

WEEKEND ARTS ART MOVIES

Unlikely art hub honed by enthusiasm

**Scene in/Seen in:
Chemnitz, Germany**

BY ELIZABETH ZACH

The 40-ton bronze bust of Karl Marx, built in 1971, still looks on to a major thoroughfare in this east German city, which was once called Karl-Marx-City. In the 19th century, Chemnitz bore another moniker, the Manchester of Saxony, reflecting the factory smokestacks across the horizon. Today, bleak concrete apartment houses border treeless boulevards, remnants of socialist urban planning.

None of this deterred Ingrid Mössinger when she arrived in 1996. A former curator in Wiesbaden and Frankfurt and at the Biennale of Sydney, Ms. Mössinger was hired to direct the Museum am Theaterplatz, which has an eclectic collection of 70,000 paintings, graphics, textiles and sculptures, as well as a large collection of work from the Chemnitz native and Expressionist painter Karl-Schmidt Rottluff. Built in 1909 in the stately Wilhelmian style, the museum faces the city's equally distinguished opera house.

"What I saw in Chemnitz demonstrated to me that people must have wanted to live here," said Ms. Mössinger, "and for them, art and music were important."

Since her arrival, Ms. Mössinger has been appointed to direct three more museums in Chemnitz, including the Museum Gunzenhauser, which contains a vast trove of Otto Dix paintings and other works of so-called "degenerate art" once outlawed by the National Socialists leading up to World War II.

The museums are an astonishing achievement for this city of 240,000, particularly when one considers that more than 20 percent of the city's residents have moved elsewhere since 1990.

Dr. Stephan Scholz, president of the Society of Friends of the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, the city's collection of four museums, can remember interviewing Ms. Mössinger for the museum directorship. "She saw potential," he recalled, "where few others did."

Ms. Mössinger has a penchant for vibrant dress suits and fire-engine-red lipstick, both in apparent contrast to the city's mostly drab façades. She exudes an immediate affection for her adopted home.

"It is the purest architecture museum, with the largest, most cohesive Art Nouveau district in Germany," she said.

Elegant Art Nouveau villas, spared during Allied bombing in 1945, still grace Chemnitz's hilly Kassberg district. Before the world wars, Chemnitz had an admirable symbiosis between art-loving textile industry titans and painters. There were salons and cafes, and artists and designers such as Henry Van de Velde, Otto Dix and, at one point, Edvard Munch all gravitated to the city, in part to take advantage of



WOLFGANG SCHMIDT, CHEMNITZ (ARND)



benefactor largesse.

At a time of constrained municipal budgets across the Continent and much of the world, Ms. Mössinger's artistic coups over the past 15 years have prompted admiration, if not bewilderment.



In 2007, she engineered the world's first-ever exhibition of Bob Dylan's sketches and paintings. The international press lauded the show at the Museum am Theaterplatz, and it has since opened in Copenhagen, London and New York.

It wasn't until she came across a coffee table book of Mr. Dylan's sketches while browsing a bookstore in New York City that she bought 50 of his CDs.

"I recognized this strong connection between his lyrics and his drawing and it was obvious to me that this was something unique."

There was the Pablo Picasso exhibition, also at the Museum am Theaterplatz, in 2002 and 2003, in which a collection of 215 portraits of women drew an estimated 100,000 visitors. Other high-caliber exhibitions at the Theaterplatz have featured Renoir, Munch, Chagall and Cranach.

These shows came on the heels of another milestone when, in 2001, Ms. Mössinger worked with city leaders to have the Esche Villa, designed by Henry van de Velde and built in 1903, restored as a museum of Art Nouveau design and furnishings.

The Schlossberg Museum, in a 12th-century Benedictine monastery exhibiting Gothic art and sculpture, fell under her direction in 2005.

Off of a busy tram junction sits the fourth and most recent addition to her museums: the Gunzenhauser. It is a cuboid-style building, unremarkable but for the fact that inside is an impressive private collection of masterpieces,

many of them once banned and all burned.

In 2007, the inauguration of the museum, and the collection's sheer vol and scope, had art lovers, collectors and dealers again asking, "Why here?" The nearly 2,500 paintings, all dating from Germany's Expressionist and New Objectivity period between the world wars, includes works by Carl Felixmüller, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Gustav Wunderwald, among others. Many had never been exhibited.

It also includes a number of paintings by Otto Dix, born in nearby Gera in 1891. Dix's bold renderings of war-torn urban melancholy won him recognition within and beyond the New Objectivity movement, which called for a practical and realistic aesthetic.

But the genre rankled National Socialist leaders, who branded his work "degenerate art." In 1933, under pressure from the regime, he quit his position as an art instructor in Dresden, fled to Randegg, near Lake Constance in southern Germany, and began painting innocuous yet poignant landscapes an "inner emigration," as art historian call it. He died in 1969 in Singen.

In 1998, Ms. Mössinger viewed so many of the paintings at a Leipzig gallery learned that the owner was planning