

Sparta's questionable rise to fame

Daniel Sturm

He is without question the most popular figure on Michigan State University's campus: *The Spartan*, better known as Sparty, a three-ton, 11-foot-high colossus. You can find his face on cups, sweatshirts and jackets, and meet him in person as a full-bodied mascot at MSU celebrations and football games. Since he was erected in 1945, university officials proudly call him the largest freestanding ceramic figure in the world. Today, green-and-white clad students guard Sparty through the night on the eve of the MSU-UM game, and devoted alumni praise him with religious fervor.

At first glance the stone-faced MSU symbol impressed me as a Rambo-like warrior, with oversized muscles and a shocking emptiness of expression. Hadn't ancient Sparta been a state system, which intentionally raised children as war machines? And weren't the Spartans reputed as intellectually and artistically barren, since they limited reading and writing to an absolute minimum? Strangely, Sparty reminded me of the artwork of Nazi Germany, back when 'Aryan' race body aesthetics were celebrated. Where did this guy come from?

This becomes an especially relevant question, in light of the fact that President McPherson and Campus Parks and Planning may replace the Spartan Statue, at the intersection of Red Cedar Road and Kalamazoo Street, with a new \$50,000 bronze replica within the next three to six years and move the original, which was just restored, inside to preserve it.

The Spartan ideal gained favor in 1858, when Sen. Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, the author of the Land Grant Act that created in MSU, promised to make Michigan schools like those of ancient Sparta, whose "graduates would know how to sustain American institutions with American vigor." But Spartan warriors had to wait, since the Michigan Agricultural College primarily trained farmers. At the turn of the century, students rallied to slogans such as "Ye can't fool the Farmers, by heck," or "There'll be a hot time, on the old farm tonight."

When the school became Michigan State College in 1925, students wanted a nickname other than Aggies or Farmers. They held a formal contest, to which entries such as Fawns, Pioneers, Statesmen, and even Bearcats (in honor of the Stutz, an automobile coveted by students) were submitted. Although Michigan Staters won the prize, it was too long for headlines and lacked the right zing for the sports page. So George Alderton of the *State Journal* and Dale Stafford of the *Capitol News* dug through the rejected entries and chose Perry J. Fremont's submission: "Spartans." Within a few days the *State News* embraced the new name, and within a year "The Gods of Sparta" was the water carnival theme at the university. The MSU *Fight Song*, written by cheerleader F. I. Lankey in 1906, was revised from "Their specialty is farming, but those farmers play football," to "Their specialty is winning, and those Spartans play good ball."

In the middle of the World War II, sculptor Leonard D. Jungwirth, an MSU assistant professor, decided to create a statue of *The Spartan*. Jungwirth was born in Detroit in 1903, the son of an Austrian wood-carver and modeler who had immigrated to America in 1882. His mother was born in Germany. And he studied in Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler.

It remains unclear why Jungwirth sacrificed three years of his spare time to create Sparty without receiving any apparent compensation. According to the MSU Library of Arts archives, the *Spartan* was a gift of the class of 1942. The statue was dedicated to the public on June 9, 1945, just four weeks after the victory over Nazi Germany. At the ceremony, the MSU *Fight Song* was sung and President John Hannah gave a short speech: "In the years ahead, this Spartan Warrior in this beautiful and

proper setting will become one of the distinguished marks of this campus that all students and visitors will associate with this college and this campus. It is a real pleasure for me to congratulate Mr. Jungwirth for his fine work, and to accept and dedicate formally this Spartan Warrior as a proper exemplification of the youth and spirit of Michigan State College."

Jungwirth's oldest daughter, Sandra Ayers, who lives in DeWitt, said that her father hadn't been a big sports fan. She also remembers that he didn't believe the statue was his greatest work of art. He often told her, "I hope I don't get to be known as the creator of Sparty when I die." But when he died in 1963, that is exactly what happened. Ayers believes her father's stay in Germany from 1929 to 1933 had an influence on his artwork. He'd told her about running into SA troops and about the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, whom he'd seen on two occasions. She told *City Pulse* about a Nazi knife he'd brought back from Germany. "He told me it had dried blood on it, but I don't know if it did. I guess it was rusty."

In 1929, Jungwirth attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. Nine years earlier Adolf Hitler had founded the Nazi party in Munich's Hofbräuhaus. As Jungwirth arrived, they had just started to rally in the city, which they would later call "Capital of the Movement." They campaigned intensely, adopting the slogan "Munich Must Again Become the Hope of Germany," to win the municipal elections in December. Two thousand paramilitary troops marched through the city during one campaign. The party also mounted 20 rallies in Munich beer halls, with Hitler scurrying from rally to rally.

The streets had become a stage for violent political confrontation when 29-year old Jungwirth visited the home of his family. Was he excited to see this new German fascist leader, like many of his generation? Whatever his reaction, he must have realized the Munich Academy was not the same as it had been 20 years before, when it had nurtured geniuses such as Vassily Kandinsky, Alfred Kubin, Paul Klee and Franz Marc. After WWI, the Academy had quickly lost respect, as nationalist bigotry turned a European metropolis into a center of fascist propaganda.

The Academy of Fine Arts was located in Schwabing, the old bohemian quarter that Hitler favored, and where disgruntled artists joined students, teachers, civil servants, and white-collar workers in placing their faith in the failed painter from Austria. Although the Academy building was badly damaged in a bomb attack during WWII, a catalogue of the 1932 Munich Art Exhibition lists two sculptures under Leonard Jungwirth's name, including *Die Bäuerin* (wood) and *Pieta* (plaster).

A 1996 MSU exhibition about Sparty and the Figurative Tradition in Sculpture acknowledges that "Jungwirth's Munich years may have been significant in the development of his idea of *The Spartan*." The exhibit points out that Jungwirth probably visited Munich's famous museums, where major works of Greek and Roman sculpture --some of them athletes and warriors -- were on display. However, it fails to mention the transformation of Munich during this time into an open-air museum of National Socialism, or what influence this might have had on Jungwirth. This important background is censored from MSU brochures and publications.

By the 1940s, the realistic style was largely out of favor outside of Germany. But the idealized figure of *The Spartan*, sleek and impersonal, was similar to sculptures of Jungwirth's German contemporaries, such as Josef Thorak and Arno Breker. The latter created two 10-foot-8-inch-high statues for the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin -- *Zehnkämpfer* (*Decathlete*) and *Siegerin* (*Winner*).

The National Socialist standards for art were based upon the 19th-century popular taste for idealized figures, writes the art historian George Moose in his 1987 essay, "Beauty without Sensuality." The beauty of the Greek youths -- lithe and supple, muscular and harmonious -- lay in their nakedness. The Nazis considered certain kinds of nakedness, including people with war injuries, physical handicaps,

or in the process of lovemaking, 'degenerate' and banned from exhibitions. The Nazis also encouraged physical training, and "here the problem of nudity arose once more," Moose wrote. "The skin had to be hairless, smooth, and bronzed. The body had become an abstract symbol of Aryan beauty, as it was in Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Olympic Games. This idea of 'sensuality' was transcended by an idealization of ancient Greek form, and figures that could be worshipped, but neither desired nor loved," concludes Moose.

Jungwirth must have been at least unwittingly influenced by this style. Sparty stands, invincible, near the Spartan Football Stadium, a figure to be worshiped, but neither desired nor loved.

Moose writes that depicting beauty with sensuality presents a danger to societies because it symbolizes a revolt against respectability as a principle of unity and order. During the first half of the 20th century many artists managed to create figures that were unlike the large impersonal nudes such as *The Spartan*. Ernst Barlach, who like Jungwirth started out with woodcarvings, created the 1927 Güstrow War Memorial, which showed a life-sized human figure with the peacefully stylized visage depicting beauty with sensuality by showing grieving figures and pathetic souls. When Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933, Barlach wrote: "My little boat is sinking fast. [...] The louder the Heils roar, instead of cheering and raising my arms in Roman attitudes, the more I pull my hat down over my eyes."

I wonder what message *The Spartan* sends out today. In October 1989, the sculpture was rededicated after a yearlong face-lift. A university marching band played *The Fight Song*, and onlookers raised their fists, yelling, "Fight!" Vince Vandenburg, a member of the committee to Save Our Sparty (S.O.S.), which raised \$100,000 in donations for the statue's renovation, said: "Sparty is God, he represents MSU, athletics and progress. Sparty is MSU." Hannah, who served as president from 1941 until 1969, said Sparty harkens back to the glorious past of ancient Greece and with its renovation the statue can uphold the "Spartan image of obedience, endurance and discipline."

The myth of Spartan boys who loved their motherland, fought bravely and died without fear simply presents a powerful saga for a university sports team. In fact, Sparty is a descendant of the Spartan King Leonidas, who together with all 300 warriors died in the Battle of Thermopylae, 480 B.C. Forty years after his death, his remains were returned to Sparta and annual games were held around his monument.

Sports aside, this link to National Socialist artwork is a serious matter, that should be acknowledged in Sparty's biography. Students should take with them from university critical thinking skills that enable them to reflect on the act of sacrificing one's life for heroic ideals. With the MSU statue's proposed facelift, the university should take a moment to reflect on the troubled historical context of their mascot, *The Spartan*. Censoring the influence of WWII on artwork is a dangerous act. In his second to last dictation (Feb. 6, 1945), Hitler compared Germany's fate with that of Leonidas' Spartans: "And if, in spite of everything, the Fates have decreed that we should once more in the course of our history be crushed by forces superior to our own, then let us go down with our heads high and secure in the knowledge that the honor of the German people remains without blemish. A desperate fight remains for all time a shining example. Let us remember Leonidas and his 300 Spartans!"

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