

## 2 This Barbaric Art

Hildebrand Gurlitt first encountered the art that was to shape his life in a shop selling lamps on a bleak Dresden street in 1912. His mother Marie took him as a schoolboy aged about sixteen to see an exhibition of the founders of the wild young Die Brücke (The Bridge) group of artists – Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel.

The pictures shocked him. Though he had seen some Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch works, this was something newer and brasher. ‘These barbaric, passionate, powerful colours, this coarseness, all framed in the cheapest wood – this art wanted to give the bourgeoisie a slap in the face and it succeeded,’ he wrote later. His mother was impressed, and purchased one of the extraordinary woodblock prints.<sup>1</sup>

Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, Heckel and Fritz Bleyl, pioneers of German Expressionism, founded the Brücke group in a disused shoemaker’s shop in 1905 while studying architecture at the Dresden Technical School, where Hildebrand’s father Cornelius was chancellor. They swapped their studies for art and a bohemian lifestyle that entailed much naked bathing with young female models in the lakes around Dresden. Their nude portrayals were often sexually loaded. Wooden figures of naked women served as furniture and sculptures in Kirchner’s studio and his tiles, curtains and wall hangings featured copulating couples. In Germany’s prim pre-World War I society, they aimed to provoke with their liberal ways as well as their art. The group’s revolutionary manifesto, as proclaimed in wood by Kirchner, was to ‘call on all youth to unite, and as the standard-bearers for the future, assert our creative freedom and freedom of lifestyle in a stand against cosily entrenched older forces’.

Cornelius Gurlitt senior, whose fields of expertise encompassed architecture, art history, heritage protection and city planning, was the embodiment of those ‘entrenched older forces’. He taught Kirchner,

Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff. Though he could never tune to the wavelength of the Brücke members and didn’t connect with their art, he could see that they were more than rebellious university dropouts. By then in his sixties, Cornelius predicted to his son that these radical young artists, with their bold colours, angular figures and highly sexed vigour, could play as big a role in Hildebrand’s life as 19th-century artists like Hans Thoma, Max Liebermann and Arnold Böcklin had in his own.<sup>2</sup> Time was to prove him right.

Hildebrand grew up in an elegant white villa designed by his father on Kaitzer Strasse in Dresden. At that time, Dresden was the cultural jewel in Germany’s crown, often described as the Florence of the north. His family was steeped in the arts. His father, a patriarch of Dresden and trusted adviser to the king of Saxony, devoted much of his illustrious career to preserving and reviving interest in the city’s magnificent Baroque buildings. The extension of Kaitzer Strasse is to this day called Cornelius Gurlitt Strasse. Cornelius, prone to self-importance, would probably have heartily approved. Though intimidating to strangers<sup>3</sup> and old-fashioned in some of his ideas, he was a kind and loving father to his three children and welcomed their friends into his comfortable but unostentatious home.

Cornelius’s mother was a descendant of the Lewalds of Königsberg, a prominent Jewish family, and her sister Fanny Lewald was a famous feminist novelist. Hildebrand’s grandfather Louis Gurlitt was a landscape painter and his cousin Manfred was a composer. One of his uncles, Ludwig Gurlitt, taught art history at Munich University. Another, Fritz Gurlitt, ran an avant-garde Berlin art gallery; an exhibition of the Brücke artists was staged at the gallery in 1912, the same year as the show Hildebrand saw with his mother. In the 1890s, Fritz had been among the first dealers to exhibit the French Impressionists, long before they had become the rage in Paris. He also represented Böcklin, Liebermann and Thoma, the popular artists of the 19th-century German-speaking world.

Hildebrand completed his schooling and registered to study art history at the Dresden Technical School in 1914. World War I intervened,

putting his plans on hold for four disruptive years. Both he and his elder brother Wilibald volunteered. Their father, an ardent patriot who had himself fought in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War, expected nothing less. Hildebrand described the boredom and horror of life in the trenches on the Western Front in letters and postcards to Wilibald. ‘These hours where we are sitting in the dug-out listening to grenades whistling over our heads or above our cover are exhausting,’ he wrote in January 1915. ‘The absolute defencelessness of our position brings us to despair sometimes. We are constantly hoping to advance, even if in our section there is no prospect of that.’<sup>4</sup>

With his lively intellect and abundant energy, Hildebrand seemed to suffer more from frustration than fear. He complained of the ‘big, contagious war sickness: stultification of the mind’ and described to his brother how he tried to use every free minute to learn and read.

He was wounded at least twice, at the Somme and in Champagne, where he served as an officer in the machine-gun division. Many of Hildebrand’s friends lost their lives in the bloody, muddy battlefields of the Somme, where tens of thousands were massacred. He later said it was the ‘chance of a ten-thousandth of a second’ that he was not among them and was instead sent home with injuries.<sup>5</sup> At the front in France he formed a lasting friendship with Arnold Friedrich Vieth von Golssenau, who later became a well-known communist writer and changed his name to Ludwig Renn, the hero of his novel *War*. Renn described Hildebrand as ‘lively and talkative’, and said he argued with more traditionally minded peers and quoted frequently from an avant-garde magazine called *Aktion*, which he somehow managed to get delivered past the censors to the front. Together they pored over its pages, Renn startled by the anti-war sentiment and baffled by the Expressionist poetry.<sup>6</sup>

Hildebrand’s correspondence during the war betrays a close and affectionate relationship with his family, particularly with Wilibald and his sister Cornelia, six and five years older. That intimacy sustained him through the tedium and terror of the trenches and the long periods away from home. ‘I have no greater wish than to be together with my

two siblings,’ Hildebrand wrote to Wilibald in 1916. Cornelia, an artist known by the family as Eitl, volunteered as a nurse for the Red Cross. Hildebrand described to his brother a birthday at home in Dresden during his leave, when Wilibald was a prisoner of war in France. His brother’s card was delivered to him under burning candles, in a wreath made by Eitl.<sup>7</sup>

Hildebrand’s later war service was much less gruelling, working as an army press officer and discovering what he described as the ‘mysterious Polish, Lithuanian and Yiddish Baroque cities of the winter and the night, Vilnius and Kaunas, where we thought we recognized images from Chagall’s paintings’.<sup>8</sup> There he became friends with the Brücke painter Schmidt-Rottluff and the Jewish writer Arnold Zweig, with whom he worked together on the *Wilnaer Zeitung*, a newspaper for the German troops on the Eastern Front. Ludwig Renn recalled Hildebrand enthusiastically regaling him with stories about his work, especially the editorial team’s subversive attempts to sneak anti-war articles and cartoons into the newspaper. Once, when they were both on leave in Dresden, Hildebrand showed him a satirical graphic by Magnus Zeller, mocking Kaiser Wilhelm II and the militaristic General Ludendorff. It had been discovered just before deadline and quickly spiked.<sup>9</sup>

Eitl was serving a short train ride away, working nightshifts at the hospital and painting during the day. Hildebrand spent weekends with his elder sister and a pretty, vivacious nurse called Hedwig Schloesser. Together they ‘spoil me much more than I deserve and we go canoeing and lie in the woods’, he reported back to Wilibald, who had been taken prisoner of war after being wounded in the Battle of the Marne in 1914 and was only released, to neutral Switzerland, in summer 1918. Hildebrand remained in Kaunas until January 1919, long after others had demobilized. It may have been Hedwig who persuaded him to stay – it seems they set up house together there. Hildebrand described the summer of 1918 as the happiest of his life.

The Germany he returned to was not the one he had left behind. The scarred and mutilated war wounded, grotesquely portrayed by

Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and George Grosz, begged in public places to survive. Food and coal were scarce and people were hungry and cold. Paramilitary groups fought armed battles on the streets and hatched terrorist plots to murder their opponents. Demonstrations, strikes and riots raged through the cities. Yet revolution brought a new creativity as it ripped apart the rigid pre-war structures. In the constitution drafted in Weimar in 1919, the freedom of the arts was anchored in law for the first time. Order and tradition gave way both to chaos and to a new social, intellectual, artistic and sexual freedom that was to usher in a tragically short-lived era of flourishing creativity.

Like the millions of other soldiers who returned to this fractious, un-German tumult, Hildebrand was also changed forever, no longer the schoolboy who had volunteered to fight with enthusiasm. His war service, an experience he shared with many of the artists whose work he later collected, earned him Saxony's highest military honours. It also left him sceptical about politics and determined to focus on art alone. He tried to keep his distance from the turmoil of the streets and the violent political exchanges. He lamented the 'hate preached by every party and every newspaper, the hatred of everyone for everyone else'. He wrote to Wilibald in 1918 that 'my political position is non-existent', adding that he would vote for no party to the left of the moderate Social Democrats. Yet he spurned the nationalists, too, chiding himself for taking up their cause so readily when he volunteered to serve in 1914. 'I believed all that stupid talk in the newspapers and everywhere about honour, bravery, patriotism and so on,' he wrote.

Imagining that art could provide an escape route from politics in the era in which Hildebrand lived was a grave miscalculation. Art was to prove no refuge from a devastatingly destructive political movement led by an embittered, failed artist called Adolf Hitler; instead it became a target for hate and intolerance. Perhaps more political engagement would have led Hildebrand to make fewer ideological compromises later in his life.

He studied art history in Frankfurt, choosing the city because it was less politically fraught and prone to rioting than either Munich or Berlin

and boasted one of the richest German art collections. He wore his old military coat dyed black. His family's wealth had evaporated in the inflation of the time and he was afraid his good woollen overcoat would be stolen – along with the twenty or so others filched from the university each day. His letters home suggest he was happy despite the hardships of the era and his young man's appetite. His parents posted him potatoes and cabbage. 'I won't suffer too much in all this poverty and the bad things that our defeat will bring Germany,' he wrote to them in February 1919. 'It's no great pleasure, but I am capable of eating at the soup kitchen with all the refugees from Alsace without having to overcome too much disgust, and it tastes better to me than it does to them.' He described being invited to the home of a rich Jewish doctor and wondered whether he would be asked again. 'There were good cakes and stuff,' he wrote.

Tragedy struck the Gurlitts later that year. Eitel had sunk into a deep despair after World War I, becoming inaccessible even to her younger brother. A talented artist, she took after her father in appearance and was tall and fair-haired. She was his favourite child and he had built her a studio in the courtyard of their Dresden villa.<sup>10</sup>

She revelled in the freedom she experienced serving as a nurse in Lithuania and had fallen in love with a married man – the art and theatre critic Paul Fechter, whom she met when he was working for the *Wilnaer Zeitung*. In 1917, she wrote to Wilibald describing her new friend as a person 'who immediately understands what I think and mean when I am talking about art'. Cornelia became pregnant by him and lost the child, either through an abortion or miscarriage, according to the story Wilibald's wife, Gertrud, told her son.

Miserable and lonely, Cornelia could not adjust to life in chaotic Berlin. 'She is crying for a happy time in Vilnius when everything seemed complete to her, and the wonder of that time has destroyed all her hope for the future,' Hildebrand wrote to their brother. As Marie put it in a letter to her eldest son, Fechter had made Eitel 'happy, then very happy, then very unhappy'. Hildebrand tried to warn Wilibald, then living in Switzerland, about Cornelia's despair. 'Eitel is in a much worse state than

you can imagine,' he wrote from Dresden. His attempts to get her to come home were to no avail as she wouldn't answer his letters.

Cornelia killed herself by taking poison. She went into a Berlin bakery for breakfast at 10 a.m. one morning, then fell asleep and never woke again. By 4 a.m. the following day, 5 August 1919, her heart had stopped. She left no letters apart from an old one addressed to her younger brother. 'But my mother said she found a small strip of paper with your name on it without an address,' Hildebrand wrote to Fechter three days after her death.<sup>11</sup>

Fechter, who remained friends with Hildebrand for decades after these sad events, wrote about Cornelia Gurlitt in his 1949 book *An der Wende der Zeit* (In a Time of Change), a compilation of essays about his encounters with female artists. He evoked a restless, passionate young woman who loved Chagall and Dostoevsky and scorned sleep to paint and to live life to the full. It may have been partly his conscience speaking when he described her as 'perhaps the most gifted of the younger generation of Expressionists' and rhapsodized about her Lithuanian landscapes and images of beggars and soldiers in Vilnius. Surviving pictures, many of them lithographs, show Cornelia's melancholy, emotional work bore similarities with that of the Brücke artists, though her lines are more delicate and precise, and there is a fantasy element that recalls Chagall.

Wilibald and Gertrud were expecting their first child when Eitl died, so it was Hildebrand who kept his distraught parents company in Dresden, sorted through her possessions and posted her paintings, drawings and lithographs to family members as mementoes. She was, he wrote to his mother Marie later, 'the person who was closest to me'. He kept some of her artworks for himself.<sup>12</sup>

Dietrich Gurlitt, the son born to Wilibald and Gertrud in Switzerland days after Eitl's death, is now in his nineties. Though he walks with the aid of crutches, his mind is alert. He says Marie regarded the suicide as a great disgrace and burned the rest of Eitl's artworks after Cornelius's death.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, given his own Jewish mother, Cornelius blamed the

Jews of Vilnius for his daughter's ruin. He lived in denial about her suicide, telling people she had died in the war.<sup>14</sup>

Hildebrand's grieving mother was frantically worried about him after Cornelia's death. 'He is so pale and thin,' Marie wrote to Wilibald. 'He misses Eitl and says he has no one he can confide in.' He had also fallen in love with Hedwig Schloesser, the nurse with whom he had set up house in Lithuania. Hedwig had been married briefly during the war and may have been older than Hildebrand. His parents disapproved, hurting Hildebrand's feelings. He wrote to them saying he couldn't bear their contempt and disgust for her, and asked them not to speak of her again with him.

Instead, they tried to recruit Wilibald's help in dissuading Hildebrand from the liaison, which was to last four years. Marie wrote to Wilibald that Hildebrand 'is still so young and has so much to learn' and 'is too easily influenced by others'. Much later, in 1922, Cornelius wrote in a startlingly frank letter to his elder son (with a request to Wilibald not to show it to his wife Gertrud) that Hedwig had divorced her husband because he had infected her with syphilis, and that she in turn had passed it on to Hildebrand. That may explain the wan complexion that so worried Marie in 1919, as well as Hildebrand's complaints of pain from a swollen liver over a period lasting several years.

Hildebrand picked up his studies in Berlin after Eitl's death. In the 1920s, it was the second-largest city in Europe, bustling with more inhabitants than it has now. It was a magnet for the young, poets and artists as well as for thieves, prostitutes, beggars and the homeless. A hub of economic activity, political strife, culture and nightlife, it provided a cosmopolitan haven for thousands of Russians fleeing the Revolution and had the biggest Jewish community in Germany. This was the Berlin of Christopher Isherwood, Alfred Döblin and Kurt Weill, a place of endless entertainment with its cabarets, jazz bars, crowded cafés, lavish new department stores, avant-garde theatres and seedy dance clubs.

On discovering that Hedwig was caring for Hildebrand when he contracted the flu there, his mother tried to persuade him to spend the

next semester away from his lover, in cosy Freiburg, where Wilibald was now teaching. Instead, Hildebrand used his university contacts to get a position as an assistant to the art history professor Georg Voss, helping to inventory the art collections of the state of Brandenburg, of which Voss was custodian. Hildebrand needed to remain nearby, and stayed in neighbouring Berlin. His parents couldn't object to the decision as he was gaining valuable work experience and earning money, reducing the strain on the ever-tighter family budget.

He returned to Frankfurt to study in May 1921. That summer he visited Hedwig Schloesser in Zofingen in Switzerland, writing to Wilibald that his stay with her 'is of no concern to society, the state or the family, as there will be no engagement or wedding'. Hedwig's name disappears from the family correspondence in 1922.

The following year Hildebrand got engaged to Helene Hanke, a dancer with the stage name Bambulla (which loosely translates as 'trouble'), and moved into his family's villa in Dresden with her because they couldn't afford their own home. This was the peak of hyper-inflation, and money, though abundant, was valueless. 'The soul suffers from the constant calculations, the huge sums, the enormous packets of money,' wrote Marie. She told Wilibald of a trip Helene and Hildebrand made to visit an artist in Loschwitz, a few kilometres away from Dresden, at about the time the Reichsbank began printing 100-trillion-mark notes: 'The smallest excursion has to be carefully considered because the train costs 35 billion marks.'

It's possible this was a business trip for Hildebrand, who had already begun dealing art by the time of his engagement. Before their wedding, he sent Helene to Berlin with a picture he wanted evaluated, and gave her a letter for Fechter asking whether he could take her out for lunch because she had few acquaintances in the city.<sup>15</sup> He had previously written to Fechter asking him to value an Erich Heckel painting that he planned to sell to a Dresden museum on behalf of a lady he didn't name.

Marie described Hildebrand and Helene's modest wedding celebration at home in Kaitzer Strasse 26 in a letter to Wilibald, who was unable

to attend: 'Everything was charming and harmonious, our home looked good, the table looked nice with the old Meissen etc. and father looked handsome in his medals. Most weddings are jollier, this one was quiet. Father found it hard – we missed Eitl, and you and Gertrud too, because the fact that you couldn't come reminded us of the difficult times we are living through.'

Helene seems to have met with the Gurlitt parents' approval, though Marie had to conquer her initial horror about her profession. Cornelius described her as 'a calm, quiet creature who is trying to support the household by teaching dance'. Hildebrand wrote in a letter to Wilibald, she 'is the only person I can sit in a room with and not be distracted. I am getting more and more work done.' Her family, he said, are 'very nice people, even if abstract academia is a long way away from their world'.

Hildebrand won his doctorate in 1924 with a thesis about the Gothic architecture of St Catherine's Church in Oppenheim. That year he also began working as an architecture professor's assistant at the Dresden Technical School, his father's academy. Since 1921 he had been writing for newspapers about art, thanks in part to Fechter's connections.<sup>16</sup> He continued doing so after he finished his studies, contributing reports and reviews on art and architecture to newspapers including the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, *Vossische Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. His reviews were knowledgeable, opinionated and lucidly written.

On assignment for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he travelled to New York to cover a city planning congress that his father also attended as head of the German delegation. Cornelius, who himself had written art reviews for magazines in the 1890s, thought Hildebrand's journalism was a 'useful way to oil the writer's wrist' but 'not a job for a serious person'.

In April 1925, aged just twenty-nine, Hildebrand took up his first real job when he was appointed the director of the cash-strapped King Albert Museum in Zwickau, a small industrial town southwest of Dresden. Though the museum was first opened in 1914, no full-time director had so far been appointed. The city council decided a director

could do much to encourage the patronage needed to compensate for the lack of public funds for the museum.<sup>17</sup>

In this sleepy provincial mining town, ‘full of coalmines, industry, unemployment and rust’<sup>18</sup> as he put it, Hildebrand briefly opened a remarkable window on avant-garde creativity and intellectual exchange. For him, it was the fulfilment of a long-held dream. Even before he began his studies, Hildebrand had confided to Wilibald that he wanted to work as a museum director in a modern industrial city, using art to attract thinkers in all fields. He later wrote that he saw it as his role to ‘eradicate some of the general awfulness’ of Zwickau and that ‘the uglier and grimmer life is in a town, the more agreeable the task’ of running its museum and establishing a forum where creative minds could meet.<sup>19</sup>

He commissioned friends at the Bauhaus in Dessau, the cutting-edge architecture school, with the interior decor. He turned the main hall of the museum into an exhibition of medieval sculpture. Brought up to date with modern colours and the latest furniture, the revamped museum opened in October 1926.<sup>20</sup> Hildebrand’s efforts made a profound impression on one young visitor, a schoolboy called Christoph Lenz, who decades later remembered the newly opened museum with its fresh modern colours – ‘the beautiful grey, the mild blue’ – and the stylish new Bauhaus armchairs as one of the highlights of his youth. Lenz tried to go to every event at the museum and worshipped Hildebrand from afar.<sup>21</sup>

Not everyone was as appreciative. The *Sächsische Volksblatt* newspaper reported on the official opening with a smirk at the incongruity of some of the guests and exhibits: ‘It was a special pleasure to see distinguished gentlemen arrayed with medals and wearing steel helmets shake their heads in horror in front of the George Grosz, Dix, Kokoschka, Pechstein etc.’<sup>22</sup>

Hildebrand’s first exhibition was devoted to Max Pechstein, a Zwickau artist who joined the Brücke group in Dresden soon after it was founded. Hildebrand staged the show with assistance from the artist and from his cousin Wolfgang Gurlitt, who took over the Berlin dealership of his father Fritz Gurlitt after World War I. The cousins later fell

out, but at this point Wolfgang was willing to loan Hildebrand some Pechstein works for the exhibition, as did a Dresden gallery. Hildebrand purchased five graphic works from the exhibition for the museum.

The composer Paul Hindemith gave regular recitals in the museum and Hildebrand also put on exhibitions of Schmidt-Rottluff, Heckel, Emil Nolde, Max Slevogt and Käthe Kollwitz.<sup>23</sup> He persuaded his Berlin art critic friend Fechter to venture out to the provinces to lecture and to write about the museum, raising its profile.<sup>24</sup> Among his most popular exhibitions were a 1927 show called ‘Kitsch and Art’ and a 1928 exploration of sexually transmitted diseases, which drew 7,500 visitors.<sup>25</sup> Hildebrand worked hard to push the buttons that would bring Zwickau’s working-class citizens into the museum.

With virtually no budget, Hildebrand acquired mainly works on paper and sold some 19th-century works to buy the art of his day. This he did carefully, as he saw safeguarding the old collections as an important part of his role ‘so that nothing historical – as indifferent as it may seem to us now – is lost or damaged, because it may be needed at a later time for a purpose that we can’t even guess at today’.<sup>26</sup>

His primary interest, though, was contemporary art and his bold ambition for this industrial backwater was to build a collection ‘unparalleled in Germany’. He found private sponsors, including the department-store magnate and publisher Salman Schocken (who was to emigrate in 1933 to Israel, where he became owner of *Haaretz* newspaper). Hildebrand showed amazing foresight, buying art by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Kokoschka, Kollwitz, Kirchner, Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Edvard Munch, Otto Dix and more.<sup>27</sup>

These are artists whose works today can fetch millions at auction and delight visitors at museums around the world. Yet at that time, they were groundbreaking and daring, and many of Zwickau’s conservative burghers did not share Hildebrand’s modern tastes.

More sinisterly, the Nazi movement was gaining ground and the fascists understood that art is power. They were quick to embrace concepts of ‘degenerate art’ (*entartete Kunst*) that had taken root in the 19th

century. Max Nordau, a Jewish doctor and writer, had sparked much interest with his 1892 tome *Degeneration*, in which he equated artists with the mentally ill and warned of art's potentially 'corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation', particularly 'the impressionable youth'. He believed that all cultural disciplines should be state-controlled.

Though Nordau did not blame the Jews for social degeneration and became an ardent Zionist, the Nazis linked 'degenerate' modern art with mental illness, Bolshevism, Jews and threats to the health of 'the race', waging a poisonous, self-contradictory war against the cultural avant-garde. As early as 1927, the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg – who later masterminded the wholesale looting of the Jews in occupied France – had formed a unit that became known as the Militant League for German Culture and targeted, among others, museum directors who acquired works of contemporary art.

Hildebrand was in its sights. The art he loved the Nazis despised, and their contempt found resonance in the mainstream population, which did not understand or want to engage with modern art. When Hildebrand became ill in 1928 – he was bedridden for four weeks because of a complicated appendix operation – right-wing forces on the Zwickau city council used the opportunity to attack his exhibitions and acquisitions.<sup>28</sup>

One of the artists whose work Hildebrand championed and acquired for the museum was Ernst Barlach, a sculptor of humble human figures often portrayed reading, praying, begging or playing music. In February 1930, still three years before the Nazis took power, Hildebrand was attacked in a local Zwickau newspaper for trying to turn the 'sub-human' figures of a sculptor whose 'racial roots were in the eastern Baltic or Mongolia' into something socially acceptable.

Hildebrand had supporters. He wrote to the director of the Hamburg Museum of Arts and Crafts, Max Sauerlandt, who like Hildebrand had purchased many Expressionist works for his institution, thanking him for a letter of support. 'The outlook here is desolate. You have given me a great boost, as one can easily fall into dark depressions on such occasions.'<sup>29</sup>

A few weeks later, Hildebrand was fired, ostensibly on cost-cutting grounds. Yet in reality he was among the earliest victims of Nazi cultural policies as the first German museum director to be fired for advocating 'degenerate art'. 'Young as I was, I was trying to do the right thing in the wrong place,' he wrote after the war about his time in Zwickau.<sup>30</sup>

Hildebrand became a pivotal figure in the debate about modern art. The director of the Berlin state museums, Ludwig Justi, wrote an essay titled 'The Zwickau Scandal' about Hildebrand's departure, saying 'he was a victim of his preoccupation with our modern living art'. Both Justi and Sauerlandt would suffer similar fates in 1933.

Dietrich Gurlitt, Hildebrand's nephew and godson, remembers his Onkel Putz, as he affectionately calls him, as a lively, elegant and charming man with a sense of humour. He believes that Hildebrand had by now adopted communist ideas. He certainly moved in Marxist circles: the Dresden artist Otto Griebel recalled Hildebrand and Helene visiting with Hildebrand's friend Ludwig Renn in the late 1920s. Both Griebel and Renn were communists and over the tea table they fell into a debate about Austromarxism, a current of Marxism that developed in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>31</sup>

When confronted by his nephew at that time, Hildebrand denied being a communist and told Dietrich that he supported Gregor Strasser, the leader of the left wing of the Nazi Party. Strasser stepped down in 1932 after a power struggle with Hitler and was executed by the SS in 1934. Whatever the truth, Dietrich said his father Wilibald held more conservative political views and didn't rush to Hildebrand's defence in his clashes with the Zwickau Nazis. The brothers drifted apart after that.

After his dismissal, Hildebrand taught art in Dresden, worked again as a journalist and wrote a book about Kollwitz, a Berlin female artist with communist sympathies who produced tormented, realistic images of poverty and squalor among the working class, and whom the Nazis despised. He was unreservedly scathing about the Nazi ideologues in the Militant League for German Culture in his art writing. He described a Dresden lecture aimed at promoting 'German' art by the Nazi architect

and art historian Paul Schultze-Naumburg, to which local art lovers were invited as well as members of the League. 'A discussion arose, but the gentlemen from the Militant League were silent,' Hildebrand wrote in the *Vossische Zeitung*, the daily Berlin newspaper, in February 1931. 'They were darkly and determinedly silent. It is always the same: their stupid dilettantism is exposed whenever experts talk about specialist issues seriously.'<sup>32</sup>

Yet Hildebrand got another chance to lead an art institution. In 1931, he was appointed to head the newly built Art Association in Hamburg, thanks in part to references from Carl Georg Heise, the director of St Anne's Museum in Lübeck, who shared his love of Barlach's sculptures, and Fritz Schumacher, an architect and former colleague of his father at the Dresden Technical School.<sup>33</sup> In Hamburg, a much more cosmopolitan and liberal city than little Zwickau, Hildebrand's ambitious work at the King Albert Museum had been noted and admired – as had Justi's words of support for him.

His standard of living in Hamburg was high, with 'an apartment of twelve rooms, a very large library and a nice art collection', he told Allied investigators after the war. 'I had a good future ahead of me.'<sup>34</sup> The Hamburg Art Association, though short of funds, had just opened house in a newly renovated villa with a modern façade and a sky-lit extension on Neue Rabenstrasse, near the shores of the Alster Lake.<sup>35</sup>

Hildebrand's exhibitions at the Hamburg Art Association included an Ernst Barlach show and a display of modern British sculpture with seven pieces by Henry Moore, who was then just thirty-four and unknown in Germany. Hildebrand described him as the leader of a new wave of British artists who were 'producing incredible results'.<sup>36</sup> It was the first contemporary exhibition of British art in Germany since World War I. The British ambassador, Sir Horace Rumbold, gave a speech at the opening of the show, which was supported by the Tate Gallery, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>37</sup>

Hildebrand was willing to fight for the art he believed in. He staged an avant-garde photography show and daringly included works by

Jewish artists such as Gretchen Wohlwill in his exhibitions.<sup>38</sup> One of his major battles was in support of Barlach's proposal for a monument to the victims of World War I by the town hall on Hamburg's main square. The memorial, a simple relief of a grieving mother with her child portrayed in profile on a 7-metre pillar, had invited virulent attacks from the nationalist establishment. Hildebrand joined forces with Hamburg's chief construction director to lobby for support, writing to such cultural heavyweights as Thomas Mann, Max Liebermann and Emil Nolde. Just eight people showed up for the monument's inauguration. It was later removed by the Nazis.<sup>39</sup>

His commitment to modern art again earned Hildebrand abuse in the press. The Nazi Party newspaper, *Hamburger Tageblatt*, accused him of 'jewifying the Art Association'. He knew it was only a matter of time before he was hounded out of that job, too. Yet in March 1933 he forged ahead with plans for an exhibition of modern Italian art, including works by artists such as Amedeo Modigliani, whose elongated figures Schultze-Naumburg had set alongside images of disabled people in his book *Art and Race*.

By now, the Nazis were in power, and in the months that followed, museum directors in Germany who collected and displayed modern art were ousted. Their successors banished the art to museum depots or, in some cases, even held 'shaming exhibitions' of the 'degenerate' acquisitions of the past. Some loans and gifts were returned to benefactors; a few museum directors even began to sell their modern works.

Artists were kicked out of their teaching posts – among them, Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and Käthe Kollwitz. Max Liebermann, a Jew, was in 1933 requested to resign from the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, where he was president. Some were even banned from working at all and were subject to raids by the Gestapo.

In Hamburg, Max Sauerlandt, the director of the Museum of Arts and Crafts who had sent Hildebrand a cheering letter, was forced to resign in April 1933 because of his support of 'degenerate art'. Days earlier, an exhibition of the elite group of avant-garde artists who had formed the



'Hamburg Secession', with whom Hildebrand shared exhibition space at the Art Association, became the first in Nazi Germany to be closed by police – at the instigation of the Militant League for German Culture. In May, the Secession was required to throw out all its Jewish members. Instead, it voluntarily disbanded at its last meeting on 16 May 1933. The funds left in its coffers were converted into champagne and consumed in one last party.<sup>40</sup>

Hildebrand left his post in July 1933. By his own account, he was denounced because he had the flagpole at the front of the gallery sawn off to avoid having to display a swastika banner. Whatever the final pretext, it was clear his approach to art was not compatible with the Nazis' ideas.

His career options were narrowing. As a quarter-Jew – Hildebrand's grandmother was Jewish – he could no longer work as a journalist or for the state. In April 1933, the Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service called for the dismissal of anyone with one or more Jewish grandparents from government jobs. An 'Editors' Law' barring people of Jewish heritage from all areas of journalism followed soon after.<sup>41</sup>

Adding to the pressure, Hildebrand and Helene were starting a family. Their son Cornelius was born at the end of December 1932 and named after his grandfather. 'May the child become a real Cornelius Gurlitt, like his grandfather and great-great uncle,' Cornelius senior wrote in a letter to his sister-in-law Else. 'That sounds very vain of me, but I think I can stand by it.'

Hildebrand continued to give lectures and used his extensive contacts among collectors, museums and art dealers to set up his own independent gallery in Hamburg, becoming a full-time dealer.

'What it meant to be true to the art you love in the years that followed is impossible to imagine in the USA,' he wrote in 1955. 'It meant opposing the press and a public mood that finally allowed "ordinary" citizens to give full vent to their innate hatred of good art that challenged their cosy world, but it also meant countering clever art enthusiasts who said "this problematic new German art is not so important, let's stick with the good old stuff". These were the toughest opponents. You were alone.'<sup>42</sup>

### 3 An Isle of Free Thought

Hildebrand was not completely alone. There were others who supported the artists he admired. But by now they had to be discreet about it, and the dealership he opened in his Hamburg apartment was semi-clandestine. Visitors came, he wrote later, as though his gallery was a den of vice – 'a little bit furtively but eagerly'. And not just any visitors; museum directors he had seen around town in SS uniforms felt at ease there and didn't denounce him.<sup>1</sup>

Like most things Hildebrand turned his hand to, his gallery was successful. He took risks. Though he dealt in all kinds of art, his speciality remained the modern works he had done so much to promote during his stints as museum director in Zwickau and as head of the Hamburg Art Association. He moved from Klopstockstrasse to better accommodation on Alte Rabenstrasse near the Alster Lake, just around the corner from the Art Association building. There he was proud to host the only exhibition during the Third Reich devoted to the 'degenerate' artist Max Beckmann in 1936. Today considered one of Germany's greatest 20th-century painters, Beckmann fled to the Netherlands in 1937 and stayed there throughout the war.

Walter Clemens, Hildebrand's friend and lawyer, described the gallery, which Hildebrand called *Kunstkabinett Dr H. Gurlitt*, as 'an isle of free thought'. Gurlitt's house, he said, 'was a cultural centre where the concept of intellectual freedom was honoured and nurtured lovingly, regardless of the political and mental terror of the Nazis'.<sup>2</sup>

A visitor to Hildebrand's gallery on the last day of the Beckmann show was the impoverished thirty-year-old playwright Samuel Beckett, who spent nine weeks in Hamburg in the autumn of 1936 at the start of a tour of Germany. 'Strong & interesting with excellent colour sense,' Beckett noted in his diary after seeing the Beckmann exhibition on 13 November.