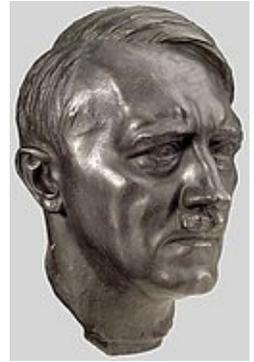




Breker, Arno (1900-1991)

by Jason Goldman

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A bust of Adolf Hitler by Arno Breker.

State-commissioned Nazi sculpture is perhaps one of the last places one might expect to encounter homoeroticism. Given the status of homosexuality as degenerate in Hitler's vision of a new Germany and his subsequent "social purification" schemes, which actively sought to eliminate lesbians and gay men, among a host of other "deviants," the homoeroticism of public artwork designed to advance Nazi ideology is a puzzling contradiction that demands critical attention.

Arno Breker was born on July 19, 1900 in Düsseldorf, the son of a sculptor and stonemason. He studied art in Düsseldorf, then, after a brief stint in Rome, lived in Paris from 1927 until 1933, when he returned to Germany.

Soon Breker became the best known sculptor of the Nazi era, receiving numerous commissions to make large-scale public works for the German state. These ranged from sculptures of athletes that decorated the Berlin stadium built for the 1936 Olympic games to programmatic works celebrating Nazi ideals. In 1937, he was named "Official State Sculptor" and soon employed hundreds of assistants.

Considered emblematic of the Nazis' program of public art, Breker's work repeatedly featured representations of nude male athletes, soldiers, and workers--central and complex lodestones of fascist ideals of masculinity. While Breker depicted a variety of subjects both before his state commissions and afterward, his most (in)famous sculptures are his Nazi-era male nudes, imbued with the mythos of Aryan purity and entrenched in the political rhetoric of the Nazi Party.

Hitler, an artist himself, was keen on the role art could and should play in suggesting the superiority and invincibility of German culture. Through its emphasis on athletics, the building of monuments, a glorification of the German landscape, a focus on technological achievement, and deliberate grandstanding like the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the Third Reich consciously aligned itself with the famed virtuosity of ancient Greece.

Deliberately evoking comparisons between Germany and ancient Greece, Breker's neoclassical sculptures cast muscular, naked men as national symbols of Nazi Germany's valor and supremacy. Breker's muscular nudes are meant to signify the virile but highly civilized German male: strong yet restrained, brutal yet pure, nude yet decent. At the same time, these Aryan musclemen serve as ready foils to the weak and corrupt Jew and homosexual, holding out the German male as racially and culturally superior.

Several of Breker's works, whether multi-part, freestanding sculpture programs or individual reliefs, feature all-male, all-nude scenes that conjure a homosocial narrative verging on the homoerotic. Despite its attendant homoerotic trappings, the idealized depiction of a community of men--strong, close to nature, and devoted to each other--was central to many Nazi social programs.

Nazi Party officials took steps to counter homosexual activity within the Hitler Youth Movement and other organizations, but Breker's work elucidates the striking proximity between Nazi visions of a platonic fascist

utopia and gay fantasies of a steamy wonderland in which the male body is always on view.

Poised for battle, holding their wounded comrades, bonding in sport, or toiling together at hard labor, Breker's male figures are easily readable as gay superheroes, their hard bodies and inner-directed physicality supplanting their official decency.

For contemporary gay audiences, Breker's sculpture is important because it represents a place where politics and desire collide; the salient values of racial and physical desirability in his work are disturbingly grounded in both Nazi and gay cultures. Even a cursory survey of gay visual culture suggests the prominence of men who fit the Aryan ideal. In this sense, gay culture is fixated on the paramount desirability of the white, blond, muscular, youthful (and, to some degree, "straight-acting") man much as Nazi culture was.

While these two cultures are hardly comparable (and it would be obscene to equate the two), the idol status of this mythic type within each suggests the degree to which these longstanding icons of purity, power, and supremacy carry diverse meaning--and the degree to which they do not.

More pointedly, while gay male desire is generally considered to overturn hegemonic notions of sexual and social normality, the worship of these Aryan emblems suggests that homosexual desire is neither so simple nor so politically correct.

In this sense, Breker's sculptures are challenging reminders of the political nature of desire, pushing us toward new ways of reconciling desire with politics, guilt, and the right to pleasure. They also lead us to ask how effectively and toward what end we can subvert and reclaim even the most egregious elements of modern history.

After the war, Breker's work was denounced as cold and propagandistic, but he continued to work as a sculptor. Among his post-war works are heads of such prominent gay figures as Jean Cocteau, Jean Marais, and Henri de Montherlant. He died on February 13, 1991.

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