
H-France Review Vol. 23 (May 2023), No. 76

Tessa Friederike Rosebrock, *Kurt Martin et le Musée des Beaux-arts de Strasbourg: Politique des musées et des expositions sous le IIIe Reich et dans l'immédiat après-guerre*, trans. Françoise Joly. Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme/Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art, 2019. xxvii + 524 pages. Figures, appendices, bibliography, and index. €30.00. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7351-2442-8.

Review by Dominique Poulot, IHMC, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne/CNRS.

This large volume, beautifully produced, testifies to the editorial quality of the publications of the German Center for Art History in Paris. It originated as a thesis defended in 2010 at the Free University of Berlin under the direction of Thomas Gaehtgens, although the project began in 2004 when, in response to several requests for restitution, the author was commissioned by the director of the museums of the city of Strasbourg to investigate the provenance of works that had entered the collections during the German occupation. In fact, even if Rosebrock's ambition goes chronologically beyond the Nazi period, on both sides, and concerns not only Alsace but also the region of Baden, the most important aspect of her book is this search for provenance, based on meticulously studied sources, some of which are reproduced as appendices. From this point of view, the research is pioneering and commendable: it will be essential reading for anyone interested in the contemporary history of French museums and in the Nazi politics of art.

But this French translation of the original German thesis appears in a context that has undergone a certain evolution since Rosebrock's research began twenty years ago. The reader is warned from the first page by the current director of the Strasbourg museums, Paul Lang (appointed in 2018), that institutions must face up to "non seulement un devoir de mémoire mais aussi un impératif d'exemplarité" (p. 1). This places the book in a specific French intellectual, cultural, and political context—that of the "duty to remember"—which has, moreover, been the subject of numerous works by political scientists and historians. [1] The new foreword by the author briefly recalls the history of the MNR (Musées nationaux récupération), works recovered from post-war collecting points in Germany and Austria and identified as originating in France, which began to be examined from 2000 onwards within the framework of the Mattéoli Mission (Mission d'étude sur la spoliation des Juifs de France). And Rosebrock briefly mentions the rise of research on provenance in France, sanctioned by a recent program within the Institut national d'histoire de l'art, as well as the rise of studies of museum directors during the National Socialist period in Germany. But it is disappointing that she has not updated anything in the book itself, on the grounds of "conserver le texte dans sa version initiale" (p. xxiv). A bibliographic and historiographical update, at least, would have been welcome.

The book opens with a photograph of Kurt Martin (1899-1975) alongside an introduction devoted to the reopening of the museum in the Palais Rohan in 1948. The author ends by affirming that, for her, “l’intention de la présente étude n’était pas de condamner ou d’absoudre le personnage, mais de décrire l’évolution d’une institution sous le régime national-socialiste (...). Il s’agissait de poser des faits, mais pas forcément de les interpréter” (p. 302). Her reading is, in fact, as much psychological and moralistic as it is descriptive. The author’s empathy for her subject is unquestionable, no doubt marked by the excellent relationship she established with Martin’s son, and her access to personal memories and archives. It is nevertheless a challenge to write a classic biography “avec comme intention première de mieux comprendre la vie culturelle de cette période historique” (p. 302)—a time, precisely, when the individuality of civil servants did not carry much weight.

About ten pages are devoted to the founding and re-founding of the Strasbourg painting gallery during the nineteenth century, its direction by Wilhelm von Bode from 1889 to the end of the First World War and, during the interwar period, its direction under Hans Haug (1890-1965). The Nazi occupation of Alsace is the subject of another ten-page overview before we come to the museum policy itself. Curator Kurt Martin—first in charge of the new Baden Army Museum in 1934, which was “fondé à l’initiative du *Reichsstatthalter* Robert Wagner” (p. 48) whom Martin apparently satisfied—was appointed head of the Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe and then, in a rather spectacular institutional ascent, recommended to head the Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Ultimately, Martin accepted the position of plenipotentiary in the new Gau “Oberrhein” (Alsace and Baden). The author’s rather complicated discussion of Martin’s motivations is the beginning of what becomes a leitmotif of the book leading to an equally confusing conclusion about Martin’s beliefs and conduct under Nazism. Rosebrock chooses to use a typology of conduct developed by Jonathan Petropoulos: art historians and curators would have made their choices by “faire barrage, par leur action, aux conséquences négatives d’une politique qu’ils récusaient; faire carrière dans le nouveau système en acceptant des compromis en matière d’éthique; [faire] silence pour assurer leur tranquillité matérielle personnelle” (p. 299).^[2] One may find this range somewhat caricatured, but the author’s choice of the first hypothesis is questionable when reading the rich archival material she provides.

The convincing description of the projects imagined by Reichsstatthalter Wagner for Alsace as a cultural center of the Reich leaves one in doubt as to whether Martin’s position in Strasbourg was really as unimportant (in comparison to leading the Berlin Nationalgalerie) as the author argues. While the realities of funding and museum operations in Alsace were ultimately rather limited, they were nonetheless impossible to predict in 1940. On the contrary, governing the artistic and museum life of this new territory might have seemed an extremely stimulating undertaking for an ambitious forty-year-old who had already proven himself on a local scale. Besides, Wagner’s fanatical personality (with which Martin was already very familiar) precluded any naivety about the undertakings Martin would have to carry out in this position. Martin did not join the Nazi Party, but this fact was not crucial, as the author herself acknowledges. Thus, Martin’s choice of Alsace over Berlin, and then his various actions, reveal at best a series of personal motivations that exclude any obvious anti-Nazi commitment. Finally, at no point after the war does Martin seem to have examined his conscience about his activities in Germanizing Alsatian museums under Wagner’s reign of terror. A quick reading led the book’s French prefacer, Paul Lang, to write that it is “la biographie de cet opposant au régime nazi” (p. xii), an assertion that remains problematic.

Chapters four through six, devoted to Nazi policy, constitute the heart of the book. The principles of a general administration of the museums of the Upper Rhine were established by Martin in 1941, in service of the Germanization of Alsace. He wrote on 24 March 1941, “tous les musées, aussi divers soient-ils dans leur singularité, doivent aujourd’hui travailler selon le même principe politique et être débarrassés des tendances françaises, tout comme des objets français” (p. 82). This policy included the organization of propaganda exhibitions, “la fondation, à l’initiative de Wagner, d’une camaraderie des artistes et des amis des arts,” the creation of new or reinvented museums of regional art and local ethnography, and a future Goethe House to centralize the literary activities of the region, all according to a model traced out for the whole of Germany and present, in particular, in Munich. The project for a museum in the service of the army was apparently fought by Martin until its brief opening in Strasbourg in 1944, but it is difficult to say whether this was for practical reasons, out of personal taste, or out of ideological resistance. For, as the author summarizes, very characteristically, “Martin avait développé un projet convaincant qui obéissait aussi bien aux vœux du *Gauleiter* qu’aux principes de la muséologie contemporaine” (p. 83).

The “enrichissement des collections des musées d’Alsace” discussed in chapter four, was based on three sources: the confiscation of property from enemies of the Reich, purchases in Germanized Europe, and loans from other Reich museums. The book provides a detailed account of purchases, which Martin probably wished to divide between Strasbourg and Karlsruhe according to the specificities of each collection, as he would later say. Martin’s requests, in vain, for loans from the Berlin collections to small Alsatian museums, relied on the pretext that Alsatian museums were very French—and poor. Martin wrote on 10 January 1942, “nous n’avons trouvé presque exclusivement que des œuvres françaises qui ne peuvent plus être exposées aujourd’hui. Dans ce cas, la mission politique rejoint les vœux du directeur de musée car, de fait, il n’y a dans ces musées pas une seule œuvre de qualité et je défends face à une telle situation le point de vue que dans l’Alsace allemande nous ne devons exposer en matière de tableaux français que des œuvres qui, par leur qualité, pourraient être exposées dans d’autres musées allemands” (p. 146).

Chapters seven and eight examine the evacuations of 1944/45, the protective interventions of the Allies, and the post-war exhibition policy in Alsace and in occupied Baden. Martin put his know-how at the service of the new powers and pursued a successful professional career in West Germany. In 1946, he reflected “sur la situation des musées allemands indissociable de l’état d’esprit général de l’Allemagne” (p. 242). “On cherche sous les ruines le dessin possible d’une construction, et en même temps on parle d’un tout nouveau niveau d’existence qu’il nous faut conquérir. Les uns ne savent pas ce qu’ils vont trouver, les autres ne savent pas ce qu’ils cherchent” (p. 243). While the book characterizes such comments as “quasi lyriques” (p. 243), they are also disorienting and ambiguous.

The book’s general epigraph, borrowed from James Joseph Rorimer—the curator and later director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York made famous in recent years as one of the *Monuments Men*—asserts that “the value of works of art to civilization is not limited by national boundaries” (p. 1). It is this theme that the book seeks to develop by trying to show the superiority of universal values of art over chauvinistic mobilizations before and after the war. But it is not clear that the character of Kurt Martin is the best chosen to illustrate such a demonstration. Symbolically, the author mentions that Martin, then director of the Karlsruhe Museum of Fine Arts, was one of Haug’s guests in Strasbourg at the inauguration of a new museum in June 1939; it is from Martin’s memories of 1967 that the author paints a picture of a

kind of *entente cordiale* between men of good will for the protection of their respective heritages. This is exactly what Martin maintained in a 1948 speech to the Allied forces, that of a common effort by the vanquished and the victors in favor of the protection of works of art. Protesting against the initiative of the United States to evacuate works of art from the collecting point in Wiesbaden in order to exhibit them on American soil, he defends the honor of the German art protection organizations despite the circumstances of the war: “pendant la guerre, les organismes allemands de protection des biens artistiques se sont en général efforcés avec le même objectif que les organismes alliés d’épargner au patrimoine artistique et aux biens des musées européens toute destruction et tout déplacement ; (...) en dehors du fait qu’à ce moment-là il n’était pas tout à fait simple de garder une idée précise et normale de ce qu’était le droit pour agir en conséquence” (12 April 1948, p. 285). The more general question of this book is whether its subject was a dedicated, professional, and effective servant of a criminal state, or whether he was a cosmopolitan citizen in the service of the republic of arts and letters. The author asks whether he could he not possibly have been both. That remains largely doubtful.

NOTES

[1] For a survey of this scholarship, see Jean-Pierre Rioux, “Les avatars du ‘devoir de mémoire,’” *Le débat* 3 (2012): 186-192.

[2] See Jonathan Petropoulos, *The Faustian Bargain: The Art World in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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ISSN 1553-9172