

Detective work led to an artistic breakthrough

LACMA's Stephanie Barron assembled 'German Expressionist Sculpture'

By Hunter Drohojowska

At first, German Expressionist sculpture seems a surprising idea for an exhibition. The German Expressionists, who comprised an influential art movement between 1905 and 1930, are commonly recognized as prolific, volatile painters and graphic artists but — with the exception of Wilhelm Lembuck, Ernst Barlach, and Kathe Kollwitz — they were not known as sculptors.

Of course, this didn't stop Stephanie Barron, curator of 20th-century art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, who discovered this rarely examined field by leafing through catalogs and art magazines from the era. After three years of research and some daunting detective work, "German Expressionist Sculpture," a breakthrough exhibition of 150 pieces, opens at the museum today and continues through Jan. 22. Among the 33 artists represented are the above-mentioned sculptors and well-known artists such as Emil Nolde, Max Beckmann, Max Pechstein and Egon Schiele, as well as the lesser-known Christophe Voll and Hermann Scherer.

In the competitive discipline of art history, every wrinkle of every movement seems to have been researched in detail. The question logically arises: Why haven't the sculptures received the same scholarly attention as the paintings and graphics from that era?

Surrounded by distorted, primitive figures pregnant with the anxiety of pre-war Germany, Barron said the reasons for decades of neglect are manifold. "One problem was that those pieces went through the Nazis in the Second World War, (they even went through) the First World War, and a lot of them were destroyed."

Barron pointed out that even

though the Expressionist movement was at an end by the 1930s, the Nazis considered all modern art degenerate. "Nazis wanted to reinstate the academic sculpture because it elevated an ideal they chose to emphasize, an ideal of the pure Aryan, perfect human being. The Expressionist work was not in the service of the state and those ideals. They were much too free with artistic expression. They rebelled against society. They wanted a change from the stringent aristocratic society of the 19th and 20th centuries." (The Nazis even organized an exhibition in 1937 to show the so-called "degenerate art" and the catalog from that show, which includes a number of sculptures, was one of Barron's first clues that the subject was worth pursuing.)

She added that the sculpture was vulnerable. "It's harder to save a sculpture than a painting or graphic, which can be rolled up or hidden. When you realize the hundreds of thousands of works destroyed by the Nazis. ... I wanted to emphasize that no matter how complete I made this exhibition, it wasn't the total picture." To accommodate the absences in the exhibition, Barron has mounted photographs to scale of sculptures that were destroyed, including the works of Pechstein.

Another factor contributing to the invisibility of the sculpture was that artists from the influential group Die Brücke ("The Bridge," so named for their desire to represent a transition to the future and to feeling) — Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rotluff, Erich Heckel — and others made the work for personal reasons. They were reluctant to exhibit it at the time, though their photographs, drawings, and graphics often reveal them working on the pieces.

Barron built an exhibition from scant resources. "There was no particular corpus of material to



Michael Haering/Herald photographer

Stephanie Barron, a curator at the county museum, says many pieces of German Expressionist sculpture were destroyed in World War II. The Nazis, she says, considered all modern art degenerate.

deal with," she said. There were few books, catalogs or previous exhibitions of sculpture. In fact, she doubted the research or the exhibition would have been possible without access to the collection and library of German Expressionist art of Robert Gore Rifkind, a Beverly Hills securities lawyer and LACMA trustee. (The collection of 5,000 prints and 4,000 volumes was acquired by the museum last spring.) In addition to graphics, Rifkind has collected German Expressionist sculpture, especially the work of Barlach, and 19 of his sculptures, the largest individual loan, form the nucleus of the exhibition.

To go through the intense research for this exhibition Barron had to have a passionate interest. "I like the emotion and psychological content of the work. I like the different guises it can take. Not all German Expressionist sculpture looks alike. I like the tactility of it

as well. This is the first sculpture exhibition I've ever done ... and it's marvelously three-dimensional. The differences in the woods are fabulous. The various kinds of expression they can get from a piece of oak, I'm pretty awed by it."

Barron used the Rifkind sculptures as a point of departure and in 1981 spent a month in Germany on a fellowship to determine that sufficient supplementary material existed. Then Barron sent letters of inquiry to 200 museums, and went through old periodicals and books trying to trace various sculptures. She spent the next two years traveling through West and East Germany and Switzerland, visiting museums, private families and "tracking down a lot of leads." She crawled through the basements of "practically every museum in Germany" with a flashlight, dusting off hundreds of forgotten sculptures. "And several of those pieces are here," said Barron glancing around the galleries. "They had not been thought of or exhibited by those museums. The Germans' reactions as I would tell them about the exhibition were to be intrigued, then puzzled, then enthusiastic. They just had never focused on it."

Many other works had survived the years with the artists' families and friends. "Many of the pieces I found entailed tracking down people who were 70, 80 years old. There was a marvelous collector in the Hageman family. He was involved with the artists. One of the pieces I tracked down, a wonderful Schmidt-Rotluff sculpture, was with his daughter, an octogenarian woman (Dr. Margarita Wempe) living in a marvelous flat in Essen (West Germany) surrounded by her German Expressionist paintings." After tea, the woman offered to take Barron upstairs to visit her sister, also in her 80s, but warned that her sister "really likes the wild stuff." Barron entered the flat to see "a marvelous collection of (Emil) Nolde paintings."

The most coincidental discovery happened at the county museum. Curatorial assistant Stella Paul was browsing through one of Barron's catalogs, pointed to a sculpture by Kirchner and said that she was certain she knew the owner. Barron said, "Stella, people don't just have Kirchner sculptures. This is rather unusual." But Paul went back East, visited the collector, and came back assured. When the collector sent photos to Barron, she circulated them among art historians who specialize in Kirchner. "They were all astonished. This is the first publication of the piece, which was believed lost."

The sculpture, "Dancer with Necklace," a voluptuous nude roughly cut from a block of wood (missing the necklace now), is prominently displayed with a photograph and drawing documenting the piece in Kirchner's studio. "That was a marvelous stroke of luck," said Barron. "You can be a good curator and art historian, you can do your homework, and then there is just good luck."

Barron, 33, who has been a curator at LACMA for eight years, organized the "The Avant Garde in Russia: 1910-1930," a 1980 exhibition which also required three years of ambitious preparation. "I like to take an area (of art history) which hasn't been worked in, do some

detective work and really find things out and pull it together. It doesn't interest me as much to take a body of work which already exists and just write the loan requests and hang it up on the wall. I like the creative act of pulling things together and having a dream about what it is you want to make."

For Barron, this extends to the exhibition catalog (224 pages), which she considers a source book. It includes seven essays written during the German Expressionist era and never before translated from the original German, as well as her own essay and extensive documentation. (The exhibition cost over \$500,000, over half of which was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. After Los Angeles, it will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the Josef-Haubrich Kunsthalle in Cologne.)

Barron grew up in the wealthy community of Oyster Bay, Long Island. Her father's company publishes the Barron's series of guide books to universities and colleges and, due to his daughter's influence, now publishes a small line of art books. Barron studied art history at Barnard College in New York City and attended graduate school at Columbia University. She went on to work at the Solomon M. Guggenheim Museum, the Toledo Museum of Art and the Jewish Museum in New York before coming to LACMA.

The exhibition of German Expressionist sculpture couldn't be more topical given the widespread interest in the Neo-Expressionism being produced by contemporary German artists. (A small show of "Neo-Expressionist Sculpture" by Georg Baselitz opens at LACMA on Nov. 10.)

Barron acknowledges that the impetus behind the traditional expressionists and new movement is different. "I don't think that artists working today have to break those same barriers (in art). It's more stylistic. But within the Germans' recent history, it's the last time they excelled culturally. It gives (the young artists) a real pride identifying with it. For many years Expressionism was a dirty word, because almost anything German was not given much credence. We're basically a very Francocentric society, and I think that's changing. We were constantly oriented to an evolution of art history that follows the French line: Impressionism, Cezanne, Cubism, Surrealism, and I think those are extremely important but things like the Russian Avant Garde or German Expressionism certainly have as much validity."

Barron's eyes glitter with anticipation, a star about to go on stage, as she concludes, "To spend three years on an exhibition, you have to care a lot. And I'm still excited, which I guess means the material is good. For me, the research is a lot of fun, tracking it down is very stimulating. Writing the catalog is an arduous process, but any curator has to love the moment when all the sculptures are here and you get to install it. It's a real thrill."