

Bernhard Heisig and the Fight for Modern Art in East Germany. By April A. Eisman. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018. xvi, 280 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Plates. Photographs. \$49.95, hard bound.
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From the outset of this fascinating book on the East German artist Bernhard Heisig (1925–2011), April Eisman states that her goal is to situate his works in their original context in order to reassess what we think we know about socialist art made during the Cold War. Such an investigation, according to Eisman, allows us to see that socialist realism in East Germany was more than a simple propagandistic style, it was “a position (*Haltung*)” (5), one that entailed exciting, but also potentially perilous new prospects for artists as they navigated the debates surrounding their responsibilities to the socialist society and its people. The book that results captures the complexity of this era and stands to profoundly affect art historical understandings of this controversial period of artmaking.

After an introduction that deftly surveys the available scholarship on Heisig and East German art, the first chapter focuses on the years leading up to Heisig’s appointment as the director of the Leipzig Academy in 1961. Eisman describes how Heisig negotiated the Formalist Debates (1948–51), the New Course (1953–56), the revisionism after Nikita Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization speech, and the establishment of the Bitterfeld Way in 1959. She weaves interpretations of individual prints and paintings Heisig produced in this period with selections from his published articles and speeches to show how artists sought to make their art relevant to the people. One only wishes that this chapter had contained more discussion of Heisig’s time as a soldier in the Tank Division of the Hitler Youth. While Eisman states early on that this portion of the text would focus on the first thirty-six years of Heisig’s life, only two paragraphs are actually devoted to his first two decades, leaving something of a lacuna surrounding this problematic period.

In the next chapter, Eisman turns to a rigorous investigation of the controversy surrounding Heisig’s speech at the Fifth Congress of the Union of Visual Artists in 1964. She tracks the main elements of Heisig’s speech compared to other lectures given at the Congress before examining its reception and Heisig’s official self-criticism delivered three months later. Eisman contends that a new phase in Heisig’s art began as a result of these experiences—one that was “unabashedly modern” and “challenged official notions of what styles were suitable for East German artists” (78). Following directly from these debates, Eisman explores the reaction to Heisig’s murals for the Hotel Deutschland in chapter three. These murals provoked mixed responses—some claimed they showed “*deformed fragments*” (82) while others asserted they were “successful” (96)—further demonstrating the complexity of cultural politics in East Germany. Here, and elsewhere, the argument would have only been strengthened if Eisman had more clearly delineated what constitutes the “modern” style she attributes to Heisig beginning in 1964. Artistic modernism seems to consistently entail only formal qualities for Eisman—she mentions “the flattening of space” (32), “fractured forms” (51), and “looser brushwork” (61)—but these fail to cohere into a definition with the conceptual depth of so much recent writing on modern art.

The fourth chapter flows directly from the discussion of the murals to examine Heisig’s numerous depictions of the Paris Commune, then seen as “an important precursor to the GDR” (107). In this chapter, as in much of the book, Eisman’s ability to describe even the most pictorially dense of Heisig’s works makes itself strongly felt and this quality is matched by the overall clarity of the book as a whole. Both of these qualities continue in the book’s final chapter, which assesses commissions Heisig received between 1968 and 1971 for typical socialist realist subjects. These portraits initially

sparked a mix of reactions and show how Heisig “attempted to rejuvenate hackneyed subject matter” (135) by creating works which would engage both the people *and* the party. The conclusion that follows explores Heisig’s turn to the subject of modern warfare. Such works have often been read biographically, but Eisman carefully places them in the context of the German *Bilderstreit* (“image battle”) which took place in the 1990s. This last section, like the chapters which preceded it, situates Heisig’s work in its original context and reveals the role he played in creating a socially-committed modern art in East Germany. Through the rigor of her social historical methods, Eisman reveals “the complexity and artistry that was possible in East Germany” (136) and disproves the idea that communist ideology and modern art cannot coexist.

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The Queen’s Court and Green Mountain Manuscripts with Other Forgeries of the Czech Revival. Ed. and trans. David L. Cooper. Michigan Czech Translations, vol. 6. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 2018. xxx, 234 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$56.00, hard bound.
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The *Donatio Constantini* (ca. 8th century CE) is one of the most important forgeries in all the western world, arguably the most important in all of human history. Purportedly written in the fourth century, the document’s guarantee was left unquestioned for hundreds of years and, in certain sectors, its authenticity is mustered to legitimate actions and discourse even to this day. Very likely commissioned by Constantine the Great, the “Donation” critically guaranteed that the papacy, at a time of its tenuousness, did indeed have authority over its historical Roman see, and, by dint of such a claim, geopolitically far beyond Italy. At moments when protestation swelled against the Church, when the papacy teetered towards being unseeded or superseded, the “Donation” could be mustered to contravene any and all arguments against its authority. Like the *Green Mountain* and the *Queen’s Court* manuscripts (*Rukopisy zeleňohorský a královédvorský*), the *Donatio’s* provenance was questioned from within and deep linguistic-philological research was employed to dispute its origin. The recurring disputations repeatedly opened up wounds that made visible the very core of the institution that “required” the retrograde creation of its own legitimacy.

Like the works collected in *Queen’s Court and Green Mountain Manuscripts*, the Donation and, for that matter, *The Song of Igor’s Campaign*, has proved historical relevance to the present day not *despite*, but *sensationally, because* the critically-generous issue of authenticity has attached itself to any and all discussion of the work. I would risk that the Church requires it still, by dint of the fact that the arguments that ensued over its authenticity were part and parcel of arguments about its matter. Historical disputes over the Donation keep the status of papal power, and the actions legitimated by it, ever valuable and emergent.

Similarly significant are the expert forgeries of nineteenth-century Czech romantic nationalists. Both the *Green Mountain* and the *Queens’s Court* manuscripts’ forgery is traditionally attributed to Václav Hanka (and associates). Hanka was an individual of eminence, educated both in Prague and in the seat of the empire, Vienna. He knew first-hand the existential crisis facing the Czech language and its culture under Hapsburg rule. In what one could call a functionally desperate mood, Hanka founded a society whose aim was to preserve the Czech language; his colleagues were well familiar with his reactive Slavophilia and, though impassioned to make that stance