

Bauhaus and a spirit of subtle resistance

Two items from the exhibition tell revealing stories about life in Germany in the 20th Century. Both have a link to the Weimar School of Architecture and Design, called the Bauhaus, which pioneered modern design in the 1920s. Because of its socialist and internationalist outlook, the Nazis set out to destroy it.

The first item is a ceramic vase, above, by Greta Marks. Displaying African influences, it is a striking piece even today. Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, singled it out as ‘decadent art’. Marks fled to Britain and continued working but never again found the inspiration of her early work.

The second is the inscription *Jedem das Seine* – to each his due – on the gate of Buchenwald concentration camp, where many Jews and communists were incarcerated, including two prime ministers of France, and 56,000 people died. Unlike the more famous inscription on the gate at Auschwitz, this one faces inwards and was designed to be seen by prisoners every day. The wording is one of the fundamental principles of Roman law. The Nazis subverted it to show that it was they – not university intellectuals – who decided



who got their just deserts.

Intriguingly, the typeface is a product of Bauhaus design. It was made by a camp inmate, the communist architect Franz Ehrlich, who was imprisoned on a charge of treason in 1934. The font displayed what MacGregor calls ‘a spirit of subtle resistance’, which the inmates understood to mean that one day the Nazis would get justice.

Ehrlich was set free in 1939 and, uniquely for a communist, allowed to work through the Nazi period. At the end of the war he was fêted as a hero in the East Germany. The story of how he negotiated life with two kinds of tyrannical regime does not end there, however.

‘We find the story of Ehrlich the good communist moving. But when the Stasi archives were opened, it emerged that he’d been a very energetic informant – and one of a very disagreeable sort,’ says MacGregor. ‘This is a story that makes me extremely glad not to have been German at that time.’