

AICGS/DAAD Working Paper Series

A Publication of the
American Institute for Contemporary German Studies
The Johns Hopkins University

AICGS/DAAD Working Paper Series
**ALEXANDER DORNER (1893-1957):
A GERMAN ART HISTORIAN
IN THE UNITED STATES**
Ines Katenhusen

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD)
Research Fellowship Program
2002

Dr. Ines Katenhusen, Institut für Politische Wissenschaft, Arbeitsgruppe “Europäische Integration/ European Studies,” Universität Hannover, Engelbosteler Damm 7, 30167 Hannover; Tel.: 49-511-762-19165, Fax: 49-511-762-19185; e-mail: katenhusen@ipw.uni-hannover.de

AICGS would like to thank the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) for funding this AICGS publication as part of DAAD Research Fellowship Program.

© 2002 by the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies.

Additional copies of this AICGS/DAAD Working Paper Series are available at \$3.50 each to cover postage and processing from the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, 1400 16th Street, NW, Suite 420, Washington, D.C. 20036-2217. Telephone 202/332-9312, Fax 202/265-9531, E-mail: info@aicgs.org Please consult our web-site for a list of on-line publications: <http://www.aicgs.org>

**ALEXANDER DORNER (1893-1957):
A GERMAN ART HISTORIAN IN THE UNITED STATES¹**
Ines Katenhusen

In March 1939, a year after becoming the Director of the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), Alexander Dorner received an art shipment from Europe. After looking at the enclosed works, he complained about the terrible condition in which he found those of the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky, the painter of the blue rider group Franz Marc, and the De Stijl-artist Piet Mondrian. Dorner understood his business—only a few years earlier the Franz Marc and the El Lissitzky paintings had belonged to the Provincial Museum of Hanover, where Dorner had been the director. In 1939 he was purchasing these works a second time for the RISD museum in Providence. With respect to the two Mondrian paintings, Dorner remarked that he had not seen them before, that they were probably works stolen by the Nazis, and that he was therefore not willing to buy these.²

At that time Dorner was a highly recommended business partner for such art, which in Germany had been labeled “degenerate” and which had, in fact, been stolen from German galleries and museums. In May of 1939, when a Berlin gallery offered him a painting by the Russian Wassily Kandinsky, Dorner refused it. This painting had been kept at the museum in Hanover, though Dorner had not purchased it—it had been under private loan. Dorner wrote that, “I am afraid to buy these things ... because some time the owner might make legal claims and sue us.”³

Today, more than sixty years later, his words have come true. The Kandinsky painting, *Improvisation 10*, one of the most significant works of art of the twentieth century, had been confiscated by the Nazis but eventually found its way to a Swiss collector and is exhibited in his gallery today. In November 2001 the son of the former owner, who had been married to the Jewish artist El Lissitzky, sued the Swiss collector. An arrangement reached by both parties in early July 2002 appears to have resolved the case.⁴ It had, however, been closely watched by art circles around the world, since it was likely to set a precedent for future trials concerning declared Nazi-art loot. Yet there is another reason for this attention: *Improvisation 10* has an estimated value of around \$20 million. Considering the legal confusion and the mutual suspicion this caused among all involved persons and institutions, Dorner’s refusal to repurchase the painting in spring 1939 was far-sighted.

Improvisation 10 is by no means the only former object on loan to the Hanoverian museum preoccupying the art market as well as specialized courts worldwide. The confiscation list prepared by the Nazis from 1937 contains more than 270 avant-garde works

¹ It is a pleasure as well as a wish for me to thank several key people and institutions for their help and support during my work on this current research project: Peter Nisbet and the staff at the Busch-Reisinger Museum/ BRM, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge MA, Joyce Botelho (John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization/ JNBC, Providence, RI), and Andrew Martinez (Archives of the Rhode Island School of Design/ RISD). I also wish to thank the Thyssen Foundation, Cologne, the JNBC, Providence, and the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, the Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. for granting me research fellowships in the years 2000-2002.

² Letter from Alexander Dorner to Curt Valentin, Buchholz Gallery, March 14, 1939 (RISD Archives, Office of the Director, 1930-1949, Correspondence A-Z).

³ Letter from Alexander Dorner to Ferdinand Möller, May 26, 1939 (Berlinische Galerie, Archives, Ferdinand Möller Papers).

⁴ Summary by Christoph Heim, „Lieber den Spatz in der Hand als die Taube auf dem Dach“, *Basler Zeitung*, July 5, 2002.

from Hanover.⁵ These were confiscated and then either burnt, lost, or sold by the government to other countries. Considering the size of its art gallery, the Hanoverian museum proportionally contributed the most to the Nazi “Degenerate Art” exhibition in summer 1937. Moreover, the ownership of a greater number of pieces remains uncertain, especially pieces such as the Kandinsky, which were private loans that never actually belonged to the museum. In the early 1930s collectors of avant-garde art—often Jews—had asked Dorner to stash works in his museum or in his home until safer times returned, well aware that this was prohibited. In these lists of private loans, the works of Paul Klee, George Grosz, Piet Mondrian, Fernand Leger, El Lissitzky, Alexej Jawlensky, and Marc Chagall—some of the most important artists of the past century—can be found. And behind all these open questions stands the art historian and museum Director, Alexander Dorner.

Who was this man, who, during the 1920s, with a mix of enthusiasm, dynamism, arrogance, and insensitivity was able to move Hanover’s art scene into the international limelight of modern art? In 1961 Serge Chermayeff of Harvard University said of Dorner, “I don’t believe that what has happened to the Museum of Modern Art could have happened without the preliminary work of Dorner in Hanover.”⁶ Here was a man who campaigned for avant-garde art longer than any of his colleagues, even though it was prohibited by the Nazis, who in 1941 was labeled “a dangerous Nazi sympathizer” by the FBI, and who, in 1957, prior to his death, was recognized as a victim of Nazi persecution by the German government. Who was this man who was deemed “a big catch for the position in Providence”⁷ when he arrived on the east coast of the United States in 1937, but who a few years later was no longer considered capable of fulfilling the high standards in the United States?

Of course it will not be possible to answer all these complex questions. The intent of this paper is to illustrate why it was difficult for the approximately 250 German art historians and museum directors who had left Germany during the Nazi regime to adapt to the American political and cultural environment.⁸ The ambivalent and contradictory character of Alexander Dorner, a non-Jewish German who tried to establish himself in Providence just prior to the outbreak of World War II, is used as a concrete example of their experiences.

What follows are some biographical notes⁹ on Dorner, whose biography in many respects is typical of a man of his familial and social background. Alexander Adalbert Dorner was born in January 1893. His mother, an Englishwoman, was raised in India. His father was a professor for philosophy and theology in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), which, at the time, belonged to Germany. Dorner’s father and grandfather belonged to the most influential group of philosophers. Dorner later profited from his grandfather’s honorary doctor status at Harvard and Columbia University. His father held philosophy lectures at no cost for the Königsberg working class, an endeavor that Dorner Jr. considered a waste of time and ill-fitting to their interests. He was not allowed to learn English from his mother since it was not considered a “classical” language. Instead, he received a firm education in the “classical” humanities.

⁵ See Ines Katenhusen, „150 Jahre Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover,“ in Heide Grape-Albers (ed.), 2002. *150 Jahre Museum in Hannover. 100 Jahre Gebäude am Maschpark. Festschrift zum Jahr des Doppeljubiläums*, Hannover 2002, p. 40f.

⁶ Serge Chermayeff’s remarks on the occasion of the ceremony held in honor for Lydia Dorner’s gift to the Busch-Reisinger Museum, July 1961 (Alexander Dorner Papers, BRM Archives, untitled folder (Correspondence with Lydia Dorner)).

⁷ Letter from Walter S. Cook to John Nicholas Brown, November 24, 1937 (JNBC Archives, Folder “John Nicholas Brown (1900-1979) – Dorner, June 1941-November 1937”).

⁸ For further information see: Karen Michels, *Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft. Deutschsprachige Kunstwissenschaft im amerikanischen Exil*, Berlin 1999.

⁹ See Samuel Cauman, *The Living Museum: Experiences of an Art Historian and Museum Director Alexander Dorner*, New York 1958.

Important to Dorner was the exchange of ideas with his brother Hermann, who, despite his father's disapproval, was interested in the natural sciences. His brother later became one of the most significant flight pioneers in Germany and the United States.

After graduating from high school, Alexander Dorner enrolled at the Königsberg University. There he recovered from the demands of high school, played sports, and joined one of the fraternities. Dorner almost succumbed to a sword injury that left a scar on the left side of his face during a student duel. Later, during his stay in the United States, Dorner was mostly photographed with his good and favored right side forward. This kind of scar—a symbol worn by students—used to signal ones sympathy for the nationalist right. It is unknown whether Dorner shared such a philosophy at that time, but his notes from this time depict him to be a typical conservative young man from a good family who thought himself above the social problems of his time.

World War I began before he got a chance to take up his studies in earnest. At age twenty-one, Dorner volunteered for the front and divided the next four years between war and his university studies. He was also forced to stay at several hospitals in Belgium and Italy. Once a grenade exploded right next to him, another time he was buried alive and could not be rescued for several days.¹⁰ For the rest of his life Dorner suffered from epileptic attacks and had difficulty concentrating. His doctor in New York in the mid-1950s even argued that he suffered from mild schizophrenia as a result of his war experiences.¹¹

In 1915 Dorner moved to the University of Berlin to study art history, archaeology, philosophy, and history. Here he met people like Erwin Panofsky. Later he wrote about this time, "I soon belonged to a group of 'smart' boys and girls who represented the refractory element ... What made us so unruly was the familiar lack of connection between life and knowledge." Slowly he started "to look behind the carefully analyzed surface of changing styles for the forces which cause the change." He was convinced that this alone "would draw from the past something which might reach into our own day, give meaning and direction to life as we lived it."¹² The search for a connection to his present situation already became the standard for his work as an art historian. His personal notes documenting the German and American years contain many ironic comments about his colleagues, who, in his eyes, only accumulated one detail after the other of essentially dead knowledge without considering actual life. Towards the end of his studies he was influenced by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl had developed a new definition for changes and succession in art history. By pursuing a "directive drive," he brought a "breath of fresh air to Berlin's art history seminars, which, without him, would have remained wholly antiquated and stuffy."¹³

Dorner's dissertation about Romanesque art¹⁴ was completed in May 1919 during a time of general political and social disorder. The war had come to end, Emperor Wilhelm II had abdicated and the monarchy was replaced with the Weimar Republic—the first democratic experiment in Germany ever. For fourteen years, extremists from both the left and the right attempted to topple the Republic. This finally happened in 1933 with the seizure of power by the National Socialists.

¹⁰ See Niedersächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Hannover (NStAH), VVP 21, Nr. 151.

¹¹ Medical Certificate Prof. Otto Lowenstein, New York, December 16, 1953 (NStAH Nds. 401, Acc. 2000/ 155, Nr. 32).

¹² Autobiographical Statement Regarding His Early Years, by Alexander Dorner (compiled by Francis Golfing from conversations with Dorner), in *The Art Quarterly*, vol. XXI, issue 3, Autumn 1958, p. 317f.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Alexander Dorner: Die romanische Baukunst in Sachsen und Westfalen*, Leipzig 1923 (= Bd. 52, Bibliothek der Kunstgeschichte).

In 1919 Dorner was looking for a job and found one at the Provincial museum in Hanover. This institution had been founded almost seventy years prior by sympathetic citizens interested in art and was supported by the local aristocracy. In this museum, pieces of early natural history and archaeology were exhibited among works of art. While the art gallery was not of bad quality, the taste of the collectors was such that new artistic currents such as Naturalism, Expressionism, and especially Constructivism were excluded. Art that did not precisely express detailed reality and was not focused solely on beauty did not have a chance in Hanover at that time. The city, the ninth largest in Germany in the early 1920s with a population of 430,000, was no exception in this respect.¹⁵ Moreover, works of all eras were clustered together without any particular order. Generally, the personal interests of local sponsors and art politicians determined their arrangement. Walls were covered from bottom to top like a collector's stamp album. The artist and friend of Dorner's, El Lissitzky, once compared a visit there to one in the zoo, where visitors were stared at by thousands of wild creatures simultaneously.

Dorner, a novice on the job, showed ambitions for change right from the start. In the early 1920s, the Hanoverian museum went through a transformation. Dorner took the initiative to rid the museum of what he considered to be mediocre works. Another objective was to finally find an organizational concept for the collection. After he was put in charge of the painting gallery, he was finally given the status and authority to realize his plans. It should be noted here that at age thirty-six, Dorner was one of the youngest museum directors in Europe. In 1927, when he was almost finished with arranging the paintings in a new way, Dorner wrote: "The objective of an art museum is more than to position its treasures in an orderly fashion. An art museum is an educational facility whose purpose is first to develop a taste for the subject—and secondly, and more importantly, to illustrate the developments of the human spirit in its most independent and liveliest object—in art."¹⁶

In the newly arranged rooms visitors followed a chronologically specified path through art history. Dorner created the so-called "atmosphere room," less with the intention of imitating a particular art period and more with the objective to convey a sense of living.¹⁷ He attempted to demonstrate the connection between different periods by having the rooms painted in different colors: medieval art was mounted on dark walls to reflect the atmosphere of medieval churches; baroque rooms contained red velvet, and the walls in the rococo rooms were painted in yellow-gray. While the floors mainly remained neutral, appropriate furnishings and seating were added to further enhance the atmosphere of a particular era. Elaborate scripts were available everywhere, but they were displayed in a non-intrusive manner. Dorner's notes from those times show that the idea of disseminating information via ear phones and speakers did not develop first in Providence, but, rather, in Hanover, though its technical implementation, unfortunately, failed.

Alexander Dorner was not the only museum director of his time who concentrated on finding a new museum concept.¹⁸ It had not been his idea to color-code the exhibition rooms. However, his way of rearranging the collection served as a model and gained him recognition

¹⁵ See Ines Katenhusen, *Kunst und Politik. Hannovers Auseinandersetzungen mit der Moderne in der Weimarer Republik*, Hannover 1998.

¹⁶ Alexander Dorner, „Kunstmuseum und Publikum. Provinzialmuseum“, *Hannoverscher Anzeiger*, 4 September 1927. Alexander Dorner, „Der Geschmack und das Kunstmuseum“, *Hannoversches Tageblatt*, Oktober 9, 1927. Alexander Dorner, „Die Kunstsammlung“, *Hannoverscher Kurier*, Oktober 9, 1927.

¹⁷ See Alexander Dorner, „Die Kunstsammlungen des Museums der Provinz Hannover“, in *Der Sammler*, vol. 14, issue 17, September 15, 1924, p. 1-8.

¹⁸ See Monika Flacke-Knoch, *Museumskonzeptionen in der Weimarer Republik. Die Tätigkeit Alexander Dorners im Provinzialmuseum Hannover*, Marburg 1985.

from German and international colleagues. This recognition increased in 1927 with the implementation of the abstract cabinet, marking the end of the journey through art history. The abstract cabinet, which Dorner developed in close cooperation with the constructivist El Lissitzky, constituted an attempt to design a room in a museum that would change with the viewer's perspective and, therefore, appear dynamic and active. As an expression of a timely reality produced by abstract art, it was consistent with Dorner's conviction that art evolved from precedents. In Germany and abroad, the abstract cabinet evoked interest and enthusiasm. Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art in New York reminisced that "[T]he Gallery of abstract art in Hanover was probably the single most famous room of twentieth century art in the world."¹⁹

It would have been atypical for Dorner to stop here. His next project was to be simultaneously the end and the high point of his reorganization. The Room of the Present was planned in 1930, with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Inventions of science and technology and their influence on the visual culture of the time were to be represented by photographs and films. These plans, which would have marked another milestone in Dorner's comprehensive museum concept, were never realized due to both the worsening world economic crisis as well as a change in the cultural and political climate in Germany.

Dorner's theoretical philosophy with respect to art and museums in these years was such that he did not distinguish between good or bad and boring or interesting just because a piece belonged to a certain period.²⁰ He was able to purchase a series of spectacular older art pieces, and although this remained his philosophy in purchasing, he was and is still known as a promoter of modern art. In fact Dorner was the first museum director in the world to purchase and permanently exhibit the works of Piet Mondrian, Naum Gabo, Kazimir Malevich, and El Lissitzky. In the early 1920s he was able to make contact with multiple international gallery owners, collectors, and artists, putting Hanover on the map in avant-garde art circles. He took on several highly influential positions in different art associations, making himself indispensable in the field.

Given his methods, Dorner earned both jealousy and opposition.²¹ Many people did not comprehend his approach or found it too modern. They did not understand Dorner's focus on the general public. Why did he want to educate individuals who have never visited a museum about modern art? They questioned his idea of holding a competition with the intention of awarding a prize to the person finding the most reproductions in an exhibition. Many people had difficulty understanding his personality, which was not entirely free of egotism and readiness for intrigue, or his ruthless negotiation without consideration of the relative poverty of current artists. He manipulated praise to further highlight his achievements and simply ignored criticism.

Financially, Dorner was known to be a generous spender of provincial museum funds and found it absolutely acceptable to keep purchasing commissions personally. He took advantage of private loans of works of art from unknown artists, promising to act as a mediator while emphasizing his extensive international contacts. Many of the works taken into his museum and into his home were works by artists whom we now know as the leading classical modern artists. When he promised to exhibit a painting in his museum, the paintings were exchanged

¹⁹ Quoted in Samuel Cauman, *The Living Museum: Experiences of an Art Historian and Museum Director. Alexander Dorner*, New York 1958, p. 116.

²⁰ See Joan Ockman, "The Road not Taken: Alexander Dorner's Way beyond Art," in E. R. Somoli (ed.): *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America*, New York 1997, p. 82-118.

²¹ See Ines Katzenhusen, „Zwischen Lob und Tadel - Zur Beurteilung der Arbeit Alexander Dorners in Hannover“, in Alexander Dorner Kreis Hannover (ed.); *Überwindung der 'kunst' - Zum 100. Geburtstag des Kunsthistorikers Alexander Dorner*, Hannover 1993, p. 71-79.

several times until the owner had (or so Dorner hoped) forgotten that he had ever given it to Dorner in the first place.

On the other hand, Dorner gave many unknown artists a platform for exhibiting their work. One can find documentation that the young museum director was someone whose opinion was honored among those who, like Dorner, supported modern art. The opposite, however, holds true among skeptics of modern art, who grew in numbers during the rise of National Socialism in the late twenties and early 1930s. Dorner's influence in international avant-garde circles and his lifestyle were cause for increasing suspicion. The museum director was known as a man fond of life and was labeled a typical salon bolshevist without civil morals. In 1935, at age forty-two, he married for the fourth time, causing anonymous letters to be sent to his superiors, urging them to take a closer look at this modern and immoral man. Possibly, his negative experiences in bourgeois Hanover led him to conceal his first three wives and his children when filling out official U.S. documents.

To rid himself of all negative publicity, Dorner applied for membership in the NSDAP in May 1933, relatively early for a man of his social class and status.²² His application was denied without cause. In public, he tried hard to portray himself as a convinced National Socialist. A few weeks after the seizure of power by the Nazis, he convinced his superiors of the importance of further displaying art now labeled "degenerate" with the argument that such pieces symbolized times of "confusion" in art history.²³ He even went a step further by publishing documents containing Nazi interpretations, labeling current art with labels that read: "This is degenerated art" or "This is art as it shouldn't be." When asked by the insulted and discredited artists to take their works down, he refused. He argued that the museum had purchased them, and as director he was free to do with them whatever he wanted.

In the end, however, all his declarations of National Socialist ideology were insufficient to keep his position. In late 1936 fate took a path that would later repeat itself in Providence, although under different political circumstances. Dorner became a victim of his own shortcomings and mistakes, which made it easy for his opponents to rid themselves of him. Documents suggest that while Dorner was under surveillance from the Gestapo for quite some time, he managed to hold on to his job as museum director until he was forced out in February 1937, ostensibly because of his shady financial practices. No doubt this excuse was more convenient than proving that he was political unreliable. There was, indeed, proof of financial wrongdoings, but in contrast to earlier times, such practices were no longer being tolerated.²⁴

Dorner and his wife Lydia moved to Berlin, where he tried to find work as a journalist. However, newspapers were prohibited from publishing his work. Dorner felt threatened and decided, as he called it, to "spontaneously" leave in the summer of 1937. With Lydia he traveled to Paris and from there on to the United States. He would later tell the story about how the Nazis attempted to arrest him on the train and that he had barely escaped. Like many of his stories, it sounded plausible but was, however, impossible. First of all, he had asked Alfred Barr, who had visited him in Hanover in 1935, to look for a position for him in the United States. Secondly, he and his wife had a visa from the Berlin authorities when they arrived in New York in August 1937. His departure thus hardly qualified as a hasty escape.

The visa was approved for a short trip to visit the architect and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, himself a newly arrived immigrant. He had befriended Dorner in the 1920s, when the museum director had lent his support to the politically and artistically controversial Bauhaus. Like Alfred Barr and the former fellow student Erwin Panofsky, who taught at Princeton,

²² Berlin Document Center, Alexander Dorner File, NSDAP Membership Card, May 5, 1933.

²³ See NStAH Hann. 152, Nr. 72.

²⁴ See NStAH VVP 21, Nr. 83.

Walter Gropius was looking for a position for Dorner in the United States prior to his arrival. During the first weeks of his visit, Dorner was busy as a guest lecturer at well-established universities, museums, and colleges on the east coast. In spite of being highly regarded, he was not able to find a permanent position. He was, however, often confronted with the astonished comment about “Germany’s ability to spare so many of their distinguished citizens.”²⁵ In mid-1937, a large number of mostly Jewish German art historians already had fled from the Nazi regime, saturating the U.S. market. Even Dorner’s involvement in the preparation of the Bauhaus exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art in the late summer of 1937 did not improve his situation.²⁶

The tables turned when Dorner, as only one of two German art historians,²⁷ was nominated to be director of a museum in the United States—the RISD museum—in late 1937. Neither Panofsky’s nor Barr’s support in Providence should be underestimated in this respect. Barr recommended Dorner in September 1937 “with particular enthusiasm ... because I feel that this Hanover position is very similar to the Providence position which I think he could handle in a masterly way. He has no political affiliation and is of pure gentile stock.”²⁸ For Barr, as for Walter Cook of the New York University, Dorner was the most suited candidate to succeed Earle Rowe, the former director of the RISD Museum who had died early in 1937.²⁹

Cook emphasized that “he would put the museum on the map as it never had been before, he would sell the museum to the public.”³⁰ At the same time Philip Youtz, director of the Brooklyn Museum, was informed by Gropius about Dorner and was in touch with the RISD president. The same day that he received Gropius’ recommendation, he wrote to the president of RISD about his reform suggestions: “To summarize, I should like to see the School of Design become a new kind of Bauhaus which would irrigate the arid industrial regions of New England (and) the museum become an active research and participation centre for art students.”³¹ Youtz added that he believed it was an excellent chance to invite Alexander Dorner, who “stands very high in the art fields”³² as “prospective candidate for Director,” and, further, “to establish a series of informal seminars with men such as Gropius (and) Neutra.”³³

By late fall of 1937, thanks to the initiative of his friends and acquaintances, Dorner was the most influential candidate for the position of the museum director. Finally, the most influential persons in the Providence art scene were willing to accept him as new director. Dorner was introduced to the public by the Trustees. The new director was said to be

²⁵ Letter from Attorneys Nagel, Kirby, Orrick and Shepley to Walter Gropius, October 15, 1937 (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Listing of miscellaneous papers,” Box B I).

²⁶ Alexander Dorner, “The Background of the Bauhaus,” in Herbert Bayer/ Walter Gropius/ Ise Gropius (ed.): 1919-1928. *Bauhaus (catalogue, 82th exhibition Museum of Modern Art)*, New York 1938, pp. 9-13.

²⁷ Karen Michels, *Transplantierte Kunstwissenschaft. Deutschsprachige Kunstwissenschaft im amerikanischen Exil*, Berlin 1999, p. 74.

²⁸ Letter from Alfred Barr, Museum of Modern Art, New York, to John Nicholas Brown, September 22, 1937 (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Listing of miscellaneous papers” Box B I).

²⁹ Carla Mathes Woodward, “Acquisition, Preservation, and Education: A History of the Museum,” in *A Handbook of the Museum of Art. Rhode Island School of Design*, Providence RI 1985, pp. 35ff.

³⁰ Letter from Walter S. Cook to John Nicholas Brown, November 24, 1937 (JNBC Archives, Folder “John Nicholas Brown (1900-1979) – Dorner, June 1941-November 1937”).

³¹ Letter from Philip Youtz and Helen Danforth, RISD President, April 9, 1937 (RISD Archives, Office of the President. Historical Records 1877-1947. Helen Danforth records (1931-1947), 7/3. 1937, January-June).

³² Letter from Philip Youtz to Helen Danforth, May 3, 1937 (RISD Archives, President’s files, 1937-1941).

³³ Letter from Philip Youtz and Helen Danforth, RISD President, April 29, 1937 (RISD Archives, Office of the President. Historical Records 1877-1947. Helen Danforth records (1931-1947), 7/3. 1937, January-June).

interested in the installation of works of art for the public good, and in methods showing the development of painting and sculpture throughout the ages in relation to historic events and social conditions of the time. He was also “deeply interested in bringing the history of art in close contact with present day life.”³⁴

At this point Dorner must have had the impression that he had been hired to reform and modernize the RISD Museum. His method was the same that had paid off in Hanover. He immediately created atmosphere rooms in which paintings were arranged in a chronological order. Again, a great number of pieces were moved into storage, complementary furniture was purchased, a new lighting concept was tested, and, according to Bauhaus tradition, he waived the separation “between the so called fine arts and the applied arts.”³⁵ Accessories were removed, flashy picture frames exchanged for more neutral ones, “thus giving the object of art alone more prominence.”³⁶ In one report Dorner explained, “In order to emphasize the ... character of Greek art ... the exhibit tries to bring out in color and arrangement the gay character of Greek and Roman art, the conditions in the physical life of the individual and the colorful atmosphere of the surrounding landscape as well as of art itself.”³⁷

He was convinced that the windows to the museum garden jeopardized the atmospheric effect of the new rooms. Therefore, he incorporated ten transparencies in front of them to suggest restorations of buildings, which lit from behind, give the impression of space. Even an Egyptian death mask, highly fragmented due to its age, faced a change. He gave it eyeballs, and had the chest and arms completed to represent it as it had once been—all the while making sure that these restorations were highly obvious.

As in Hanover, elaborate descriptions inconspicuously positioned played an important role in Providence. In early 1941 the Carnegie Foundation approved a grant of \$2,800,00 for a loudspeaker system “to provide for the installation of musical equipment.”³⁸ Dorner contacted musical scientists and musicians all over the United States and the galleries that he rearranged—according to the historical succession from the prehistoric period to the present time the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Classical and Medieval—were all equipped with sound, ancient music, poetry, and explanatory audio. The Carnegie grant also allowed for brochures, as Dorner had a keen interest in displaying the museum in publications.

More so than in Hanover, all of these activities in Providence were part of an overall educational concept. Dedicated to the creed that “an art museum can do more than teach beauty and refine the taste,”³⁹ Dorner once said that to him the basis of museum attendance was “the steady bloodstream of education and enjoyment ... to turn the collections into a shrine

³⁴ Press Report from Eleanor Lambert, New York, n. dated (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Listing of miscellaneous papers,” Box B I).

³⁵ Alexander Dorner, Plans for the Museum Presented to the Corporation, June 1, 1938, RISD Yearbook 1938, p. 25.

³⁶ Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees, June 1-October 1, 1939 (RISD Archives, Corporation/ Trustees: Committee reports 1888-1975. Quarterly Reports of the Museum Committee).

³⁷ Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees, January 10, 1940 (RISD Archives, Corporation/ Trustees: Committee reports 1888-1975. Quarterly Reports of the Museum Committee).

³⁸ Annual Report of the Museum Committee, June 1, 1940-June 1, 1941, in: RISD Yearbook 1940/ 41, p. 23.

³⁹ Quarterly Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees, October 1, 1940-January 1, 1941 (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Quarterly Reports of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees,” Box B I).

which the whole population of Rhode Island considers their own spiritual property is one of the great tasks which lie ahead of our museum.”⁴⁰

From the beginning, the museum director tried to focus his interest on a wide spectrum of the public. He talked to women’s and men’s clubs in Providence, worked with churches, wrote for newspapers, and convinced a local theatre to stage a competition about the museum and its collection. He also asked visitors of the museum to name the most beautiful painting and displayed advertisements in buses and streetcars. In November 1938, after having been in his position for less than a year, Dorner approached the public on the radio, which, considering his broken English, was a courageous step. As quoted from his speech: “Isn’t it with collections of historical art the same as with the nice illustrated novel? If you look at the illustrations, you get a lot of pleasure out of it... (B)ut even reading the printed explanations you can hardly do more than guess what they really mean, and very often your guess will be wrong ... You are perfectly right if you ask: Now, well and good, they may be beautiful and fine works of art, but nevertheless what do they mean for us? ... They can tell us how the human mind developed from step to step, restlessly striving for a higher and broader view of the world, for wider perception and understanding.”⁴¹

Dorner also approached more than 800 public school teachers and gave talks and lectures about the museum collections or the development of art and culture. Next he focused on the students. He reached 15,000 students through a local radio station. From then on the Dorner era marked a time when the school was attended by students who came from all over Rhode Island. Programs were established through joint efforts of the museum and schools, and a museum’s youth club was founded.

Dorner was a leading purchaser and exhibitor of avant-garde art in the United States. He rekindled old connections with art dealers and artists in Europe, among them Lyonel Feininger, Marcel Duchamps, and Amedé Ozenfant. Some works of the latter were displayed at the museum. Dorner also tried to reach the modern media in which he still was highly interested. Full of ideas, nothing moved quickly enough for him at this time. In a letter to Josef Albers he wrote that he was unsatisfied with his work and continued in the following manner: “Of course I do not want to make a mistake and in the end spoil everything ... because I am planning a new arrangement of the whole museum and I need all my power for this purpose. I like the USA very much.”⁴²

At the beginning of his time in Providence, it became apparent how unusually reserved and almost passively Dorner faced members of the museum committee and the executive committee. He tried to fulfill everyone’s expectations of him, reassuring them all of the fact that he was, indeed, the right choice. The museum director at this time received a lot of praise and admiration. In an Annual Report of the executive committee in June of 1939 it says, “The future is bright, not only reflecting on the visitor numbers after years of depression.”⁴³ In the last year before he became museum director (1936/1937), about 35,000 had visited the museum. Under Dorner, this number had skyrocketed to about 85,000.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Quarterly Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees, June 1-October 1, 1940 (RISD Archives, Corporation/ Trustees: Committee reports 1888-1975. Quarterly Reports of the Museum Committee).

⁴¹ Radio Talk, November 1, 1938 (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Articles and Presentations 1925-1938,” Box I).

⁴² Letter from Alexander Dorner to Josef Albers, February 26, 1938 (RISD Archives, Office of the Director 1930-1949, Correspondence A – Z).

⁴³ Annual Report of the Executive Committee to the Corporation of the RISD, June 7, 1939 (RISD Archives, Executive Committee Minutes).

⁴⁴ RISD Yearbooks 1936-1941.

However, Dorner's practices were being increasingly questioned. Contributors and sponsors often complained about pictures being put into storage without notice. Dorner continued his scientific research but taking books from the museum to his home whenever he pleased—a practice that was not condoned. He also was told that he could not criticize the young volunteers for not working enough, because daughters from the most influential families were amongst them. It soon became apparent that Dorner was either not willing or not able to adapt to American museum practices. He disliked teamwork and refused to take instructions from supervisors or the Board of Trustees. Again, he was asked to confer more regularly with his superiors and allow them insight into his financial transactions—a request with which he did not comply.

On the contrary, when Dorner received substantial financial contributions from immigrant art dealers, he explained that it was a typical practice in Germany. He consequently faced allegations of bribery. In general, he showed little tolerance for criticism, frequently felt threatened, and reacted with arrogance and insult. He confessed his discontent and disbelief that each of his professional ideas was being slowed or hindered. In February 1941 he wrote that he had become the victim of a campaign; “It almost seems like a bad dream ... is there no right or wrong in an institution like this? It is the most undemocratic thing I ever saw.”⁴⁵ Dorner saw a conscious disassembly of his work and a tendency towards what amounted to negligence by his colleagues, whereas his opponents discovered an “unwillingness to fit into the general scheme of things” and “impatience and anger at being directed to conform.”⁴⁶ One colleague summarized this thought in a letter to the president: “The American way of good teamwork has to give place to the Germanic way of subservience to one will.”⁴⁷

Dorner was not the only one who employed the juxtaposition of democratic and undemocratic practices; an increasing number of his opponents did the same during the second half of 1940. Their campaign against Dorner did not stop at deception or defamation. It was remarked that Dorner had been given a fair chance by the influential families in Providence to establish himself in the United States and had reacted with ingratitude and an “autocratic and dictatorial” form of leadership.⁴⁸ This behavior of a foreigner whose “understanding of general ethics and New England principles is totally different from ours,”⁴⁹ was no longer acceptable, as one opponent mentioned in one of his notes to the president.

This opinion mirrored the growing disapproval “that a German had been placed in charge where an American ... should be installed.”⁵⁰ The height of this scandal is marked by an anti-German attitude apparent in the city and at the museum. Just prior to the outbreak of World War II, immigrants to Rhode Island, who were persecuted by the National Socialist regime,

⁴⁵ Letter from Alexander Dorner to John Nicholas Brown, February 4, 1941 (JNBC Archives, Folder „John Nicholas Brown (1900-1979). Dorner June 1941-November 1937“).

⁴⁶ Note from Royal B. Farnum to Helen Danforth, April 8, 1941 (RISD Archives, Office of the Executive Vice-President. Subject Files 1905-1947. Museum – Alexander Dorner 1937-1942. Private School, 1937-1942, 1941-1942 (2)).

⁴⁷ Letter from Miriam A. Banks to Helen Danforth, July 18, 1940 (RISD Archives, Historical Records 1877-1947. Helen Danforth records (1926-1967). Museum records 1926-1949, 7/7 1940, July-December).

⁴⁸ Memorandum of Royal B. Farnum re: Faculty and Museum Situation, May 3, 1941 (RISD Archives, Office of the Executive Vice-President. Subject Files 1905-1947. Museum – Alexander Dorner 1937-1942. Private School, 1937-1942, 1941-1942 (2)).

⁴⁹ Letter from Royal B. Farnum to Helen Danforth, March 27, 1940 (RISD Archives, Office of the Executive Vice-President, Subject Files 1905-1947. Royal B. Farnum Papers on Museum. Alexander Dorner, 1937 – 1942, Carnegie Grant 1941-1942).

⁵⁰ Letter from Royal B. Farnum to Helen Danforth, April 8, 1941 (RISD Archives, Office of the Executive Vice-President. Subject Files 1905-1947. Museum – Alexander Dorner 1937-1942. Private School, 1937-1942, 1941-1942 (2)).

documented the wrong doings of the Nazis. Also, in the summer of 1940 a beer festival nearby Providence was uncovered as a secret meeting place for German Nazis.

Although Dorner's direct involvement could not be proven, he was recognized as a non-Jewish, typically imperious German. He was accused of manipulating visitor numbers, and his exhibitions, celebrated only a few months earlier, were now declared "propaganda and self-aggrandizement."⁵¹ Suspicion and defamation now focused on his political orientation in Germany. Several sources at the museum now looked for evidence, questioning his opposition towards the Nazis. This was no longer about differences. The ignorance about political circumstances in Germany became evident when the question was raised as to whether Dorner was a Nazi or a communist. Their determination to rid themselves of Dorner gave way to the suspicion that he must be both and that he, therefore, had to leave.

Due to Dorner's contacts with European born art dealers in New York and several shady financial practices, members of the RISD boards approached the FBI in March 1941. They also produced a film of Dorner's personal surroundings. A month later the War Department in Washington issued a report about *Suspect Nazi Agents in the Art World*. Dorner, along with other German immigrants, was labeled "anti-Semite" and a "dangerous Nazi-sympathizer." According to the War Department, he belonged to a group of German art historians "who preach defeatism with considerable success to Americans of importance and who are planted here by the Nazi government or Nazi sympathizers."⁵²

Even after all of these allegations proved to be circumstantial, on the eve of World War II almost no one in Providence seemed interested in further explanations. Dorner's destiny was sealed. On May 6, 1941 a meeting of the museum committee was held about the museum director's future. Very few members supported Dorner's remaining at the museum. They suggested that he be assigned an assistant director, stating that the RISD museum would never "get a first rate director if he is put under the school."⁵³ Their appeals, however, were useless—Dorner's contract would not be extended. However, he was granted a leave of absence until the summer of 1942. He was expected to fulfill all Carnegie grant promotion obligations while at the same time staying out of the museum's business. Dorner accepted these terms.

In September of 1941, several Rhode Island, Boston, and New York City newspapers reported on Dorner's apparent Nazi past and justified his dismissal owing to ongoing FBI inspections. The RISD executive committee publicly and immediately denied any connection to this matter. However, to any outsider Dorner's guilt must have been apparent. Dorner was appalled by the articles and consulted his lawyers in the hope of receiving an apology from the respective papers. He received strong support from John Nicholas Brown, one of the most influential citizens of Providence. Brown used his reputation and influence to rehabilitate Dorner in the public eye. A large number of papers, including the *New York Times* and the *Boston Herald* printed Dorner's side of the story in September of 1941 and John Nicholas Brown's declaration of loyalty with both the art historian and the man Alexander Dorner. In the end, John Nicholas Brown resigned from his board positions at the RISD because, as he

⁵¹ Memorandum of Royal B. Farnum, March 12, 1941 (RISD Archives, Office of the Vice-President, Subject Files, 1905-1947. Museum – A. Dorner 1937-1942. Military Intelligence Investigation 1941).

⁵² Confidential Letter from the War Department, M.I.D., Subject "Suspected Nazi Agents in the Art World," April 22, 1941 (National Archives at College Park, MD. RG 59. General Department of the Department of State. Box C 269. Dr. Alexander Dorner 862.20211/4-2241. Possible subversive activities).

⁵³ John Nicholas Brown, Minutes of the Museum Committee Meeting, May 6, 1941 (RISD Archives, Office of the Executive Vice-President, Subject Files, 1905-1947. Museum – Alexander Dorner, 1937-1942. Museum Committee Meeting, May 6, 1941).

said, “he believes it is not in the best interest of the institution to forego the benefits of Dr. Dorner’s talents.”⁵⁴

Thanks to Brown, Dorner was able to find work as a lecturer in the art department at Brown University. He remained in Providence until 1948. In spite of a series of restrictions due to their enemy alien status during the Second World War, the Dorners seemed to be happy in Providence. In December 1943 they finally became American citizens. At Dorner’s new position, and in Bennington, Vermont, where he taught from 1948 onwards, he once again faced art theoretical questions. There he took part in publications about the bases of museology and twentieth century art history. He further developed projects about facsimile museums in the United States, about an Institute for the Growth of Vision and an Institute for Constructive Art History. He never again became director of a museum. His ideas were no longer based on actual experiences, and slowly Dorner lost the connection to current developments in a flood of more or less unrealistic plans.

Correspondence with friends indicates how much Dorner had suffered through the events at the RISD museum and how this had impacted on his overall impression of the United States. In a letter to Walter Gropius he wrote, “The scale of suppression of free speech and the most primitive rights of employees can hardly be united with the definition of democracy. This is oligarchy!”⁵⁵ Dorner’s bitterness becomes evident in the following statement: “The Americans have not yet reached the European mental faculties, yes, they are about to drop even further.”⁵⁶ Alexander Dorner died on November 2, 1957 during a trip to Europe to settle the formalities associated with his persecution by the Nazis.

After his immigration to the United States, the German art historian Alexander Dorner, in the last two decades of his life, had to cope with two opposing cultural and scientific systems, one German and one American, as did so many of his colleagues. Sadly, unlike his friends and colleagues Erwin Panofsky or Walter Gropius, Dorner’s contradictory and ambivalent character was either not willing to recognize and to take into consideration the differing communication structures—or perhaps he was simply unable to do so.

⁵⁴ RISD Trustee Defends Curator. Resignation Is Filed By John Nicholas Brown in “Sympathy Move,” *Pawtucket Times*, September 9, 1941.

⁵⁵ Letter from Alexander Dorner to Walter Gropius, September 9, 1941 (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Walter Gropius Papers (bMS Ger 208, 654)).

⁵⁶ Note of Alexander Dorner, n. dated (Comment on a newspaper article, December 9, 1956) (BRM Archives, Alexander Dorner Papers, Folder “Evolution in Universe + on Earth,” Box I).