Public Confrontations of GDR Art
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In the Crucible:
Bernhard Heisig and the Hotel Deutschland Murals

This chapter focuses on the series of murals Heisig created for the Hotel Deutschland in Leipzig in 1965. The murals became the centre of an intense debate shortly after they were finished, one of several between artists and GDR cultural functionaries. The primary disagreement revolved around a proper definition of socialist realism, which was left purposefully vague by the party. An investigation of these murals and the controversy surrounding them demonstrates that East German cultural politics were more complex than is currently thought and provides a deeper understanding of how Cold War-era thinking impacts current scholarship about East German art.

Bernhard Heisig (b. 1925) is one of former East Germany’s best-known and most successful artists. Indeed, many consider him to be one of the most important German painters of the post-war era. Since unification, scholarship on Heisig has focused primarily on his painterly commitment to early modernist styles and his thematic focus on the traumas of war. Works like Weihnachtstraum des unbelehrbaren Soldaten (1977) are praised for their impressionist brushwork, complex compositions and seeming relationship to the artist’s own experiences as a teenage soldier in the Second World War. Heisig’s struggles to create these paintings – he is famous for painting multiple canvases with the same subject matter and for repainting some to the point of destruction – are viewed most frequently today as a microcosm of Germany’s attempts to come to terms with this traumatic past. This similarity has led some to praise Heisig as the quintessential post-war German artist. Connections between his art and the East German society in which he lived and worked for nearly forty years, however, have been largely ignored or dismissed from this paradigm of trauma. Stemming in part from unified Germany’s discomfort with communism as well as the dominance of West German authors in post-Wende scholarship, this elision of the East German past from Heisig’s art has led to an oversimplification of his life and work in recent years.

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