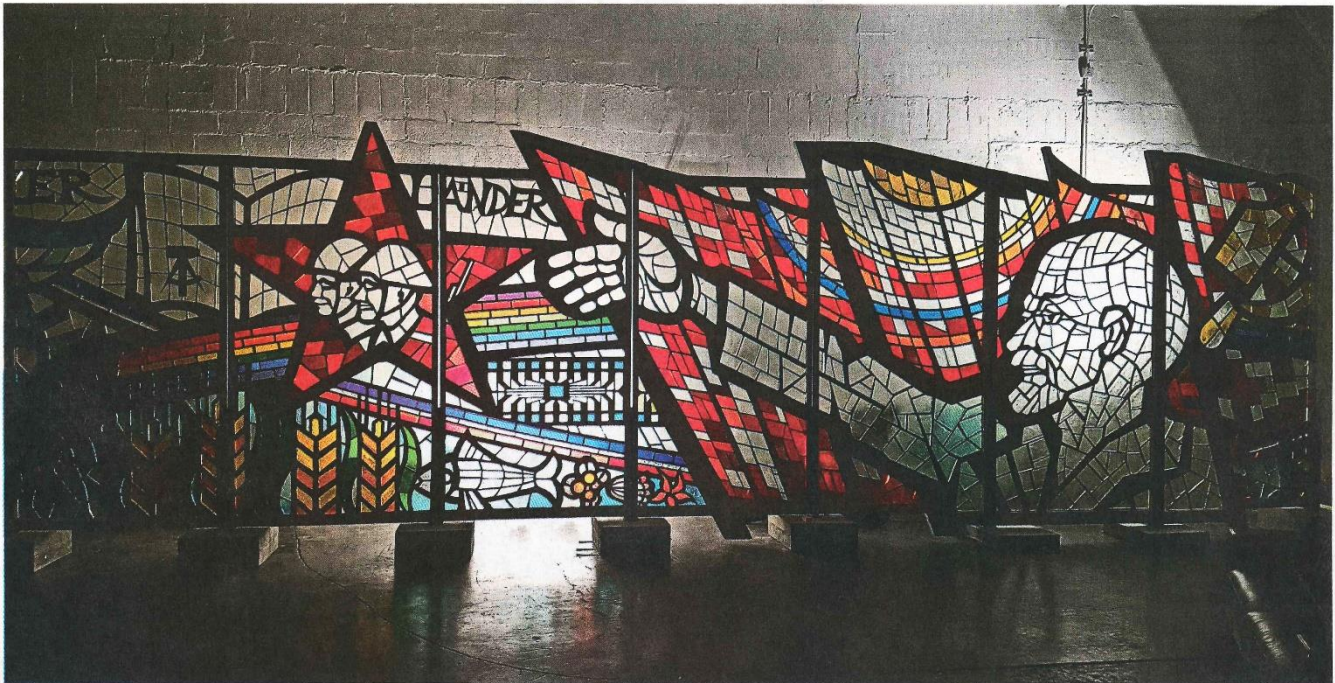




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VIA THILO HOLZMANN

"Revolution: Frieden unserem Erdenrund," a stained-glass screen by the artist Richard Otfried Wilhelm, which was commissioned in 1979 by the head of the East German secret police.

From Behind the Iron Curtain to Miami

A Stained-Glass Screen Created for the Stasi Headquarters Has a \$21.4 Million Asking Price

By NINA SIEGAL

An art historian in Germany has unearthed a three-ton, 65-foot-wide, stained-glass mural that was created in the early 1980s for the headquarters of the East German secret police, or Stasi, and had been forgotten in a shipping container for 24 years. It will go on sale at a temporary exhibition space in Miami to coincide with the Art Basel Miami Beach contemporary art fair starting this week, with a \$21.4 million price tag, which some historians said was out of line with its value.

The free-standing mural was commissioned in 1979 by Erich Mielke, head of the Ministry of State Security. It sat in a general purpose room in the agency's compound, a high-security group of buildings in the former East Berlin that is now the Stasi Museum. The work was recently found by Thilo Holzmann, an art historian and dealer, whose uncle had bought it in 1990 and put it in storage.

Willem Melching, an expert in German Cold War history at the University of Amsterdam, said, "It was a kind of custom to make stained-glass memorial things in East Germany," and he ques-

tioned the asking price for the work.

"What struck me as odd is that it was in the Stasi headquarters and that there is no specific reference to the secret work, intelligence activities or the conspiracies which they indulged in," he said. "That would make it more valuable."

Mr. Mielke commissioned the mural from the artist Richard Otfried Wilhelm, who was then the chief master of glass for public works in the German Democratic Republic, or the G.D.R. (as East Germany was known). Mr. Wilhelm was one of the few artisans in that country trained in the Gothic stained-glass techniques dating to the 14th century.

He is now 84 and living in Berlin. He said in an email interview that his initial meeting was with Heinz Gläske, a government architect, who told him only that the mural would be placed in a new Stasi complex.

"So it was crucial that it be both artistically outstanding and politically powerful," Mr. Wilhelm said. Later, he met with Mr. Mielke (who died in 2000), and the artist and a team of about 15 glaziers

worked on the piece for about two years, completing it in 1983.

Once the piece was finished, Mr. Wilhelm said, he was not allowed to photograph it when it was installed in a ceremonial conference room at the Stasi headquarters, which was open only to top Stasi agents and members of the KGB and other Iron Curtain intelligence agencies.

The 10-foot-high glass wall is pigmented with precious metals — including 55 pounds of gold — and has a hammer-and-sickle symbol, a slogan of the international Communist movement and references to the French Revolution.

Mr. Wilhelm titled the work "Revolution: Frieden unserem Erdenrund" ("Revolution: Peace to the Whole World"), an incongruous title for a symbol of a repressive regime. In the center is an image of Lenin, and there are two doves, symbolizing peace — both common iconographical elements in East German monuments, Mr. Melching said.

"Their rhetoric was always revolving around how they had to arm themselves in order to preserve the peace," he said. "They

were not pacifists."

After the Berlin Wall fell, the Stasi headquarters were closed in 1990, and the agency's assets were sold through the Deutsche Reichsbahn, the state railroad company. Eberhard Dümmlen, the owner of an art logistics company and Mr. Holzmann's uncle, learned about the work from one of his employees who had worked for the Reichsbahn. He bought it for an unknown sum — records of the sale have been destroyed, and Mr. Holzmann said that Mr. Dümmlen did not recall what he paid — loaded it into a shipping container, and placed it in a storage lot in Berlin.

Mr. Holzmann remembers his uncle telling him about the piece around that time. "In those days, I was not at all interested in Communist stuff," Mr. Holzmann said in a phone interview from Miami, where he was installing the piece before the opening of the fair. Later, he became an art historian specializing in Impressionist art and an art dealer for his uncle.

"I knew about it all these years, but for all these years, I, like everyone else, was forgetting what was forgotten," he said.

Mr. Holzmann asked about the fate of the glasswork several years ago. When Mr. Dümmlen said that it was still probably where he left it, Mr. Holzmann tracked it down in Weissensee, a Berlin neighborhood.

He called Susanna Lilienthal, a conservator who played a central role in the restoration of the sixth-century B.C. Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. She saw the work in August 2015. "When the container opened, history came out," she said.

It was in nearly perfect condition, she said, except for a few cracks in the glass. Together, Mr. Holzmann and Ms. Lilienthal researched the history of the artwork and tracked down Mr. Wilhelm, who shared his story with them in a videotaped interview.

Mr. Holzmann, who is representing his uncle in the sale, said the craftsmanship and the extraordinary story are what make the piece worth \$21.4 million. He said that he hoped to sell it to a museum or an individual who would donate it to a public institution.

But Mr. Melching said that he would be surprised if it brought

anywhere near that price. "Maybe a couple of hundred thousand euros, but millions is a bit ridiculous," he said.

Sjeng Scheijen, an associate researcher at Leiden University who curated an exhibition about Stalin-era propaganda art at the Drents Museum in Assen, the Netherlands, agreed. "The quality of this piece is certainly not exceptional from an artistic point of view," he said. "If they will sell it for this price, you will see a storm of the same kind of art coming on the market because many of these kinds of stained-glass windows are very often in buildings from the '70s and '80s that aren't used any more."

Whatever the piece's monetary value, the history associated with it has a complex message for viewers who lived through the era. "I grew up in the G.D.R. and I still have a hard time with it," Ms. Lilienthal said. "But we need to save the dark parts of our history, too."

"It's very colorful and beautiful, but what's most important is that it shows that the artists in the G.D.R. were not free," she said. "They did what the dictators wanted."