Apathetic Aphrodite: Classical Ideals and Politicized Sex in Ivo Saliger's *Urteil des Paris*

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Ivo Saliger's 1939 painting *Urteil des Paris* (*Judgment of Paris*, Fig. 1) presents a familiar scene. The story of the Trojan prince, whose selection of Aphrodite as the fairest goddess ultimately leads to the Trojan War, is well represented throughout the Western tradition. By painting Hera, Athena, and especially Aphrodite, the artist can display command of the female form, and the myth's important position within the epic cycle bestows rhetorical power upon any work featuring it. However, Saliger's version does not exhibit the beauty and sensualism present in most *Judgments*. Painted during the height of Nazi Germany's power during World War II, *Urteil* is a message to the male youth of Germany. Play your role, produce for the state, realize the pastoral ideal. Saliger uses a classicizing style to claim interpretive legitimacy and buoy the Nazi promise of a return to a pure, eternal Germany. In Saliger's hands, Aphrodite's body becomes that of an ideal Aryan woman, the other goddesses are genetically suspect, and Paris is the German everyman, choosing not the fairest goddess, but his ideal mate.

The oldest known iteration of the judgment of Paris myth appears in the *Cypria*, a lost work belonging to the Greek epic cycle. Although the original would have dated to the 7th or 6th century BCE, it survives only in summaries written well after the poem's original composition. Proclus, a non-definitively identified grammarian active either in the 2nd or the 5th century CE, provides the simplest of these summaries. It is only a few lines long:

> Strife arrives while the gods are feasting at the marriage of Peleus and starts a dispute between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite as to which of them is fairest. The three are led by

Illustration

Fig. 1: Ivo Saliger, *Urteil des Paris*, oil, 1939. Photographed for the GDK archive. Now housed at the *Deutsches Historisches Museum, Sammlung Haus der Deutschen Kunst*, Berlin.

Hermes at the command of Zeus to Alexandrus [Paris] on Mount Ida for his decision, and

Alexandrus, lured by his promised marriage with Helen, decides in favor of Aphrodite

(*Chrestomathia*, frag. 1).[1]

This version is corroborated by Apollodorus, who wrote during the 1st or 2nd century CE. His

version adds the gifts the other two goddesses promised: Hera offers "universal dominion" and

Athena "victory in war" (*Bibliotheca,* E3.2).[2]

Art and literature from the ancient world and beyond show that the myth has been

predominantly interpreted as a cautionary tale. Paris' choice only benefited him, and it came at

an unacceptably high price. Commenting on both Proclus' summary of the *Cypria* and Homer's

Iliad, Davies argues that Paris, whose retrieval of Helen is shown to cause the Trojan War,

appears as passive and easily swayed, the opposite of the active, heroic Hector.[3] Doherty,

analyzing ancient vase paintings and frescoes, agrees that Paris was held culpable for the war.[4]

He adds that the Trojan prince was frequently depicted wearing a Phrygian cap and trousers,

strengthening the relationship between his poor choice and the morally suspect Eastern world.[5]

This negative conceptualization of Paris endured, and authors from medieval through early

modern Europe derided his choice of beauty over virtue; their reactions ranged from lamenting

the simple foolishness of the choice to claiming that it was symbolic of the deleterious effect of

female power through beauty.[6] In recasting Paris as the hero of his painting, Saliger ignores the

context provided by the myth's place in the epic cycle and retains only its most widely

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[1] Proclus and Homer, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, vol. 57, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1977), 489–491.
[2] Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford University Press, 1998), 146.
[3] Malcolm Davies, "The Judgements of Paris and Solomon," *The Classical Quarterly (New Series)* 53, no. 01 (2003): 36, 38–39.
[4] J. Keith Doherty, "The Judgment of Paris in Roman Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 4 (2012): 528.
[5] Doherty, "The Judgment of Paris in Roman Painting," 530–531.
[6] Amanda Eubanks Winkler, "'O Ravishing Delight': The Politics of Pleasure in The Judgment of Paris," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15, no. 01 (2003): 17–18.

recognizable evocative elements. Using the myth's visual framework capitalizes on the cultural legitimacy offered by classical forms without having to meaningfully engage with the original source material or its many reinterpretations. He collapses the myth and all its baggage into a single question: who is the fairest? The answer is clear. Paris, a cog in the party machine, should not pick Juno or Athena, choices that would indicate aspirations of personal power and omniscient wisdom. He has resigned control. He follows the Nazi script. He labors to realize the German pastoral ideal, and in turn he is afforded the ability to select a beautiful, genetically pure mate.

In trying to establish how the painting promotes Nazi ideology, previous scholarship has often incorrectly identified Saliger's target audience. Adam stresses the contemporary style of Paris' clothes and the goddesses' hairstyles, suggesting that "Venus with a permanent wave" was meant to tell women "I am like you, you can be like me."[7] Taking a different route to the same argument, McCloskey comments that Saliger's nudes "draw on the rhetoric of the photograph and its documentary claim to truth."[8] She thinks that the painting's commitment to what she sees as photorealism, down to the inclusion of Aphrodite's pubic hair, is designed to "naturalize" the bodies presented and thus make "Aryan perfection" seem like an attainable ideal for the female German viewer.[9] However, these interpretations fall short in two ways. Firstly, it seems unlikely that a painting with such an unabashed display of female nudity was meant to be enjoyed by a female audience. The goddesses do not seem happy with their situation, and they do not invite the viewer to celebrate their position as objects being evaluated. Secondly, the static and sterile scene is hardly true to the realities of post-WWI German life.

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[7] Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992), 155.
[8] Barbara McCloskey, "Marking Time: Women and Nazi Propaganda Art during World War II," *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* 2, no. 0 (April 1, 2012): 5, doi:10.5195/contemp.2012.43.
[9] McCloskey, "Marking Time," 5.

The clothing and position of Paris reveal him as a proxy for the painting's true target: young German men. Paris is dressed in the uniform of the Hitler Youth.[10] His shorts and rolled-up sleeves are perfect for performing the work needed to apply order to his natural surroundings, the proper pursuit of a youth in the countryside. His tan skin demonstrates his commitment to outdoor labor and contrasts his masculine form with the pale Aphrodite, whose femininity was suited to the interior, domestic sphere. The healthy coating of brown dirt on Paris' upper back further indicates his propensity for hard work. The dip between his shoulder blades, visible from under his shirt, and the conspicuous tendon under his bent left knee both indicate functional strength without narcissistic focus on physique. Even more telling for his role as the German everyman is the orientation of his body. He faces the interior of the painting, observing the goddesses and background just as the viewer does. The majority of his face is obscured. He could be anyone. His stone bench, slightly right of center, gives him visual prominence without infringing on the true focus of the painting: Aphrodite's naked body. His pose, simultaneously leaning back yet reaching forward, indicates his dual role. He is part observer, a proxy for the viewer, lounging and taking in the display before him. But he is also a participant in the scene, offering the apple to the beautiful Aphrodite. The painting shows that working hard in service of the state will bring many rewards, including the opportunity to select among a variety of women. But once given a choice, men must do their part and select a pure, Aryan bride.

Using details from the myth to read the painting helps identify the figures present. In the *Cypria* summaries, the goddesses face judgment in the same order. Hera comes first, then Athena, and Aphrodite last, the winner. Using this standard allows for the identification of Saliger's Aphrodite. The seated goddess' white robe is draped over the stone and tucked under

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[10] Helena Ketter, *Zum Bild der Frau in der Malerei des Nationalsozialismus: eine Analyse von Kunstzeitschriften aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2002), 152.

her body, as if she had left the garment on the stone and now has sat down to put it back on. Since she is redressing rather than undressing, Paris must have already examined her. The goddess currently being judged is the last, Aphrodite. Paris' outstretched arm extends the apple to her, crowning her the winner. Distinguishing between the other goddesses is more difficult, but useful to attempt for purposes of clarity when discussing the painting. The seated goddess can be tentatively identified as Athena. She has the white robe of a virgin, and her position closer to the viewer suggests that she finished being judged more recently than the other. By elimination, the figure with her back to the viewer is Hera. Noteworthy is Saliger's exclusion of Zeus and Mercury, one or both of whom are present in other representations of the myth. Since Paris is the only male figure, the association between the Trojan prince and the male viewer is stronger, which makes the scene more sexually charged. The presence of another man would decrease the viewer's erotic access to the nudes.

The context provided by the judgement of Paris myth reinforces the biosocial importance of a pure German *Volksgemeinschaft* (racial community). Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, whose status as the most beautiful women in existence is actively confirmed by Paris' judgement, is Aryan. She has all the stereotypical features: blond hair, light but vibrant skin, a high forehead, an oval face, an aquiline nose, and a fit-yet-feminine body.[11] Other features affirm her desirability. Her lightly flushed cheeks indicate natural vitality, not cosmetic enhancement. Her breasts are nearly perfect circular orbs, and they extend from her chest at an angle unhindered by gravity. Complementing her other features, a vertical line extends down from the V-shape created by the tendons in her neck, continues between her breasts, and finishes just above her mons pubis. This line works with the triangle formed by her arms and palms to draw

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[11] McCloskey, "Marking Time," 5.

attention to her positive and well-proportioned sexual characteristics, especially her breasts, hips, genitals, and, by proxy, her womb.

The other goddesses are distinctly less Aryan. Their hair is darker, especially Athena's pubic hair, which appears in an overly determined triangle. Aphrodite's pubic hair is a barely visible halo. Athena's brow is also heavier, and its coloration combined with her downcast gaze makes her eyes look more deeply set. She also appears to be wearing makeup. Her eyelids have a brown-gold color absent in Aphrodite's, and her lips are a deeper red. Aphrodite's pure, natural beauty requires no augmentation. Hera's hunched back and strongly defined musculature eclipses Aphrodite's toned look and extends into the realm of unattractive masculinity. Athena's arms-up pose partially obscures her breasts, accentuates her arm muscles, and makes her shoulders seem wider than they are. Further contributing to her masculine unattractiveness, the strong horizontal line across Athena's abdomen highlights her stomach. This line makes her seem less feminine: her waist is not as narrow, and she is overall less slender, a characteristic associated with femininity, productivity, and health.

Saliger's works, most of which were painted in Vienna during its occupation by the Third Reich, are part of a larger tradition of Nazi-approved art produced during World War II. Although the ideologically charged phrases "Nazi art" and "Nazi artist" are imperfect descriptions of this tradition and those who participated in it, they nevertheless function as useful shorthand for those who worked concurrently with, though not under the direct control of, the German government from 1933-1945. Even outside of formalized propaganda and political messaging, the Nazis took an extremely active role in the production, curation, and regulation of art. They valued its cultural power, aware that overt propaganda was not as effective as the

"sweetened medicine" of didactic art and entertainment.[12] When Hitler came to power in 1933,

he founded the *Reichskulturkammer* (RKK, Reich Chamber of Culture), and the Nazi

propagandist Joseph Goebbels was placed as its executive.[13] The party held that German artists

should strive to produce art that was "heroic, epic, Nordic, Germanic, racial, inspired,

fundamental, mystical, spiritual, down-to-earth, and rooted in the native soil."[14] The RKK was

designed to implement this ideal.

Quick to begin its work, the RKK literalized its political message through the *Große*

Deutsche Kunstausstellung (GDK, Great German Art Exhibition). Saliger had two paintings

displayed at the opening of the GDK. Hitler purchased both.[15] Every subsequent year of the

exhibition, Saliger had at least two paintings featured, for a total of 16 from 1938-1944. Every

single one of those 16 paintings was a female nude, with some, like *Urteil des Paris*, featuring

more than one naked woman. *Urteil* was included in the GDK in 1939, and Hitler bought it for

4000 *Reichmarks*, or about $27,500 in today's US dollars.[16] Saliger leaves no record of his

personal ideology, but given the popularity of his work among the party leadership, it is hardly a

stretch to assume that his paintings fit squarely within the RKK's agenda for propagandist art.

The nudity in Saliger's works, including *Urteil*, serves a dual purpose. It is attractive to a

male audience, and it reinforces the Nazis' ideological focus on the human body. In his *Der*

Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit

(*The Myth of the 20th Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our*

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[12] Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, "Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand," *Journal of Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (February 2009): 72, doi:10.1002/pa.312.
[13] Martin Kitchen, *The Third Reich: Charisma and Community*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: Pearson Longman, 2008), 184.
[14] Kitchen, *The Third Reich*, 202.
[15] "Ivo Saliger," *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.gdk-research.de/.
[16] "Urteil Des Paris," *Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.gdk-research.de/en/obj19403809.html; R. L. Bidwell, *Currency Conversion Tables: A Hundred Years of Change* (London: Rex Collings Ltd, 1970); "Inflation Calculator: Bureau of Labor Statistics," accessed April 10, 2016, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Time) Alfred Rosenberg, a party leader who would later be hung at Nuremberg, establishes the "*Mythus*," or social force, of the awakening of the German racial soul.[17] Rosenberg believed that one of the main challenges facing Germany was its falling birthrate, which would leave the country vulnerable to invasion by genetically undesirable peoples.[18] He implores "pure" German citizens to breed in earnest: "All else is secondary to that which will produce healthy German stock."[19]

Following the lead of the government under which it was produced, the painting uses classicizing forms to access aesthetic authority and promote a message of biopolitical purity á la Rosenberg. The Third Reich placed a great deal of stock in the claim that they were the heirs to the classical tradition, and they sought to cultivate both the sophistication of Greek culture and the raw military power of the Romans.[20] Viewing ancient history through a Winklemannian lens, the Nazis thought of the classical as the essence of pure, clean, and vital beauty.[21] Like their ancient sources, they readily connected physical beauty with health, an association they extended to art.[22]

Both the figures and background of Saliger's *Urteil* have classicizing elements. The forms are idealized, representational but not true to life. Aphrodite evokes a Hellenistic statue, complete with nudity and contrapposto pose. Paris' pose is similar in that it echoes reality without being fully realistic. His position is physically possible, but hardly natural or comfortable. All the figures' skin and hair is smooth and perfect. Their bodies lack dynamism,

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[17] Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythus Des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung Der Seelisch-Geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe Unserer Zeit*, 27th-28th ed. (Munich: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1934).
[18] Rosenberg, *Der Mythus Des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 594.
[19] Rosenberg, *Der Mythus Des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 595.
[20] Alan Joshua Itkin, "Restaging 'Degenerate Art': The Politics of Memory in the Berlin Sculpture Find Exhibit," *German Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 399.
[21] Jan Nelis, "Modernist Neo-Classicism and Antiquity in the Political Religion of Nazism: Adolf Hitler as Poietes of the Third Reich," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9, no. 4 (2008): 480.
[22] Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1997), 67.

and the figures fail to interact, engaging neither through bodily contact nor by meeting each other's gaze. The painting does not seem like a captured moment in time, but rather a frozen artifact, as if Saliger were painting a still life.

The painting's unrealistic setting and light establish it as a political message, not an achievable reality. The plinth-like stone under Paris has a perfectly flat top, and its right edge forms a sharp, nearly 90 degree angle. The stone to the right, on which Athena sits, is similar. The light yellowish tinge of the field behind the wall suggests the pointed tips of wheat, but it is entirely textureless save for a faint rut down its middle. The light in the painting comes from the left of the figures, and its position does not fit with the outdoor background of the scene. Given the blue sky, one would expectt the light source to be the sun. However, the light is too low for that to be true. It hits the figures in the middle of their bodies. Aphrodite's shadow extends perpendicularly from her feet, and only half of her face is illuminated. The light is clear, bright, and white. The discontinuity between the outdoor daytime setting and the unnatural light source creates a sense of artificiality. The figures seem to be like actors in a play: a bank of bulbs could be just out of sight on stage left.

The painting's artificiality connects to a major promise of German fascism: an eternal pastoral utopia. The Reich told its people that the triumph of the Germanic *Volksgemeinschaft* would lead to the rebirth of the state.[23] The top party tastemakers, perhaps better labeled propagandists, wanted art that reflected "timeless values" in order to reinforce this claim to a post-WWI palingenesis of the German state.[24] The painting is not a photographic snapshot of reality. It is a visual representation of the promise implicit in Nazism. To convey its message, the painting needed to be idealized, to deliberately present itself as an artifice. In his study of Nazism

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[23] Clark, *Art and Propaganda*, 48.
[24] Clark, *Art and Propaganda*, 48 and 55.

as a consumer brand, O'Shaughnessy explains that explicit propaganda was "an invitation to share a fantasy, a mutual hallucination... images and assertions too ridiculous to be taken seriously."[25] His analysis also applies to works of art that were ostensibly not propaganda. In Saliger's painting, the fantasy of an ideal, pure, reborn Germany is alive and well. It invites the viewer to imagine himself in Paris' shoes and to fantasize about the rewards Nazism will bring. The idea of rebirth takes on a more literal meaning in the context of the myth. Aphrodite's nude self-presentation to Paris alludes to the necessity of genetically pure sexual reproduction. Multiple mythologies are present: not only the judgement of Paris myth, but also the shared cultural dream of a pure, timeless, Aryan Germany.

To promote this myth necessitated a rejection of non-representational art. Much of the art produced during the Weimar Republic did not aspire to produce photorealistic images, but rather to otherwise capture the unsettling realities of life.[26] For the Nazis to present their art as the opposite of Weimar art afforded them a unique political opportunity. Modernist art represented a period of extreme dissatisfaction among the German people: it expressed the horrors of World War I and the dysfunctions that crippled post-war Europe. The RKK instead encouraged "hortatory painting, stripped of complexity and ambiguity" that "retreaded" familiar, comfortable, and more widely palatable compositional forms.[27] In rejecting Weimar art, the Reich established its separation from the previous regime and solidified its political autonomy. And in embracing classicizing forms, the Reich told its citizens that a return to the power of previous times was coming. Germany would no longer be a suffering, ugly, and sick nation, but a pure, beautiful, and strong empire.

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[25] O'Shaughnessy, "Selling Hitler," 74.
[26] Paul Wood, "Chapter 4: Realisms and Realities," in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*, ed. Briony Fer, Paul Wood, and David Batchelor (Yale University Press, 1993), 289–290.
[27] Wood, "Chapter 4: Realisms and Realities," 314.

The Nazi politicization of sex contextualizes the painting's sanitized yet overly determined presentation of the female body. The fascist promise of a return to an idealized pastoral past implies a return to natural or otherwise unregulated interaction among the members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. *Urteil* shows that this natural state includes sexual contact. However, as human sexuality under the Reich became less stigmatized, it became more subject to public scrutiny. Providing an example of governmental sexual regulation, Czech discusses the phenomenon of Reich-owned and operated brothels. These establishments matched prostitutes of a given ethnicity to clients with the same racial background.[28] The segregated brothels were purportedly necessary to protect the purity of the German stock by avoiding race mixing: the initiative was part of a larger effort to regulate sex "according to the principles of economic rationality, racism, discipline, and hygiene."[29] Czech does not discuss visual representations, but he does touch on the Nazi conceptualization of sex as an incentive for soldiers and male party members.[30]

This idea appears in *Urteil*. Paris receives Aphrodite as a reward; she presents herself to him. Her palms are open, and her vertical posture exhibits self-assured display. Her contrapposto pose, with one leg closer to Paris, suggests movement toward him. However, she lacks the emotional weight of eroticism. Her lightly upturned lips ensure that her face is not unpleasant for Paris to behold, but her eyes are neutral, not romantic or tender. Her gaze does not meet Paris'. He seems similarly disinterested. He leans back on one arm and limits access to his body by resting his left arm on his right knee. He will receive her, as hinted by the offering of the apple, but he does not yearn for her. The painting is scrubbed of all inappropriate, unseemly lust. Just

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[28] Herwig Czech, "Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and the Control of Sexuality in World War II Vienna," *East Central Europe* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 76, doi:10.1163/187633011X566111.
[29] Czech, "Venereal Disease," 76.
[30] Czech, "Venereal Disease," 65.

like the excessively ordered scenery, the figures are controlled. The implied sex is sanitized, nothing more than an act in service of the German state. Paris has done his duty for the party, and Aphrodite will do hers.[31]

The Reich predicated its success on its ability to control the totality of Germany. In service to this end, the Nazi party set out to regulate everything from art production to prostitution. The human body was not only a tool of the state, it was a microcosm of it, something to be standardized and controlled. Several strands of this totalitarian ethos culminate in Saliger's *Urteil*. The myth, formerly read as a warning against prioritizing beauty above personal virtue, becomes a lesson in proper sexual contact. The mythical context, the goddesses' nudity, and Aphrodite's self-presentation work in concert with the static poses, emotionless faceless, and ordered scenery to remove sex from the realm of romanticism and define it as a political act of critical importance. When Paris offers Aphrodite the apple, confirming her superiority, he chooses both to protect the racial purity of the *Volksgemeischaft* and to affirm the absolute authority of the Nazi state.

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[31] Apologies to George Orwell.

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