

## THE ORDER POUR LE MÉRITE FOR SCIENCES AND ARTS

The golden medal of the Order displays the Prussian eagle, the crowned initials of Frederick the Great repeated eightfold, and, against an enameled blue background, the designation "Pour le mérite" ("for merit"). Since 1842 the medal has been worn in this form, at any one time, by (according to the current statutes) a maximum of forty German and the same number of non-German "men and women who through widespread recognition for their contributions to science and art have made an eminent name for themselves." Scientists, scholars, and artists are honored in approximately equal numbers.

Under the sponsorship of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, the members constitute the chapter of the Order, which meets twice a year for internal discussions and deliberations. One of these gatherings takes place toward the end of May in Berlin, where, with the German head of state in attendance, a festive public session with musical accompaniment is held to introduce newly elected members of the Order, commemorate those who have died, and present a lecture by one of the members.

The history of the Order and its significance are bound up with the ruptures that have punctuated recent German history. Although created by Frederick the Great in 1740 as a distinction to be awarded without respect to nationality and for civilian as well as military achievements, after 1810 the Order Pour le mérite was bestowed exclusively as a Prussian-German war honor. In 1842 King Frederick William IV of Prussia, upon the advice of Alexander von Humboldt, added a "Peace Class", which was empowered to select its own members from the ranks of both domestic and foreign persons "for contributions to the arts and sciences."

Unlike the War Class, the Peace Class survived the end of the monarchy after World War I as a "free assembly of outstanding scholars and artists" charged with electing its own members. However, following the general ban on all medals and decorations proclaimed by the constitution of the Weimar Republic, the Order For Merit was demoted to the status of a badge and could no longer be conferred upon foreigners.

In 1933, the year the Nazis came to power, the Order Pour le mérite was worn by, among others, the Jewish physicist Albert Einstein, the communist artist (and first woman elected to the Order) Käthe Kollwitz, and the artist and writer Ernst Barlach, whose works were branded "degenerate" by the Nazis. With such members, the Order hardly suited the new regime. Although the Order's international renown saved it from being abolished outright, a prohibition on electing new members was designed to let it die out.

Three of the Order's members were still alive in 1952 when, at the suggestion of Theodor Heuss, the first President of the young Federal Republic of Germany, the Peace Class of the Order Pour le mérite was revived and renewed as it began once more to elect members.

The Order thus embodies one of the few great traditions of Germany that was not tainted and corrupted during the country's most sinister era. Scholars, scientists, and artists who were expelled or who emigrated during the Nazi period, as well as foreigners, were also soon elected to its ranks. In this cosmopolitan body the arts and sciences are once again reflected (in Goethe's words) as an "endowment of the whole world and all humanity."