

# German Cultural Heritage Protection Today: Josef Thorak, yes – Fritz Koenig, no?

## Open letter

to the Minister of State Prof. Monika Grütters,  
State Premier Dr. Markus Söder,  
Minister of State Bernd Sibler and  
Member of the State Parliament Robert Brannekämper.

Fritz Koenig (1924–2017) was Germany's most eminent sculptor in the latter half of the 20th century. Following the Second World War, Koenig, the scion of a Bavarian family of inventors and industrialists, led German sculpture into the modern age. German Federal President Theodor Heuss visited him at his studio in Rome while Koenig was a Fellow at Villa Massimo. Koenig's art was featured at the 1958 World's Fair in Brussels, the first time since the end of the war that a reformed German nation received international accolades. Peggy Guggenheim was among Koenig's early patrons; today, his *Biga* stands prominently on the terrace facing the Grand Canal at the Guggenheim Museum in Venice. Koenig's most famous work, the *Great Sphere*, was created for the World Trade Center Plaza in New York. Heavily damaged but not destroyed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it has become an emblem of the city's will to survive. No German artist has evoked the horror of the Holocaust more powerfully than Fritz Koenig. He also created the "*Klagebalken*", a memorial sculpture for the Israeli athletes murdered during the 1972 Munich Olympics. In 2017, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence staged a retrospective of his work. It attracted well over a million visitors. It was the sixth most visited exhibition in the world.

Koenig lived at the Ganslberg near Landshut in a house and studio he had designed himself. He worked there and he also bred horses. It was here that he built the large "*Kugelhalle*" (in 1968) specifically to model his *Great Sphere* for the World Trade Center Plaza. Stefan Trinks, writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, referred to Koenig's Kugelhalle as "an architectural jewel in every detail, down to the hinges and handles". Two further cavernous, timber halls housed Koenig's collection of African art. Just as African sculpture was a source of inspiration for his sculptures, the artist drew from the traditional elemental building forms of Lower Bavaria to create an architecture of perfect proportion, employing a deliberate limitation of means, formal clarity, and harmonious integration into the surrounding landscape. The resurrection of traditional forms also characterises other important buildings of the modern era. "It is precisely the spaciousness and spectacularly fine architecture that may mark this 'kingdom' (Koenig-Reich) of an exceptional artist as a treasure among artists' homes." (Stefan Trinks, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*)

Koenig's Ganslberg, however, is threatened to fall into decline. Its current owner, the Fritz and Maria Koenig Foundation, needs help.

**We therefore demand** that the Ganslberg be granted heritage protection! This is the only way to ensure its long-term preservation and to defend it against rapacious

schemes to exploit and destroy it. Thanks to its preserved inventory and Koenig's Africa collection, the Ganslberg is one of the most important artists' residences in Germany. There have been media campaigns for its preservation by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Stern*, *Handelsblatt* and *Landshuter Zeitung*. The Bavarian State Monuments Council has spoken out in favour of its protection. These calls have so far fallen on deaf ears.

The Bavarian State Office for Monument Preservation (Bayerische Landesamt für Denkmalpflege) refuses to grant the Ganslberg protection and has denigrated the unique ensemble as an unartistic, functional building. This judgment has been subject to heavy criticism. Instead of rescinding its decision, the Bavarian State Office for the Preservation of Monuments has dug its heels in, basing its objections on specious arguments.

It is claimed, for instance, that the ensemble, built as early as 1961, does not meet the criteria of belonging to a "bygone era". The idiosyncratic argument for refusing protection is that, "its significance lies not on the meta-level of history but in the private sphere." The significance of Goethe's house on the Frauenplan in Weimar, a huge draw for visitors today, is also in the private sphere. Goethe himself never intended the house to be a museum. It has also been falsely presumed that the Ganslberg was not designed by the sculptor himself.

This leaves us with the unmistakable impression that the significance of Koenig's architecture, which allegedly lacks "the artist's signature" and even artistic ambition in general, is being deliberately diminished. This seems absurd. By themselves, the 74 photographs accompanying the article "Sculptor and Architect: The Built World of Fritz Koenig" in the Uffizi exhibition catalogue stand in stark contradiction of this. The location is crucial to an understanding and appreciation of Fritz Koenig's art. Indeed, Koenig was the winner of the Bavarian State Prize for Architecture!

No one is more blind than those who do not want to see.

When it comes to the martial studio of Hitler's sculptor Josef Thorak (1889–1952) in Baldham, however, the eyes of the Bavarian State Office for the Preservation of Monuments are wide open. Thorak repudiated his Jewish wife in 1933 in order to 'liberate' himself for the service of Hitler's Reich, whose coddled artist he became. His colossal sculptures adorned the New Reich Chancellery as well as other notable sites. Thorak was also responsible for works on a smaller scale in his capacity as master sculptor at the Allach Porcelain Manufactory, which Heinrich Himmler operated at the Dachau concentration camp. Prisoners were forced to produce porcelain kitsch, which was bestowed on SS members eager to decorate their idyllic domestic homes. Thorak also produced portraits of Hitler and other Nazi bigwigs.

While Thorak building was deemed worthy of protection nonetheless it is a 'brown monument', such protection is denied to the artist's residence of the world-renowned, modern, democratic German sculptor Koenig. Nazi artistic heritage, yes, German democratic artistic heritage, no? A comparison of images says more than any words can express: Thorak's muscular 'Aryan' with Koenig's depiction of the victims of Nazi terror in all their human frailty. "Here in a gutter lies a single representative of an

infinite number.” These are Koenig’s words on the official memorial he created at the site of the former Mauthausen concentration camp.

Minister of State Prof. Grütters, State Premier Dr. Söder, Minister of State Sibley and Member of the State Parliament Brannekämper, we respectfully but urgently call upon you: Intervene! Fritz Koenig’s art is world art, and it honours Germany’s democratic post-war history. His Ganslberg, one of the most important artists’ residences in Germany, and the key to understanding and appreciating his art, must be conserved and preserved and made accessible to the public.

The *Landshuter Zeitung* put it most succinctly: “Landshut has a huge opportunity to make amends.” As does Bavaria. As does Germany.

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Eleonore and Percy Adlon, five films about Fritz Koenig

Prof. Dr. Holger A. Klein, art historian, Columbia University

Prof. Dr. Winfried Nerdinger, President of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts

Alexander Rudigier, Curator of the Fritz Koenig Retrospective, 2017

Prof. Dr. Eike D. Schmidt, Director of the Uffizi Gallery

Dr. Josef Schuster, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany

Dieter Wieland, Monument Conservationist

Prof. Dr. Michael Wolffsohn, Historian



Josef Thorak, Boxer, formerly Reichssportfeld (Berlin), 1936

Photo: AKG images



Fritz Koenig, Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany (Concentration camp memorial Mauthausen, Austria), 1982/83