



GEORG KOLBE —

Elisa Tamaschke, Julia Wallner (eds.)

THE ARTIST AND NATIONAL SOCIALISM

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The Artist and
National Socialism.

Breaks and Continuities in Life,
Work, and Reception

Translated by Gérard A. Goodrow

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Preface

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”

*Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,”
7th thesis, 1940¹*

In his ambiguity during the National Socialist regime and the historicization that followed his death in 1947, Georg Kolbe emerges more and more clearly as a key figure in a newly developing art historiography of modernism. This is increasingly working from the previous margins of a male-centered Eurocentric narrative, emphasizing research on the social conditions for artistic creation as well as the relationships to overarching social and political forces that need to be reappraised, described, and contextualized.

This publication, edited by my predecessor Julia Wallner and the researcher Elisa Tamaschke, is thus a central contribution to a new integrative understanding of—and critical demand for—art historiography in relation to ideologies and power relations, and it assigns Georg Kolbe an important position in this context. The work of artists, the context of creation, and their own attitudes and responsibilities are increasingly at the center of innovative museum work and exhibition practice. Many of the studies carried out here in the methodological tradition of the social history of art thus reposition Kolbe within the construct of art histories, which has become mutable. They place the plural and often non-linear narratives of the everyday on an equal footing with familiar art-historical narratives in order to broaden our access to art historiographies. This publication positions Kolbe as a critical example to trace and understand how artists have navigated, appropriated, and come to terms with various institutionalized systems and forms of power. Transcending national boundaries, this volume invites further research and reflection on the relationship between difficult pasts and their influence today, as an often self-centered and overly consolidated German memory landscape needs to be updated and reactivated anew for the increasingly challenging present.

In this way, not only are new insights developed and classified, but far-reaching questions can be developed that offer many possibilities for research. As a contemporary research and learning institution, the Georg Kolbe Museum will use this space opened up by the past to ask which forms of contemporary confrontation are important and central. What kind of society do we live in today, what stories and truths need to be told in order to grasp and assess its complexity, and how do we do this? Making and exhibiting art means understanding the world as changeable. Museums need to find a form of active memory that is able to take into account both the light and the dark sides in equal measure, and to connect the time and the circumstances of the works to be preserved,

researched, and presented with the urgent questions of our present, in order to be effective as a place of knowledge formation and enchantment at the same time.

For a museum must situate and communicate the artists not only in the contexts of their lives, but also in our own time. This publication is therefore also a basis and a starting point for asking more broadly how we can go beyond the boundaries of the archive and move towards other models of knowledge. What role do we assign to the archive and its reprocessing as a tool for imagining new futures, for building multi-layered collective knowledge through and with artists and thinkers, new art histories, curatorial practices, and documentation and display strategies? How can an awareness of the past, updated through an engagement with art and its contexts, which does not excuse but also does not absolutely demonize lead to a new sense of responsibility in our present?

This publication is also to be understood as a handing over, as it were, in which a chorus of outstanding scholarly voices opens a new chapter for the institution with their work. As the Georg Kolbe Foundation and Museum, it is now necessary to make productive use of this often distressing basis, not only to research what was and to show what is, but also to imagine and shape what can be. The publication is therefore intended to serve as a compass, not only for the still incomplete indexing, classification, and visualization of new sources, or the deconstruction of the mechanisms of the process of coming to terms with the past in Germany that have been in effect for decades, but above all in the search for an institutional approach that is capable of critically grasping this process in all its complexity, which ranges from the artistic and cultural claim of universality to the abysses of colonialism. It also feeds on what the publicist Max Czollek recently called “inconsolability” in the face of what has happened and how it could have happened at all. With its emphasis on feeling, it forms an antipole to the sovereign claim of a self-centered German understanding of history. In its deliberately chosen sentimentality, the term also reaches deeply into the reappraisal of Georg Kolbe’s life and work that this publication brings about.

I conclude with great thanks to the former director of the Georg Kolbe Museum, Julia Wallner, and the art historian Elisa Tamaschke, who supervised this publication with outstanding commitment. I would also like to thank all those involved for their exceptional work and the impulses they have given. This publication would not have been possible without the support of the Hermann Reemtsma Foundation, the Ferdinand Möller Foundation, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, and the Friends of the Museum.

Kathleen Reinhardt

Director, Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin

Introduction

After the death of Maria von Tiesenhausen, Georg Kolbe's granddaughter, a significant and hitherto largely unknown part of his written estate was transferred from Canada to the artist's former residence and studio in Berlin in March 2020, seventy years after the opening of the Georg Kolbe Museum. The surprising quality of its contents, its thematic diversity, and its overwhelming quantity make it an art-historical sensation. The materials that we, as the director and research associate of the museum at that time, examined in the apartment of the deceased granddaughter far exceeded our expectations: hundreds of letters and documents, notes, plans, records, diary-like calendars, photographs, magazines and journals, books, and numerous works of art (figs. 1 and 2). With this rich addition, the Kolbe Estate is now one of the most comprehensive documentations of the biography of a twentieth-century artist.

During his lifetime, Georg Kolbe (1877–1947) was considered one of the most successful German artists of his generation. With participation in numerous international exhibitions, works prominently represented in influential collections as well as in public spaces, an extensive network of artist friendships, and memberships in artists' associations, he was considered an important voice in connection with cultural policy. In the 1910s and 1920s, he decisively and programmatically modernized figurative sculpture. It is important to note that, during his creative period, the artist lived through four different systems of government, which were marked by harsh political disputes, as well as two world wars. His recognition and success grew steadily during the German Empire and the Weimar Republic. Even under the National Socialist regime, he was able to largely maintain his established position, although a younger generation of sculptors had come to the fore. Today, Kolbe's defensive interpretations of his existence as an artist must provoke contradictions: in his fundamental understanding, he considered his artistic work to be free and independent, invulnerable to social influences or political demands on art. Kolbe's formal language developed continuously, without strong breaks, and revolved around the depiction of the human figure. It must always be seen in the context of cultural-political and contemporary historical developments.

The arrival of new material from Canada—but not only that—is challenging us to question previous interpretations of Kolbe's life and work. We now have the opportunity to add some dynamism to what we thought was certain and firmly established.

This publication brings together the research papers that were presented in September 2022 at the Georg Kolbe Museum's conference "Georg Kolbe and National Socialism.



1 Various boxes in Maria von Tiesenhausen's apartment in Vancouver, Canada, 2019



2 Some of the boxes after their arrival from Canada, Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin, March 2020

Continuities and Breaks in Life, Work, and Reception” and were subsequently expanded upon. For us, as specialists who have been dealing with the life and work of the artist for many years, it was a matter of subjecting the research on Kolbe’s position during National Socialism to a necessary revision. To this end, we made available the newly accessible sources, drawing, of course, on the material already available in the museum and excellently catalogued in recent years, as well as on the basis of existing publications. As

a research institution, the critical and differentiated examination of questions of artistic production, its creation, and its (changing) reception is one of our core themes; the dedication of a monographic museum makes this indispensable. At the same time, this historically evolved task represents an opportunity to keep alive in the present and in the future an engagement with the challenging (art) history of the twentieth century.

Georg Kolbe's Estate and Its History

The estate of Georg Kolbe is characterized by an unexpected, literally eventful history. In his last will and testament, the artist had stipulated that the studio house he had built in the late 1920s, the works of art contained in it, and his written estate should go either to a foundation yet to be established, or to the state and be made accessible to the public. By the time of his death on November 20, 1947, this self-confident gesture had created the necessary conditions for securing his estate—and his posthumous reputation. In 1949, old friends and companions established the Georg Kolbe Foundation, and in 1950 the studio building was opened as a museum.² The first director was Margrit Schwartzkopff, Kolbe's former photographer and office assistant, as well as the executor of his will, who was allowed by the will to live in selected rooms at Sensburger Allee 25. The interpretation of the will led to long disputes over the artistic and material estate between Margrit Schwartzkopff, who represented the foundation, and the family. She served as director until her death in 1969, during which time she ran the institution as a kind of memorial to the late artist, leaving the furnishings of the rooms largely as Kolbe had left them. Schwartzkopff was succeeded as director of the museum by Maria von Tiesenhausen, Georg Kolbe's granddaughter, who was born in 1929. She emigrated to Canada in the 1950s but continued to travel regularly during her directorship between Berlin and her adopted country of Canada, where her husband, Hans Dietrich ("Dietz") von Tiesenhausen, a Second World War naval officer, lived. It is impossible to date exactly when she began taking estate documents from the museum's archives to Canada, but she did so on a large scale and without disclosing which or how many documents were involved. Since there was no inventory of the written estate, it was subsequently impossible to collate what was missing with what existed in the museum's holdings. In 1987, almost a decade after the end of her directorship, von Tiesenhausen published a selection of letters to and from Kolbe.³ For the most part, the selected excerpts came from the estate, which she also supplemented through selected acquisitions. As a close relative, she also had access to other materials remaining in the family; she continued to maintain some of her grandfather's contacts for research purposes, and conducted research in the public archives accessible to her. She also successfully and extensively researched the works of Kolbe that remained in the GDR and the Soviet Union. By 2006, she had successively returned the originals of the letters she had published, along with other documents, to the museum and its director Ursel Berger, who had been working there since 1978, as well as to her research assistants Josephine Gabler and Carolin Jahn—a total of approximately 800 individual documents. The written



3 A glimpse into the estate of Maria von Tiesenhausen

estate, which has been reunited and is preserved in the museum, thus comprises some 3,500 documents, most of which come from the estate, but which the museum had also selectively supplemented through purchases and donations in previous decades.⁴

It could be assumed that Maria von Tiesenhausen kept more material with her. However, the quantity and quality could hardly be determined from Berlin, despite the improvement in the relationship between the museum and von Tiesenhausen, which had been problematic for decades.

Julia Wallner traveled to Canada several times during her directorship and also received the granddaughter at the museum in Berlin.⁵ She was eventually able to convince von Tiesenhausen that the museum was unquestionably the best place to preserve and process the estate. In 2018, after long and sometimes difficult discussions, part of the estate, including a sculpture by Aristide Maillol and a painting by Max Beckmann, as well as works by Georg Kolbe, were transferred to the museum. It was only after von Tiesenhausen's death in 2019 that a comprehensive viewing of the objects and documents was possible, thanks to the Canadian executors of her estate, who had already acted as intermediaries during her lifetime, and to their relationship



4 One of over 100 drawings from the estate of Maria von Tiesenhausen

5 Letter from Max Pechstein to Georg Kolbe, 1920



6 Georg Kolbe's appointment diaries from the estate of Maria von Tiesenhausen



of trust, which was underpinned by previous visits and conversations. Finally, in March 2020, approximately 3,000 additional private and business letters, as well as works of art, photographs of works and photo albums, pocket calendars, appointment and telephone calendars, address books, notes, newspaper clippings on exhibitions, fellow artists, and cultural-political topics from Kolbe's estate, as well as from the holdings of the granddaughter and her parents, were returned to the museum (figs. 3–6).⁶

The Museum as a Place of Reappraisal

Four museum directors, in a not always conflict-free relationship, have worked with their respective teams and networks to ensure that this heritage is preserved and maintained.

Now, for the first time, it is reunited for future generations in its original location and is accessible in its entirety for research, which was a major concern of ours. Its significance for art history extends far beyond the sculptor himself; the estate leads to four continents, and thus into the far-reaching and challenging networks of relationships in the history of art and culture in the twentieth century, of which it is an invaluable witness.⁷

Margrit Schwartzkopff and Maria von Tiesenhausen were too personally involved to be able or willing to deal with the artist in a scholarly and critical manner. In fact, the very history of the museum's founding is itself the story of a continuity in the field of art and cultural policy after 1945 that needs to be critically evaluated. Two of the founders were members of the NSDAP; and after 1950, works from the 1930s and 1940s were also installed in public spaces without criticism or reflection.⁸ Schwartzkopff made it her declared goal to be a "torchbearer" on the path to elevating "the work of Georg Kolbe beyond its ties to a specific time [...] until the knowledge of the significance of this unique work has truly become common knowledge."⁹ Statements of this kind indirectly refer to critical voices that were raised against Kolbe and his role in the cultural-political system of National Socialism, as well as against his artistic conception of man, which was at least formally connectable to National Socialist ideology.¹⁰ Margrit Schwartzkopff and, after her, Maria von Tiesenhausen were able to stylize Kolbe as an artist who, even between 1933 and 1945, was primarily concerned with artistic-formal issues and could therefore not be interpreted politically.¹¹

Art-historical research on the life and work of Georg Kolbe did not begin until 1978 with Ursel Berger. In the decades of her directorship (until 2012), she developed fundamental research—her published findings still form the basis of any discussion of the sculptor today.¹² In addition to extensive biographical and art-historical contextual research, during her time as director of the museum she began compiling a catalogue raisonné of Kolbe's works: an extensive and costly undertaking—especially in the case of sculptures with numerous casts—that has since been continued at the museum by the art historian Thomas Pavel.¹³

Since the 1980s, research has turned to Kolbe's work during National Socialism, a topic that eventually became urgent at that time. In addition to Ursel Berger, Magdalena Bushart, Josephine Gabler, Arie Hartog, and Penelope Curtis have published on this topic in the context of exhibition publications or university theses, thus making important contributions.¹⁴ With the exhibition at the Georg Kolbe Museum and the publication of the major research volume on the work of the art dealer Alfred Flechtheim in 2017, an important chapter on the artist's environment during National Socialism was opened up and further explored in the specific context of sculpture.¹⁵

Revision and Multiple Perspectives

New sources require new research and an update of previous research results; at the same time, they offer the historical opportunity to open up a field of research, also in terms of personnel. With the receipt of the bequest from Canada, it quickly became

clear that numerous documents from the period between 1933 and 1945 had not been previously known and would now allow for more in-depth research. This remains an institutional obligation; after all, questions have remained unanswered and must be asked anew. The reappraisal of National Socialist history can never be complete because it is an ethical and social necessity to remember it.

In recent years, the critical study of artists' biographies during National Socialism and the postwar period has undergone a great development. Exhibitions on Emil Nolde and the continuity of artists' careers after 1945, such as the exhibition on the "Gottbegnadeten-Liste," the list of "divinely gifted" artists, have set new standards and sharpened the view of the art world and its political entanglements in the twentieth century.¹⁶ These projects were often accompanied by the revision of existing archives and allowed external researchers to access and work with the material. An open way of dealing with the material was also fundamental to our approach. After an initial phase of intensive indexing, which included a year of reviewing, sorting, and securing by Elisa Tamaschke, the new archival material was to be made available as quickly as possible and without any restrictions. In order, as the Georg Kolbe Museum, not to claim sole interpretative authority over the documents and the resulting art-historical questions, and in order to build on the expertise in the field of art during National Socialism, in the fall of 2021 we invited a group of renowned art historians to familiarize themselves with the new material and to develop their own research priorities on the basis of existing research. Their insightful results were finally presented at a conference at the museum in September 2022, and can be read in expanded form in this volume.¹⁷

With this project, we were particularly concerned with extending and rejuvenating the circle of scholars working on Georg Kolbe. After all, scholarship only remains justified and vital in its openness if it experiences a constant broadening of horizons through ever new perspectives.

The essays in this volume change our view of Kolbe. He served the NS power elite to a much greater extent than has been recognized in the literature. Many of the essays in this volume show the ambivalence of Kolbe's actions, which is characteristic of every human existence; at the same time, they show for the first time in detail how this ambivalence increasingly developed into opportunism. Thus Georg Kolbe signed the "Aufruf der Kulturschaffenden" (Call of the Cultural Workers), he accepted public commissions and honors, he portrayed Francisco Franco, and he expressed the wish to make a portrait of Adolf Hitler,¹⁸ which was never realized. He was on the "Gottbegnadeten-Liste" and was invited to evening events of the political elite.¹⁹ However, he was not a member of the NSDAP, and at the beginning of National Socialist rule he was apparently widely perceived as a representative of the Weimar Republic; some of his sculptures in public spaces were removed. Unlike Arno Breker and Josef Thorak, who, as representatives of a younger generation of sculptors, clearly benefited from the NS state, Kolbe built on an existing career. He continued to cultivate his friendships with artists defamed as "degenerate," and to appreciate and represent their works on juries; furthermore, contrary to various official pronouncements, he expressed his criticism of the system in private letters. Such an

exemplary list shows how important it is to perceive the shades of gray in order to grasp the complexity of historical facts and human life, instead of creating a black-and-white picture. In this context, it is also important to turn the argumentative “but,” which is often placed between pro and contra and always smacks of a desire to relativize, into an “and.”

This publication does not offer a fixed framework for interpretation, but rather seeks to open up space for a multi-perspective approach. The authors’ analyses provide in-depth and new insights into a subject that is challenging due to its multifaceted nature. Aya Soika places Kolbe for the first time in the cultural-political situation between 1933 and 1945, both in detail and critically. Paula Schwerdtfeger and Ambra Frank examine his participation in exhibitions during this period as well as his strong public presence in Frankfurt am Main to the present day. Christian Fuhrmeister focuses on a particular gala dinner in 1939 and its cultural-political significance in the NS state. Jan Giebel’s overview of Kolbe’s relationship with his art dealers provides new insights into his self-image as a businessman and artist. The in-depth studies by Wolfgang Schöddert, Gesa Vietzen, and Anja Tiedemann of Kolbe’s business relationships with the galleries of Ferdinand Möller, Alfred Flechtheim, and Karl Buchholz provide new and sometimes electrifying insights not only into the topic of Kolbe but also and especially into the galleries that were so crucial to modernism in Germany. Bernhard Maaz, Olaf Peters, and Arie Hartog explore artistic-formal questions of tradition and the ideational content of Kolbe’s formal language. The texts by Christina Irrgang and Magdalena Bushart consider the resonances during Kolbe’s lifetime: on the one hand, the reflection of sculpture in the medium of photography and its medial usability; on the other hand, the written tributes that the artist received on the occasion of milestone birthdays and awards. In their studies, Maike Steinkamp and Dorothea Schöne examine the history of Kolbe’s reception after 1945 in the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the United States. With these contributions, research on Georg Kolbe, on the life of an artist under National Socialism, is on entirely new ground.

Prospects

At the same time, further research is necessary. Kolbe’s relationships to his collectors and to his Jewish friends, his international travels, his life between 1943 and 1945 in Hierlsenhagen in Silesia, his relationship to the Allies, the political dimension of his sculptures, which Kolbe certainly intended, the history of ideas of the bodies he designed, his reading experiences, his scope of knowledge of everyday political events, his awareness of and striving for power and success, his reception in the GDR, the institutional history of the Georg Kolbe Museum— all these are research perspectives that need to be deepened and continued. The digital publication of the catalogue raisonné in the coming year will also facilitate a thorough analysis of the development of the form, while at the same time making the history of reception even more tangible through cast editions and exhibition participation. The publication of the conference papers is a beginning of something that we look forward to continuing.