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CARL GEORG HEISE AND THE USA

New Perspectives on the History of Harvard's Germanic Museum and Lübeck's Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte

Kathryn Brush

This article examines a vital, yet previously unstudied chapter in the career of Carl Georg Heise (1890–1979), director of the Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte in Lübeck from 1920 to 1933 (fig. 1). Encouraged from his youth by his mentor Aby Warburg to study art history, the Hamburg-born Heise was one of the most energetic and versatile museum-based promoters of art and culture during the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic. Best known today for his championing of such artists as Emil Nolde, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Georg Kolbe, and Ernst Barlach, Heise launched many other initiatives that helped to shape the cultural identi-

ty of the Hanseatic city after the First World War. At a time of great economic hardship the youthful museum director endeavored to expand the city's cultural infrastructure, educate the public about the value of modern art, and support and publicize the emerging artists of his generation, among them the photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch, who went on to achieve international fame.

Heise's work as a high-profile *provocateur* in the art and museum scene of Weimar Germany is well known. Many of his enterprises, especially those foregrounding the work of avant-garde artists of his day, made him a controversial figure



1 Carl Georg Heise, ca. 1925

in conservative Lübeck.¹ His ambitious exhibition on 'Lübeckische Kunst außerhalb Lübecks' (The Art of Lübeck Outside Lübeck), initially devised in conjunction with the city's 700th anniversary celebration in 1926, helped to ignite a protracted dispute, the *Faksimile-Streit* (Facsimile Debate), which centered on the value of reproductions versus original works as tools of public education and scholarship. This vehement debate, carried out in 1929–1930, put many of Germany's leading museum directors and art scholars at loggerheads.

By contrast, Heise's extra-European activities during this same era have been completely overlooked. In early 1924 the Lübeck director embarked on a two-and-a-half-month study trip to the United States, where he visited museums, private collections, and other cultural institutions.² Apart from one article published in 'Kunst und Künstler' in early 1925, in which he discussed his observations about American museums, focusing on New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heise produced no scholarship on the topic.³ Therefore there has been little to suggest that his experiences in the USA left a lasting impression on his thought and curatorial initiatives.

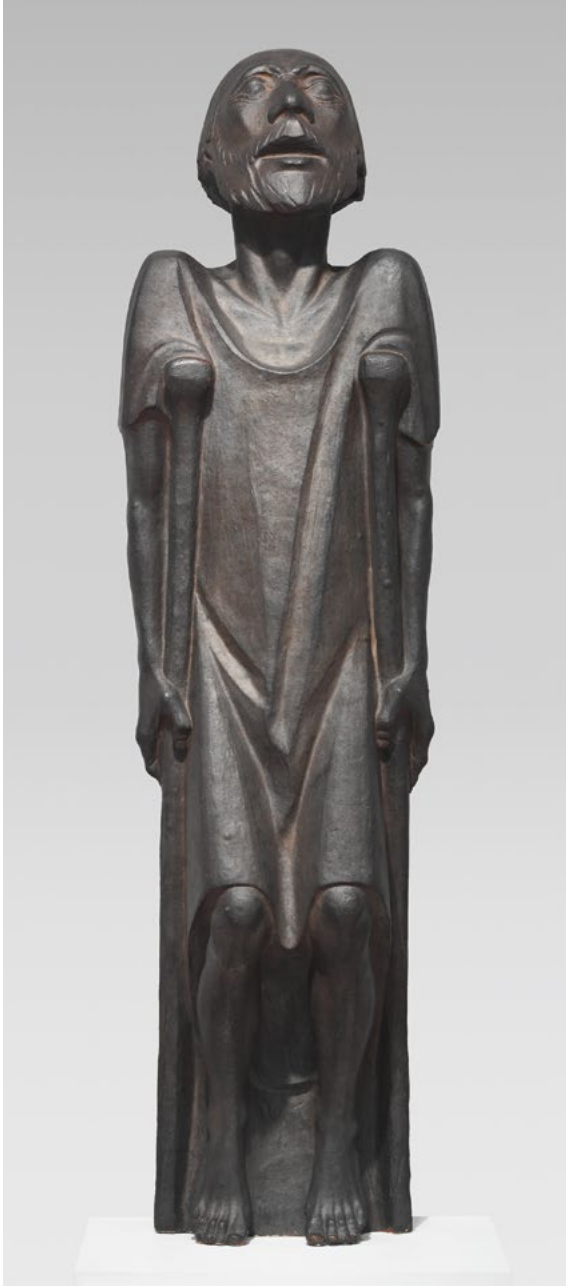
Surviving fragments of Heise's administrative and personal correspondence in archives in Europe and the USA make it possible to piece together a comprehensive picture of his American sojourn and the persons he encountered. The most unexpected find – one that disrupts and complicates the conventional narrative – is that from 1924 through 1930, Heise actively entertained the idea of leaving Lübeck. Although he weighed the possibility of several posts in Germany, his correspondence with his closest associates reveals that his objective was to assume the leadership of Harvard University's Germanic Museum (now the Busch-Reisinger Museum).⁴

Heise's self-styled "ideal plan" to become the director of the Harvard institution was in the end not realized. Nevertheless, the story of his project to transfer his activity from "old Europe" to New England, as chronicled by the documents, is riveting. Some of the most prominent figures in the German and American art and museum worlds played roles in the conception, mobilization, and eventual negation of his scheme. Critical

study of Heise's interactions with the Germanic Museum from 1924 onwards not only expands our vision of his activities, but also contributes new dimensions to our ever-enlarging picture of the transatlantic networks that connected European and American scholars and museums prior to 1933. Furthermore, the interpersonal dynamics that linked Lübeck's Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte and Harvard's Germanic Museum have significant implications for our understanding of the histories of both institutions. For example, Heise's extended engagement with the American museum provides a fuller context for certain objects acquired by that institution in the years around 1930. The most celebrated of these is Ernst Barlach's 'Crippled Beggar' (fig. 2), the double of a monumental sculpture commissioned by Heise in 1929 for the façade of the Katharinenkirche (Church of St. Catharine) in Lübeck.

Carl Georg Heise and 'Amerika 1924'

When Heise set sail for the United States he was 33 years old and already had a long list of accomplishments. After studying with such well known authorities on medieval art as Wilhelm Vöge and Adolph Goldschmidt, he completed a dissertation on the late medieval painting of north Germany at the University of Kiel in 1915.⁵ Young Heise formed a special friendship with Goldschmidt, *Ordinarius* for art history at the University of Berlin. Like their mutual friend Aby Warburg, the two men had grown up in Hamburg and shared a deep interest in Hanseatic art and cultural history. Goldschmidt's dissertation of 1889 on the late medieval architecture and sculpture of the city of Lübeck laid the groundwork for later scholars, including Heise.⁶ Furthermore, the medievalist Goldschmidt sympathized with the younger man's taste for both historical and modern art. As a young professor at the University of Halle Goldschmidt had promoted the acquisition of contemporary works for that city's art collection, and during his years in Berlin he was actively involved in the modern art and gallery scene, counting such figures as Edvard Munch, Max Liebermann, Paul Cassirer, and Alfred Flechtheim among his friends.⁷



2 Ernst Barlach, 'Crippled Beggar', 1930. Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Partial gift of Edward M. M. Warburg and partial purchase through the Association Fund, BR31.5

Heise began his museum career at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg under its director, Gustav Pauli, a close friend of Warburg and Goldschmidt. During his two years (1916–1918) at the Kunsthalle he produced a catalogue of that

institution's old master paintings and also wrote a catalogue of modern and contemporary works in the von der Heydt collection in Wuppertal-Elberfeld.⁸ A particularly impassioned friend and advocate of Expressionist artists in the immediate postwar years, he co-founded a journal, 'Genius. Zeitschrift für alte und werdende Kunst', in 1919, with Hans (Giovanni) Mardersteig, to champion their work. After his appointment in 1920, at the age of 29 to the directorship of the Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Lübeck, he shaped a new postwar mandate for the institution that not only highlighted the city's many medieval cultural treasures, but also vigorously embraced "art of the present" through regular loan exhibitions, educational and outreach programs for the public, and artistic commissions. To implement his goals, Heise expanded the museum (then concentrated in the St. Annen-Museum, a former medieval cloister) shortly after his arrival in Lübeck by acquiring a stately eighteenth-century house, the Behnhaus, as a venue for modern art, and the deconsecrated late medieval Katharinenkirche (fig. 3) as a site for temporary exhibitions. Central to all of his endeavors was his perception of a vital bond linking the art of the past and the present.⁹

When Heise arrived in New York on 10 March 1924 he was not alone. He had sailed across the Atlantic in the company of Wilhelm Valentiner, the chief intermediary between German and American museums before and after the First World War.¹⁰ Valentiner had served as the personal assistant of Wilhelm Bode, the General Director of the Berlin Museums, from 1904 to 1906, and had worked under Julius Lessing at Berlin's Kunstgewerbemuseum from 1907 to 1908. On Bode's recommendation, Valentiner was appointed head of the Decorative Arts Department of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, a position that he held from 1908 to 1914. After serving in the German war effort, he returned to America in 1921 to catalogue the paintings in the Widener Collection in Philadelphia and the Henry Goldman Collection in New York.¹¹ In early 1924 when he crossed the Atlantic with Heise, Valentiner was working as an advisor to the Detroit Institute of Arts, and that same year he became its director.