

CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

Bill of Right in Action

Spring 1997 (13:2)

Updated June 2000

CONTROVERSIES IN THE ARTS

[BRIA 13:2 Home](#) | [The Battle Over the National Endowment for the Arts](#) | [The Suppression of Art in Nazi Germany](#)
[Music on Trial: Rock, Rap, and Responsibility](#)

The Suppression of Art in Nazi Germany

In 1937, the government of [Nazi Germany](#) held two bizarre art exhibits in Munich. The "Great German Art" exhibition opened in the new House of German Art, which was built to look like a huge Greek temple. This exhibit was launched with a rousing speech by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and a lavish parade with people dressed as Greek gods and goddesses. The exhibit housed what the Nazis proclaimed as the best art in Nazi Germany. They believed this art showed that Third Reich could produce art that rivaled the ancient Greeks.

A few hundred yards away, the Nazis held the second exhibit in a small building. In nine rooms, they crammed nearly 700 paintings and sculptures created by German artists. On the walls, they scrawled words insulting the works. This exhibit housed what they called "[Degenerate Art](#)," art that the Nazis believed was harmful and repugnant. Modern, or avant-garde, art filled these rooms. The exhibit was meant to hold modern art up to public ridicule.

The Nazis placed the two exhibits near each other so people could compare them. The Great German Art exhibit showed the kind of art approved of by the Nazi state. The Degenerate Art exhibit showed the kind of art that the Nazi state prohibited. The exhibits were part of an incredible Nazi campaign to put art under control of the state.

Art in the Weimar Republic

Prior to the Nazi takeover in 1933, German art had exploded into a dizzying array of styles. Although some artists still painted in the [realistic style common in the 19th century](#), many experimented with new forms. They followed the lead of [Impressionists](#) and [Post-Impressionists](#) who had broken away from realistic-style painting. [Cubists](#) structured their paintings along geometrical forms. [Expressionists](#) distorted forms to express inner feelings. [Dadaists](#) created abstract, fantastic works that mocked everything—even other modern artists.

Berlin was challenging Paris as capital of the art world. Germany attracted such prominent artists as [Wassily Kandinsky](#) and [Paul Klee](#). Art magazines sprouted up everywhere debating the merits of different artists and art forms. The [Bauhaus](#) opened. This was a school of modern art and architecture that would become internationally famous. The [National Gallery in Berlin](#) opened a wing devoted to modern art, which housed major works by German painters like [Max Beckmann](#) as well as foreign artists like [Pablo Picasso](#).

All this was taking place amidst the chaos in German society. Following its defeat in World War I, Germany seemed on the brink of collapse. Its money lost all value. In 1918 at the end of the war, a loaf of bread cost 2 German marks. By the summer of 1923, the price of single loaf of bread had risen to 4

million marks. The people responded with strikes, protests, brawls, assassinations, and open rebellions. Extremist groups plotted to seize power: Communists wanted a Soviet-style state; Nazis wanted a "pure" Germany free of Jews and Communists. The new democratically elected German government, known as the **Weimar Republic**, seemed unable to control the situation.

The art reflected the period. Some avant-garde artists, like Georg Grosz, took an active political stance, using their work to agitate for change. Most, however, were not overtly political. Some captured the despair of the time—painting prostitutes and other downtrodden in city settings. Others, like social realist Otto Dix, painted about the horrors of the World War.

Because of its themes and styles, avant-garde art provoked controversy. Its abstract forms troubled traditionalists. They called for a return to the realistic art of the early 19th century. Right-wing nationalists thought modern art insulted German values. They looked on paintings showing the horrors of war as mocking German patriotism and militarism.

The shrillest voices belonged to the Nazis. They saw modern art as degenerate and degrading—a product of an intellectual elite who had lost touch with the German people. They thought its "distorted" images and forms showed the artists were mentally ill. Since they blamed almost every problem on the Jews and Communists, they often referred to all the different kinds of modern art as "Jewish" or "Bolshevik" art. A Nazi leader announced: "This alien Syrian-Jewish plant must be pulled out by its roots."

Although the Nazis talked of banning modern art, this was out of the question in a democratic Germany. And, for a time, German democracy grew more stable. The Weimar Republic replaced the old devalued mark with a new sounder currency. Foreign governments helped Germany restructure its debt. As the economy stabilized, memberships in the Communist and Nazi parties dropped.

But in 1929, the worldwide Depression struck Germany hard. Six million people lost their jobs. As conditions grew worse, more and more people favored radical solutions. Many felt their only choice was between the Nazis or the Communists. By the end of 1932, the Nazis were the largest party in Germany. But they didn't hold a majority in the German legislature. After several failed attempts to form governments, German President **Paul von Hindenburg** named Nazi party leader **Adolf Hitler** as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Von Hindenburg and the leaders of big business thought they could control Hitler. They were wrong. Hitler moved quickly to set himself up as dictator.

Nazi "Purification" of the Arts

Hitler saw himself creating a new Germany, pure of outside influences. As part of this task to get rid of "un-German" influences, Hitler started censoring the arts. In May 1933 at universities across Germany, Nazis burned thousands of "un-German" books in huge bonfires. That same spring, they fired all modern artists who held teaching positions and any museum director who admired modern art. Nazis also raided the Bauhaus school and ordered it shut down. In the fall, the Nazi government permanently closed the modern art section of the National Gallery in Berlin.

The responsibility for "cleansing" German culture fell on **Joseph Goebbels**, the minister for propaganda and popular culture. In November 1933, Goebbels set up separate state bureaucracies, known as chambers, to control film, theater, music, radio, journalism, literature, and the arts. Anyone who wanted to work as an artist had to be approved by the state chamber on the arts. Members of the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, conducted searches of banned artists' homes to make sure they weren't creating new works. The arts were now part of the Nazi state's vast propaganda machine.

Until November 1934, it appeared that modern art might have a place in this propaganda machine. Some

Nazis called on the regime to make good use of modern artists who had Nazi sympathies. They pointed to Hitler's ally **Mussolini**, who had embraced **Futurism**, a form of Cubism, for his fascist dictatorship in Italy. Goebbels seemed to support this view. In his house, he displayed several pieces of modern art created by artists with Nazi loyalties.

But at a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg in November 1934, Hitler made clear his hatred of avant-garde art. He railed that "the driveling Dadaist, Cubist, and Futuristic 'experience'-mongers would never under any circumstances be allowed any part in our cultural rebirth." The Fuhrer had spoken: All modern art was "un-German." Goebbels quickly got rid of his modern art works.

With modern art dead in Germany, proclaimed the Nazis, a new German art would flower. People waited. Traditional painting and sculpture continued. But nothing new developed. Goebbels warned people not to "get impatient."

After some magazines complained about the emptiness of German art, Goebbels banned art criticism. No one could publish any opinion about art.

Great German Art Exhibit

The Nazis did not allow anyone to doubt that they had created a great new culture. They held small art exhibits throughout Germany with titles such as "Blood and Soil," "Race and Nation," and "Pictures of Family." The exhibits showed works of art created by state-approved artists. The works were done in the state-approved realistic style with state-approved themes: the beautiful German countryside, Greek mythology, healthy German bodies, strong German youth, happy German families, hard-working German farmers, and heroes and heroic death. The art was simple, easy-to-understand, and predictable. It hid the ugly truth of the Nazi regime.

The Nazis also held several small exhibits ridiculing modern art. With titles like "Chamber of Horrors," "Cultural Bolshevism," and "Eternal Jew," these exhibits served to bolster the lie that modern art was a Jewish-Communist concoction totally alien to German art.

These exhibits of "German" and "un-German" art were forerunners to the two large exhibits staged in Munich in 1937—the Great German Art exhibition and the Degenerate Art exhibit. To assemble these exhibits, Goebbels relied heavily on Adolf Ziegler, the head of the state chamber on art.

From more than 16,000 pieces of art submitted, Ziegler and his staff selected about 600 works for the Great German Art exhibition. Hitler personally approved the final selections.

Ziegler organized the exhibit by subject matter. Landscapes, which made up almost half the paintings, were in one section. Portraits of historical figures filled another—and so on. Only one work portrayed a non-German. It was a bust of Hitler's ally Mussolini.

The art was for sale. Hitler wanted all Germans to collect the new art. When someone purchased a work, it was removed and replaced with another. Hitler himself bought many works and donated them to public buildings. Throughout the Nazi era, a high honor for any painting was the label: "Purchased by the Fuhrer."

Degenerate Art Exhibit

For the Degenerate Art exhibit, Ziegler looted more than 5,000 modern works from museums throughout Germany. Air force commander **Hermann Goring**, who later earned a reputation for looting

museums across Europe, took 14 of the pieces for his private collection—four van Goghs, four Munchs, three Marcs, one Gauguin, one Cezanne, and one Signac.

Ziegler selected almost 700 works for the exhibit. He designed the exhibit so it would shock most Germans. By jamming all the works in a small space, he overwhelmed the viewers with stimuli. He covered the walls with large graffiti-like labels insulting the art works. To enrage people that taxpayer dollars had been wasted in buying these pieces, he put the purchase price next to each one. He failed to mention that many of the works had been purchased with the inflated currency of the 1920s. To make it clear that the works were offensive, he made the exhibit open to "adults only." He published a pamphlet that further insulted the art. Someone who visited the exhibit remembered it this way:

The strong colors of the paintings, the interfering texts, the large wall panels with quotations from speeches by Hitler and Joseph Goebbels all created a chaotic impression. I felt an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. The large number of people pushing and ridiculing and proclaiming their dislike for the works of art created the impression of a staged performance intended to provoke an atmosphere of aggressiveness and anger. Over and over again, people read aloud the purchase prices and laughed, shook their heads, or demanded "their" money back.

Ziegler arranged the art to show how it supposedly offended German values. In the first room, he exhibited works that the Nazis thought offended religion. One of the works was *Beckmann's Descent from the Cross*, a deeply religious painting. Because its colors and forms weren't realistic, the Nazis claimed it was an attack on religion. Another room featured offenses to morals. On one wall labeled "Degradation of the German Woman" hung pictures of prostitutes and strippers. Another wall, labeled "Deliberate Sabotage of National Defense," include two paintings by *Dix—War Cripples* and *The Trench*. They showed suffering German soldiers in World War I, but the exhibit's labels and pamphlet said the paintings mocked the soldiers.

The exhibit was an overwhelming success. Drawn by the sensationalism, people flocked to the Degenerate Art exhibit. More than three times as many people saw it than the Great German Art exhibit. It traveled from Munich to other German cities. By the time it closed, more than 3 million people had seen it. This is more than have ever seen any exhibit of modern art.

Ziegler and his staff continued rounding up pieces of modern art. By the end of summer 1937, they had confiscated more than 16,000 works from museums and private collections throughout Germany. Goebbels noted in his diary: "We hope at least to make some money off this garbage." Much of it was sold to foreign museums and collectors. In one day, the Fischer Gallery in Switzerland auctioned more than 100 pieces by Picasso, *Braque, Chagall, Gauguin, Van Gogh* and artists from the Degenerate Art exhibit. The Nazis destroyed what they couldn't sell. On March 20, 1939, they burned about 5,000 works in the courtyard of Berlin's fire station.

Many modern artists fled Germany, among them Grosz, Kandinsky, and Beckmann. Those who stayed either stopped making art or created safe pictures. Dix was one of those who remained. He was imprisoned briefly. Recalling what he did during the Nazi era, Dix said: "I painted landscapes. That was tantamount to emigration."

The Nazis kept tight control on the arts throughout the war. The Great German Art exhibition became an annual event, the last one held in 1944.

At the war's end in 1945, the allies removed Nazi-sponsored art from museums and public buildings. Most of it was crated and shipped to America. By 1986, almost all of it had been returned to Germany, where it has remained in storage. It is tainted as the official art of the Nazi regime, one of the most evil

governments in human history.

In 1991, the Degenerate Art exhibit made another appearance. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art somehow managed to find 175 of the almost 700 original works and put them on display. The show proved popular and traveled to Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Berlin.

For Discussion

1. Why do you think the Nazis suppressed modern art?
2. In 1939, the Nazis sold much modern art and destroyed what they couldn't sell. The proceeds from the sales went to the Nazi government. If you were an art dealer in 1939, would you have bought art from the Nazis? Why or why not?
3. What do you think should be done with the official Nazi art currently stored in Germany?
4. Do you think that there are certain types of art that the government should censor? Why or why not?

For Further Reading

Art History: A web site including links to sites about individual artists and art movements ranging from prehistoric times to the present.

A C T I V I T Y

Should Government Ban Offensive Art Work?

Nazi Germany serves as a horrible example of total state control over the arts. The government dictated what artists could and could not create. No government today exercises this kind of control. But most governments, including that of the United States, exercise some controls on art. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that the government may ban obscene works. There are frequently calls to ban or regulate other art work that people find objectionable. In this activity, you will have a chance to decide whether the state should place controls on some forms of art.

In small groups, discuss whether the government should ban each of the kinds of art listed below. Think of reasons for and against banning each. Then discuss and decide. Be prepared to discuss your decisions and reasons with the whole class.

1. Art works that promote racism
2. Art works with graphic sexual images
3. Art works that hold a religion up to ridicule
4. Art works with graphicly violent images

Comments

Only registered users can write comments!

Powered by [!JoomlaComment 3.26](#)

Close Window