

Marlee Bryant

Frau Lemmond

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Degenerate Art

Although censorship is the traditional route of a repressive government's control of expression, and one the National Socialists often employed as seen by their widespread book burnings, they chose a different approach in controlling controversial artwork: propagandizing it through staged exhibitions. Before they came to power in 1933, the Nazis publicly condemned modernism and "racially impure" artworks, blaming specific artists, critics, and curators for this blasphemy. After 1933 they were enabled to confiscate any works deemed corrupt, but rather than destroying these as was done with rejected literature, the Nazis organized the works into "Exhibits of Shame," allowing the German public to marvel at how far they believed art had fallen from proper German ideals. The largest and most monumental of these exhibits opened in Munich on July 19th, 1937, one day after the opening of the Great German Art Exhibition, a showcasing of what they believed to be ideal German art, and was exhibited here until November 30th before making a tour through other prominent German and Austrian cities. *Die Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*, or the Degenerate Art Exhibition exhibited over 600 modernist paintings, drawings, and sculptures created in the early 1900's, mocking them as degenerate, a term frequently utilized by the Nazis. This unique treatment could be attributed to Hitler's affinity for the fine arts, which he pursued in his youth but couldn't make a career of due to his rejection from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, which may have triggered jealousy towards

successful artists who Hitler believed were less talented due to their art being expressionistic, a style the modernists tended towards, rather than representational as his works were. Beyond these possible personal reasons, there were certainly political reasons as to why spectacle was more effective than just destruction in the case of fine art. The National Socialist Party staged the Degenerate Art Exhibition to integrate their ideas into German culture by redirecting contemporary art towards an aesthetic representation of their ideals by publicly degrading contradictory art to bring its creators and supporters into disrepute and therefore subjugate them.

Typically, degenerate is a term which could be applied to a person in deteriorated mental, physical, or moral state, but doesn't seem to fit the context of art. The word was first used in this peculiar context by Max Nordau in his novel *Entartung*, from which Hitler seemed to have borrowed many of his ideas and yet would never assign credit since Max Nordau was Jewish. Hitler believed that modern art had too wide a range of subjects, and therefore brought esteemed subjects into the same realm as the perverse, for example a prostitute painted with the same grandeur as a mother. In his words, proper art "must develop from the collective soul of the people and express its identity... must be comprehensible to the people... must be positive, not critical of society... and represent the good, the beautiful, and the healthy." Therefore, the priorities of the Nazis were reflected in their view of proper subjects for art: the respected working class, pure mothers raising pure children, strong soldiers dedicated to their nation, the natural wonders of Germany, and the perfect Aryan physique. Any art that demeaned these subjects, even by simply depicting them in an unrealistic style, was deemed degenerate. As a result, nearly all modernism was condemned as degeneracy, despite ideological debates over expressionism. The pinnacle of these debates was known as the Rosenberg-Goebbels dispute, debated by these two heads of Nazi cultural policy, and resulted in oddities in the exhibition,

such as some art being displayed in both the Degenerate Art Exhibition and the Great German Art Exhibition, and the most exhibited artist being Emil Nolde, a German expressionist who was a member of the Nazi party himself. This revealed the extreme complexities of mingling politics with art and the fault in arbitrarily labeling an entire body of work corrupt. The corruption of German ideals was believed to stem from “Semitic inspiration” or “cultural bolshevism,” an idea introduced in Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s *Kunst und Rasse*, outlining his beliefs in the connection between artistic style and the race of the artist. Shockingly, only 6 of the 112 artists exhibited were Jewish, but this fact didn’t stop Hitler from assigning their racial impurity the blame. Hitler believed that “Jewish perversion” led even non-Jewish artists to soil their German ideals, which provides an understanding of why Hitler believed a term used to describe people could be extended to describe art: degenerate art was the product of a degenerate people.

The meticulous effort put into selecting the pieces was extended to their exhibition, which was itself a grotesque work of art manipulating its viewers to see this art in the same light as the Nazis. The viewer was intended to feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed while walking through the exhibit, starting from the moment they entered through a small staircase and came face to face with Ludwig Geis’ *Crucified Christ* sculpture hanging over them, crowding the entrance. Throughout the exhibit the paintings and sculptures were chaotically crowded together in a way which felt somewhat dangerous, as though they might fall at any moment. These feelings of danger and discomfort reflected how the Nazis viewed Jews in German society, as threatening misfits, and strove to condition viewers with the same correlation. The artwork was also displayed in a disgraceful manner, sometimes hung lopsided, by rope, or without frames and surrounded by mocking quotes painted on the walls. These quotes often took the form of art criticism, which was now illegal under the National Socialists, which was intended to seem

absurd compared to the art it praised, or otherwise took the form of outright insults such as “Nature as seen by sick minds.” This served to remove the viewer from the sense of attending an art show and evoke instead the feeling of a public slaughter, where viewers should be disgusted by the criminals and applaud the executioner for ridding the world of such corruption. The details of the crimes were also presented, in the form of plaques showing how many tax payer dollars were “wasted” by museums to obtain these works, oftentimes greatly inflated by the economic crisis in the 1920’s. Outraged guests would then blame this waste on the already widely disliked former Weimar Republic, further disparaging the German public’s view of democracy. On the other hand, the Nazis hypocritically did not display how much was spent on the Great German Art Exhibition, which was somewhat unspectacular since the most talented contemporary artists were modernists, leaving only second-rate artists creating realist works. Hitler himself expressed hope that some of the “decent creators” in this exhibition would be lifted into “the starry realm of the immortal, divinely inspired artists of the great past.” Because of this, and what an unique spectacle it was, the Degenerate Art Exhibition had three times as many visitors as the Great German Art Exhibition, an unintentional issue, since the two were intended to be viewed together. Progressing through the Degenerate Art Exhibition led you through themed rooms, such as a room filled with only Jewish artists and rooms which each showed art disparaging specific themes such as religion, women, soldiers, or the working class. Each room had its foil in the Great German Art exhibition, where art uplifting this theme in the proper German manner was shown. The most curious of these was art which foiled the degradation of religious figures, which might at first seem absent, but was most likely the great number of portraits of Hitler which presented him in a Christ-like manner. These parallel exhibitions presented the Nazi party as the uplifter and purifier of German society, but by seeing

only the Degenerate Art exhibition, it seemed to many that they instead were only stripping it of what they deemed improper, leaving an empty shell to fill with their own ideologies behind.

The immediate after effects on modern art in Germany were detrimental, since a hostile environment had been created. Many artists were banned from selling art, some even from purchasing art supplies, which was enforced by surprise raids from the Gestapo, and the tortures of a hateful society were inescapable. Many artists went into exile, either by physically leaving the country or by isolating themselves into an “inner exile”, some to continue clandestinely creating, but many with no room for creativity amidst the fear. Paul Klee, for example, chose the former option, and attempted to flee to Switzerland where he discovered how widespread the effects of his new label were: he was unable to obtain citizenship because of his status as a degenerate artist. Even artists in Hitler’s favor were not immune from his control, as he sent one of his favorite painters, Adolf Ziegler, to a concentration camp at one point to reprimand the defeatist attitude he was exhibiting in his art. The leftover unfavorable artwork was sold in auctions to other countries if possible, but oftentimes met the same fate as degenerate literature, leading to over 4000 paintings being burned. Some who couldn’t stand to see the art go up in flames risked hiding it in their own homes or burying it, some of which is still being discovered and exhibited today. All of these travesties show the detrimental effects of government attempting to shape the culture around it, since culture is the method by which society expresses its opinions of the government, so by removing and vilifying this element, dissenters lose their voice as was intended in this situation. Fortunately, the modernists gained new strength after the end of the Third Reich, as German society distanced itself from anything the Nazi’s agreed with, and therefore welcomed what they had rejected. Despite this resurgence, so much important art expressive of an important age in German history was a casualty of misguided oppression. While

some censorship or judgement of art by the government may seem acceptable, or even necessary, in modern society, it's important to rethink how far it can be taken in corrupted hands.

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