

## **Ludwig Gies , 1942 “The Oaktree”**

### **Family dispute among the heirs of Ernsting's family causes a removal of a historic work of art from public view**

In 1999, the founder of the billion-dollar company ‘Ernsting's family’ had a wooden carving installed in his company headquarters on the recommendation of his son Uwe Ernsting. The artist of this monumental oak tree is Ludwig Gies, who also created the ‘Bundesadler’ in Bonn's post-war parliament. However, there was a dispute between the Ernsting heirs after their patriarch's death because of the possible Nazi references in the company's art. Following a court order, the artwork was removed from the company headquarters against the wishes of part of the family, bought up by an auction house and removed from public access.

If the billionaire heirs had taken a closer look, it would not have been necessary to place Gies under general suspicion like this. Unlike artists such as Nolde or Hoetger, Gies, as a devout Catholic, did not allow himself to be corrupted by nationalist ideologies and was almost always able to defend himself against the use of such symbols in his works.

Although he accepted the commission for the Germanic oak from Hans Frank - the ‘Butcher of Poland’ wanted to use it to decorate his ‘seat of government’ in Krakow's Wawelsburg - he kept delaying the completion of his ‘Oaktree’ so that it was never finished. In light of the many carvings of forests around the war years it can be surmised that Gies wanted to use the ‘forest’ symbol to approach the subconscious mind of the Germans at that time. In any case, the non-finito of his key work enabled him to protect his assistant and himself from being sent to the front.

It is easy to say that one should never have accepted a commission from one of the most vicious men in history. But as a professional artist, Gies could hardly have survived the twelve darkest years of German history without such commissions. And what about other commissioners of great works of art history? This exhibition promotes a constructive, differentiated approach to art in history instead of discrediting historical artists with apparent moral superiority. Closeness to one's own history goes further here than a distancing view of historical power dynamics.