



## The Fighter of the Spirit

Artist: Ernst Barlach (German, 1870-1938)

Date: 1928

Location: G100

Medium: Sculpture | Bronze

Size: H. 18 ft.

Creation Place: Germany

Accession Number: 59.16a,b

### Questions and Activities:

- Look closely at this sculpture. What parts of the figure are most expressive? [The body is concealed under loose clothing, leaving the face and hands as the most expressive elements; these became the major stylistic elements of his mature works.]
- How does the sculpture make you feel?
- This statue was despised by the Nazis and their predecessors during the Weimar Republic as being a pacifist work. The angel is wielding a sword, usually considered a pugilistic / violent gesture. What about this statue is pacifist or peaceful? WDYSTMYST?
- When the statue was removed from its original location at the University Church of Kiel by the Nazis, the artist commented that the work had achieved its final form from the specific requirements of its setting and was designed specifically for it and formed a single unit with it. The MIA statue has been moved from an indoor setting to an outdoor setting since its acquisition in 1959. How does the placement of the statue effect its impact on you? Is this the best way to display this statue? {Show picture of the Kiel statue.]
- It has been suggested that the statue is a symbolic metaphor for the concept of justice. What do you think the angel, the sword and the lion might represent? [Traditionally, an angel acts as a

protector of the innocent; the lion epitomizes strength; and the sword is an instrument of authority which dispenses justice. Thus, justice is administered on behalf of the good and right by a messenger of God.]

- It has been suggested that the statue represents the ascendancy of the spiritual over the bestial in human nature. WDYST would support this view? [Explain that this theory is closer to the artist's view of the piece, to the extent it can be discerned from his writings.]

### **Historical Background**

- In the first half of the twentieth century, Germany was profoundly affected by world wars. After World War I, the severe penalties placed on Germany by the Allies created harsh economic conditions that fueled the rise to power of Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), who led Germany into fascism and World War II in 1939. Hitler also headed a regime that orchestrated the Holocaust, a horrific legacy with which subsequent generations struggled to come to terms.
- Throughout the century, Germany was at the forefront of all fields of the arts. German artists engaged new conceptions of the inner self formulated by Sigmund Freud, while at the same time responding to industrialization with programs for reforming the design and production of architecture and furnishings. The rise of fascism politicized art-making, as the Nazi regime equated modernism with degeneracy and drove many avant-garde artists out of the country.
- In 1927, Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), equating modernism with degeneracy, and degeneracy with Jews and Bolsheviks, founded the Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur (Militant League for German Culture) to purge the arts of "corrupt" elements.
- In 1937, the National Socialist (Nazi) government organized the exhibition Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art), which included the work of many modernist artists. Opening in Munich, the exhibition was attended by literally millions of visitors in its dozen German and Austrian venues. The show included only a fraction of the 16,000 artworks confiscated from German museums by order of Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945). Thousands of these works were burned, the rest auctioned off. Among the artists deemed "degenerate" were the Expressionists Kirchner, Marc, Kokoschka, and Nolde, as well as Beckmann, Klee, Chagall, Dix, Grosz, Picasso, Van Gogh, and Kandinsky. Other cultural forms were subjected to the same rites of "purification." For instance, a Degenerate Music exhibit was mounted in 1938 to educate the listening public on the dangers of atonalism and jazz.

### **The Artist / Biography**

- Ernst Barlach was a prolific and successful German expressionist sculptor, printmaker and writer.
- Barlach was born in Wedel, Holstein (near Hamburg) on January 2, 1870, the oldest of the four sons of Johanna Luise Barlach and Dr. Georg Barlach. When Barlach was a boy, his mother was absent for many months in a mental institution. (She later drowned herself in 1920.) His father died when he was fourteen years old. According to his autobiography, he was the family bard and storyteller, an inspired puppeteer, an inventor of outdoor dramatic games, as well as a creator of sketches and small sculptures. He graduated 'Primus' of his high school class in 1888.

- Barlach studied from 1888 to 1891 at the Gewerbeschule in Hamburg. He continued his studies at the Königliche Akademie der bildenden Künste zu Dresden (Royal Art School of Dresden) as a student of Robert Diez between 1891 and 1895. He continued his studies for one more year (1895-96) in Paris at the Académie Julian.
- After completing his studies, Barlach worked for some time as a sculptor in Hamburg and Altona, working mainly in the *Jugendstil*, a style of architecture and decorative art similar to art nouveau, popular in German-speaking areas of Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He produced illustrations for the magazine, *Jugend*, from 1897 to 1902. His first solo exhibition, of ceramics and drawings, took place at the Kunstsalon Richard Mutz, Berlin, in 1904.
- During the decade from 1897 on, "as he sought his way through the thickets of *Jugendstil* , ... he failed to find a subject matter, a content to satisfy his inner need. ... He drew and modeled attenuated yearning figures ..." for grave monuments "... and superficial decorative trivia--fauns and nymphs, designs for plaques and for lampshades, jars with handles, etc." Naomi Jackson Groves, *Ernst Barlach Life in Work* (1972), p. 5.
- A trip with his brother Nikolaus to visit his brother Hans in Russia in 1906 was a turning point in his artistic life, providing the crucial impetus for which he had been searching and influencing his emergence as a confident and resolute sculptor.
- In 1907, Barlach's financial situation improved considerably due to an arrangement with art dealer Paul Cassirer, in which he received a fixed salary to produce sculptures for sale by the dealer. He also worked for the German journal *Simplicissimus*, and started to produce some literature.
- He won the Villa Romana Prize in 1909, precipitating a ten-month stay in Florence. Upon his return, Barlach settled in Güstrow in Mecklenburg in 1910, where he spent the rest of his life.
- In the years before World War I, Barlach was a patriotic and enthusiastic supporter of the war, as reflected in his statue *Der Rächer* (The Avenger) from December 1914.
- He served in the German infantry for three months in 1915, from which he was released due to heart problems, and became a pacifist and staunch opponent of war.
- Barlach's prominence increased dramatically after the war. He received many awards and became a member of the prestigious *Preußische Akademie der Künste* (Prussian Art Academy) in 1919 and the *Akademie der Bildenden Künste München* (Munich Art Academy) in 1925. He received the Kleist Prize for drama in 1924 for his *Die Sündflut* (The Flood), in which he projected his personal mysticism onto the story of Noah and the Ark. In 1926, he wrote *Der Blaue Boll* (Squire Blue Boll or Boozer Boll), an expressionist drama in which the eponymous squire almost succeeds in seducing a down-and-out young mother, before both achieve spiritual regeneration.
- In 1930, Barlach's 60th birthday was celebrated with honors across Germany. An exhibition of his sculptures in wood was assembled at the Prussian Academy in Berlin and other shows took place in Essen, Kiel and Düsseldorf. No fewer than forty special essays and articles appeared on Barlach's many-faceted work. A large studio residence was built near Güstrow to provide space and equipment vital to fulfill further public commissions.
- In February 1933, just before Hitler came to power, Barlach was named Knight of the Order pour le Mérite, Peace Section. (Created by Frederick the Great as the highest order Prussia could award for military service, the Pour le Mérite had also been awarded for outstanding accomplishments in arts

and sciences since 1842.) Barlach was also made a member of the honorary board for the exhibition of ecclesiastical art at the Chicago World's Fair that year. The following year, Switzerland recognized his importance by giving him a one-man show at the Kunstalle in Berne.

- During the 1920's and 30's, Barlach received a number of commissions for war memorials. His creations, rather than showing heroic German soldiers fighting for their glorious country, expressed the artist's pacifist philosophy. This pacifist position was abhorrent to the Nazis and their sympathizers and made him the target of continuous harassment and persecution.
  - The *Magdeburger Ehrenmal* (Magdeburg cenotaph), was removed from the Magdeburg Cathedral in 1934 and placed in storage at the Berlin National Gallery until after the war, when it was returned to the cathedral.
  - In 1936, a handsome volume of Barlach's drawings was confiscated by the Bavarian State Police "as a protective measure on behalf of the German people ... as the contents are liable to endanger public security and order." The 3800 copies of the first edition not already sold were destroyed.
  - In the summer of 1936, three sculptures by Barlach, along with works of Käthe Kollwitz and Wilhelm Lehmbruck, were removed from the Jubilee Exhibition of the Prussian Academy of the Arts, where his works had been honored three years before. Shortly after that, the Academy's president suggested that he "resign voluntarily" from the Academy.
  - During the *Aktion Entartete Kunst*, 381 of his remaining works were confiscated from state and other public collections as "degenerate art". They were either destroyed or auctioned abroad to bring in foreign currency for armaments.
  - In 1939, the intaglio panel on the Hamburg relief of the Mother and Child was torn out of the limestone stele and replaced by an emblematic eagle because a Nazi warship was due to visit the harbor there.
  - By December 1937, the artist was placed under "exhibition ban" by the Reichskammer of Visual Arts.
  - Barlach struggled valiantly for confrontation with his faceless foes, sending letters to government officials and speaking on the radio in "Artists at this Time" (1933), as well as writing essays and rebuttals, few of which were published. He was rumored to be Jewish and accused of being a bolshevist, but he was most affected by the claim that he was *artfremd*--un-German. He responded in a document now called *Lob der Bodenständigkeit*--"In Praise of being Rooted in One's Native Soil" (1933).
  - Unable to fulfill his commissions and refusing to emigrate, Barlach created a series of works, one entitled *Das Schlimme Jahre 1937*, The Wicked Year 1937, giving vent to a sense of "slow strangulation". In one final upsurge of creative energy, he drew a series of exquisite standing figures that he called *Übungen der leichten Hand* ("Exercises of the Light Hand"), including an emaciated beggar bearing Barlach's features with his starving dog pressed faithfully to his knee, called *Die Hungersäule* ("The Hunger Pillar").
- Barlach died on October 24, 1938, "from severe constriction of the great aorta" (a broken heart?). The muzzled German press published a brief death notice. The *Steel Helmet* published a full-page article under the headline, "Was Barlach a Cultural Bolshevist?"

- In addition to his sculptures, Barlach wrote eight Expressionist dramas, two novels and an autobiography, *Ein selbsterzähltes Leben* (A Self-told Life, 1928), and had a distinguished oeuvre of woodcuts and lithographs, including illustrations for his own plays.
- His studio in Güstrow is now a museum of his work and there are also museums dedicated to him in Hamburg and Ratzeburg.

### The Artist's Philosophy, Ideas and Influences

- At the Dresden Academy, Barlach acquired the flowing curvilinear forms of the *Jugendstil*, which characterized his early work. (His later works married this abstract linear flowing form with elements acquired during his visit to Russia.)
- Paris in 1895-96 reinforced his interest in Millet and Meunier and acquainted him with Van Gogh. These artists contributed to Barlach's **great compassion for humankind**.
- A turning point in his career came in 1906, when he visited Russia. "It was if for the first time he actually saw sculptural form. In the vast rolling steppe country he sensed infinity itself; his vivid romanticizing imagination peopled this Infinity with huge shapes of Nature, clad in gray steppe-garb. Barlach was also impressed by primitive stone monoliths which he refers to as *balabanows* and he must also have seen Russian folk-art wood carving. But perhaps most important of all was the way his hungry eyes, weary of art nouveau elegance, beheld the Russian inhabitants of town and country ... 'sitting there like bronzes!', he said later about the heavily cloaked shepherds, sturdy workers, motley hordes of beggars huddled on street corners." Groves, p.5. On returning to Berlin, he immediately began work on a series of sculptures of peasants and beggars he had seen in Russia. **In these sculptures, the body is concealed under loose clothing, leaving the face and hands as the most expressive elements; these became the major stylistic elements of his mature works.**
- The **horror of the First World War** influenced all of his subsequent works.
- He was also influenced by **medieval German carving**, in which he recognized both a spiritual and a technical affinity. He preferred to carve in heavy, close-grained woods but, even when his figures were modeled in clay and cast in bronze, they retained the broad planes and sharp edges typical of woodcarving.

### The Sculpture

- *Der Geistkämpfer*, translated variously as "The Fighter of the Spirit", "The Warrior of the Spirit" and "The Champion of the Spirit", was one of a series of monumental war memorials created by Barlach in the period after 1927. These war memorials, unconventionally un-heroic and summing up the suffering and spiritual essence of the war experience, are among his most significant works.
- The statue was created in 1928 and placed at the University Church of Kiel as a memorial to students killed during the First World War. Within a year, the work was vandalized. In 1937, the Nazi SS confiscated it as a pacifist and unpatriotic work and had it cut into several pieces. Although an order was given to melt it down, this was never carried out and the statue escaped complete destruction. After World War II, when Barlach's work once again returned to favor, the statue was restored and reinstalled outside the Church of St. Nicholas in Kiel. The MIA's cast, purchased for the

permanent collection in 1959, is the only known full-sized copy. It was taken from the reconstructed original and shows the saw-toothed marks made when the Nazis dismantled the sculpture.

- Barlach wrote to his brother Hans Barlach on January 29, 1929, after the statue was vandalized: Public reaction to this work, as also to the Cathedral Angel, has been frosty and negative. Two days ago, the sword was actually bent and broken off during the night. All the right wing parties have unsheathed their weapons against me. ... Worse is the hate campaign on the part of the Fatherland Clubs, especially the Steel-helmets (Stahlhelm). ... These gentlemen operate anonymously, behind the smokescreen of non-accountability. ... I am on the lookout for proofs "black on white" and shall be obliged quite against my inclination to proceed with legal action.
- Barlach wrote to friends in 1937 and 1938 about the removal of his statue from the church at Kiel:  
Precisely on April 20th [Hitler's birthday 1937] my *Champion of the Spirit*, not thus named by me, to be sure, but generally known by that title, was removed from the University Church at Kiel ... *nomen es omen*--away with Spirit, with Intellect! ... It belongs to those works which have achieved their final form from the specific requirements of their setting and which were designed specifically for it and formed a single unit with it ... Let us speak no more of it. Foolish lamenting does not help in this case.
- There are several interpretations of the statue:
  - As a metaphor for the concept of justice: The artist used three objects--an angel, a lion and a sword--to define justice in symbolic terms. Traditionally, an angel acts as a protector of the innocent; the lion epitomizes strength; and the sword is an instrument of authority which dispenses justice. Thus, justice is administered on behalf of the good and right by a messenger of God.
  - The statue represents the ascendancy of the spiritual over the bestial in human nature.
  - Barlach wrote the following in a letter to the Willy Hahn, the Chief City Architect of Kiel on November 25, 1928:  
To characterize the work as in the notice you mention (*Victory of the Church Over its Enemies*) is stupid. ... The combined figure might be called Overcoming, Self Conquest. That exactly is what I intended to show. The upward striving vertical separates itself from the eternally horizontal. Expanding this: exalted superiority (rising up, transcending) over suffering (suffering here as being bound to impulse, utilitarian aims, and temporal destiny).
- "Amazing--and sad--is the story of the high official who, spotting *Der Geistkämpfer*, outside the University Church in Kiel, at first praised the sculpture enthusiastically, assuming it to be a medieval work, but withdrew into chilly silence upon hearing the artist was Barlach." Alfred Werner, *Ernst Barlach, Artist Under a Dictatorship*, The Art Journal (Winter 1962-63)

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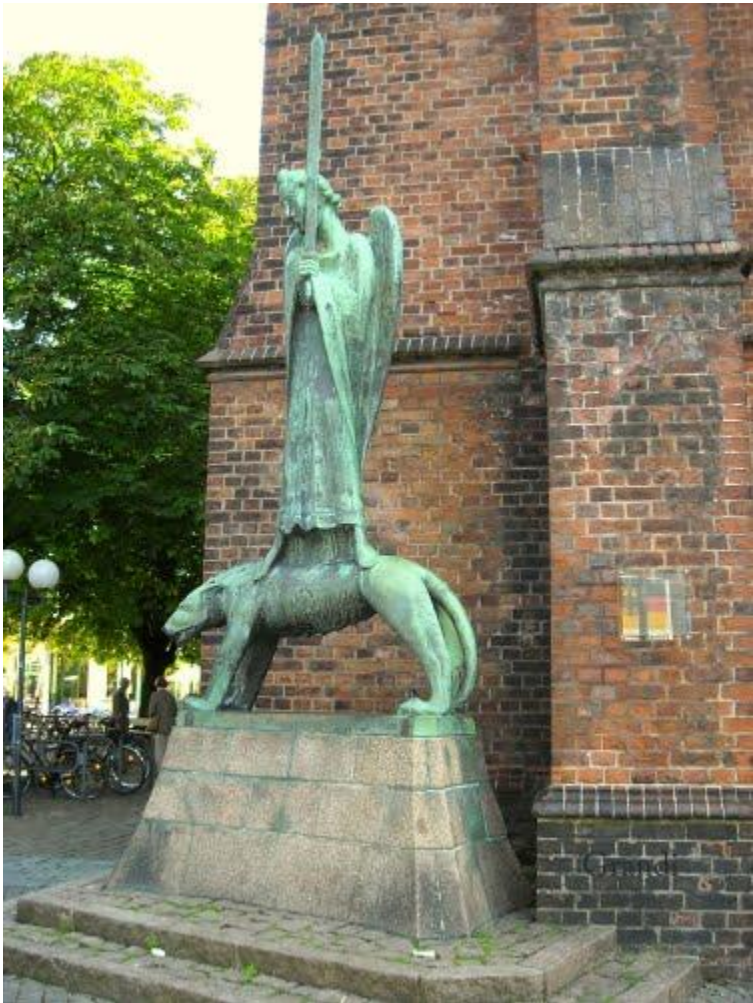
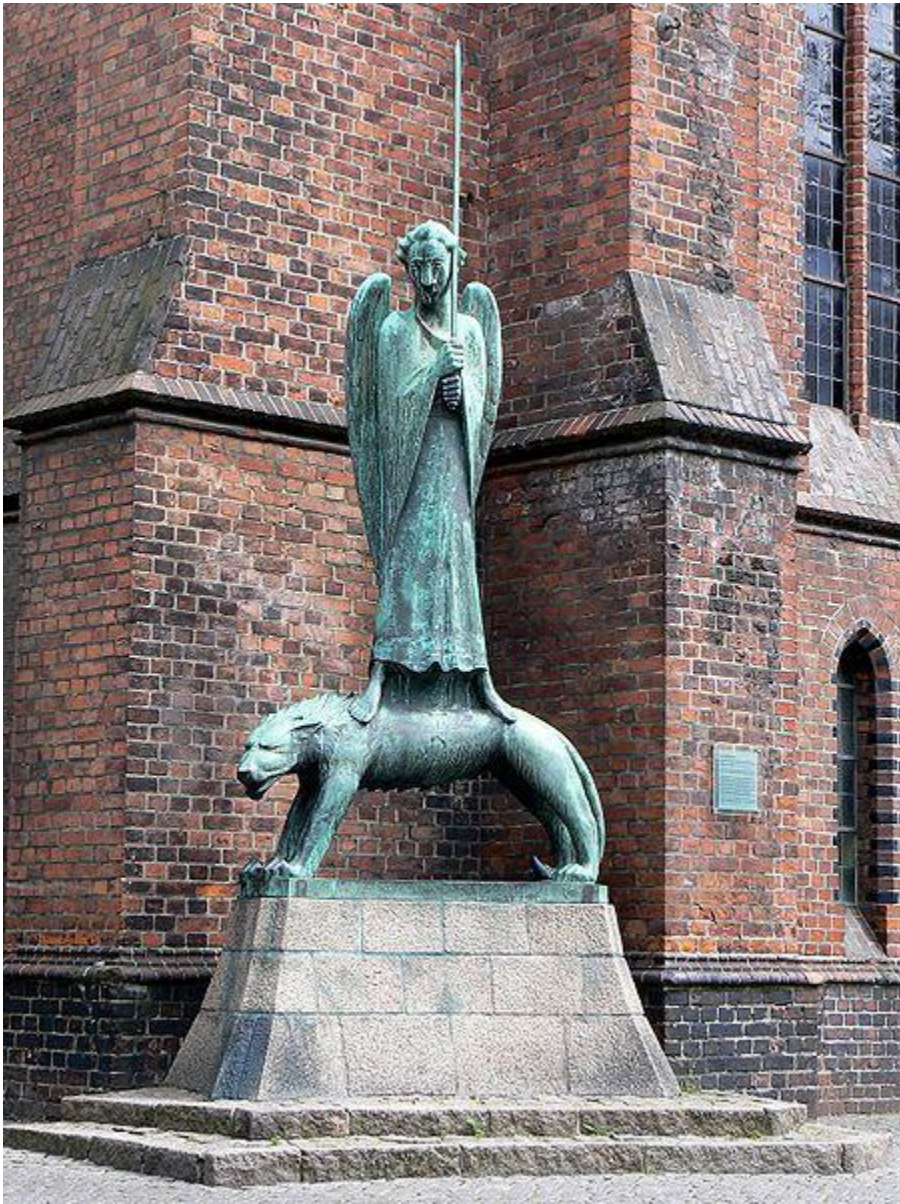
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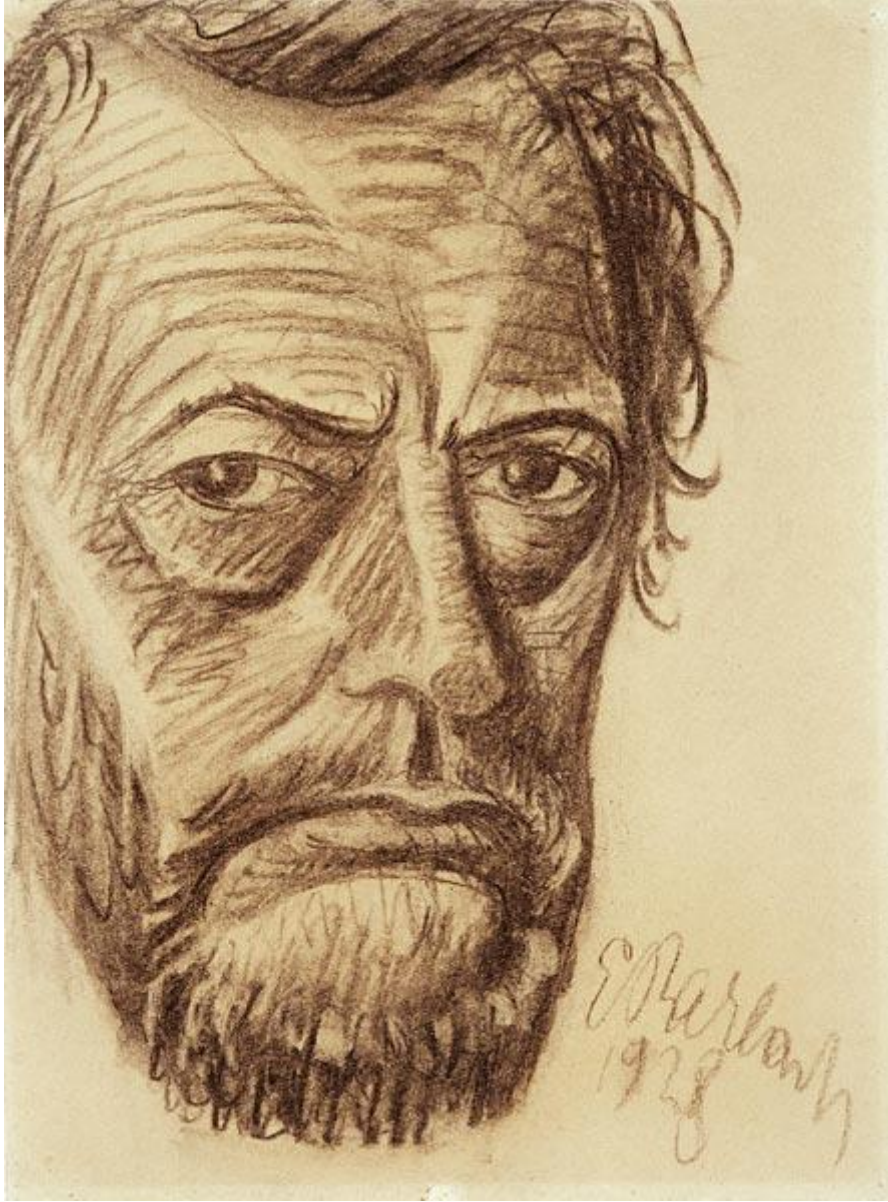
Der Geistkämpfer, Kiel











Magdeburger Ehrenmal (Magdeburg Cenotaph), 1929



The *Magdeburger Ehrenmal* (Magdeburg cenotaph), sculpted in oak, depicts three German soldiers standing in a cemetery, all bearing marks of the horror, pain and desperation of the war, flanked by a mourning war widow covering her face in despair, a skeleton wearing a German army helmet, and a civilian (with the face of Barlach himself) with his eyes closed and blocking his ears in terror.