

Masterpiece in Focus: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar

Julian Jason Haladyn
OCAD University

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It is not often that a philosopher is the subject of a major art exhibition. Yet as I walked towards the entrance to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa I could see the sculpted profile of Nietzsche looking out, from a banner promoting *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar*. Curated by Sebastian Schütze, a Professor of Art History at the University of Vienna, this exhibition looks at the material histories of the Nietzsche Archive and its influence on the arts, which we encounter through the artworks, photographs, publications and documents on display. Not exactly a show of artworks, but also not strictly a display of historical documentation, Schütze presents us with a moment in time that is caught between the realities of the impact of Nietzsche's ideas and the complex fabrications of his legacy, with the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar playing a key role.

Established in 1894 by his sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, when the philosopher was alive but suffering from a detrimental loss of mental faculties (after collapsing in 1889), the Archive was strategically moved from Naumburg to Weimar in 1897. This, Schütze writes in his exceptional essay in the catalogue accompanying this exhibition [all quotes in this review

are from this source], was a means of maneuvering “Nietzsche's philosophical legacy and inscribing him in the myth of the classical Weimar of Goethe, Schiller and Herder” (12). And this strategy clearly worked. While Schütze does everything he can to minimize Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche's eventual attempts to position her brother's philosophy more in line with the Nazis – there is only a brief and seemingly reluctant mention of this, literally in the final few sentences of the essay – it is this move to Weimar that makes such an attempt possible. It is the politics of such a move of the archive that at once makes disturbing and intriguing an overall consideration of the objects displayed in this exhibition, one that is necessarily haunted by the misunderstandings of Nietzschean ideas. This clouded history, which is not ignored by the works and documents on display, nonetheless does not diminish what is an important moment in the modern interest in Nietzsche.

Contained within a single gallery, the exhibition consists of a pleasantly-modest number of objects. Paintings, drawings, prints and photographs hang on the walls. Among these we find several important portraits of Nietzsche, Hans Olde's 1899 etching of the philosopher's head, Gustav Adolf Schultze's famous 1882 photograph and two drawings by the well-known Symbolist artist Edvard Munch, the 1905 *Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche in a Melancholic Pose* (mimicking the title of the Schultze photograph) and the more subtle 1906 *Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche*. It was a particular treat to see the works by Munch, who also created expressive portraits of Count Harry Kessler (the yellow in this work was captivating) and Henry Van de Velde, both instrumental figures in the development of the Nietzsche Archive. Kessler was a major cultural figure who was on the board of the important cultural journal *Pan* – an issue of which can be seen in a display case within the show. Van de Velde was a Belgian architect, designer and art reformer who oversaw the major renovations to the Nietzsche Archive starting in 1902, where he created a “Nietzsche temple” that “offered an unmistakably modernist setting for the growing Nietzsche-cult and positioned the philosopher as key representative of the New Weimar” (21). One particular adornment of his design,

the so-called stylized 'Napoleonic-Nietzsche N', is featured prominently in the space of this exhibition, over the main door leading out of the gallery.

In the table-style wooden display cases we see a number of important documents and publications. The most significant of these are "the luxury editions of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Ecce Homo* and *Dionysian Dithyrambes* designed by Van de Velde" (21). These were richly ornate and expensive volumes, each heavily designed to make them an experience worthy of Nietzsche's words. In his essay Schütze goes so far as to tell us the size of the books, the type of paper used, specific printer, every kind of detail imaginable – and I thank him for this. My personal favourite was *Ecce Homo*. It is shown, on the one hand, closed with a simple but ornate off-centred title on the cover, the text an Art Nouveau style font; and on the other hand, opened to the impressive double-page end-papers, specially made with the title broken up across the pages, held within an Art Nouveau-style line pattern. Also included in these cases are a number of key documents from the Nietzsche Archive, material either owned by the philosopher himself or related to him. The most impressive among these is Nietzsche's personal copy of the first German translation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1858 *Essays (Versuche)*, which contains notes and comments that Nietzsche wrote during the many times he read the book. In the second essay that appears in the catalogue for this exhibition, Jennifer Ratner-Rosengagen writes: "As Nietzsche made his way from wayward teenager to philology professor to freelance thinker, Emerson's image of the philosopher, and his approach to philosophy as a way of life, proved essential to his [Nietzsche's] language of self-definition" (41). Seeing the traces of this experience was engaging and, for me, affected the work in the rest of the show.

The final works of the show, and in many ways the most significant, are the sculptures that punctuate the space. Two standing male nudes: August Rodin's 1901 *The Age of Bronze* and Aristide Maillol's 1925 *Young Cyclist*, both of which are connected to Count Harry Kessler's artistic and cultural activities. But it is the three sculptures by the German symbolist artist Max Klinger, arranged powerfully as a triad at the end of the gallery space, which are the

focus point of the show. Standing in front of this wall, we are treated to a symmetrically-composed display with two smaller works on each side, the 1901 *Death Mask of Friedrich Nietzsche* and 1902 *Bust of Friedrich Nietzsche*, which frame the large 1904 *Bust of Friedrich Nietzsche*. This final sculpture, the largest in a series of Klinger's busts cast by the Gladenbeck foundry in Berlin, is one of three copies in the world and, as the exhibition title makes clear, is a *masterpiece* from the collection of the National Gallery of Canada. The work is an almost life-size bronze head of the philosopher that emerges out of a column of bronze, which stand freely on the ground. As the centrepiece for the exhibition, its presence is highlighted with a dark orange-red column painted on the otherwise white wall behind all three busts, drawing special attention to this one artwork.

Not only, I believe, because it is in the collection of the institution where it is displayed, but also because the work epitomizes the overall qualities of the project itself. It appears as if Schütze wanted to share this key moment in the history of Nietzsche, when his thought and his cultural persona were being formed. Both catalogue essays work towards defining the qualities of this transformation, noting key people involved in the making of this history. For this reason, the catalogue is a valuable resource that gives the show a depth that, except for extremely-knowledgeable Nietzschean scholars, most viewers would not have access to otherwise. Even without this complex and at-times peripheral framework, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar* is of extreme value for the rather direct way it shares an overlapping of practices, positioning Nietzsche's life, posterity and writing in relation to vital cultural ideas and practices around the time. Nietzsche was a large thinker and this exhibition does his thought justice.