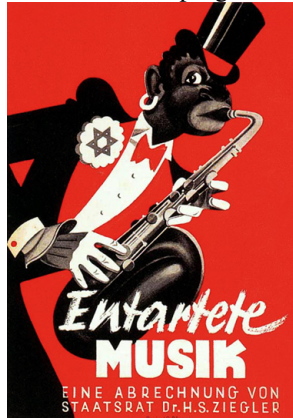


Degenerate art



- Cover of the exhibition program: *Degenerate Art* exhibition, 1937. Note the word



"Kunst", meaning art, in scare quotes
Degenerate music exhibition, Düsseldorf, 1938

- Cover of the exhibition program: *Degenerate*

Degenerate art is the English translation of the German *entartete Kunst*, a term adopted by the Nazi regime in Germany to describe virtually all modern art. Such art was banned on the grounds that it was un-German or Jewish Bolshevik in nature, and those identified as degenerate artists were subjected to sanctions. These included being dismissed from teaching positions, being forbidden to exhibit or to sell their art, and in some cases being forbidden to produce art entirely.

Degenerate Art was also the title of an exhibition, mounted by the Nazis in Munich in 1937, consisting of modernist artworks chaotically hung and accompanied by text labels deriding the art. Designed to inflame public opinion against modernism, the exhibition subsequently traveled to several other cities in Germany and Austria.

While modern styles of art were prohibited, the Nazis promoted paintings and sculptures that were narrowly traditional in manner and that exalted the "blood and soil" values of racial purity, militarism, and obedience. Similarly, music was expected to be tonal and free of any jazz influences; films and plays were censored.^[1]

Reaction against modernism

The early twentieth century was a period of wrenching changes in the arts. In the visual arts, such innovations as cubism, Dada and surrealism—following hot on the heels of symbolism, post-Impressionism and Fauvism—were not universally appreciated. The majority of people in Germany, as elsewhere, did not care for the new art which many resented as elitist, morally suspect, and too often incomprehensible.^[2]

Under the Weimar government of the 1920s, Germany emerged as a leading center of the *avant-garde*—the birthplace of Expressionism in painting and sculpture, of the atonal musical compositions of Arnold Schoenberg, and the jazz-influenced work of Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), brought Expressionism to cinema.

The Nazis viewed the culture of the Weimar period with disgust. Their response stemmed partly from a conservative aesthetic taste, and partly from their determination to use culture as a propaganda tool.^[3] On both counts, a painting such as Otto Dix's *War Cripples* (1920) was anathema to them. It unsparingly depicts four badly disfigured veterans of the First World War, then a familiar sight on Berlin's streets, rendered in caricatured style. Featured in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, it would hang next to a label accusing Dix—himself a volunteer in World War I—of "an insult to the German heroes of the Great War".^[4]



A still from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

As dictator, Hitler gave his personal taste in art the force of law to a degree never before seen. Only in Stalin's Soviet Union, where Socialist Realism was the mandatory style, had a state shown such concern with regulation of the arts.^[5] In the case of Germany, the model was to be classical Greek and Roman art, seen by Hitler as an art whose exterior form embodied an inner racial ideal.^[6]

The reason for this, as Henry Grosshans points out, is that Hitler "saw Greek and Roman art as uncontaminated by Jewish influences. Modern art was [seen as] an act of aesthetic violence by the Jews against the German spirit. Such was true to Hitler even though only Liebermann, Meidner, Freundlich, and Marc Chagall, among those who made significant contributions to the German modernist movement, were Jewish. But Hitler [...] took upon himself the responsibility of deciding who, in matters of culture, thought and acted like a Jew."^[7]

The supposedly "Jewish" nature of all art that was indecipherable, distorted, or that represented "depraved" subject matter was explained through the concept of degeneracy, which held that distorted and corrupted art was a symptom of an inferior race. By propagating the theory of degeneracy, the Nazis combined their anti-Semitism with their drive to control the culture, thus consolidating public support for both campaigns.^[8]

Degeneracy

The term *Entartung* (or "degeneracy") had gained currency in Germany by the late 19th century when the critic and author Max Nordau devised the theory presented in his 1892 book, *Entartung*.^[9] Nordau drew upon the writings of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, whose *The Criminal Man*, published in 1876, attempted to prove that there were "born criminals" whose atavistic personality traits could be detected by scientifically measuring abnormal physical characteristics. Nordau developed from this premise a critique of modern art, explained as the work of those so corrupted and enfeebled by modern life that they have lost the self-control needed to produce coherent works. He attacked Aestheticism in English literature and described the mysticism of the Symbolist movement in French literature as a product of mental pathology. Explaining the painterliness of Impressionism as the sign of a diseased visual cortex, he decried modern degeneracy while praising traditional German culture. Despite the fact that Nordau was Jewish and a key figure in the Zionist movement (Lombroso was also Jewish), his theory of artistic degeneracy would be seized upon by German National Socialists during the Weimar Republic as a rallying point for their anti-Semitic and racist demand for Aryan purity in art.

Belief in a Germanic spirit—defined as mystical, rural, moral, bearing ancient wisdom, and noble in the face of a tragic destiny—existed long before the rise of the Nazis; the composer Richard Wagner celebrated such ideas in his work.^[10] Beginning before World War I the well-known German architect and painter Paul Schultze-Naumburg's

influential writings, which invoked racial theories in condemning modern art and architecture, supplied much of the basis for Adolf Hitler's belief that classical Greece and the Middle Ages were the true sources of Aryan art.^[11] Schultze-Naumburg subsequently wrote such books as *Die Kunst der Deutschen. Ihr Wesen und ihre Werke* (The art of the Germans. Its nature and its works) and *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race), the latter published in 1928, in which he argued that only racially pure artists could produce a healthy art which upheld timeless ideals of classical beauty, while racially mixed modern artists produced disordered artworks and monstrous depictions of the human form. By reproducing examples of modern art next to photographs of people with deformities and diseases, he graphically reinforced the idea of modernism as a sickness.^[12] Alfred Rosenberg developed this theory in *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Myth of the Twentieth Century), published in 1933, which became a best-seller in Germany and made Rosenberg the Party's leading ideological spokesman.^[13]



Membership in the Nazi Party did not protect Emil Nolde, whose 1912 woodcut *The Prophet* is shown here, from being proscribed by Hitler. 1052 of Nolde's paintings were removed from German museums, more than any other artist

Purge

Hitler's rise to power on January 31, 1933 was quickly followed by actions intended to cleanse the culture of degeneracy: book burnings were organized, artists and musicians were dismissed from teaching positions, and curators who had shown a partiality to modern art were replaced by Party members.^[14] In September 1933 the *Reichskulturkammer* (Reich Culture Chamber) was established, with Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's *Reichminister für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (Reich Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda) in charge. Subchambers within the Culture Chamber, representing the individual arts (music, film, literature, architecture, and the visual arts) were created; these were membership groups consisting of "racially pure" artists supportive of the Party, or willing to be compliant. Goebbels made it clear: "In future only those who are members of a chamber are allowed to be productive in our cultural life. Membership is open only to those who fulfill the entrance condition. In this way all unwanted and damaging elements have been excluded."^[15] By 1935 the Reich Culture Chamber had 100,000 members.^[16]

Nonetheless there was, during the period 1933-1934, some confusion within the Party on the question of Expressionism. Goebbels and some others believed that the forceful works of such artists as Emil Nolde, Ernst Barlach and Erich Heckel exemplified the Nordic spirit; as Goebbels explained, "We National Socialists are not unmodern; we are the carrier of a new modernity, not only in politics and in social matters, but also in art and intellectual matters."^[17] However, a faction led by Rosenberg despised the Expressionists, leading to a bitter ideological dispute which was settled only in September 1934, when Hitler declared that there would be no place for modernist experimentation in the Reich.^[18]

Although books by Franz Kafka could no longer be bought by 1939, works by ideologically suspect authors such as Hermann Hesse and Hans Fallada were widely read.^[19] Mass culture was less stringently regulated than high culture, possibly because the authorities feared the consequences of too heavy-handed interference in popular entertainment.^[20] Thus, until the outbreak of the war, most Hollywood films could be screened, including *It Happened One Night*, *San Francisco*, and *Gone with the Wind*. While performance of atonal music was banned, the prohibition of jazz was less strictly enforced. Benny Goodman and Django Reinhardt were popular, and leading British and American jazz bands continued to perform in major cities until the war; thereafter, dance bands officially played "swing" rather than the banned jazz.^[21]

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibit

By 1937, the concept of degeneracy was firmly entrenched in Nazi policy. On June 30 of that year Goebbels put Adolf Ziegler, the head of the Reichskammer der Bildenden Künste (Reich Chamber of Visual Art), in charge of a six-man commission authorized to confiscate from museums and art collections throughout the Reich, any remaining art deemed modern, degenerate, or subversive. These works were then to be presented to the public in an exhibit intended to incite further revulsion against the "perverse Jewish spirit" penetrating German culture.^[22]

Over 5,000 works were seized, including 1,052 by Nolde, 759 by Heckel, 639 by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and 508 by Max Beckmann, as well as smaller numbers of works by such artists as Alexander Archipenko, Marc Chagall, James Ensor, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh.^[23] The *Entartete Kunst* exhibit, featuring over 650 paintings, sculptures, prints, and books from the collections of thirty two German museums, premiered in Munich on July 19, 1937 and remained on view until November 30 before travelling to eleven other cities in Germany and Austria.

The exhibit was held on the second floor of a building formerly occupied by the Institute of Archaeology. Viewers had to reach the exhibit by means of a narrow staircase. The first sculpture was an oversized, theatrical portrait of Jesus, which purposely intimidated viewers as they literally bumped into it in order to enter. The rooms were made of temporary partitions and deliberately chaotic and overfilled. Pictures were crowded together, sometimes unframed, usually hung by cord.

The first three rooms were grouped thematically. The first room contained works considered demeaning of religion; the second featured works by Jewish artists in particular; the third contained works deemed insulting to the women, soldiers and farmers of Germany. The rest of the exhibit had no particular theme.

There were slogans painted on the walls. For example:

- Insolent mockery of the Divine under Centrist rule
- Revelation of the Jewish racial soul
- An insult to German womanhood
- The ideal—cretin and whore
- Deliberate sabotage of national defense
- German farmers—a Yiddish view



Adolf Hitler and Adolf Ziegler visit the Degenerate Art exhibition, 1937.



Goebbels views the *Degenerate Art* exhibition

- The Jewish longing for the wilderness reveals itself—in Germany the Negro becomes the racial ideal of a degenerate art
- Madness becomes method
- Nature as seen by sick minds
- Even museum bigwigs called this the "art of the German people"^[24]

Speeches of Nazi party leaders contrasted with artist manifestos from various art movements, such as Dada and Surrealism. Next to many paintings were labels indicating how much money a museum spent to acquire the artwork. In the case of paintings acquired during the post-war Weimar hyperinflation of the early 1920s, when the cost of a kilo loaf of bread reached 233 billion German marks,^[25] the prices of the paintings were of course greatly exaggerated. The exhibit was designed to promote the idea that modernism was a conspiracy by people who hated German decency, frequently identified as Jewish-Bolshevist, although only six of the 112 artists included in the exhibition were in fact Jewish.^[26]

A few weeks after the opening of the exhibition, Goebbels ordered a second and more thorough scouring of German art collections; inventory lists indicate that the artworks seized in this second round, combined with those gathered prior to the exhibition, amounted to some 16,558 works.^[27]

Coinciding with the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German art exhibition) made its premiere amid much pageantry. This exhibition, held at the palatial *Haus der deutschen Kunst* (House of German Art), displayed the work of officially approved artists such as Arno Breker and Adolf Wissel. At the end of four months *Entartete Kunst* had attracted over two million visitors, nearly three and a half times the number that visited the nearby *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung*.^[28]



A confiscated self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh is auctioned at Gallerie Fisher, Lucerne, in 1939. The winning bid was \$US 40.000 by Dr. Frankfurter.^[29]

The fate of the artists and their work

Avant-garde German artists were now branded both enemies of the state and a threat to German culture. Many went into exile. Max Beckmann fled to Amsterdam on the opening day of the *entartete Kunst* exhibit.^[30] Max Ernst emigrated to America with the assistance of Peggy Guggenheim. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner committed suicide in Switzerland in 1938. Paul Klee spent his years in exile in Switzerland, yet was unable to obtain Swiss citizenship because of his status

as a degenerate artist.

Other artists remained in internal exile. Otto Dix retreated to the countryside to paint unpeopled landscapes in a meticulous style that would not provoke the authorities.^[31] The Reichskulturkammer forbade artists such as Edgar Ende and Emil Nolde from purchasing painting materials. Those who remained in Germany were forbidden to work at universities and were subject to surprise raids by the Gestapo in order to ensure that they were not violating the ban on producing artwork; Nolde secretly carried on painting, but using only watercolors (so as not to be betrayed by the telltale odor of oil paint).^[32] Although no artists were put to death because of their work, those of Jewish descent who did not escape from Germany in time were sent to concentration camps.^[33]

After the exhibit, paintings were sorted out for sale and sold in Switzerland at auction; some pieces were acquired by museums, others by private collectors. Nazi officials took many for their private use: for example, Hermann Göring took fourteen valuable pieces, including a Van Gogh and a Cézanne. In March, 1939, the Berlin Fire Brigade burned approximately 4000 works which had little value on the international market.^{[34] [35]}

A large amount of 'degenerate art' by Picasso, Dalí, Ernst, Klee, Léger and Miró was destroyed in a bonfire on the night of July 27, 1942 in the gardens of the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris.^[36]

After the collapse of Nazi Germany and the invasion of Berlin by the Red Army, some artwork from the exhibit was found buried underground. It is unclear how many of these then reappeared in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg where they still remain. The story of how these paintings survived is not documented in public.

In 2010, as work began to extend an underground line from Alexanderplatz through the historic city centre to the Brandenburg Gate, a number of sculptures from the degenerate art exhibition were unearthed in the cellar of a private house close to the "Rote Rathaus". These included, for example, the bronze cubist style statue of a female dancer by the artist Marg Moll, and are now on display at the Neues Museum.^{[37] [38] [39] [40]}

Artists in the 1937 Munich show

- Jankel Adler
- Ernst Barlach
- Rudolf Bauer
- Philipp Bauknecht
- Otto Baum
- Willi Baumeister
- Herbert Bayer
- Max Beckmann
- Rudolf Belling
- Paul Bindel
- Theo Brün
- Max Burchartz
- Fritz Burger-Mühlfeld
- Paul Camenisch
- Heinrich Campendonk
- Karl Caspar
- Maria Caspar-Filser
- Pol Cassel
- Marc Chagall
- Lovis Corinth
- Heinrich Maria Davringhausen
- Walter Dexel
- Johannes Diesner
- Otto Dix
- Pranas Domšaitis
- Hans Christoph Drexel
- Johannes Driesch
- Heinrich Eberhard
- Max Ernst
- Hans Feibusch
- Lyonel Feininger
- Conrad Felixmüller
- Otto Freundlich
- Xaver Fuhr
- Ludwig Gies
- Werner Gilles
- Otto Gleichmann
- Rudolph Grossmann
- George Grosz
- Hans Grundig
- Rudolf Haizmann
- Raoul Hausmann
- Guido Hebert
- Erich Heckel
- Wilhelm Heckrott
- Jacoba van Heemskerck
- Hans Siebert von Heister
- Oswald Herzog
- Werner Heuser
- Heinrich Hoerle
- Karl Hofer
- Eugen Hoffmann
- Johannes Itten
- Alexej von Jawlensky
- Eric Johanson
- Hans Jürgen Kallmann
- Wassily Kandinsky
- Hanns Katz
- Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
- Paul Klee
- Cesar Klein
- Paul Kleinschmidt
- Oskar Kokoschka
- Otto Lange
- Wilhelm Lehmbruck
- El Lissitzky
- Oskar Lüthy
- Franz Marc
- Gerhard Marcks
- Ewald Mataré
- Ludwig Meidner
- Jean Metzinger
- Constantin von Mutschke-Collande
- Laszlo Moholy-Nagy
- Margarethe (Marg) Moll
- Oskar Moll
- Johannes Molzahn
- Piet Mondrian
- Georg Muche
- Otto Mueller
- Erich(?) Nagel
- Heinrich Nauen
- Ernst Wilhelm Nay
- Karel Niestrath
- Emil Nolde
- Otto Pankok
- Max Pechstein
- Max Peiffer-Watenphul
- Hans Purrmann
- Max Rauh
- Hans Richter
- Emy Röder
- Christian Rohlf
- Edwin Scharff
- Oskar Schlemmer
- Rudolf Schlichter
- Karl Schmidt-Rottluff
- Werner Scholz
- Lothar Schreyer
- Otto Schubert
- Kurt Schwitters
- Lasar Segall
- Friedrich Skade
- Friedrich (Fritz) Stuckenberg
- Paul Thalheimer
- Johannes Tietz
- Arnold Topp
- Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart
- Karl Völker
- Christoph Voll
- William Wauer
- Gert Heinrich Wollheim

Artistic movements condemned as degenerate

- Bauhaus
- Cubism
- Dada
- Expressionism
- Fauvism
- Impressionism
- New Objectivity
- Surrealism

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- [4] Barron 1991, p.54
- [5] Barron 1991, p.10
- [6] Grosshans 1983, p. 87
- [7] Grosshans 1983, p. 86
- [8] Barron 1991, p.83
- [9] Barron 1991, p.26
- [10] Adam 1992, pp.23-24
- [11] Adam 1992, pp. 29-32.
- [12] Grosshans 1983, p. 9. Grosshans calls Schultze-Naumburg "[u]ndoubtedly the most important" of the era's German critics of modernism.
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