightful place of the Cologne Progressives within the history of 20th century art? The answer is not without irony. Seiwert, Hoerle, and Arntz wanted to change society with pictures. They failed in this endeavor just as all the other revolutionary artistic movements of the Weimar period failed in theirs. They went down to defeat in 1933 along with the Republic itself. This said, the Progressives did achieve one success over the long term: Their signature stylistic use of the pictogram, originally derived from theories of social revolution, has become ubiquitous in the communications of today's globalized society – whether in the directional signs of urban jungles, as marketing tools, or as shorthand for political messages of whatever stripe.