

**CASE STUDY**

**Victory over Disability: Two Words about Erich Stegmann,  
Founder of the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists of  
the World\***

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**Abstract**

This article is about the German artist Erich Arnulf Stegmann (1912-1984), founder of the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painters of the World. Disabled almost from birth, Stegmann accepted his disability as a challenge and overcame it. Due to his artistic gifts, as well as his willpower, his magnanimity and his entrepreneurial spirit, he has been placed among the most important personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** *Erich Stegmann, Disability, Art, Due acceptance.*



Based on a self-portrait sculpted by Erich Stegmann

*During his life, he was regarded as remarkable for his ability as an artist, and now even more so for the self-help organisation he founded sixty years ago.*

**Marc Alexander**

## Stegmann: One of the Most Important Personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Disability is present throughout the animal and the vegetal kingdoms; the simple fact of being alive makes us vulnerable to disability – only rocks and mineral beings in general do not run the risk of becoming disabled. However, no form of disability is an insurmountable obstacle for us to achieve happiness.

This is particularly true when it comes to disabled people who decide to act in the field of art. Philosophically speaking, disability belongs to the category of “undesirable privations of goods”.<sup>1</sup> Art, on the other hand, is a *gift* (e.g., of being able to carve the marble and extract a sculpture from it) and the *product* of this gift (the sculpture extracted from the marble thanks to the ability of carving it). For this article, I selected the German Erich Arnulf Stegmann (1912-1984), one of the most illustrious disabled artists of all times.

Marc Alexander, one of his biographers, places Erich Stegmann among the most important personalities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> When Erich was two years old, spinal paralysis caused him to lose the capacity of moving the hands freely.

This is a quite noticeable point in the story of his life, since it is this very capacity that gave the *Homo habilis* the possibility of chipping stones, c. 2.5 million years ago, adding to Nature new elements that she herself would be unable to produce, inaugurating this way what we can already call *art*, in its broad sense: Nature gives us the marble to carve, the pigments to paint and the sounds to produce poetry and music; but we should not expect her to give us statues, pictures, poems and songs. She just will not.

The frontier between Nature and Art is as rigid as that which separates Biology from Culture.<sup>3</sup>

Deprived of those “universal tools”, as Aristotle calls human hands<sup>4</sup>, Erich Stegmann – and along with him so many other people throughout History, most of them anonymous, since the History of Disability is mostly a History made of silences<sup>5</sup> – discovered he was artistically gifted.

At Nuremberg, he entered the *Fachhochschule für Buchgewerbe und Graphik* (School of Higher Education for Book Trade and Graphics) in the German city of Nuremberg, where Erwin von Kormöndy and Hans Gerstacker were his masters. Five centuries before him, another German, Johannes Gutenberg, industrious and enterpriser as Germans normally are, invented the movable-type printing press. In like manner, Erich Stegmann sought his own way and, from 1932 onwards, “he sold his own works produced in his own publishing house. In this way he succeeded, at a young age, in his art”.<sup>6</sup>

### Restarting from Zero, Again

Considered “dangerous” to Nazi Germany, Stegmann stayed in jail for 15 months. Released in 1936, he “remained under observation until 1945 by the National Socialists who forbade him to paint and publish his works”.<sup>7</sup>

Strange as it may seem, Stegmann became *persona non grata* in the eyes of the Nazi Party due to his sympathies for communism. Let it be remembered that Hitler and Stalin were allies at the start of World War II, and they remained as such during years; the reasons for the quarrel between Nazi Germany and the USSR stem from the similitudes, not from the differences, of their

<sup>1</sup> Miguel J. Romero. “Aquinas on the *corporis infirmitas*”, in Brian Brock and John Swinton. *Disability in the Christian Tradition. A Reader*, Grande Rapids (Michigan)/Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2012, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Painters First. Art Celebrating the Conquest of Misfortune. Art Celebrating the Conquest of Misfortune*, Kingsley, Leader Books, 1995, p. 7.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, *L'origine de l'humanité* (trad. Jean-Pierre Ricard), Paris, Hachette, 1997, p. 122 et passim; and Mischa Titiev. *Introdução à Antropologia Cultural* (translated by João Pereira Neto), 6<sup>a</sup> ed., Lisboa, Calouste Gulbenkian, 1989, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *De partibus animalium*, 687a.

<sup>5</sup> See João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira. *Disability: a Literature of Silence*, in *Albertian Review of Literature*, Cochin (Kerala/India), vol. 3, n. 1, October 2016, p. 5-17.

<sup>6</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnulf\\_Erich\\_Stegmann](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnulf_Erich_Stegmann).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

purposes: both wanted to conquer the whole world.

Just as in Nazi Germany, in a communist society, disabled people – seen as useless and unsuitable in a world considered to be “perfect” (or at least as the best of all possible worlds) – is a frequent target of discrimination. Materialistic, communism assumes that material poverty is the cause of human wickedness; the truth, however, is quite the opposite: it is human wickedness that causes all sorts of misery. Spirit has chronological – as well as ontological – precedence over matter, just as thoughts precede acts: “If we do not live the way we think, we will soon begin to think the way we live”, Fulton Sheen used to say and write.<sup>8</sup>

As the anthropologist Sarah Phillips revealed in a recent article, the Soviet Union went so far as to deny the very existence of disabled people within its borders; segregation was total.<sup>9</sup>

After the war, Stegmann restarted from zero and raised his old publishing house from the ashes, under a name that could not be more full of meaning: *Dennoch* (“Despite Everything”). Not only a great artist but also a great man, Stegmann was not content with merely achieving his own victory over disability and the many other challenges he had to meet.

Stegmann also wanted to enable other, similarly handicapped painters to lead a financially independent life from the proceeds of their artistic work.

He undertook many journeys to find other mouth and foot painters for his idea of an organization for the distribution of their artistic works. In 1953-1954 he organized the Lodge of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists as a community of interests for the mouth and foot painting artists. In 1957, the International Association of Mouth and Foot Painters of the World (*Vereinigung der*

*Mund- und Fussmalenden Künstler in aller Welt, e. V.* [VDMFK]) was founded in the Principality of Liechtenstein by A. E. Stegmann, whose president he was elected for his lifetime.<sup>10</sup>

The association's stated objectives are the following:

- Find as many mouth and foot painting artists as possible.
- Safeguard and promote the interests of the mouth and foot painting artists, improve their working and living conditions, promote and improve their artistic abilities and skills, in particular, by promoting the commercial use of their work.
- Conclude and negotiate contracts with publishers in countries all over the world.
- Grant scholarships to promote the development of mouth and foot painting artists.
- Collect and make available to its members or Student Members the literature and medical or other aids owned by the Association or by others.
- Organise exhibitions by mouth and foot painting artists.
- Collect, catalogue, and administer the works created by the members.

### **Political Correctness and Disability do not Combine**

Fortunately Stegmann realized the suicidal character of his former pro-Communist behaviour. No wonder, after the war, he decided to live in the West and to found his association in Liechtenstein, a real democratic country – not in the German “Democratic” Republic, let alone the USSR or the “Democratic” People’s Republic of Korea, a country where disabled people are persecuted by the very State administrative machinery.<sup>11</sup> In Stegmann’s view,

What difference does it make how a Picture is painted? A painter does not mean only a pair of hands – he paints from his heart what his eyes see... Pictures are like children who leave home. Nobody asks them

<sup>8</sup> *From the Angel's Blackboard. The Best of Fulton Sheen*, Bangalore, Asian Trade Corporation, 1995, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> “There Are No Invalids in the USSR!": a Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History”, in *Disability Studies Quarterly: the First Journal in the Field of Disability Studies*, v. 29, n. 3, 2009 (accessible at <http://www.dsqsds.org/article/view/936/1111>).

<sup>10</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnulf\\_Erich\\_Stegmann](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnulf_Erich_Stegmann).

<sup>11</sup> See Stéphane Courtois et alii. *Le Livre noir du communisme*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1997, p. 792 et passim.

whether their father has lost a foot or an arm.<sup>12</sup>

Accepting his disability was a real turning point in Erich Stegmann's life. Acceptance is the unavoidable first step to be given in the always difficult process of overcoming disability. As the German philosopher Natalie Knapp puts, "It is only when we accept the unavoidable that we can open our minds to what is new, and reach a future that is still unknown to us".<sup>13</sup>

Many disabled do not accept their disability and, therefore, do not achieve the victory over it. Accepting disability as a challenge (isn't life itself a challenge?) is an attitude that comes from an inner and (of course) free choice. Victorious disabled owe their victory to the choice they made in regard to disability, which they see as a challenge to meet and to overcome. Likewise, defeated disabled people owe their defeat to their choosing to consider disability as an unfair and terrible fate.

This is the ultimate reason why some disabled use their disability as a weapon: aggressing society, blaming it for their own faults, they fell as though they were legitimately fighting back against what they consider a personal injustice against them; exerting pressure on the people around them – some would say blackmailing – they climb the steps of their lives.

In a few words, all they get from life, be it good or bad, is due to their disability. Those people are always asking to themselves and to others around them: "Why us?", whereas the right question is quite the opposite: what they should ask to themselves and to others is "Why not us?".

Political correctness and disability do not combine. Politically correct disability language makes the deficiency seem something non-existent; makes one's mind flit to and fro between expressions like "person with disability" and the actual faces of actual disabled people in one's own surroundings.

Being nothing more than *flatus vocis*, "mere names, words, or sounds without a corresponding objective reality", as nominalists tended to use in the Middle Ages<sup>14</sup>, such expressions carry in their immaterial body the mischievous potential of anesthetizing the critical sense and giving the user the impression of "having already fulfilled his duty".

It is not difficult to see that *real acceptance* does not belong to the list of priorities of the politically correct agenda concerning the disabled. Instead of wasting time using or stimulating the use of politically correct words for disability, and never cursing it as a disgrace, Stegmann *accepted* it as it really is – a *challenge* –, and he came out victorious of all the battles he had to fight throughout his extraordinary and happy life [1-14].

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Marc Alexander. *Painters First. Art Celebrating the Conquest of Misfortune. Art Celebrating the Conquest of Misfortune*, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Der unendliche Augenblick. Warum Zeiten der Unsicherheit so wertvoll sind*, Leck, , Leck, Rowohlt, 2015, p. 19.

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