

## **Hitler as Sculptor: Molding Germany's Collective Memory of "Degenerate" Art**

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**Bio:**

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**Abstract:**

The topic of my research is the 1937 National Socialist exhibition, “*Entartete Kunst*,” (Degenerate Art) and the ways it influenced the public’s perceptions of the art displayed, as well as modern art in general. Much of the existing scholarship about *Entartete Kunst* focuses on what Hitler and the Reich’s Culture Chamber deemed “degenerate” versus “healthy” art, and the design of the exhibition itself. My research takes up a different topic—the implications the exhibition would have for the collective German memory of modern art. In this paper, I discuss the topic by analyzing the exhibit with an emphasis on photographs and a reproduction of the exhibition catalog. I consider how effectively this art exhibition served as a propaganda tool for molding public taste and memory.

## Introduction

During July 1937, the National Socialist exhibition, “*Entartete Kunst*,” opened in Munich. It was the largest exhibition of modern art ever assembled to that time. Subsequently, it traveled to six additional German cities over the course of two years. Featuring paintings by *avant-garde* French, Swiss, and Russian artists Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky,<sup>1</sup> it drew upwards of three million visitors in Munich alone. Had paintings by these artists been exhibited today, art lovers would flock to see them. However, in 1937, many viewers were horrified by the art.

While exhibitions usually are carefully curated as a tribute to artistic achievement of the artists, the Reichskulturkammer (Reich Culture Chamber) organized *Entartete Kunst* as anything but flattering. As a generality, the Reichskulturkammer perceived the *avant-garde* break from the traditional subject matter and styles of painting and sculpture as a threat to the state. They considered certain subjects to be subversive and experimental styles of representation as a sign of artistic and cultural decline. Consequently, they treated *Entartete Kunst* as a propagandistic tool for spreading National Socialist ideology to the German people.

The exhibition presented artworks along with the artists who created them as “degenerate.” From its haphazard arrangement of paintings to the degrading commentary it posted on the walls and reproduced in the accompanying pamphlet, the exhibition promoted feelings of general dislike toward *avant-garde* art and artists. Contemporary scholars have discussed the politically motivated reasons the National Socialists deemed contemporary art “degenerate”. For example, in her essay, “1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany,” Stephanie Barron summarizes Hitler’s preference for traditional art and attack on modernism as “an opportunity to use the average German’s distrust of *avant-garde* art to further his political

objectives [against] Jews, Communists, and non-Aryans.”<sup>2</sup> This same point is made by Joan Clinefelter, who studies the artists who produced Reich-approved artwork. Clinefelter says the Culture Chamber was “less concerned with aesthetics than with using art as an instrument to support their ideology and regime.”<sup>3</sup> Scholars also discuss the economic effects felt by the artists who were either approved or condemned by the Reich. Robert Brady<sup>4</sup> and Christine Fischer-Defoy<sup>5</sup> examine how the organizations of the Reich Culture Chamber and their membership—and thus, the government’s approval—could make or break an artist’s reputation and financial security.

Other scholars describe the selection of works of art and organization of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, sometimes contrasting it with Hitler’s counter-exhibition “*Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung*” (Great German Art Exhibition), including Peter Adams’ *Art of the Third Reich*<sup>6</sup> and essays in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*.<sup>7</sup> In the latter book, Barron argues that “[t]he National Socialists sought to rewrite art history, to omit what we know as the *avant-garde* from the history of modern art.”<sup>8</sup> Today, we know that the National Socialists did not succeed because Expressionism, Cubism, and other *avant-garde* art movements continue to be studied, admired, and displayed around the world today.

I am interested in the ways the Reichskulturkammer designed the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition to inflame the German public’s opinion against modern art and its implications for Germany’s collective social memory. I argue that evidence for my argument can be found in the organization of the exhibition itself, including its design and layout as well as didactic text installed on the walls and published in a catalogue. I will use a first-hand account of the exhibit, written by Peter Guenther and published in 1991<sup>9</sup>, describing his visit to the Munich exhibition

of *Entartete Kunst* as a young man. I will use the theories of Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann to consider the consequences of the exhibition in terms of how "degenerate" art would be remembered in Germany.

The primary argument I will focus on is that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories"<sup>10</sup> (Halbwachs) which, for the society, serve as a "means by which to maintain their nature consistently through generations."<sup>11</sup> Contemporary theories about collective memory place a lot of importance on the enduring quality of memory within groups. I contend that from this perspective, we can understand that the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition amounted to more than simply bad publicity for modern art and artists. In fact, it had the power to mold the German peoples' collective opinion of an entire genre of art—modernism. Specifically, this was done by categorizing the selected works as *degenerate*.

### **The Argument**

The German word, *entartete*, translates to the English, *degenerate*, which the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as "having sunk to a lower or usually corrupt and vicious state,"<sup>12</sup> or "having declined or become less specialized from a former state."<sup>13</sup> This word effectively sums up the National Socialist platform on the *avant-garde*. The platform considered emerging styles of painting and sculpture as a corruption of traditional academic methods and a threat to German nationalism. The National Socialists also perceived such art as the work of mentally ill or uncivilized minds. Their interpretations are essential to understanding why they treated *avant-garde* art as a threat to the state, and they illuminate Hitler's vision of a perfect Aryan race.<sup>14</sup> Hitler himself declared, in *Mein Kampf*,

For it is an affair of the State...to prevent a people from being driven into the arms of spiritual lunacy...for on the day that this kind of art were actually to

correspond to the general conception, one of the most severe changes of mankind would have begun; the backward development of the human brain....<sup>15</sup>

In the above statement, Hitler is referring to the art that he believed was degenerate, namely, painting and sculpture that is nonrepresentational or represented a subject in nontraditional or experimental ways. In contrast, art that the National Socialists deemed "acceptable" tended to appear Neoclassical or Romantic in style and reflect traditional German values. Examples were realistic images representing the German landscape, simple rural life (Figure 1), the family unit (especially motherhood) (Figure 2), the worker, and devotion to state.<sup>16</sup> While artists at this time, throughout Europe, were increasingly experimenting with the form and appearance of their work, Germany especially had served as a hotspot for significant and widely resonant early movements of *avant-garde* art, namely, *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*. Yet, what could have served as a point of national pride and heritage for Germany was seen by Hitler as something to be put to shame.

The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition primarily featured paintings associated with the Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaist, and Fauvism movements. The artworks were meant to be emotional, experimental, shocking, and, in the case of Dada, pointless—a far cry from the realistic style and moralizing themes of Reich-approved mainstream art. The artists who created them intentionally broke from German artistic tradition, a trend that the conservative National Socialists perceived as a sign of corruption in the contemporary art world.

The second meaning of *degeneracy* refers to a physical or mental decline.<sup>17</sup> Another theory of modern art was that it was not necessarily the work of corrupt minds, but rather, of sick minds' warped views of the world. An important proponent of this point of view was Paul Schultze-Naumburg whose 1928 book, *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race), convincingly portrays

the figures in modern painting and sculpture as unhealthy.<sup>18</sup> On one page, he placed several close-up views of faces or full-length human figures from selected modern artworks (Figure 3). The adjacent page features photographs of patients with physical, mental, or development handicaps or deformities (Figure 4). The visual comparisons between the selected paintings and the photographs of the patients suggest that the paintings in question depict deformed people, or represent how a sick mind would perceive reality. Hitler wanted to create a flawless state with flawless people and physical and mental handicaps and deformities had no place in his vision. He saw modern art and artists as a hindrance to the creation of an idealized society.

### **The Exhibition**

Entrance was free, so that anyone interested would not miss out, although children were denied entry, to underscore the alleged obscenity that lay ahead.<sup>19</sup> From surviving photographs taken inside the exhibition (Figure 5), we can see that the objects were strewn around the rooms. Paintings haphazardly covered the walls, some merely hanging by a cord. Many were unframed and/or hung crooked. Sculptures seem to be placed with little thought. In a typical museum exhibition, paintings are securely hung with care in a neat, organized fashion; sculptures would be placed on a pedestal. Putting thought and attention into exhibition design signals value and importance of the artwork. Conversely, the Chamber's haphazard design signals that the objects did not deserve the same degree of care.

The exhibition did have one element of planning and forethought. Rooms were organized thematically: "Farmers Seen by Jews," "Insult to German Womanhood," "Mockery of God," and a fourth room that served as a catchall for the remaining pieces.<sup>20</sup> The design of the exhibition was obviously chaotic, especially considering the sheer number of objects, approximately 650. Where the walls were not crowded with paintings, any white space on the exhibition walls was



covered in scathing commentary; examples include “madness becomes method,” “nature as seen by sick minds,” “an insult to German womanhood,” and “the ideal—cretin and whore.” These phrases, among others, were also included in the accompanying guide. The rooms of the exhibition hall were just as crowded as the walls. A visitor to the exhibition recalls that “the rooms were quite narrow, as were the openings from one room to another, and the ceilings low,” creating an “overwhelming sense of claustrophobia.”<sup>21</sup> It is standard for exhibitions to be designed for the ease of viewing and enjoying the art; the aim of the Reich Culture Chamber seemed to be the exact opposite. Crowded, chaotic, and overwhelming, the experience must not have been a pleasant one for visitors. The exhibit hall effects were subtle, but added to the overall effect of the exhibition in inflaming the public’s thoughts about the artwork. An unpleasant museum visit would almost certainly stay with the audience in their memory of a day when they were visually bombarded by hundreds of modern artworks.

### **Use of Physical Space**

Whereas most curators use wall text and other exhibition literature to place the selected artwork in context to allow visitors to have their own interpretation of the art, the Reich Chamber of Visual Arts uses every aspect of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition to force their ideology and interpretation of *avant-garde* art. Many people initially feel uneasy upon encountering art that is unlike anything they have seen before because it challenges them; and normally they could learn more about it in a gallery space and come to their own, informed interpretation of the work. However, at this exhibition, the arrangement/design, text, and visual overload exacerbated the discomfort visitors felt when confronted with art that was purposefully created to go against the norm. Guenther remembers that in Munich “the visitors were practically forced by the installation and the accompanying texts to despise the art and the artists.”<sup>22</sup> With National

Socialist propaganda all around, little room is left for the viewer to form his or her independent meaning for the presented objects.

### The Exhibit Guide

The Reich Culture Chamber produced an exhibition guide to accompany *Entartete Kunst* that I suggest served as a piece of take-home propaganda echoing the aforementioned perspectives of degeneracy from cover to cover. The primary focus of the cover was the treatment of the word *Kunst* (Art). The typography was blockish and sloppy, appearing as though it was written in crayon. Overall, the appearance of the letters conveys a childish quality that suggests a decline of artistic skill. What is more, *Kunst* was written in quotation marks, implying that the art featured in the catalog should not be considered art at all. Thus, even before opening the pamphlet, it gave readers a negative impression of the art featured in the exhibition. As further attack on the selected artworks, the rest of the exhibition guide was filled with inflammatory commentary. An image of an abstracted bust was captioned as "obviously the work of an incurably sick man."<sup>23</sup> A page featuring paintings of prostitutes and scantily dressed women was headlined, "The Whore is Elevated to the Moral Ideal"<sup>24</sup> which contrasted with the ideal of feminine decency. Nearly every page bore an accusatory tagline such as "Obviously un-German Religiousness,"<sup>25</sup> contrasting with the official anti-Semitic stance, "Art Preaches Class Struggle,"<sup>26</sup> "Painted Military Sabotage,"<sup>27</sup> a contrast to the duty to the state, or "Any Comment is Superfluous Here."<sup>28</sup> The language is extremely straightforward, leaving no room for the misinterpretation of National Socialist ideology.

Throughout the guide, artists' names are preceded by the qualifiers "*Kunstler*," again in quotation marks, *Nicht-Kunstler* (non-artist), or even *Kunstler-Anarchist* (anarchist artist). The range of designations indicate that the Reich Culture Chamber did not regard all of the painters

and sculptors as true artists, and that many of the objects they created signify their status as insane and depraved individuals.

The publication of the *Entartete Kunst* catalog was a smart move on the part of the Reich Culture Chamber because of its potential to influence collective social memory long after the show was uninstalled and many of the paintings were destroyed. The fact that visitors could take home their own copy of the catalog ensured they would not soon forget the visual and ideological propaganda of the exhibition. Copies could also be passed among family and friends, allowing people who did not attend the exhibition to read up on the official state opinion of the *avant-garde* art movements.

### **The Travelling Exhibition**

The art-exhibition-as-propaganda's influence extended far beyond museum walls in each city as word of the show spread through the pamphlet, newspaper reviews, and word of mouth. With millions of visitors in attendance and so many art objects on display, the exhibition was a huge opportunity to influence how a society would remember an eventful chapter in the history of art. The exhibition travelled to several major cities in Germany and Austria, effectively reaching most of the population. It is in this group context, Halbwachs argues, that memories are acquired. There was essentially one interpretation to be taken away from the exhibition and that would be stored in the collective social memory: that *avant-garde* art was, for all intents and purposes, depraved.

### **German Connections of the Artists**

Perhaps what is most interesting is that many of these *avant-garde* artists were German or otherwise working in Germany; so what could have been a point of pride for German heritage, namely through the Expressionism movement, became instead an enemy in the National

Socialist quest for an idealized society and racial purity. The point to be taken away from the exhibition was that not only should modern art not be regarded at all, but also that it represented the exact opposite of Hitler's ideal Germany. Assmann claims that collective memory within a society is the "means by which to maintain the society's nature consistently through generations." Theoretically, the collective memory that the Germans shared of the exhibition would allow for the continuity of the presented thought and ideology.

### **Conclusion**

*Entartete Kunst* was much more than just a traveling exhibition of wildly new and unusual artwork. It was a powerful propaganda tool used to spread and reinforce National Socialist ideology and influence in the way that modern art should be remembered among the exhibition's audience and the society at large. Rather than celebrating artistic achievement and innovative thought, the Reich Chamber of Visual Arts condemned artists who belonged to the several *avant-garde* movements as mentally ill or depraved enemies of the state. Rather than understanding and appreciating the work, the intended outcome was that viewers would be horrified. The show was designed to reach as much of society as possible and mold the way that they would remember modern art. At the grand opening of *Entartete Kunst* in Munich, Hitler invited the Germans to "judge for yourselves!"<sup>29</sup> as he sent them on their way to receive *his* judgment of the art.

Fortunately, this method of art exhibition was short-lived; the next official presentation of modern art in Germany was positive. "Full of hope" and "with great enthusiasm," the Nationalgalerie in Berlin was able to recover many of its artworks and begin rebuilding soon after World War II.<sup>30</sup> By 1950, the museum, including a gallery devoted to modern art, was open to the public.<sup>31</sup> Only 13 years<sup>31</sup> after the opening of the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition, professional

curators were able to once again display modern art in a positive, non-judgmental way, indicating that the National Socialist attack on “degenerate” art did not entirely ruin the reputation of this genre of art.

### Sources for Figures

Figure 1. Julius Paul Junghanns, *Rest Under the Willows*, 1938. Image from Davidson College;

retrieved from [http://franklin.davidson.edu/academic/german/buhenke/art/images/paint\\_junghanns\\_rest.jpg](http://franklin.davidson.edu/academic/german/buhenke/art/images/paint_junghanns_rest.jpg)

Figure 2. Adolf Wissel. *Farm Family from Kahlenberg*, 1939. Image from Skidmore College;

retrieved from <http://www.skidmore.edu/academics/fll/german/enemy/Naziart/wissel1.jpg>

Figure 3. Page from *Kunst und Rasse*, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, 1928. Image from University of

Michigan; retrieved from [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-02206-und-02/\\*](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-02206-und-02/*)

Figure 4. Page from *Kunst und Rasse*, Paul Schultze-Naumburg, 1928. Image from University of

Michigan; retrieved from [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-02206-und-03/02206\\_03](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrimage/x-02206-und-03/02206_03)

Figure 5. Interior view of exhibition, room 3, Munich, 1937. Image retrieved from

<http://www.thehistoryblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Degenerate-Art-exhibition-1937.jpg>

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- <sup>1</sup> Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 122.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephanie Barron. "1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany," essay in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Joan L. Clinefelter. *Artists for the Reich: Culture and Race from Weimar to Nazi Germany*. (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 77.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Brady. "The National Chamber of Culture," essay in *The Nazification of Art*. (Winchester: The Winchester Press, 1990), 80.
- <sup>5</sup> Christine Fischer-Defoy. "Artists and the Art Institutions in Germany 1933-1945," essay in *The Nazification of Art*. (Winchester: The Winchester Press, 1990), 89.
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- <sup>9</sup> Peter Guenther. "Three Days in Munich, July 1937," essay in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 33.
- <sup>10</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick. "Collective Memory," entry in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 7.
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- <sup>12</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "degenerate."
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Henry Grosshans. *Hitler and the Artists*. (New York: Holmes&Meier, 1983), 87.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 121.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-170.
- <sup>17</sup> *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. "degenerate."
- <sup>18</sup> Stephanie Barron. "1937: Modern Art and Politics in Prewar Germany," essay in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 12.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter Adam. *Art of the Third Reich*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 124.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Guenther. "Three Days in Munich, July 1937," essay in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 38.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>23</sup> *Hitler's Degenerate Art—The Exhibition Catalog—First Published in 1937 as "Entartete Kunst Ausstellungsführer*. Edited by Joachim von Halasz. (London: Foxley Books, 2008)
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



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<sup>29</sup> Neil Levi. “‘Judge for yourselves!’ – The ‘Degenerate Art’ Exhibition as Political Spectacle,” *October* 85 (summer 1998): 41.

<sup>30</sup> Annegert Janda. “The Fight for Modern Art: The Berlin Nationalgalerie after 1933,” essay in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 114.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*