

The Golden Network.

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Goldschmiedekunst During the National Socialist Period

Reviewed by Jacques Schuhmacher



Das Goldene Netzwerk/ The Golden Network: Die Deutsche Gesellschaft Für Goldschmiedekunst in Der Zeit Des Nationalsozialismus/ The Deutsche Gesellschaft Für Goldschmiedekunst During the National Socialist Period.

Michael Bermejo and Andrea H. Schneider-Braunberger
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This book was born of a scandal which sent shock waves through the field of goldsmithing. The German Society of Artistic Goldsmithery's (*Gesellschaft für Goldschmiedekunst*) ring of honour is widely considered the ultimate badge of recognition in the field, but in 2016 Bernhard Schobinger refused to accept what should have been the crowning achievement of his career. In his eyes, the award carried a dark and unexamined past.

Previous recipients included men such as the long-standing Nazi activist Karl Berthold who, as acting director of the Frankfurt *Städelschule*, 'cleansed' the faculty of lecturers who he considered to be 'Judenknechte' (lackeys who served the Jews). Under Hitler's ideological regime, few German associations did not enthusiastically embrace the new order, so it was little surprise that the Society recognized the work of people who not only happened to be excellent craftsmen, but who were also prominent Nazi activists.

Schobinger's dramatic refusal revealed that for over 70 years the Society had never confronted its Nazi past. In response, the Society belatedly performed the same formulaic redemption ritual as countless other German organisations. It called in independent historians to investigate the truth of their history under the Nazis, and published the results in this parallel German/English book. Only by acknowledging its history in this way could the modern Society move on from its dark past.

Although *The Golden Network* is supposedly an organisational history, its main focus is the Society's founder, jeweller Ferdinand R. Wilm (1880-1971). Wilm's world was thrown into disarray after the revolution of 1918/19 and the exile of the Kaiser. Although he maintained contact with his former patron, hoping for his return, he necessarily became a relentless networker to survive the profound national crisis which could easily have destroyed his livelihood. He joined many different organisations in search of prospective clients, and, in 1932, founded the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Goldschmiedekunst* in Berlin. He hoped that publicly promoting the craft would in turn elevate his status and increase his income. When Nazi stormtroopers marched through the Brandenburg Gate only six months after the Society was founded, Wilm naturally sought their patronage. Deploying his finely-honed skills as a networker, he soon met Hitler and Göring, showering them with gifts and awards, while his workshop created ceremonial objects for the regime. In this way, Wilm managed to regain his status of court jeweller, albeit to the *Führer* rather than the Kaiser.

After the war, Wilm rationalized his actions by claiming that he had only done what was necessary to survive. Like many others, he rebranded his opportunism as a desperate survival strategy. We can



Ludwig Riffelmacher, head of the H.J. Wilm workshop and recipient of the Society's 1936 Gold Ring of Honour, perfects a model of the Nazi Party emblem. © Archiv Gesellschaft für Goldschmiedekunst e.V.

never know what Wilm truly believed, but we can say with confidence that even the most dedicated Nazi supporter would have been hard pressed to inculcate National Socialist values in the Society more thoroughly than Wilm.

This excellent volume reveals that Wilm was far more than a court jeweller to the Nazis: he also actively supported Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. It was Wilm who chose as Society President Hermann Esser, one of Hitler's earliest supporters and author of the rabidly anti-Semitic tract *The Global Jewish Plague*. Unsurprisingly, the Society banned Jews from membership. Wilm personally benefited from the persecution of the Jews after *Kristallnacht*, when he took over the sacked premises of a renowned Jewish jeweller. This shocking episode completely demolishes Wilm's post-war claims to be apolitical, so it is rather disappointing that it receives only a brief paragraph in this volume.

Nevertheless, *The Golden Network* provides a clear-sighted and informative account which refuses to fall for Wilm's attempts to rewrite history. Post-war, Wilm convinced the Denazification Board of his innocence and embarked on a reinvention of himself and the Society, to the extent of carefully removing swastikas from photographs of the President's ceremonial regalia that were published in a book to celebrate its 20th anniversary. Had it not been for Schobinger and the appearance of this important book, Wilm would have got away with it.

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