

Wilhelm II, “True Art” (1901)

Abstract

This speech on “true art” evinces the social and cultural conservatism of Wilhelm II (1859–1941). As German emperor and public figure, Wilhelm never hesitated to make his opinions known. The 1901 unveiling of the last monument on Berlin’s *Siegesallee* provided him with a welcome opportunity to criticize new developments in art. Wilhelm regarded art as a natural “law” that adhered to immutable standards of beauty, the antecedents of which were found in antiquity and the Renaissance. In keeping with the sentiment of the time, he saw art as an edifying and pedagogical tool to be used to improve society. However, his disapproval of artistic innovation – as seen in movements such as French Impressionism and Social Realism – shows that he favored an art that encouraged tradition (and one particular view of tradition) rather than experimentation.

Source

[...] the thought fills me with pride and happiness today that Berlin stands before all the world with artists who are able to produce something of such magnificence. *It shows that the Berlin school of sculpture is at a level which even the Renaissance could not possibly have surpassed.* And I think all of you will humbly agree that the working example of Reinhold Begas and his conception – based, as it is, on a knowledge of antiquity – served for many of you as a guiding light in solving the great task before you.

Here, one could also draw a parallel between our age and the great artistic accomplishments of the Middle Ages and the Italians, for those works were likewise commissioned by the sovereign and art-loving ruler, who also chose the master artists. The master, in turn, attracted young followers from whose ranks certain schools then developed.

Now, gentlemen, the Pergamon Museum also opened at the very same time today in Berlin. I also view this as an important chapter in the history of art and as a good omen and a fortuitous coincidence. What presents itself to the awestruck public in those rooms is of such bounteous beauty as to surpass the imagination.

How does art fare in general in the world? It takes its examples [and] creates from the great wellspring of mother nature, and this wellspring, that is to say, mother nature, despite her tremendous, apparently unbounded, infinite freedom, nevertheless functions according to the eternal laws that the Creator Himself has imposed and which can never be surpassed or violated without endangering world progress.

So it goes with art. At the very sight of the glorious vestiges of the classical age one is overcome by the feeling that here reigns an eternal, ever steady law, the law of beauty and harmony, [the law] of aesthetics. This law was made manifest by the ancients in such a surprising and magnificent manner, in such perfect form, that we – with all our modern sensibilities and all of our technical ability – still say of an especially worthy achievement: “That is almost as good as 1900 years ago.”

But [only] almost! With this point in mind, I wish to impress upon you: Sculpture has, as yet, remained largely free of so-called modern directions and influences. It still stands tall and sublime. See to it that it remains so. Do not let yourselves be led astray by mortal judgments and all manner of vacuous preaching to abandon [sculpture’s] noble foundations!

Art that violates the laws and goes beyond the bounds I have indicated is no longer art. It is factory

production, commercialism, and that can never be art. So often, under the much abused name and flag of “freedom,” one descends into excess, licentiousness, and presumption. However, he who sins against the quintessence of art, who views solutions to his main task from a merely technical perspective, loses touch with the law of aesthetics and all feeling for beauty and harmony. Such things are felt in every man’s breast, even if he cannot express it himself.

But there is more: Art should assist in educating the public. By way of its ideals, it should also offer [the members of] the lower classes the opportunity – after a day of strenuous work and effort – to refresh and strengthen themselves. For us, the German people, the great ideals [of art] have become eternal goods whereas they have become more or less lost on other peoples. It [consequently] remains to the German people alone to protect, nurture, and carry on these great ideals. And these ideals demand that we give [the members of] the working, toiling classes the chance to edify themselves through beauty and thereby elevate themselves above everyday concerns.

If art, now, does no more than portray misery – as it happens so often today – in an even more dreadful light than that in which it is already cast, then it sins against the German people. The nurturing of ideals is at the same time the greatest task of culture. And if we want to be and remain a model to other peoples, we [the German people] must all work for it together. And if culture is to fully fulfill its duty, it must penetrate the lowest levels of society. Art can only do this [however] when it offers its hand, when it *elevates*, when it does not *lower itself into the gutter instead*.

It sometimes pains me as sovereign that art – in the person of its masters – does not vigorously resist such influences. In no way do I even remotely fail to recognize that many an ambitious character among the followers of such trends might have the best of intentions. He nevertheless remains on the wrong path. The true artist has no need for ballyhoo, marketing or connections. I do not think that in the area of the [arts and] sciences our great predecessors in ancient Greece, Italy, or the Renaissance ever advertised, the way it is so often done today in the press, so as to draw attention to their ideas. They worked as God intended and let the people say what they would.

And a true artist must work in this very same way. Art that sinks to the level of advertisement is no longer art – may it be praised a hundred or a thousand times over. Every individual has a sense for that which is ugly or beautiful – may he be ever so simple. And I need all of you to cultivate this sense among the people. The fact that you accomplished a portion of such work in the *Siegesallee* – for this, I thank you especially.

Source: Wilhelm II, “Die wahre Kunst”, (December 18, 1901), in Ernst Johann, *Reden des Kaisers: Ansprachen, Predigten und Trinksprüche Wilhelms II.* Munich, 1996, pp. 99–103; reprinted in Jürgen Schütte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914.* Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 571–74.

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