



*Black Lives Matter Plaza,  
Washington D.C., 2020.  
Removed in March 2025*

## Has the Time for Panic Come?

“The 1930s all over again?”—this headline from the Italian-British *Art Newspaper* elicits a shudder. The information behind it has long been familiar from American media: Donald Trump and J.D. Vance are slashing U.S. government subsidies for cultural programs, with global repercussions. They are fighting against “Diversity,” “Equity,” and “Inclusion” as political buzzwords for fairness and participation. The first public institution to be placed under political attack for “improper ideology” was the *Smithsonian Institution* in Washington, D.C. Trump, Vance, and Elon Musk are also deploying their government appointees to put pressure on universities like *Columbia* in New York and *Harvard* in Massachusetts. The *Department of Government Efficiency*, led by Musk, is trying to lay off up to 80% of staff at key funding institutions such as the *National Endowment for the Arts*, the *National Endowment for the Humanities*, and the *Institute of Museum and Library Services*, which serves all 50 states. In February 2025, Trump appointed himself “Chairman” of the *John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts*, founded in 1971. **With potentially hundreds of millions in newly available funds, neoclassical and “heroic” forms of art are to be funded, with the goal of opening a “Heroes Sculpture Garden” in 2026, dedicated to particularly prominent Americans from the past 250 years.** At the same time, the *General Services Administration*, which manages around 26,000 publicly accessible sculptures across the U.S., is being dissolved. A street mural honoring the Black Lives Matter movement had to be removed—against the will of the current mayor of Washington, D.C.—in accordance with an executive order dated March 12, 2025. Financial support from the *World Monuments Fund* for already approved projects in Egypt, Algeria, Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ukraine, and Iraq has been suspended since March 2025. **A large number of exhibitions seen as politically unwelcome are being cancelled as a result of withdrawn funding. In parts of the U.S., a climate of fear prevails. Diversity, propounded for years as a civic ideal, is now being removed even from corporate mission statements.** Trump and Vance, with Elon Musk, imposed this cultural shift in just three months. The headline cited above, and the comparison to the 1930s, are alarming because the appointment of the German Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933, also led rapidly to cultural-political assaults. The Nazi decree “For the Protection of the German People” came into force in February 1933—just six days later. It also led to house searches, confiscations, bans on public assembly, and restrictions on press freedom.



Five weeks later, Joseph Goebbels was acting as “Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda,” and by March 1933 he had already sent traveling exhibitions of modern art titled “Chambers of Horrors” to Dessau, Mannheim, and Karlsruhe. On April 7, 1933, the “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service” was enacted, resulting in professional bans for thousands of officials and employees in museums, art schools, and universities. Eight months after Adolf Hitler came to power, the “Reich Chamber of Culture” was founded in September 1933, establishing total control over cultural life. **The aim in Germany was now the “education” of the people. Modern art was to be dealt a mortal blow and—like the Jews later on—explicitly “eliminated.” The sole ideal of beauty for the Nazis, according to Paul Schultze-Naumburg in 1934, was “the heroic human being.”** Alfred Rosenberg, a central figure in Nazi ideology, wrote as early as 1930, in reference to Greek sculpture: “The hero is always beautiful. That is to say: of a certain racial type.” Will similar or even identical forms of cultural control emerge in the U.S. in the coming months? On April 5, 2025, approximately 1,300 demonstrations took place in various American cities under the slogan “Hands Off!” An estimated 5.3 million people took part. The call to protest no longer circulated via the familiar social media channels *Facebook* and *Twitter*—*Twitter* has belonged to Musk since 2022, and *Facebook*, a division of Mark Zuckerberg’s *Meta* corporation, no longer aligns itself with democratic media but openly supports Trump’s politics under the banner of “free speech.” **Much is at stake in the United States, but unlike the 1930s, the legislative and executive branches have not yet been brought into line. Still, the parallels between Trump’s goals and those of National Socialism are, in some respects, unmistakable.** If tariffs were to be imposed on the art market—affecting not only imports and fairs but also foreign galleries—trade in paintings, sculptures, and drawings would face another major hurdle. In 2024, auction revenues in the U.S. already declined by 25.5%. During the same period, the art market underwent a worldwide contraction, with total revenues falling to \$ 57.5 billion (from a steady average of around \$65 billion) for the first time in years. China experienced the steepest national drop, with a decline of over 46%. So far, most gallerists and artists have remained tight-lipped. They do not appear to be panicking—no doubt because under Trump, tax privileges for those donating art to museums are likely to remain in effect for the foreseeable future. **The mostly privately funded museums do not yet fear the Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency. But they are keeping their heads down. Exhibitions focused on gender issues or immigration are no longer taking place. Many can feel the president’s iron will. At the heart of this cultural shift is the question of how “the heroic” is to be defined in the United States.** Under National Socialism—and this applies as well to Arno Breker, who continued to be celebrated even after the regime’s collapse—the theme of the “heroic” was enacted through visual tropes: the repetition of identical gestures, identical physiognomies, and various implausible forms of exaggerated strain. That, in and of itself, is fundamentally insufficient for high art, regardless of the culture in question.

DR. THOMAS KELLEIN  
*Head of Art Consult*  
 thomas.kellein@bergos.ch

This publication is for information and marketing purposes only. The provided information is not legally binding and neither constitutes a financial analysis, nor a sales prospectus, an offer for investment-transactions, an asset management mandate or an investment idea and does not substitute any legal, tax or financial advice.