Women, Art, and Politics in 1930s America and Germany: The Portrayal of the Female and the Justification of Gender Roles

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The role of women in art and politics of 1930's America and Germany was based on each nation's unique ideology and future goals. Under Adolf Hitler's reign, Nazi Germany imposed strict social order for men, women, and children. In particular, women were subject to men's authority, both reproductively and socially. In America, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Liberalism defined women as free and equal with nearly the same rights as men. However, American women were also affected by the trials and tribulations of the economy and the workplace. The following exhibition of art, which represents only a fraction of the works of art portraying women, offers a visual analysis of how the United States and Germany justified gender roles. Germany placed a firm foundation upon the delicate, fragile woman whereas America promoted the strong exterior, freedom, and potential of the woman.

The National Socialist German Workers Party reigned in Germany under Adolf Hitler from 1933 until 1945. Nazism was the forefront of Germany's fascist ideology, which emphasized individualism as dangerous and argued that nature was determined by race. Only certain physical characteristics were accepted; the only true German race was blonde haired and blue eyed, the "Aryan." Since individuals were unequal, the German people were to seek order, take pride in hard work, and learn obedience in order to become productive members of the state. Furthermore, Adolf Hitler promoted happiness through the nation's success. Germany expected clean conditions, mass security to prevent crime, prosperity, a strong culture, an orderly society, a single leader, and the state as the center of people's lives. The good of the German people was prized over the well being of the individual. This ideology rejected the concepts of "man," "individual," and "common humanity" (Etlin 2).

A crucial tool Hitler used to enhance the power and order of Germany was art. Art was considered a powerful influence, and Nazi leaders demanded that it be controlled by the state. Nazism, the German version of fascism, evoked the ideology of a powerful nation state that could spark economic and moral renewal. Nazi policy argued against intellectual freedom and classified equality as absurd (Etlin 3). The German woman's role in society was important to the state, but

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ideas about women's roles had to be controlled in order to keep the social order. Accordingly, Nazism patronized and controlled artistic expression. Adolf Hitler tolerated only art that highlighted the good of the German nation and its pure Aryan race. More specifically, German women were displayed as representatives of the strong Aryan race, primarily through motherhood. In support of this image, the League of German Girls, similar to the male league called Hitler's Youth, fashioned exercises and education for young women. Such education was centered around loyalty to the German nation, gave the young women a sense of community, and ultimately prepared them to be mothers (*Hitler's Children*). This league emphasized that only young women were able to participate in recreation activities. However, this recreation included uniforms, forced marching, and only occurred until they were wed and given the role as mother. Women were expected to bear as many German children as possible to keep the strong Aryan race thriving. Thus, motherhood was an essential role for German women. Even during wartime, mothers were encouraged to solely care for their and mainly work around the house doing domestic chores and duties.

Because uman biology was also used extensively to explain the German identity and to dehumanize the Jews, a woman's beauty and physical appearance were very important (Etlin 5). The appropriate image of the female Aryan was emphasized through sculpture, painting, and political propaganda (Etlin 4). Women were portrayed as physically fit like the German male's muscular counterpart. In every piece of art, women were shown as submissive to men; men were superior to their wives, daughters, and any other women. Furthermore, all Nazi art featured a positive female image, exuding happy, smiling women enjoying their life of motherhood, subordination to men, and their loyalty to the German nation.

Across the Atlantic in 1930's America, the economic depression was the central focus and fear for many Americans. It led to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election as president in 1932. He ushered in an ideology known as New Deal liberalism. This liberalism retained the necessity of individual opportunity to pursue the best life, but it gave the state a much stronger role in creating those opportunities. The American people would exercise their rights by freedom of choice. New Deal liberalism strived to create a peaceful nation and stressed "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." Moreover, this ideology protected individuals and prevented state infringement, guaranteeing that citizens enjoyed and took pride in their rights as well. Thus, equality of opportunity, a fair wage, a decent home, adequate medical care, and a good education were fundamentals of liberalism.

Also, Americans were considered independent and competitive, even as the state expanded the social safety net. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) created several federal programs during the Depression that were designed to put unemployed Americans, including artists, back to work. Liberal individuality and freedom of expression in the arts was exemplified through the Federal Art Project, a sector of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a national work