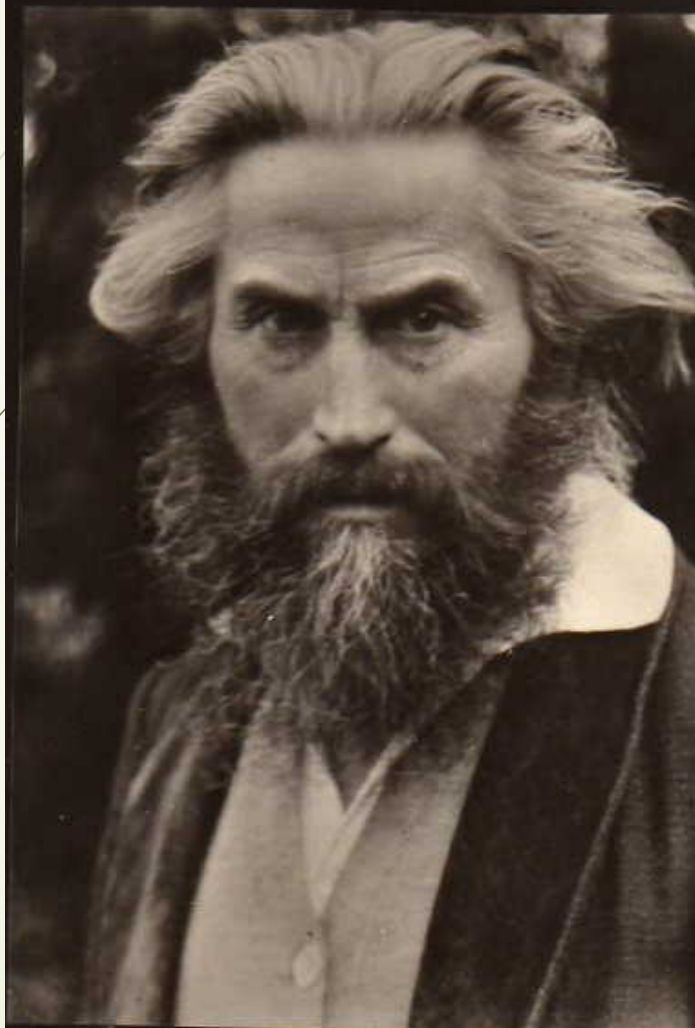


Fidus (1868-1948)

A German Artist from Theosophy to Nazism

Massimo Introvigne (UPS, Torino, Italy)
International Conference on Theosophical History
London, September 18, 2016

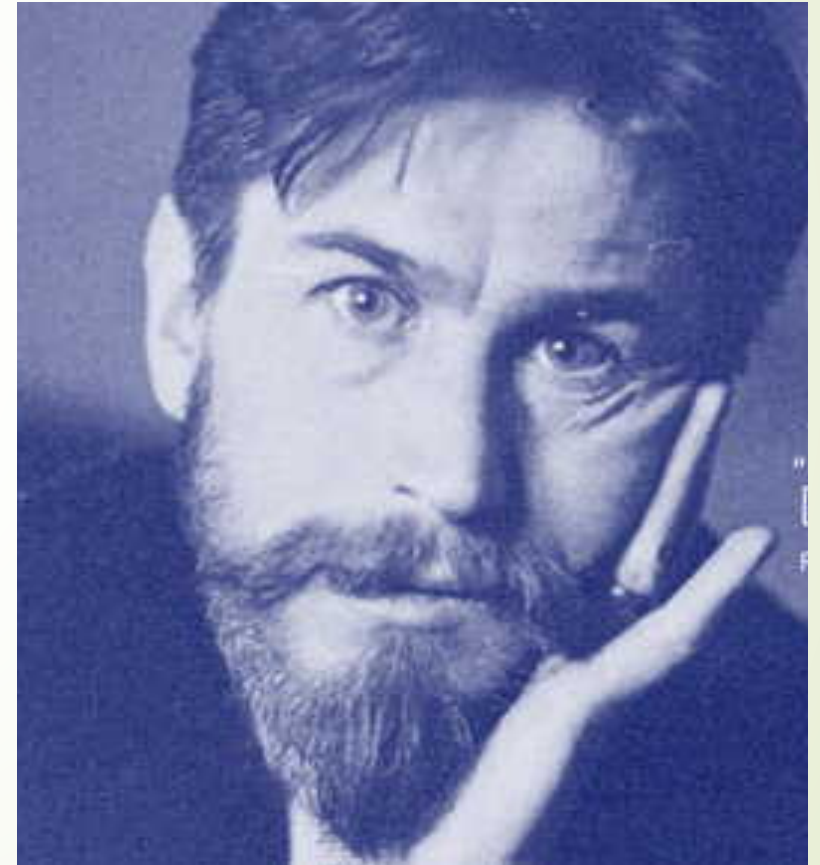
A Theosophical Embarrassment...



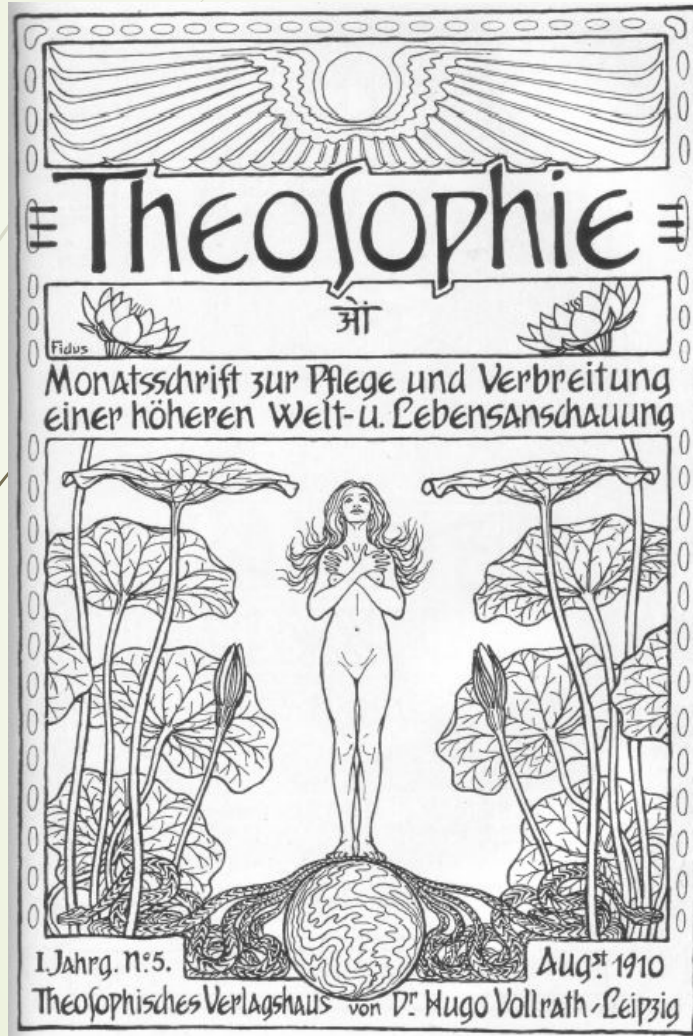
- Once immensely popular, Fidus (left) is now regarded as an embarrassment by some Theosophists. While other Theosophical artists such as Jean Delville, Piet Mondrian, and Lawren Harris, denounced Nazism as antithetical to Theosophy, Fidus became a member of the Nazi Party

... yet, a Lifelong Theosophist

- ▶ There is now a substantial scholarship on Fidus (right) as an artist, but it often regards his membership in the Theosophical Society as marginal. Yet, two years before his death, on June 7, 1946, Fidus wrote in his journal an entry implying that Theosophy was a key part of his identity and that “all Theosophists, from Plato through Jakob Böhme and Lorber (...), up to the Theosophists of Madame Blavatsky in Adyar, India, and to Rudolf Steiner” would “understand” him and recognize him as one of their own



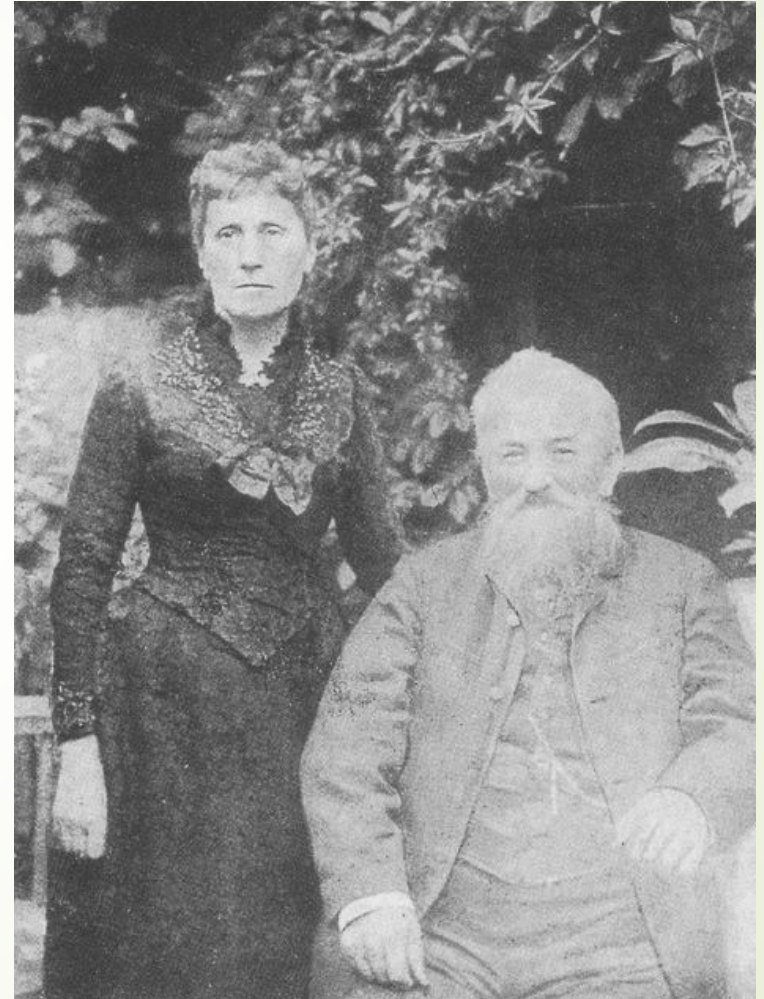
Theosophy as a Key for Understanding Fidus



- ▶ This presentation focuses on Fidus' relationship with Theosophy, and my point is that Theosophy was both essential for the artist and a key for understanding the different and apparently irreconcilable cultural and political positions he adopted throughout his life. I would not specifically dwell here on the evolution of Fidus' artistic styles. However, a reconstruction of his biography and artistic career is necessary

Fidus' Parents: A Long-lasting Influence

- ▶ Fidus' real name was Hugo Höppener (1868-1948). He was born in Lübeck, Northern Germany, on October 8, 1868. His father Julius Höppener (1830-1896) was the owner of a confectionery shop and an anti-Catholic freethinker. His mother Camilla Stender (1843-1931) was more interested in alternative spiritualities and eventually joined the Theosophical Society





Lebensreform

- ▶ At age 19, Fidus went to Munich to study at the local Arts Academy, and was exposed to three main influences. The first was Lebensreform, a large back-to-nature movement, which advocated naturopathy, health food, nudism, and sexual reform. The label “Lebensreform” included very different components, from a Germanized Catholicism to socialism and Neopaganism

From the exhibition *Lebensreform im Brandenburg*, Potsdam 2015

The Völkisch Movement

- The second influence on Fidus was the Völkisch movement. "Völkisch" too is a category including disparate components, patiently catalogued by historian George Mosse (1918-1999). The movement proposed to go "back to the people," regarded as the custodian of Germany's ancient wisdom, deposited in songs, dances, fairy tales, and folklore. "People," however, was alternatively interpreted as class or as race by a "left" and a "right" within the movement



Wandervögel and Freikorps



- ▶ Movements Fidus became interested in, such as the Wandervogel, which promoted a youth culture of hiking and adventure, and the Freikorps, a paramilitary militia that fought for various German nationalist causes, were strongly influenced by Völkisch ideology

Left: Fidus, *The Wandervögel Salute*, 1900

The New Prophets

- ▶ The third important influence on Fidus was the new prophets movement. Starting in the late 19th century, a group of self-styled prophets adopted a radical Lebensreform lifestyle, featuring communal life in the countryside, nudism, pacifism, and vegetarianism. They included Gusto Gräser (1879-1958) and Gustaf Nagel (1874-1952, right). In 2015, the exhibition *Künstler und Propheten* in Frankfurt and Vienna emphasized the new prophets' influence on modern art



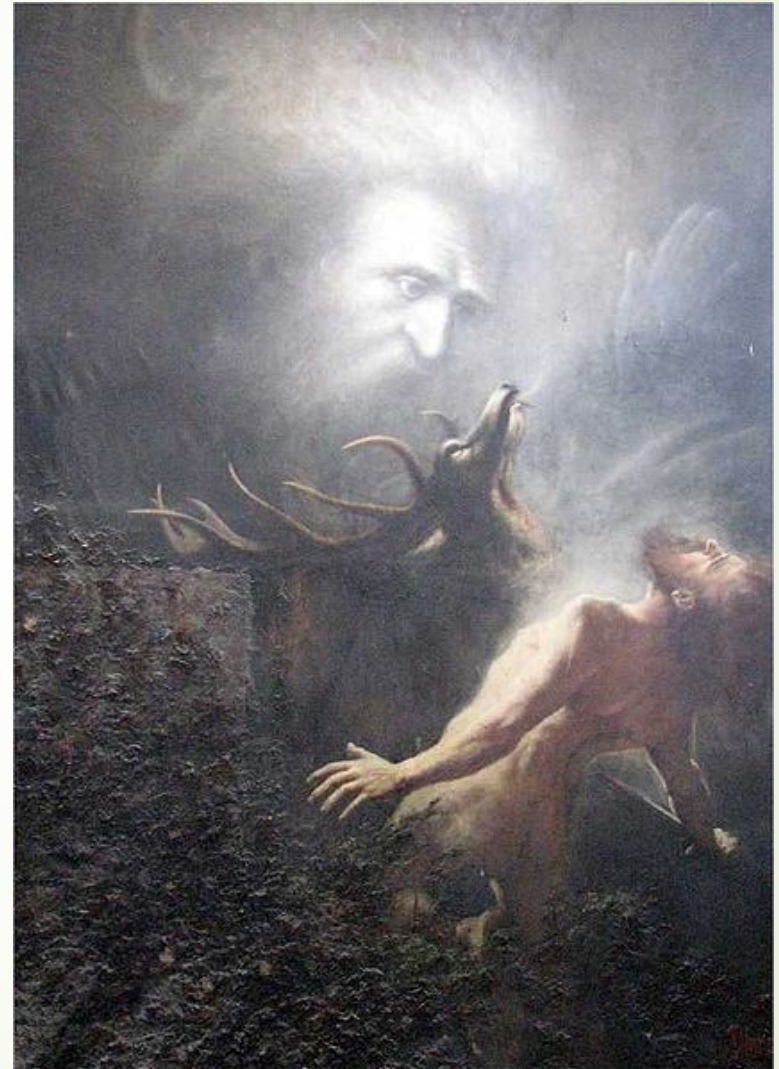
Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach (1851-1913)



- The earliest and most influential of the new prophets was Diefenbach. He embraced an extreme version of Lebensreform and founded his first commune (not to be confused with the second, Himmelhof, established near Vienna in 1897) in the Höllriegelskreuth quarry, near Munich, in 1885

Diefenbach and Theosophy

- ▶ Diefenbach (*Do Not Kill*, 1903, right) had an ambivalent relationship with Theosophy, and became a member of the Theosophical Society only in a later period of his life, in Italy, and for a short time. While he was fascinated by Theosophy as a “method,” he was suspicious of oriental doctrines of reincarnation, and maintained a fundamental, if heterodox, Christian orientation



Fidus and Diefenbach



- ▶ The young Hugo Höppener (in the costume promoted by Diefenbach, with his mother, left) joined the Höllriegelskreuth commune in the summer of 1887. He was attracted by Diefenbach's radical practice of Lebensreform and by his art, particularly, by his *Kindermusik* series of postcards and prints with silhouettes of naked children playing music

How Höppener Became Fidus

- It was Diefenbach who nicknamed Höppener “Fidus,” meaning that he was the most faithful of his disciples. When, in November 1888, Diefenbach was tried in Munich for the practice of nudity in the school of his commune, Fidus stood to his defense. We often read that he even went to jail on behalf of Diefenbach, but historian Claudia Wagner recently determined that this was a legend not supported by the documents



Kindermusik

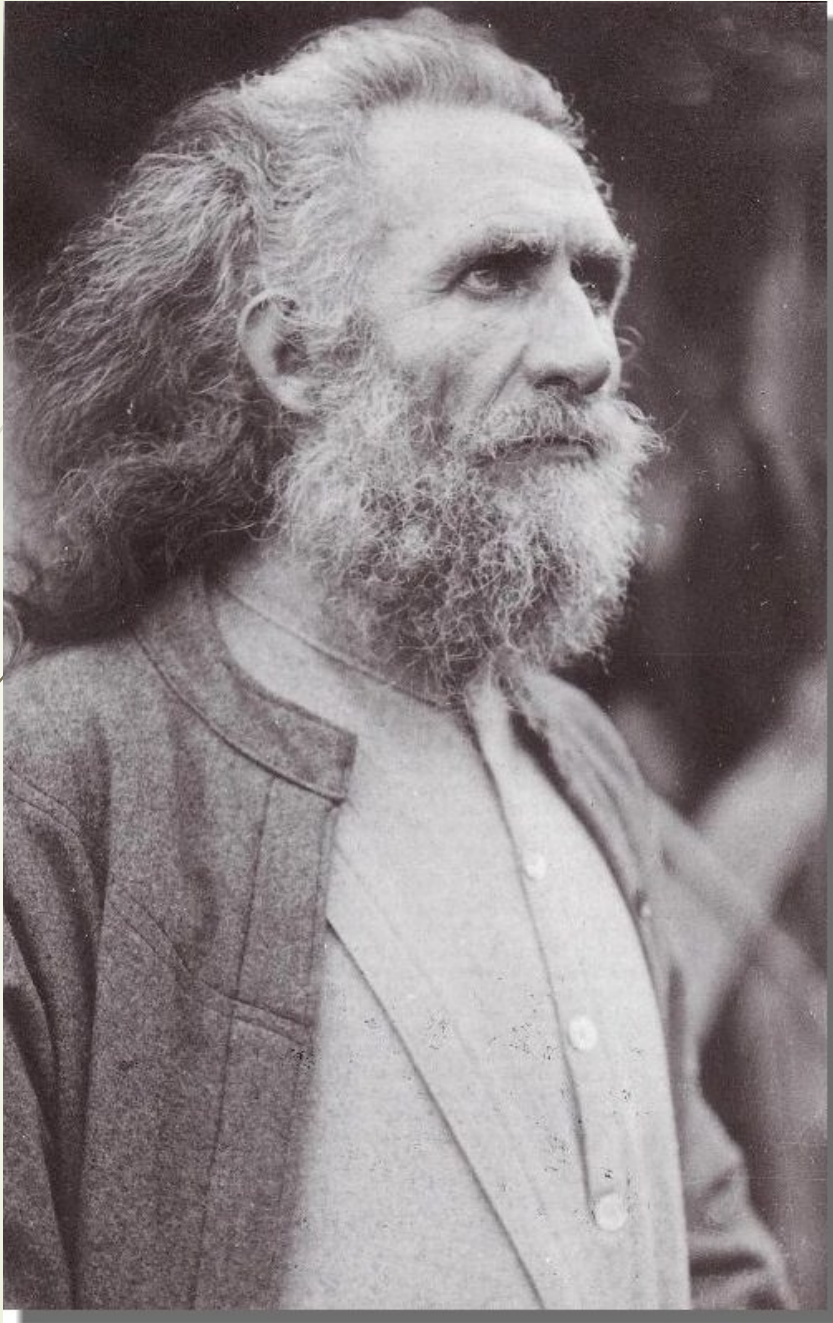


- In subsequent years, some of the *Kindermusik* drawings would be signed by Diefenbach but actually drawn by Fidus

Per aspera ad astra



- Fidus also executed part of Diefenbach's giant frieze *Per aspera ad astra*

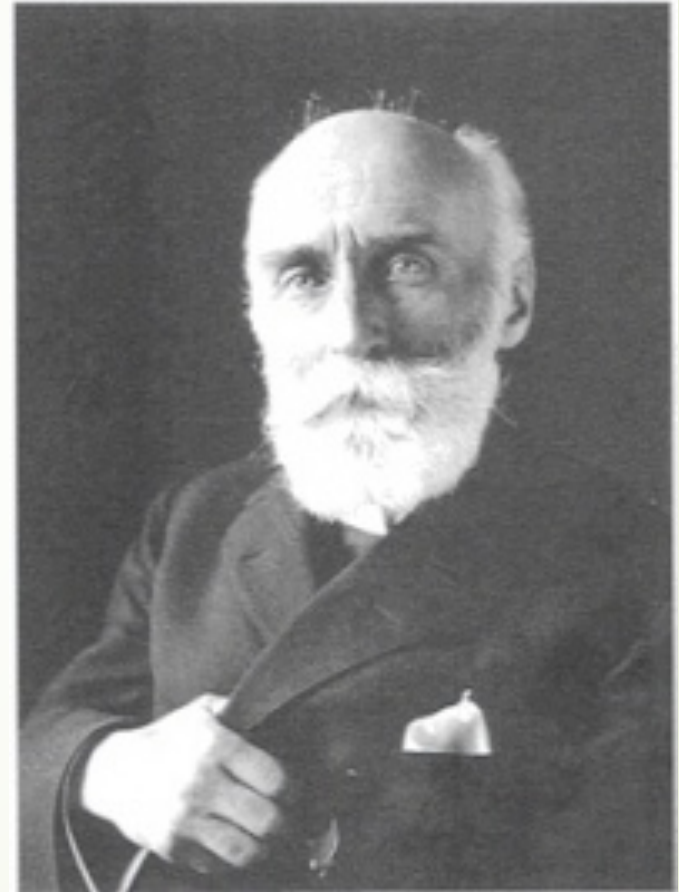


From Fidus to Infidus

- ▶ Fidus' devotion to Diefenbach (left) was as intense as it was short-lived. On June 1, 1889 he left the prophet's Bavarian commune, but continued to work for Diefenbach's artistic projects for a fee for several years. Diefenbach changed his nickname to "Infidus," although Höppener continued to sign as "Fidus" throughout his whole life

Enter Dr. Hübbe-Schleiden

- ▶ The reason for Fidus break with Diefenbach was Theosophy. Fidus met in Diefenbach's home Theosophical leader Dr. Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846-1916, right), who, according to the prophet, "knew how to make use of a confectioner's son," and induced him to leave the commune and join the Theosophical Society in 1893



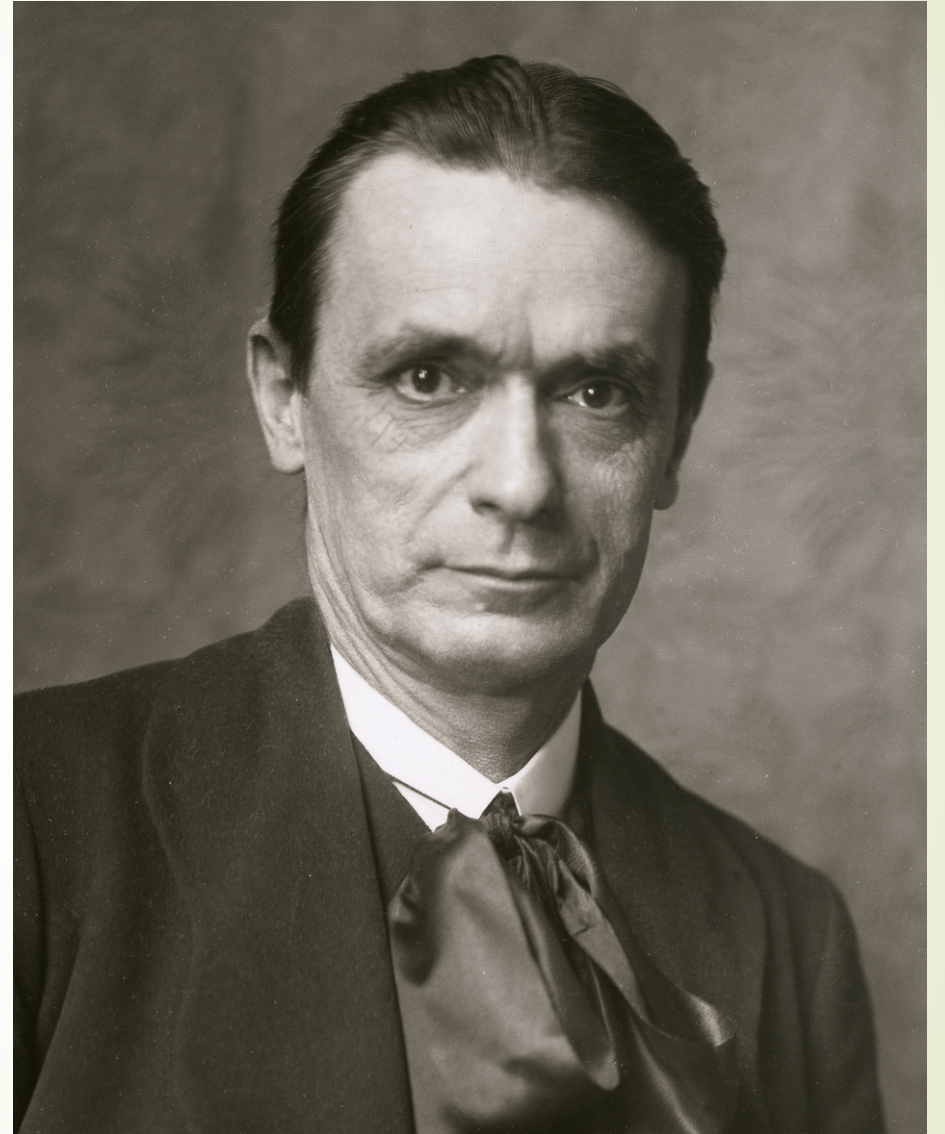
A Disciple of Koot Hoomi

- ▶ Hübbe-Schleiden was a diplomat and one of the architects of German colonial policy in Africa, but, after he met Olcott, he devoted most of his time to Theosophy. He received two letters from Master Koot Hoomi in 1884 (right). After the Coulomb scandal, he doubted their authenticity and was described by Blavatsky in a letter to Sinnett as "an unfortunate little nervous, weak man." However, he accepted the explanations Blavatsky sent to him and remained a loyal member of the Adyar Society until 1915 (when he left protesting Besant's anti-German attitude in World War I)

No Hübbe Schleiden - copy.
I wonder if this note of mine is worthy of occupying a select spot with the documents reproduced and which of the peculiarities of the "Blavatskian" style of writing it will be found to most resemble. The present is simply to satisfy the D^r "the more proof given the less believed." Let him take my advice and not make these two documents public. It is for his own satisfaction the undersigned is happy to assure him that the Secret Doctrine when ready, will be the triple production of Meow Upasika and the Doctor's most humble servant
K.H.
S.E.C.

Questions of Legitimacy

- Fidus regarded questions of legitimacy and authority as very important. He maintained the nickname “Fidus” as he considered Diefenbach an authorized spokesperson for Lebensreform. Although fascinated by Steiner (right) – who even appeared in his dreams – he recognized the Adyar Society as the only legitimate voice for Theosophy

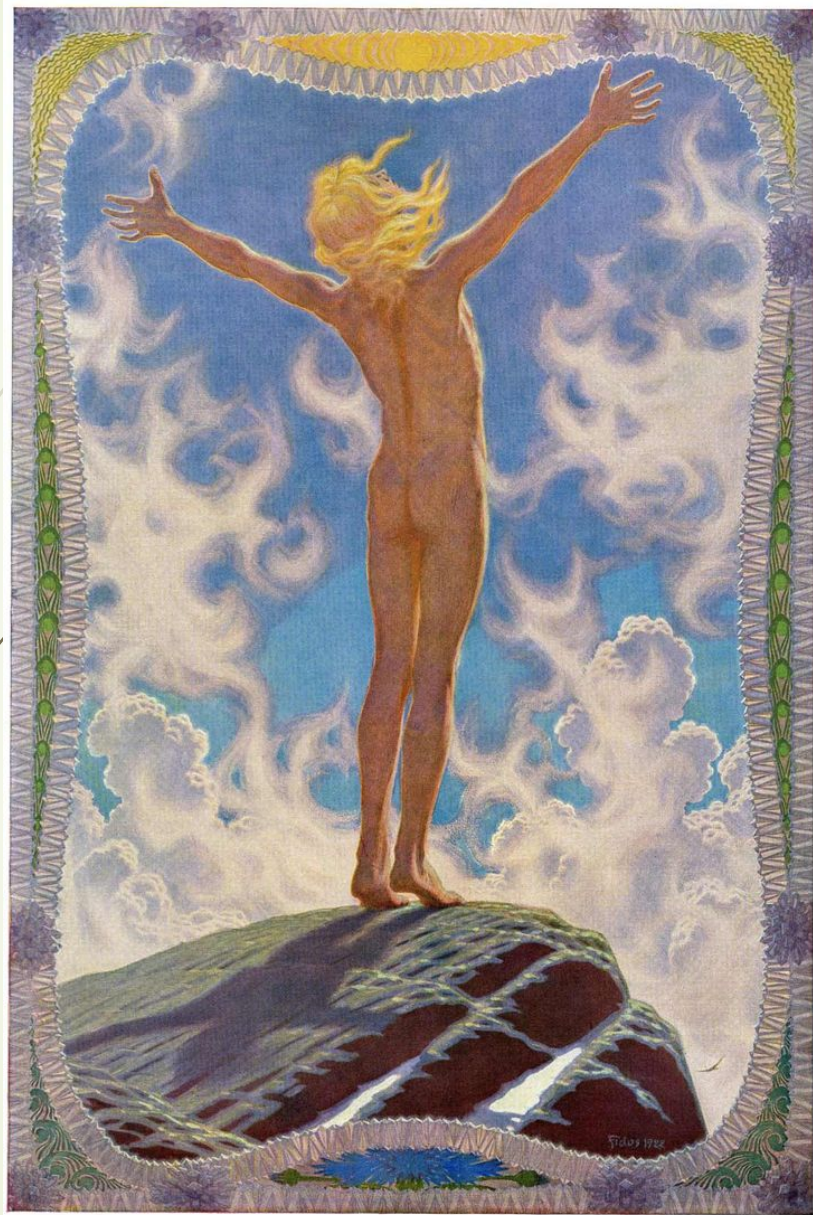


Fidus the Theosophist

- ▶ Fidus left Diefenbach because he believed he had found in the Theosophical Society a modern authority in matters spiritual. Years later, he stated very clearly that Theosophy “teaches and confirms nothing less than the awakening of a new humanity and in fact a humanity of the spirit,” with the result that “there is not in Germany a single important cultural personality who has not been touched and made more productive by Theosophy”



Monatschrift
für die
geschichtliche und experimentale Begründung
der
übersinnlichen Weltanschauung
auf
monistischer Grundlage,
herausgegeben
von
Hübbe-Schleiden,
Dr. J. U.
I. Jahrgang. 1886 Erster Band.
Th. Griebens Verlag (L. Fernau)
Leipzig.



The Years of Success

- Fidus completed his education in Munich under the Greek painter Nikolaos Gyzis (1842-1901), himself interested in Theosophy, and became a very successful illustrator and painter, combining Theosophical and German-nationalist themes. A synthesis of Fidus' different themes is his iconic *Lichtgebet*, the "Prayer of Light," where a naked blonde boy prays to the light from the top of a mountain



Initiation Night

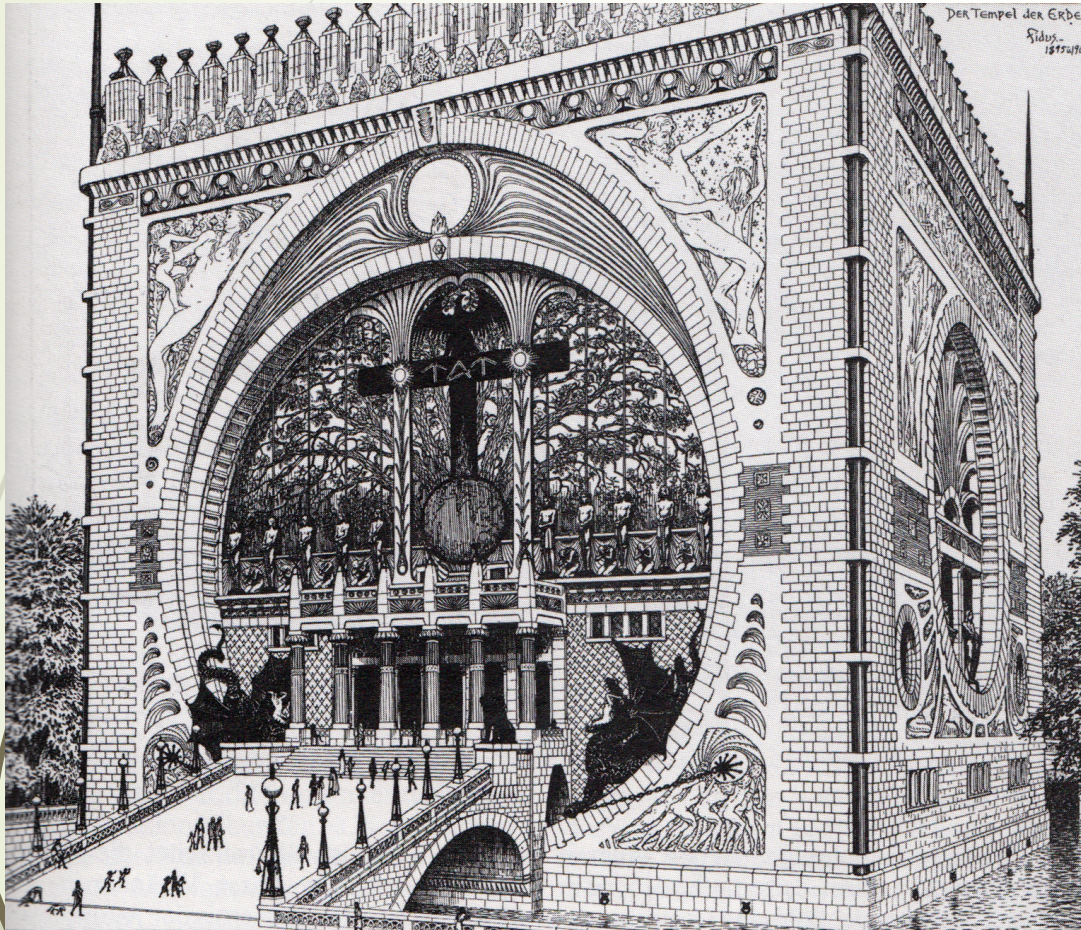
- ▶ German historian Jost Hermand sees as the epitome of Fidus' Theosophical style his painting *Weihenacht* (Initiation Night) (1892), which “portrays an elf-like maiden sitting on a lotus leaf and praying to her new-born son. The girl is to be interpreted as Maya-Maria, the infant son as Buddha-Christ, the initiation night as the birth of the spirit, the lotus blossom as the symbol of blossoming divinity within man, the solar orb as the cosmic ovum and the process of birth as the coming into the world of spiritual man”

Lucifer and Michael

- ▶ Fidus depicted several times Lucifer (right), not, he wrote, as the “filthy devil of the priests” but as “the oldest son of God, who should awake self-consciousness.” He also depicted the Archangel Michael, who so much fascinated Steiner, with “the swastika as a war symbol on the belt and on his chest the Aryan ‘Seal of the Salt Man,’ which was counterfeited by the earlier Jewish Freemasons into the ‘Seal of Solomon’”



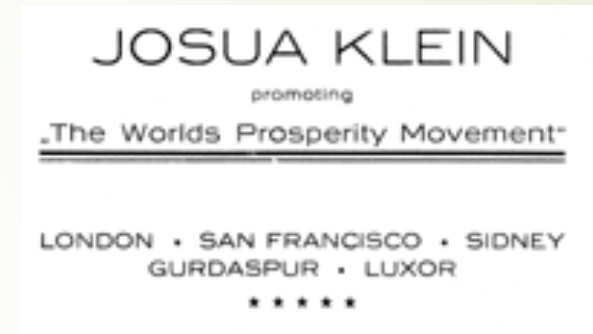
Fidus' Temples



- ▶ The *Lichtgebet* was also featured at the center of several projects for new German temples Fidus kept drawing for forty years, from 1892 to 1932. They included Theosophical and old German themes, and others derived from Diefenbach and the operas of Wagner. None of Fidus' temples were ever built, and Steiner later dismissed them as “sugary-erotic-ascetic” projects, far away from the severe grandiosity of his own Goetheanum

The Klein Fiasco

- ▶ In 1903-1904 Fidus was approached by Josua Klein (1867-1945), a bizarre Austrian-American apocalyptic prophet who had established the utopian colony of Grappenhof, in the canton of St. Gallen, Switzerland. He persuaded Fidus that his temples would finally be built there, and the artist moved to the colony (below). However, he discovered that Klein was a dreamer, whose money was vanishing. He left the Grappenhof Colony in 1904, and Klein's experiment rapidly collapsed





Klein Redux

- ▶ The Grappenhof Colony later inspired several artists, from Bern painter Otto Meyer Amden (1885-1933) to contemporary German artist Erik Steinbrecher, who stayed for three months in the ruins of Grappenhof in 2007 to prepare and photograph an installation (left) commemorating Klein's and Fidus' dream. Steinbrecher brought with him one thousand "Berliner Buletten" (meatballs), which were first "hung up" in a barn and finally burnt in a spectacular bonfire

Neopaganism?...

- ▶ Fidus also cooperated with the Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft (Germanic Faith Community) of artist and playwright Ludwig Fahrenkrog (1867-1952) by illustrating its publications, and, according to German historian Janos Frecot, actually joined the organization. This may raise the question whether Fidus actually abandoned Christianity in favor of Fahrenkrog's Germanic Neopaganism



... or Anticlerical Christianity?



- Certainly, Fidus was against organized Christianity and particularly Catholicism, as evidenced by his membership since 1900, shared with Steiner, in the anti-Catholic Giordano Bruno-Bund and his 1910 work *Pax Vobiscum*, a ferocious caricature of Pope Leo XIII, a *bête noire* of the occult subculture for his opposition to Freemasonry. However, Fidus remained a Christian, if one hostile to institutional churches

Fidus' Own Commune



- ▶ Christian elements appeared in Fidus' experiment of communal living inaugurated in 1907 in the Berlin suburb of Woltersdorf (above). There, Fidus cooperated with writer and Theosophist Gertrud Prellwitz (1869-1942, right) and the two of them eventually launched the St. Georgs-Bund as an artistic and cultural brotherhood in 1912



A Tribute by Hesse



- ▶ How popular Fidus was is confirmed by the appreciation by a novelist with a very different background, Hermann Hesse (1877-1962, left). He wrote to Fidus praising the “sweetness, perfume and tenderness” of his paintings, and concluding that “although I am not accustomed to write letters nor to seek new acquaintances, I feel the need to thank you, my dear Fidus, just as I would write and thank Chopin if he was still alive”

Fidus and the Homosexual Community

- ▶ Fidus' naked male teenagers (right) were also appreciated in different quarters. His paintings became somewhat iconic in the well-established German homosexual community. Fidus played the game, and even cooperated with the leading German homosexual journal *Der Eigene*



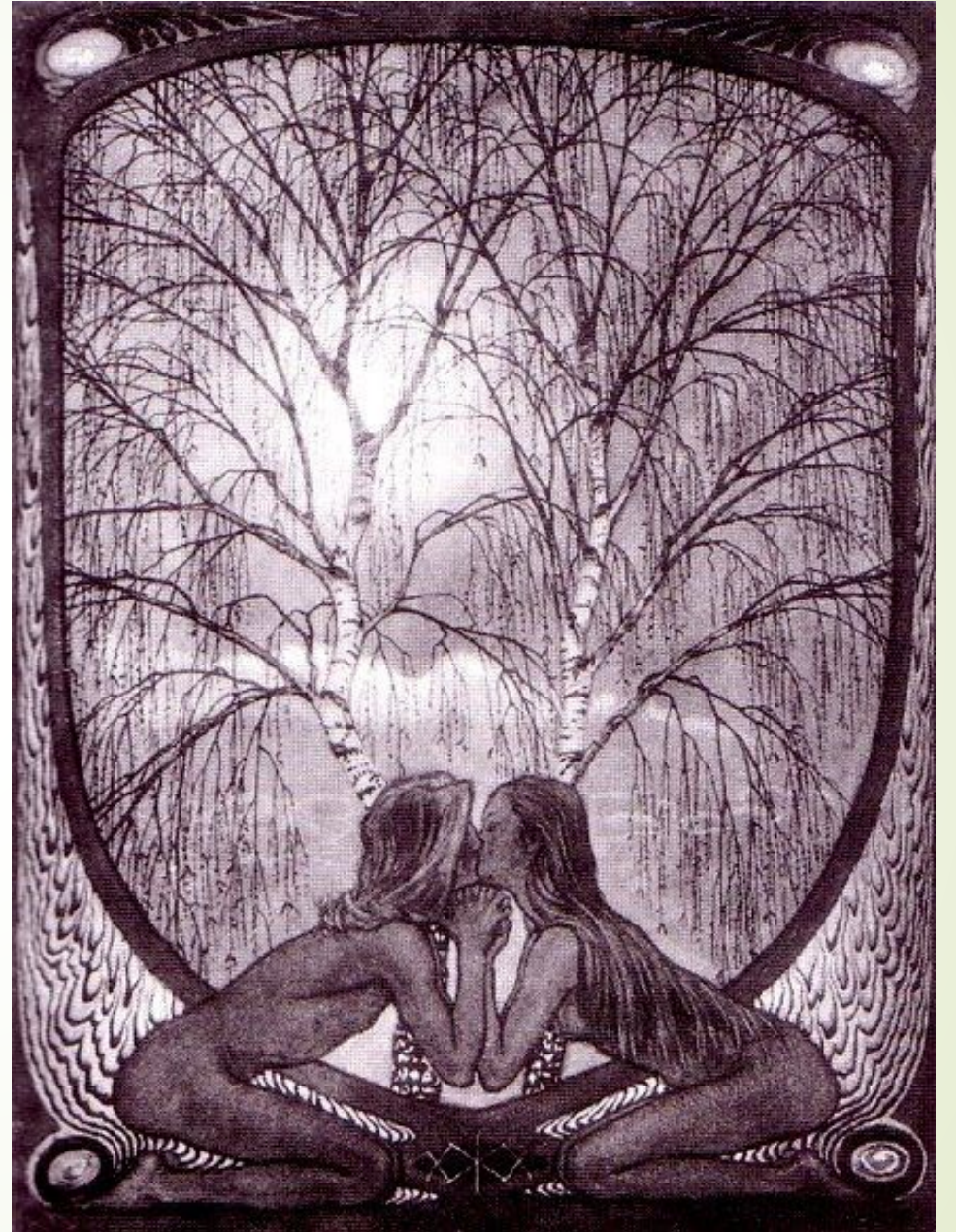
Fidus and Sexual Reform



- ▶ Fidus' ideas on sexual reform emerge in a novella he wrote in 1907 for the journal *Deutsche-Hellas*, in the shape of a fictional reportage of a ceremony called *Ringelreif*. Two beautiful athletes, one male and one female, danced in a stadium, fully naked. Then, all the audience entered the center of the stadium and started dancing in nude couples. The young boys and girls did not engage in any sexual activity. They just danced, sweated, and took their pleasure from inhaling each other's masculine and feminine scents

“Vegetal Love”

- ▶ In fact, Fidus distinguished, based both on Theosophical ideas and the theories of Stuttgart's doctor Gustav Jäger (1832-1917), who believed that bodily odors were able to reveal health, race, moral qualities, and even each person's “soul,” between “vegetal love” and “animal love.” The first was more noble and involved the inhalation of scents without actual intercourse



The Theosophical Meeting of 1913

- ▶ Fidus remained deeply involved in Theosophical activities and participated in the crucial general meeting in Berlin of the German Section of the Theosophical Society of February 2, 1913, preceded by the expulsion, by the general secretary Steiner, of Hübbe-Schleiden and all the Theosophists who had joined the Order of the Star in the East, created by Annie Besant in order to support the claims that the young Indian Jiddu Krishnamurti (right) would soon be revealed as the new World Teacher



Fidus in the 1913 Meeting



Dr. Franz Hartmann

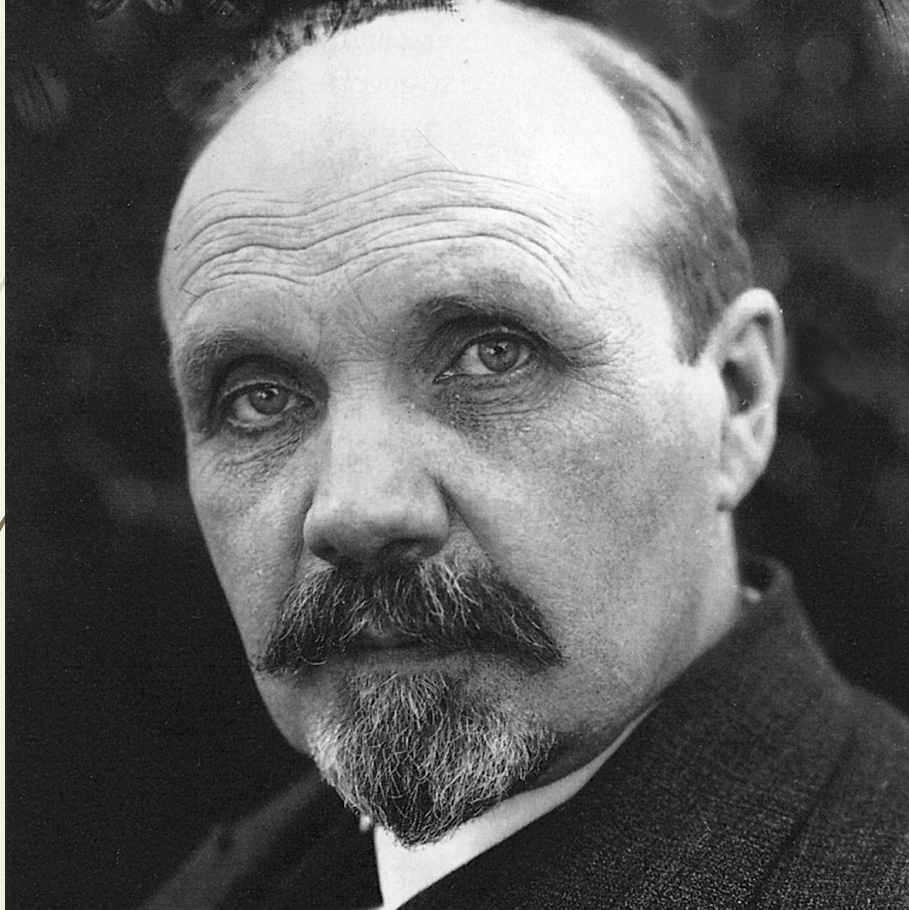
- ▶ Fidus tried to propose a conciliatory solution, with the German Section becoming largely autonomous, although not completely separated from Adyar, and actively devoted to developing a nationalist “German spirit.” Steiner realized that Fidus’ Germanized Theosophy was very close to the positions of a competing society, the Internationale Theosophische Verbrüderung established in 1897 by Franz Hartmann after his separation first from Besant and then from Judge, whom he had shortly followed

Steiner vs Fidus

- Steiner (in a rare picture with Besant, right) answered Fidus that he wanted “nothing to do with nationalist, pangermanist or, worse, racist orientations.” In the end, Fidus was one of the 218 German members (8% of the total) who remained with Besant



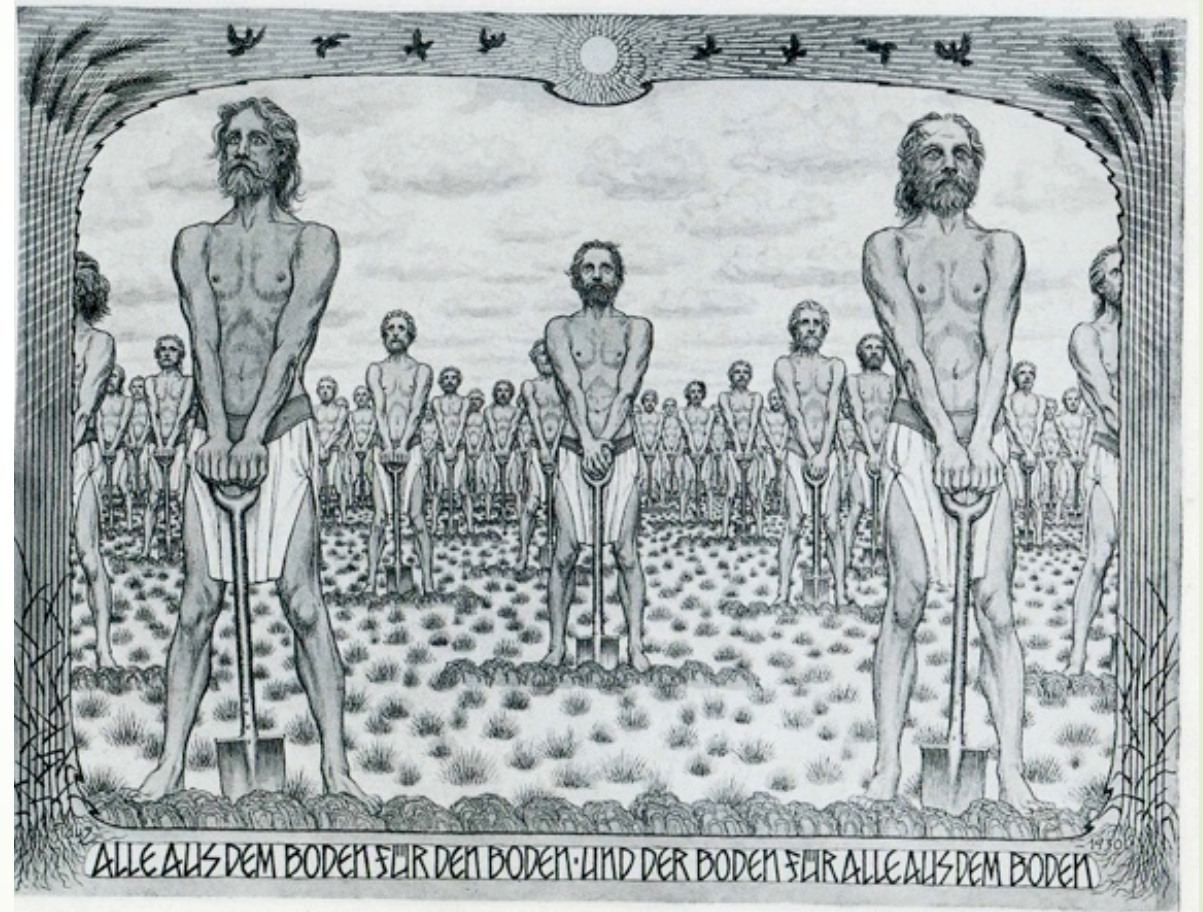
Anthroposophical Leanings?



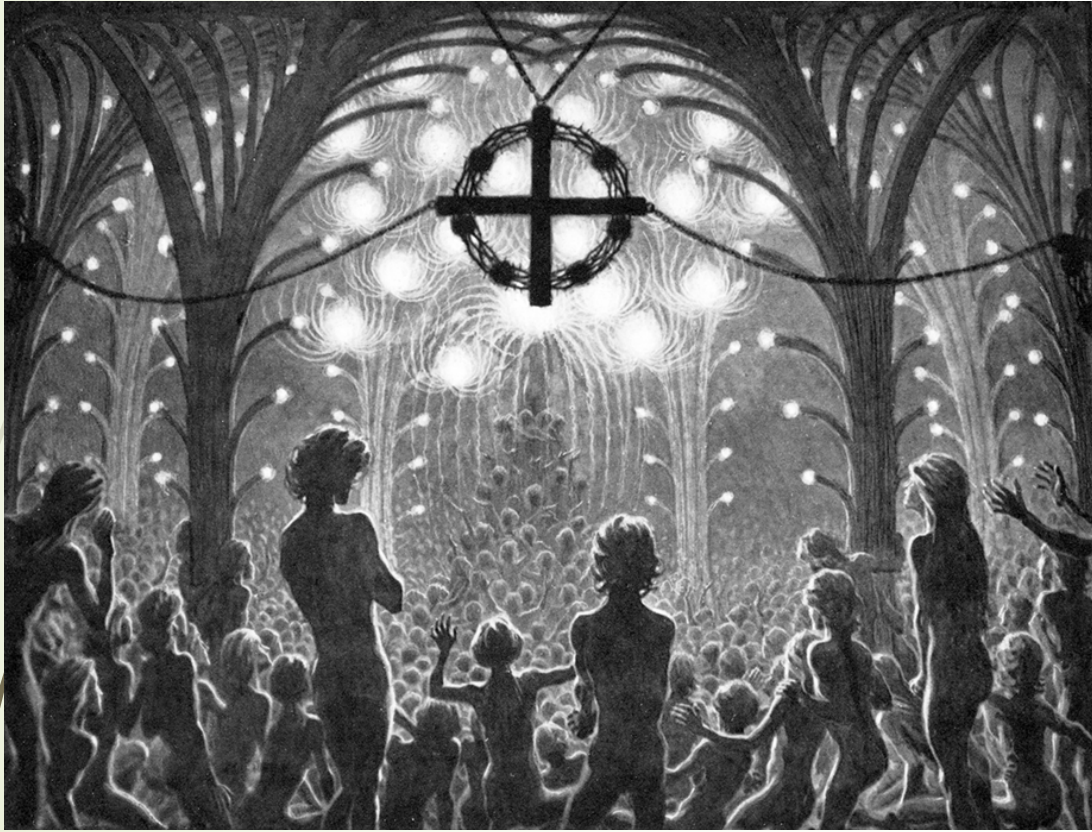
- ▶ Fidus had already refused in 1912 to join the Order of the Star in the East and even to design jewelry for this organization. And when his daughter Drude (1900-1918) – later idealized by Gertrud Prellwitz in her novels as the priestess of a new Germanic religion – died at age 18, Fidus had her funerals celebrated by Pastor Friedrich Rittelmeyer (1872-1938, left), who had not yet founded the Christengemeinschaft but certainly was an admirer of Steiner. The artist, however, remained a member of the Adyar Society

The Tragedy of World War I

- Fidus entered into a period of disillusionment after the German defeat in World War I. His Germans were increasingly represented as emaciated and suffering (right), while his art went largely out of fashion, replaced by the new avant-garde. Fidus despised the avant-garde and regarded both its success and his own marginalization as products of an anti-German Jewish conspiracy



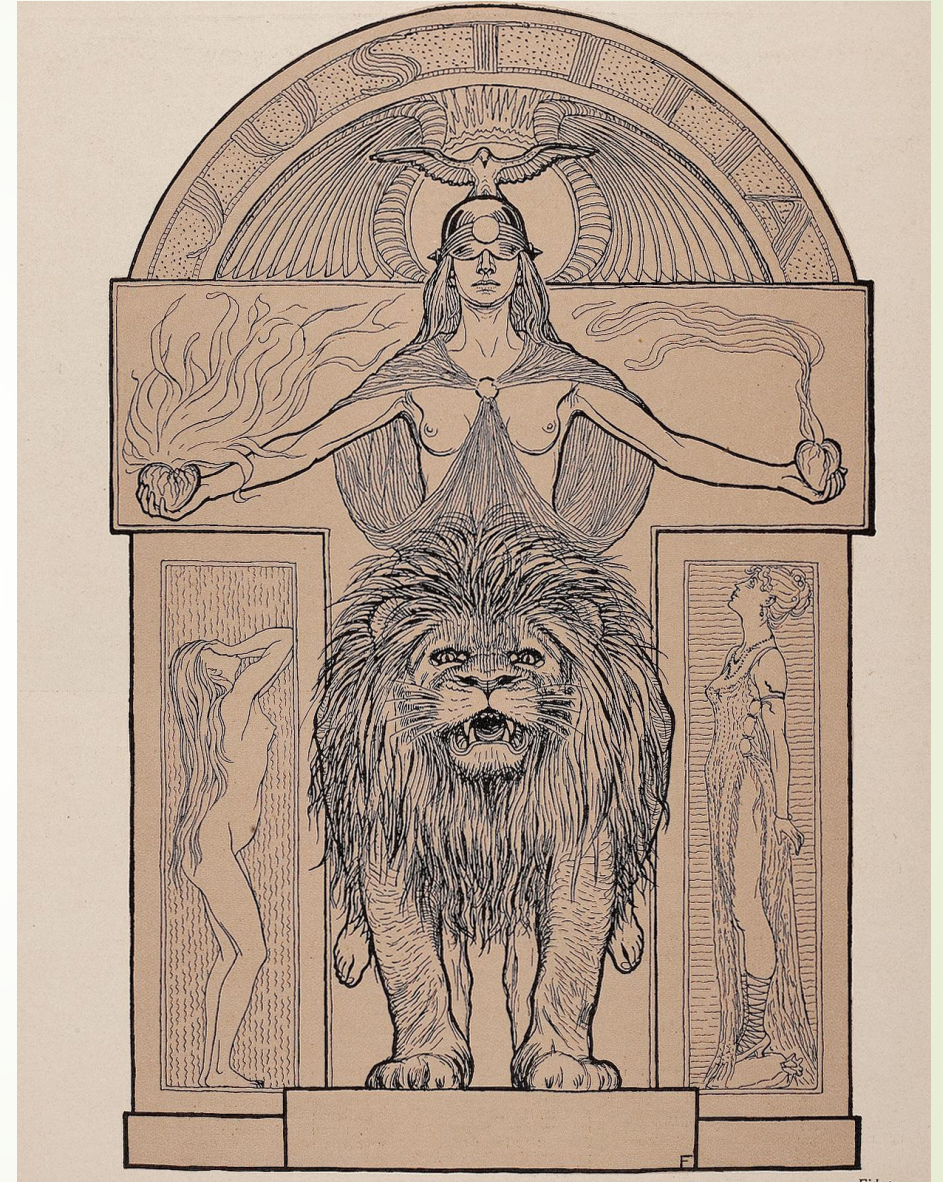
Fidus the Nazi



- ▶ As Nazism developed, Fidus became persuaded that it represented the genuine voice of the German *Volk* and the heir of the ideals of Lebensreform (left). In 1929, he became a member of the Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur (Alliance for German Culture), founded by Alfred Rosenberg. In 1930, Fidus heard Joseph Goebbels speaking and started corresponding with him. In 1932, he joined the Nazi Party

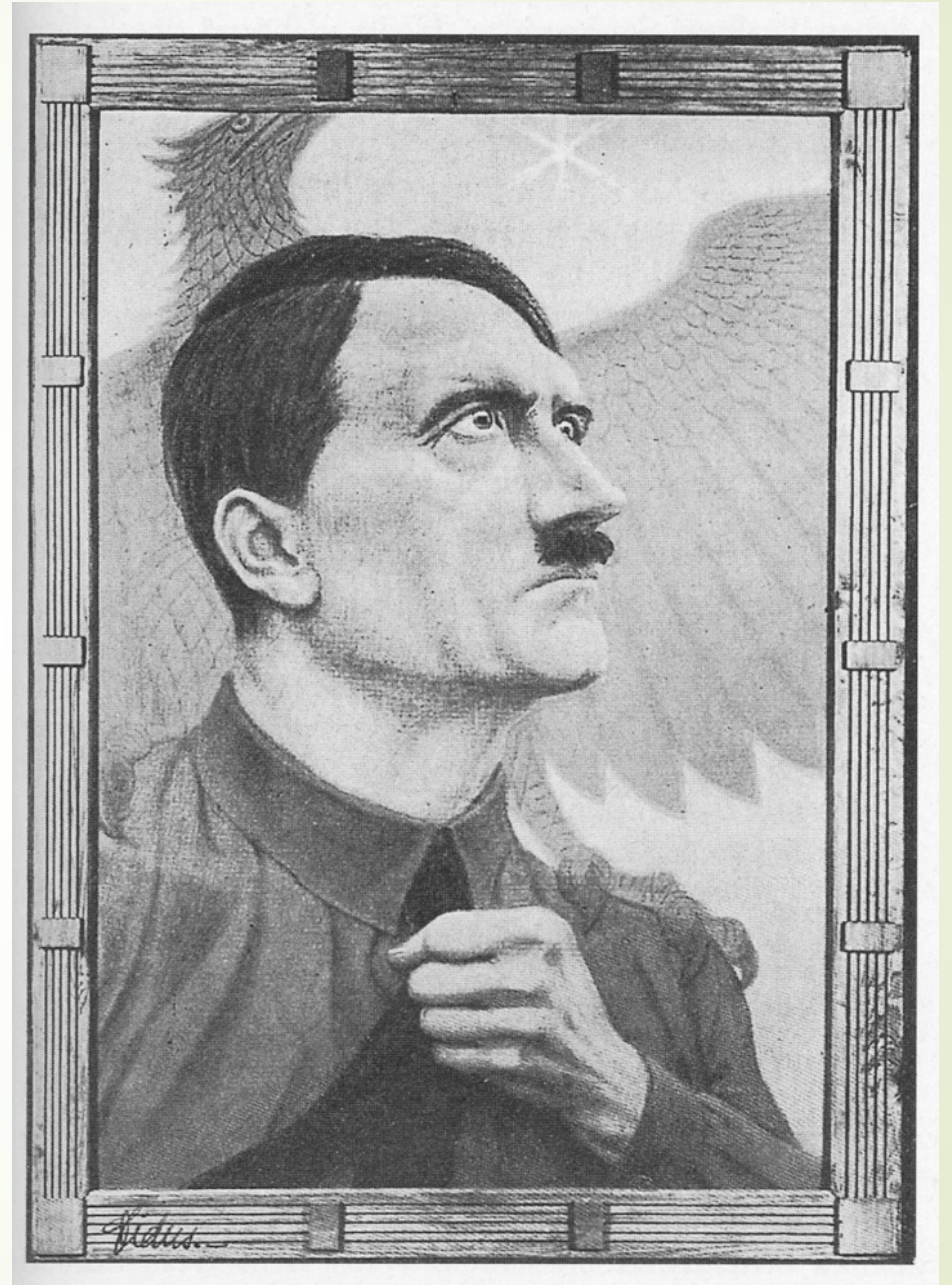
Not a Regime Artist

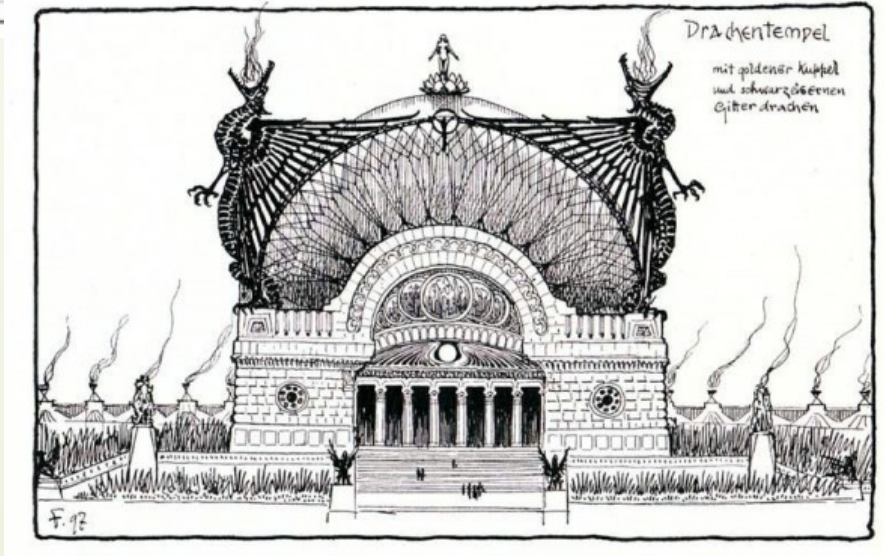
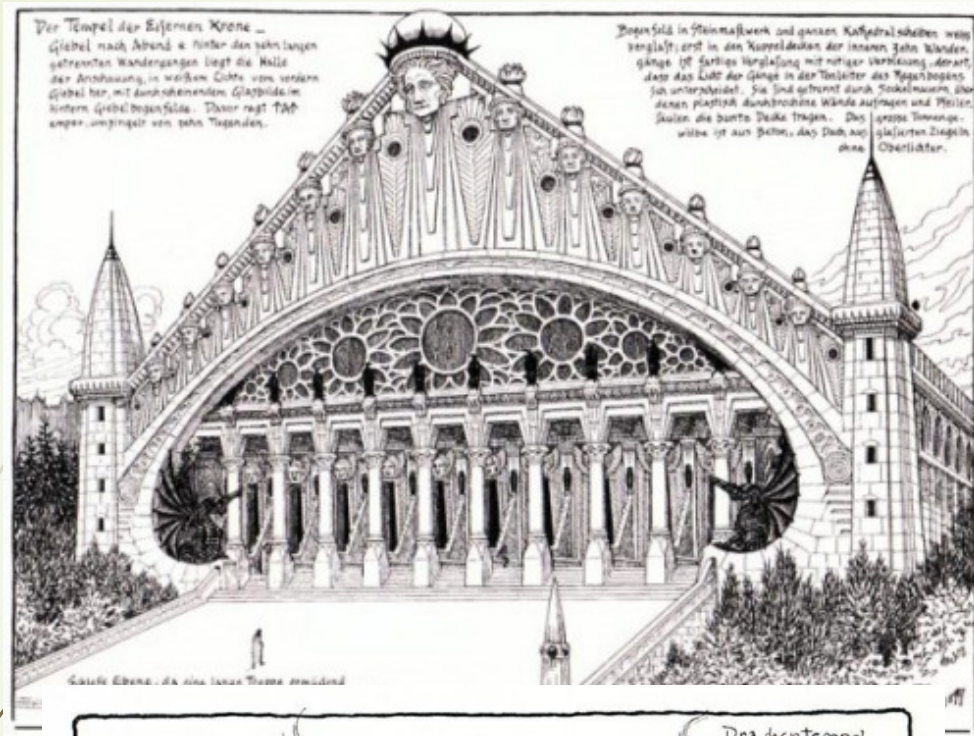
- ▶ Fidus, however, never became an official artist of the regime. Several Nazi leaders remained suspicious both of his Theosophical symbolism and of his post-World War I less than triumphalist depictions of suffering Germans. Wolfgang Willrich (1897-1948), a painter and critic who contributed to shaping the official aesthetics of Nazism, wrote that “Fidus, despite his well-meaning attempts at all manner of social reforms, is unfortunately a victim of occult influences to which he was exposed in his youth”



The Saga of Hitler's Portrait

- ▶ Hitler liked and purchased Fidus' old anti-Catholic painting *Pax Vobiscum* but found other works by him "repulsive." In particular, Hitler disliked the idealized portrait Fidus painted of him in 1941, and forbade the circulation of postcard copies of it. Fidus had photographs made of the portrait and distributed copies secretly to his friends, the closest he came to a revolt against Nazism



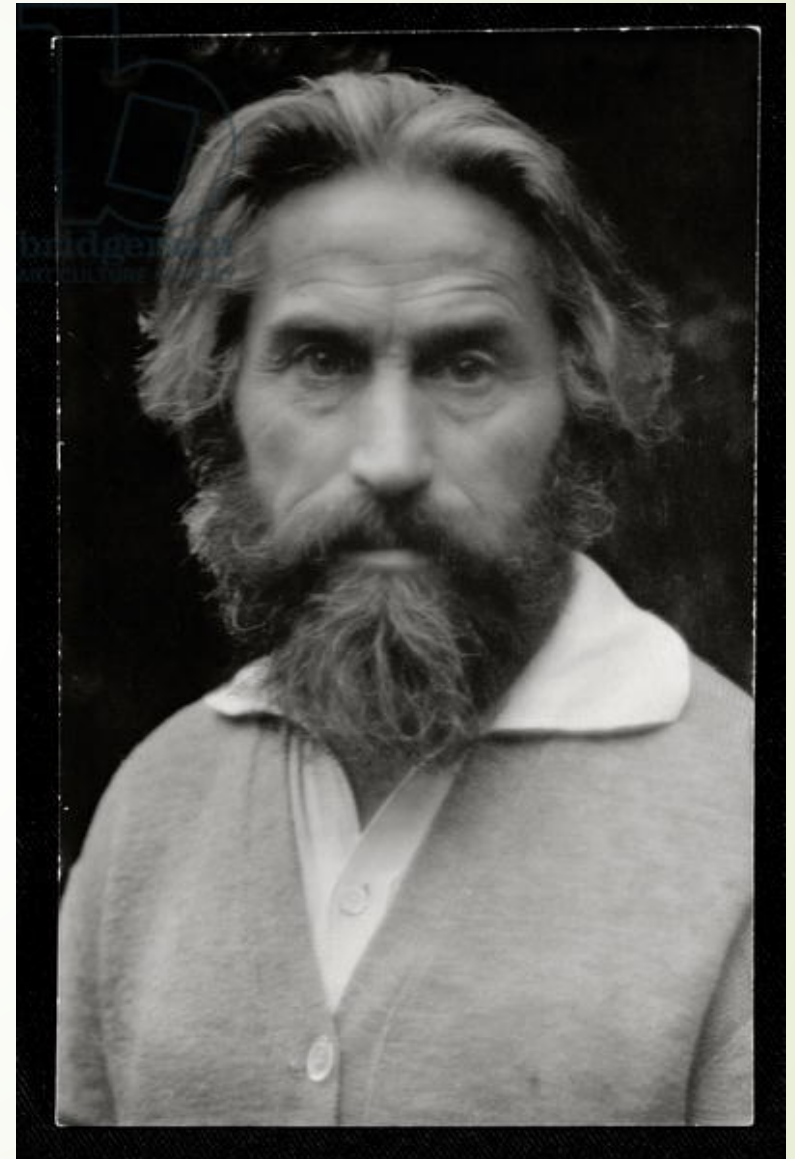


Late Recognition

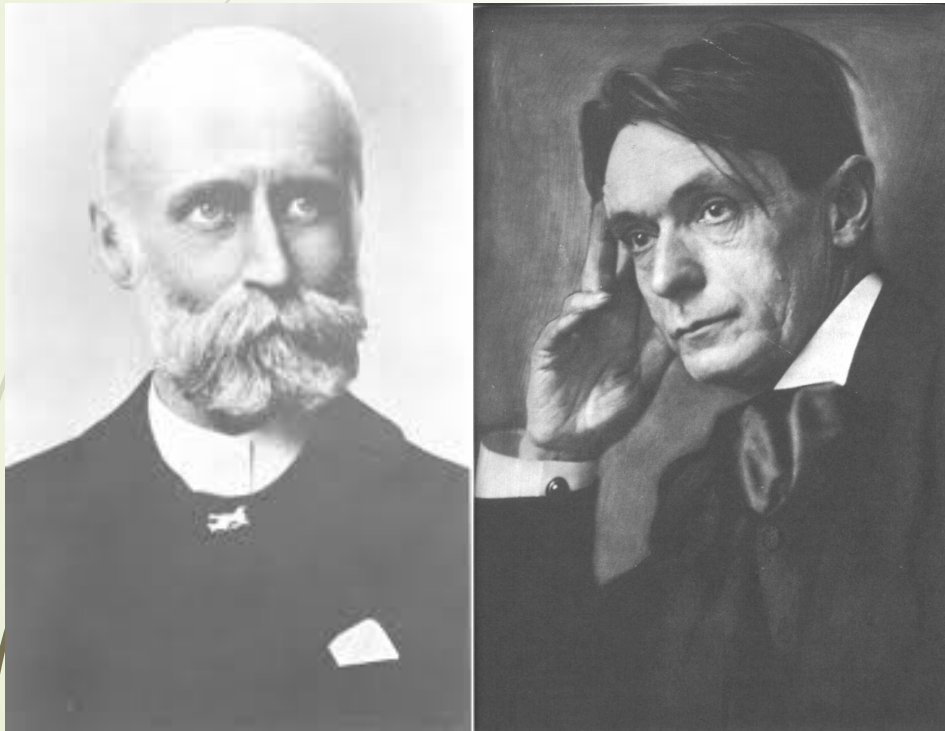
- Only in 1943, he was recognized by the regime with a title of honorary professor. "I take this as a sign of hope," he wrote, and even rejoiced at the destruction of the churches and cathedrals by the Allied bombers, since through them a space was finally being cleared on which he could erect his nordic temples after the war would have been won by Germany

Last Years: Turning to CDU

- ▶ Victory, of course, did not come and it is reported that a financially ruined Fidus had to paint portraits of Lenin and Stalin for the Soviet occupation troops in order to survive. He turned his hopes to CDU, the German Christian Democrat Party, as “the party who mostly strives for art, culture, and religion.” He died of a heart attack on February 23, 1948. His funeral was celebrated by the Christengemeinschaft



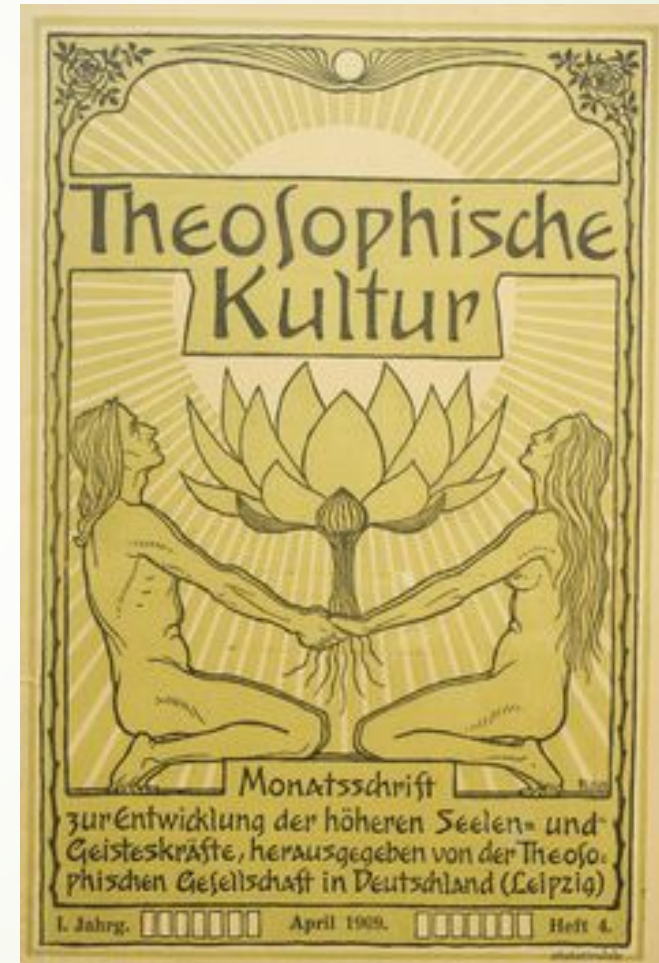
Loyal to Adyar

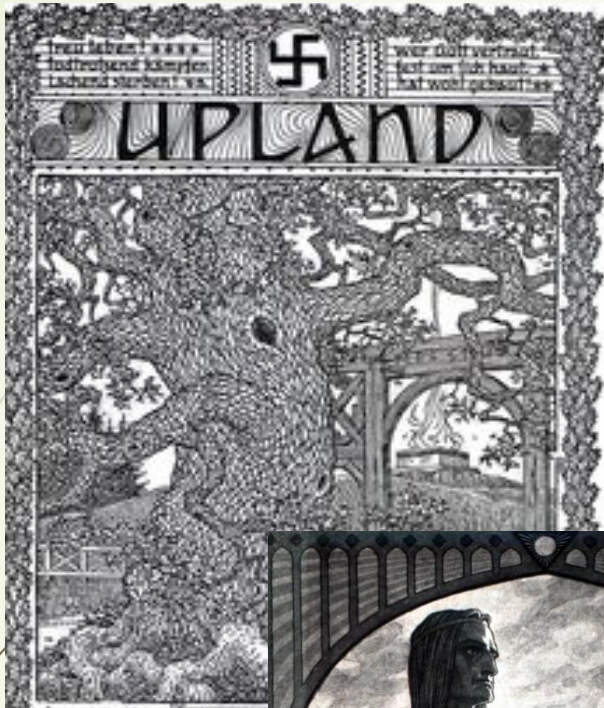


- ▶ His funeral, again, did not mean that Fidus had joined Anthroposophy, and not all parishioners of the Christengemeinschaft were Anthroposophists. In his last journal entry on Theosophy, Fidus noted that Anthroposophists had been more kind to him after Steiner's death in 1925 but reiterated that in the 1912-1913 controversy Hübbschleiden was right and Steiner was wrong

Conclusion – A Theosophical Artist...

- ▶ Theosophy was not for Fidus a marginal interest, but a primary identity and a key for understanding his different positions. However, Fidus' notion of Theosophy was not entirely orthodox. As Diefenbach did, he regarded Theosophy more as a method than as a set of doctrines. He felt free to borrow from other sources, and never embraced the Theosophical preference for Eastern religions over Christianity and over German ancient folk traditions

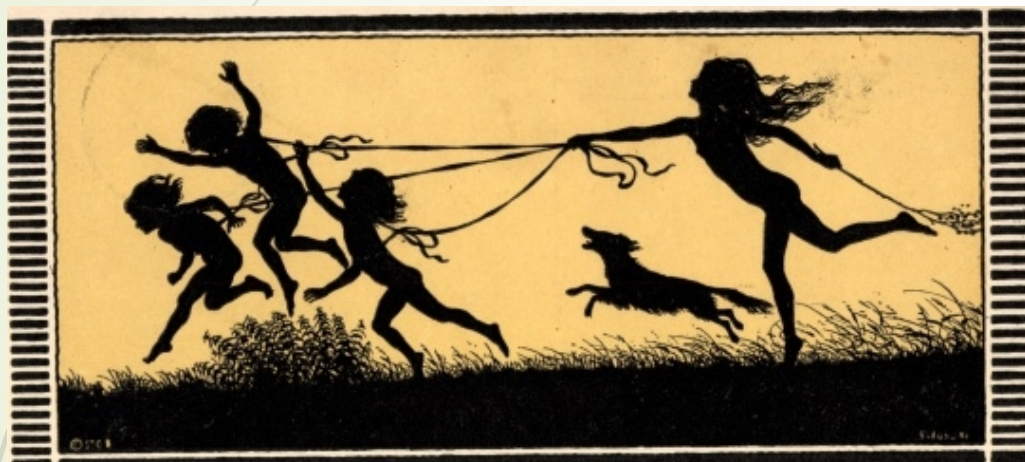




... but also a Nazi

- ▶ After World War I, Fidus came to sincerely believe that Nazism was the solution for the problems created by the German defeat. He kept calling himself a Theosophist in private, but did not publicly protest the Nazi suppression of the Theosophical Society in 1937. His positions remained, however, idiosyncratic. He was too Theosophical for the Nazis, as he had been too Völkisch for some Theosophists and for Steiner

Forgotten

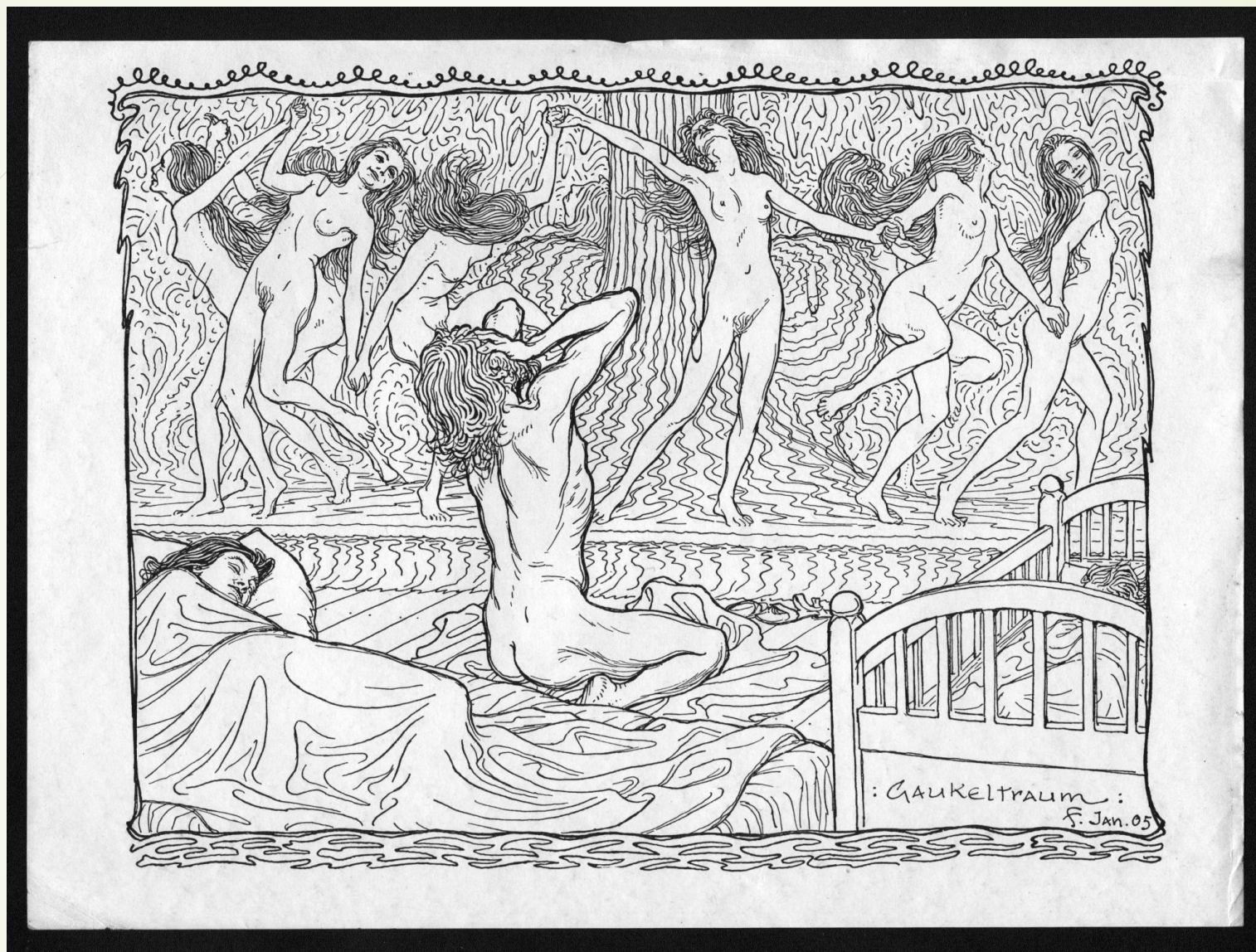


- ▶ Fidus' art had a season of immense popularity in Germany, with "thousands upon thousands of Fidus-fanatics" admiring his work (Hermand), and certainly contributed to popularize certain Theosophical themes. After his death, Fidus was forgotten for many years, and his art dismissed as Kitsch



...and Rediscovered

- It is not the last of his paradoxes that Fidus was rediscovered in the 1960s by California hippies, who knew very little of his life and ideas, but who started being inspired by his naked youth as they were experimenting with their own Lebensreform utopia



For more information: cesnur_to@virgilio.it